

## GENDER AND CULTURE IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF GUJI-OROMO WOMEN'S CUSTOMARY RIGHTS

Dejene N. DEBSU

*Department of Anthropology, Miami University*

**ABSTRACT** Anthropological research conducted from July 2005 to June 2006 in southern Ethiopia demonstrates that Guji-Oromo women have more subtle cultural and economic rights than is immediately apparent. Women actively participate in the ritual aspect of the *gada* generation grade system, but they are marginally involved in political activities. While customary laws provide women with strong protection from mistreatment by husbands and their clan members, several myths and legends portray them as ineffective for war, politics, and administration. Contrary to the myths and legends, women have continued to provide an important service to their society as links between communities and peace negotiators during and after conflicts. They also enjoy claims to family property in several indirect ways. With changes from pastoralism to agropastoralism, however, women lost some of these economic and customary legal rights and became subjected to more domestic and extra-domestic work burdens. To understand the position of Guji women in their society, myths and stories about men and women, gender-based division of labor, and the general discourses about gender are analyzed and discussed in this manuscript.

**Key Words:** Oromo; Gender; Guji women; Customary rights; Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

In many African societies, women's problems are compounded as compared to other marginalized categories. Because of their political and economic position in their society, women constitute what Obi (2005: 2) calls "the most marginalized of the marginalized." As members of society, they experience unfair treatment; they have to bear the burdens of daily life that patriarchy imposes. Their underprivileged positions are maintained and perpetuated by strong national and cultural discourses as well as by customary and statutory laws.

In Ethiopia, while the status of women may vary in different cultures, in general, men dominate the political, economic, and social arena in all cultures. Some scholars, however, tried to construct regional patterns of women's status. For example, Gopal and Salim (cited in Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2002) argue that women's status in Ethiopia declines as one goes from north to south. This position fails to understand the considerable cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in the south where women's sentiments do not constitute a uniform category. Since similar heterogeneity characterizes the north, this assertion is conjectural at best and ethnocentric at worst. Moreover, nuanced ethnographic data are needed if establishing any particular patterns of cultural rights

is deemed necessary.

Similar generalizations are apparent from pastoral studies that portray women as utterly powerless figures who live at the mercy of their husbands. Although it is true that women live in male dominated societies, the degree of their rights greatly varies cross-culturally. Hinnant, an anthropologist who studied the Guji (1984: 799) stated, "It was not until I had been in the field for a considerable period that I began to discover areas in which women, at least briefly, are dominant." Unless we appreciate those subtle rights, our knowledge of gender relations in non-western societies remains partial.

In addition to the dearth of ethnographic information to permit cross-cultural comparisons, any effort to analyze changes overtime in a given society suffers from similar absence of historical data in Ethiopia and other African countries. Particularly "...the gender relations of predominantly pastoralist peoples have been, with a few notable exceptions, curiously excluded from historical examination." (Hodgson, 1999: 41) To better understand trajectories of gender relations in Africa, changes that have been introduced by colonial and post-colonial states need to be investigated.

Gender relation is dynamic and contingent upon economic, political, and socio-economic conditions, as well as technological changes. As a case in point, African governments have favored development paths that impose culturally incompatible practices on both pastoralists and agriculturalists, with consequent negative impacts on women. Often, new agricultural techniques that were introduced to Africa targeted men, even though the contribution of female farmers to traditional agriculture was significant (Boserup cited in Olmstead, 1975: 85). Such practices have worsened women's conditions in many societies. Property rights changes have had similar negative impact on women's land rights. In places where land titling has been implemented in Africa, "usually, women lose access or cultivation rights, while male household heads have strengthened their hold over the land." (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997: 1326)

Therefore, change does not always mean improvement of women's status; sedentarization has often crystallized the domestic/public division of labor and created a situation where women work more and benefit less. In this paper, myths and stories about men and women, gender-based division of labor, customary systems for access to resources, and the general discourses about gender are analyzed and discussed diachronically to put women's role and status in historical perspective.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The Guji people are members of the larger Oromo group in Ethiopia and occupy the southern highland and lowland semi arid areas. They are also referred to as Jamjamtu by their neighbors and in some travelers' accounts. No exact population size of the Guji branch is known from the census report, which lumps their number together with other Oromo groups. Berisso (2002),

based on the 1994 Population and Housing Census, estimated their number at 900,000.

The Guji have an elaborate system of customary governance based on generation, known as *gada*. The Guji *gada* system has eight fathers' and five children's grades. All statuses, both for ritual and political purposes, depend on an individual's current place in those grades. Today *gada* has very limited power compared to government institutions, but it still has notable ritual significance.

The Guji area has a diverse ecology with wide ranging altitudes and climatic conditions. As a result, it has significant mineral potential and diverse plants and animal species. Its suitability for various crops and livestock types also varies across ecological differences. In the lowland areas, pastoralism dominates while the highland areas grow various cash crops such as coffee and tobacco, and food crops such as maize, finger millet, *teff* (*Eragrostis teff* L. *Gramineae*), and barley. Areas with altitudes above 1800m a.s.l mostly grow these crops, while the lowland areas grow them to a lesser extent but mainly practice pastoralism.

Pastoralism is a production system that is adapted to an environment where there is limited rainfall—one that does not fully support settled agriculture. Mobility particularly enables pastoralists to opportunistically exploit diverse ecologies. In the past a common herd management strategy among the Guji was the seasonal movement of herds between lowland and highland areas. The opportunity to move between different geographical landscapes is reaffirmed by a complex set of social relations between residents of the different zones. These social ties are based on kinship (and clanship), marriage and friendship relations.

Even though the lowlanders depend on farming and herding, the latter is the predominant livelihood activity in the sites selected for this study (Finchawa and Burqitu). These sites were selected to incorporate ecological, economic, institutional, and political diversities that have impacts on pastoral livelihoods. Communal ownership of grazing lands and water, and a high dependence on customary institutions of resource access and management were practiced in these areas until gradually these institutions lost their significance. These institutions and the means of access to resources have undergone significant changes, and it is important to investigate how these changes have affected the rights women enjoyed under the customary system.

This paper is based on a fieldwork research conducted from July 2005 to June 2006 using participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, oral history, and case history methods. Thirty key informants for unstructured and semi-structured interviews and 60 households for the household survey were selected from the two research sites. Informants from different categories of the communities such as poor and wealthy agropastoralists and pastoralists, leaders, businessmen, women, and young people were interviewed to gain their insights on various issues. Overall, ten female-headed households for the household survey, and ten female informants for interviews were included to represent women's views.

Information on *gada* system was collected through key informant interviews to establish past and current social and political context of the Guji. Detailed data on local conflict, herd mobility, land tenure rules and access rights, and patterns of decision-making for communal resources at the community and inter-community levels were also collected in the same way. Archival research and oral history methods were employed to document local history. Information on households and gender relations was documented through combinations of methods such as household survey, interviews, and oral history.

## GUJI HOUSEHOLDS AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN

Guji women play an important role both in the household and in their society. This section analyzes changes in household organization and function and their implications for women's land and other economic rights. The discussion of households can also provide a background to women's social, cultural, and political rights.

The Guji social structure consists of *gosa* (clan) at the highest level and extends down to *mana* (lineage), *warra* (extended family), and *maatii* or *maayaa* (nuclear family). The latter consists of the husband, his wife (wives), and their children. *Warra* includes the brothers of the husband, his father and mother, and his brothers' children in addition to the nuclear family members. Forty percent of households consist of either the father or the mother of the household head<sup>(1)</sup> or of his spouse, and other members such as married sons and their wives. Table 1 below shows the distribution of these members among 24 of the 60 surveyed households.

**Table 1.** Households with Extended Family Members

Total Households with Extended Family Members	Relationship to the Household Head				
	Mother (M)	Father (F)	Brother (B)	Sister (Z)	Others (O)
24	16	6	3	3	19

Source: Household Survey

In each of the above households, there is a mother, a father, a brother, or a sister of the husband, referred to here as "dependants." The majority of the dependants are mothers (16), fathers (6), brothers (3), and sisters (3) of the household heads. Since the survey specifies only those directly related to the household head, there is no corresponding figure for wives' mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, and they are simply included in the category "Others." This category consists of all relatives of a wife living in a household and other distant relatives of both couples, as well as others recruited to a household through other mechanisms. All these different household members com-

bined together (19) are less than the number of husbands' relatives reported living as dependants, such as fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters (28). Particularly husbands' mothers are disproportionately represented in the non-nuclear family members, indicating their preference to live with their married sons than their married daughters, partly because of the residence pattern, i.e., patrilocality. Patrilocal residence pattern consolidates related male groups while it disperses females through marriage to 'outsiders'.

Marriage is considered an important institution through which complex relations are established with affinal groups, known as *sodda*, in-laws. Therefore, great care is taken in arranging marriages for sons and daughters. Virginity for girls is valued and any sexual relationship before marriage is discouraged. Contrary to this value system, extramarital relationships, known as *garayyu*, are encouraged after marriage. Couples take up residence with the men's parents and mostly stay in the same house, forming extended families. When couples wish to establish their own household, the boys' parents may give them some more livestock in addition to marriage gifts and their personal property. These gift animals create the basic economic foundation for Guji households.

A household is safeguarded against impoverishment and dissolution of a family through various social arrangements. Customarily in the Guji system, there was rarely *haadha-iyyeessaa*, female-headed households, because the widow inheritance system provided an opportunity for remarriage for all widowed women. When a man died, the culture required his elder brother to marry the deceased brother's wife (wives). Through this custom, the Guji society provided a family with adequate male labor and orphaned children with a social father. Due to the changed livelihood system<sup>(2)</sup> and the influence of Protestant Christianity, however, this practice has significantly decreased. Today there are many female-headed households. The survey study showed that female-headed households were 8% of the total households.

Female-headed households today lack male labor for farming and herding. If they remain single, they usually do not have the sufficient number of children<sup>(3)</sup> which agropastoralism requires. With expanding agriculture, households have to split labor between herding and farming. Because of the shortage of labor, female-headed households depend only on hand-hoes for farming and live in persistent food insecurity while male-headed households use hand-hoes as a supplement to ox-drawn farming. Hand-hoes may be used when the farmland is too hard to plow, when the location of the farmland is on the hill side, or when there is surplus labor in the household to assist oxen.

Guji households rarely recruit labor outside their clans. Therefore, households with labor deficits or those who could not have their own children choose to adopt from their clans, usually from *warra* members. Families who have no sons can adopt from *warra* members, known as *kenna*, a gift. The sons have all the rights, including inheritance from their adoptive fathers. *Guddisa* is a different form of gift where, if the child is a male, he helps his adoptive father with his labor and returns to his biological parents for marriage or, sometimes, before marriage. He takes all his *handhura*, gift cattle, and other properties with

him to his biological family. If the adoptive father is yet unable to have sons, he would continue living with him and inherits his property, a practice known as *boressa*. If the child is a female, she marries from the adoptive parents' house, but the husband goes to the biological father's house for *arara*, peace-making visits. The biological father also takes a heifer, which is given by the groom's parents.

While households with labor deficits recruit members in different ways as shown above, also various mechanisms existed to limit family size in the past. Earlier when pastoralism was the mainstay of the Guji households, delayed marriage was one of family planning mechanisms. Marriageable age was usually 30-40<sup>(4)</sup> for men and 18 for women as required by the *gada* rules. Moreover, women avoided sexual relationship with their husbands up to ten months after giving birth to a baby. If husbands attempted to sleep with their wives, this could be reported to elders as a wrongdoing. Customarily this was considered a transgression on women's rights. Thus, household size was kept to a minimum through this practice.

However, political factors have influenced the size of Guji households at various historical times. The tax system locally known as *dadha*, defined as groups using the same hearth, was imposed on each household during Menelik's imperial rule. To evade taxes, *warra* and clan members used to herd together and reside in the same house. This system not only changed the composition of households, but also the system of livestock and range management. Elders reported that this practice concentrated livestock on limited space and caused pastureland degradation. This shows the impact of external interventions on the local system of production and social organization, although its effect on gender relations is not clear from this assessment.

Similar impact is evident from the expanding market in the region since the mid-1930s, with noticeable consequence for gender differentiation. Before the beginning of the cash economy, there was little difference between husbands and wives in terms of control over family income. After all, the family asset mainly consisted of livestock, which were raised entirely for subsistence with a small number of animals for exchange. Men, however, controlled those animal exchanges, while butter (a medium of exchange for small items such as coffee, tobacco, and grains) was controlled by women. With the expansion of the use of money and markets, men started to control income from the increasing sale of animals, but butter lost its importance as a medium of exchange and became only a commodity that was bought and sold. After cultivation was started, men expanded their sphere of control to include grains, while women started selling milk in a parallel development. The sale of milk is said to have expanded during the Italian occupation (1936-1941).

Today the Guji household economy is based on the production of livestock and the sale of animals and their products, in addition to cultivation of grains. Food shortages are often mitigated through purchases. The Guji agropastoralists, unlike cultivators elsewhere in Ethiopia,<sup>(5)</sup> sell large numbers of livestock during the dry season when the milk supply is at its lowest. Small animals, such as

goats and sheep, are mostly sold to buy grains and supplement household consumption. Proceeds from sales of animal products are controlled by women, and this gives them some independence in the economic arena. Consequently, for women, the rising price of items they buy from the market is a priority concern as compared to men.

The management and sale of live animals, grains, and honey has continued to be the responsibility of men, while women control income from the sale of animal products such as milk and butter. However, the allocation of these incomes involves negotiations and bargaining between husbands and wives. For example, when a husband sells an animal, he gives the money to his wife and discusses with her how the money should be utilized. Part of the money could be allocated to buy a small animal as a replacement, while the remaining could be used for the purchase of grains, clothes, and animal licks. Failure to follow these conventions could result in a serious penalty from the clan court.

It is significant that the Guji devised a system where male dominance is mitigated through various mechanisms such as a system of appeal for women to the clan court. Domestic abuse and financial irresponsibility are considered serious allegations by the court. However, women's low status is perpetuated through various myths and fables.

#### QUEENS, KINGS, AND THE *GADA* ADMINISTRATION

There is a popularly known story about a legendary queen that ruled the Guji people with an iron fist. This story is also commonly told among other branches of the Oromo, such as the pastoral Borana group and other settled agriculturalists. The Guji version of the story is given as follows:

Akko Manoyye was one of the queens that ruled the Guji. During her rule, every task, including caring for children, was performed by husbands, and every decision was made by women. One day she ordered her people to bring a bag full of fleas, an order they were unable to carry out and, therefore, they consulted a wise poor man called Hiyyo Kulle. He told them to collect a bag full of donkeys' dung and spill it on the ground. They did it accordingly and the dung was filled with mosquitoes. The queen thought the mosquitoes were fleas and made another difficult directive, which was building a house on the air. Once again the people went to consult the poor man on how they would carry out the order. He told them to ask her to put up the door poles, which customarily is done by the owner of the house. When they asked her to do so, she knew that she was outmaneuvered and failed to respond to their request. The poor man continued to give advice to the people and told them to dig a deep hole, cover it with animal skin, and stand a seat on it for her. When she sat on the chair, she went down the hole, during which she uttered a message to women: 'sobi sobadhuu buli,' which

means ‘pretend to respect male authority.’ Following her death, according to the story, a man called Durii Dulloo became the first king.<sup>(6)</sup>

This story is remarkable in demonstrating to the Guji how the concentration of power in the hands of men is justified. It rationalizes the view that women are ineffective for politics and administration. The corrupt practices during the queen’s rule are dramatized in the story in order to justify the marginalization of women from the customary administration.

Guji women are aware of the potential legitimizing role of the myth and try to use it for their own empowerment in rituals and prayers. For example, when drought occurs, women gather under Mokkonnisa (*Croton macrostachys*) tree for prayers, known as *uuddoo afata*. They chant Oyoyo Garoyye, Akko Manoyye—the names of their legendary queens—and through them they ask their Waqa, Oromo Supreme God, for rains, whereas the male group prays directly to Waqa. It is said that the women make prayers under Mokkonnisa because Akko Manoyye was buried under that tree.

Consistent with Durkheim’s (1995) explanation of religion as “a society worshipping itself,” Guji women revere their legendary queens, who are believed once to have led them and, through them, they honor women as a community. They use Akko Manoyye as an intermediary between them and their Waqa because they find her attentive to their cause. Other stories tell that the kings that replaced the queens had not performed any better—although critics are less sharp against them—triggering a transition to the *gada* system.

## THE *GADA* SYSTEM AND WOMEN

The *gada* broadly encompasses the social, political, economic institutions of the Guji and other Oromo branches. Legesse (1973) correctly describes the term *gada* as a concept that stands for the whole way of life of the Oromo. Before the invention of the *gada* institution, according to the Guji tradition, five kings and five queens ruled their people. The transition to the *gada* system took place due to bad governance and widespread lawlessness under the queens and kings.

Queens and kings’ administrations were not effective to maintain peace and stability, and arbitrary measures became the rule rather than exceptions. They did not have *jaldhaba* and *wamura*, the two important structures for law enforcement under the *gada* system. In addition, there was population growth and territorial expansion, but kings and queens did not have effective control over the people in their enlarged territory. As the territories under the Guji increased, it became necessary to delegate power to the clans and to introduce the *gada* administration.

In the *gada* system, unmarried men are not allowed to become full members of the *gada jila*, the sacred journey during the power transfer; the *gada* grade of *kuusa* is constituted by unmarried young men and considered the most disrespected grade. Men attain their full status only after marriage. Even though women do not belong to the *gada* grades, they achieve those statuses through



their husbands. For example, both men and, consequently, their wives in the same *gada* grade have similar burial ceremonies,<sup>(7)</sup> according to the status of that particular grade.

Under the Guji *gada* system, the status of individuals during their lifetime is reflected through burial ceremonies and the burial ground assigned to the dead. Burials may take place from inside a home to some distance from the home, depending on the individual's status. When young children and people who are very old die, they are buried inside their homes to indicate their low status; the distance of the burial ground from the home increases with increasing status. This procedure applies to wives of men in different *gada* grades. Hinnant (1984: 806) also notes that "burial practices are partially dependent on the male *gada* system, and women are assigned burial categories based on the position of their husbands in that system." This practice enables Guji women to achieve some statuses in their society through their husbands which they cannot attain as women. In spite of the wide-ranging male dominance in the *gada*, women still hold an important position in the Oromo, in general, and in the Guji *gada* system, in particular.

Overall, women have active roles in ritual practice of the Guji society. Similar to the Borana (a related Oromo branch), however, men control the political spheres of their society. Legesse describes men and women's participation in political activities among the Borana (1973: 19-20) as follows:

Men are in control of military and political activities. Only men can engage in warfare. Only men take part in the elections of leaders of camps or of age-sets and *Gada* classes. Men lead and participate in ritual activities. However, ritual is not an exclusively masculine domain: there are several rituals performed for women. In these and a few other instances women do take an important part.

While men control the military and political spheres both among the Guji and Borana as described by Legesse, women play a significant role by contributing to peace process in their societies.

In Ethiopia, where conflict dominates the social and political history of the country, there is little effort to document the contribution of women to conflicts, relegating this to the domain of men, with the exception of some literature on Tigray women during the liberation war (Hammond, 1989) and those of Oromo women's involvement in the OLF struggle.<sup>(8)</sup> (Kumsa, 1998) Even these are documented within the context of civil wars and liberation movements and do not reflect women's customary role in low-scale conflicts between cultural and ethnic groups. More importantly, the literature on conflicts ignores their contribution to peace-making.

Conflicts and conflict resolutions have erroneously been perceived as the exclusive domain of males. Women may be actively involved in conflicts such as "providing crucial political support, access to centrally-placed regional political actors, courier services, [and] funding sources..." (Luckham et al., 2001:

43). While the Guji women also provide logistical support to their husbands during conflict, they are not directly involved in combat or in other “dangerous” activities such as hunting. Hunting, fighting, and participation in *gada* administration, which confer prestige and status to members, are dominated by male members. Nonetheless, women are marginally involved in these activities, and this is recounted in different myths and legends.

There is a story told about women warriors who failed to successfully carry out their mission in the past. The story goes that women fighters went to war in a group of ten. They raided animals and other belongings (*waatoo*, used for perfume) from the enemy and headed back to their camp. However, the enemy followed them to retrieve the raided animals and the *waatoo*. Then the commander of the squad ordered her troops as follows:

*Waatii buusi malee*  
*Waatoo hin buusin*

You can lose the animals to the enemy  
 But never let the *waatoo* go

The troops of women followed the order of their commander and surrendered the animals but retained the *waatoo*. On their way home, the commander suggested counting the troops to check if any of their members had died. The women took turns counting each other, but every one of them came up with only nine and reported one person missing. Finally, they wanted to be sure about their number and sought help from a man to count them. The man asked them to sit down, counted ten of them, and reported that no member had died. It is said that because of this incompetence, women were declared unfit for fighting.

This story stresses two areas of ineffectiveness during the conduct of the war: failure in counting the exact number of troop members and in making the wrong choice for perfumes over the important asset, the livestock. After this time, according to the story, women stopped going to war, but they continued helping their husbands with the necessary preparations when they go to war. A wife anoints her husband with butter when he goes to war, blesses him, “*Waaqni nagaan si galchu*,” meaning “*Waaqa* bring you back home safely,” and hands the spear over to him. When he comes back from the battlefield, she welcomes him and awards him her necklace. In the evening of that day, he sponsors a *kudha* ceremony, where he slaughters an animal and boasts of his bravery.

Another activity, which is considered no less significant than war as a male’s domain, is going to *foora*, satellite camp. *Foora* traditionally symbolized wilderness, where only male members ventured to go. They herded animals far away from home and protected them from raids and wild animals. Since women are excluded from these “dangerous” activities, they are rarely the direct victims of conflicts.

Both the Guji and the Borana do not target women during conflicts or raids,

although women are the ones who bear the brunt of conflicts, including the responsibility of bringing up children after the husband's death, especially with the declining practice of *dhaala*. Luckham notes that "conflict situations generally have important demographic impacts, with repercussions for poverty, deriving from an increase in female-headed households" (2001: 45). Therefore, they have a stake in maintaining peace with their neighbors and participate in conflict resolutions.

The most relevant role to the Guji women in conflict resolution is their involvement as a link between the opponents. The role of women in the peace-making process is enormous, especially in the conflicts that arise between the Borana and the Guji. Following major conflicts between them, the two groups have a cultural practice of sending peace messengers to the adversary group. The party first interested in peace sends a *lichoo*, a female peace envoy, to the *hayyu*, judge, of the opponent group. While traveling in the territory of the enemy, the custom confers respect to a *lichoo* and protects her from any harm.<sup>(9)</sup> Even if the adversary is on a war campaign, the group returns back at the sight of a *lichoo*. Sometimes men also are sent as *lichoo* for minor conflicts, but women are normally considered appropriate for serious conflicts. In general, the *lichoo* prepares grounds for major peace talk between two adversary groups, including fixing the venue for the meeting and reporting the process to their respective *hayyus*. The decisions of the assembly are reported by the *hayyu* to the *abba gada*, *gada* leaders, of the respective groups.

In addition to their participation in the peace process, women also take part in various rituals. Rituals are important elements for the transformation or integration of individuals into groups and reaffirmation of social arrangements. In this sense Guji women are effectively integrated into their society by fully participating in *gada* rituals. At the same time, they are kept distinct by rituals of womanhood, as when ululation differs for men and women at birth or *okee*<sup>(10)</sup> at marriage, and socially constructed division of labor.

## GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR

It is widely acknowledged that the ways in which women participate in productive activities affect their status and autonomy. The African experience shows that gender and household-level social relations determine the organization and control of productive resources (Berry cited in Schroeder, 1993: 350). As will be shown in this section, women are mostly limited to domestic tasks while men dominate those activities in the public domain.

Lowland Guji women perform wide-ranging activities from making coffee to constructing a house. Some of the routine tasks of women include preparing food, churning milk, collecting firewood, and fetching water. They also perform other tasks, such as caring for children, making beds, and milking cows (although the latter was performed by both genders in the past). They are also responsible for cleaning the house and *goree* (calves and goats' kraal) and all

residential areas, while it is the husband's duty to clean the larger kraal. There are also extra-domestic tasks that women perform, such as collecting firewood, mowing grass for house covering and for fodder, going to the market to sell animal products and purchase foodstuff, and others.

Although there is strict division of labor between the Guji women and men, this has changed over time. For example, earlier when pastoralism was their main activity, milking cows was the task of men, and women were responsible only for preserving and managing milk. With declining herd size and production of milk, men abandoned this activity. Household milk consumption has also significantly been reduced, and milk has increasingly become a commodity. In the past milk was used only for family consumption, but today, since production is limited, even the less preferred milk, *areera*, is sold at the market, and little is left for household consumption.

Fetching water is the exclusive task of women and this also was the case in the past. Occasionally, a husband may help his wife by fetching water when he is returning from watering livestock, especially if she is pregnant. However, girls provide greater service to their mothers in fetching water. If they are old enough, fetching water becomes girls' main responsibility. Small boys also do this task if there is a female labor shortage.

In general, women have little leisure time during the day, except soon after they have given birth to children. In earlier times, women were exempted from routine domestic and extra-domestic work for about six months after giving birth to children. On the other hand, there are several occasions for men to have free time with friends, especially on market days. In fact, market days determine the rhythm of Guji social life—meeting friends and kin groups, discussing social and political issues and, of course, selling and buying goods and services. While market days are important to meet daily necessities for women, men may simply visit markets to relax, without necessarily buying or selling.

The expansion of agriculture introduced new forms of cooperation between neighbors and additional domestic and extra-domestic tasks both for men and women. Since agriculture became part of their subsistence system, women began to prepare food when men were engaged in *goottalee*, work parties. They may also do agricultural work, such as weeding, either with their husbands, other family members or alone, when work parties are not formed. Carrying maize from the field to the storage facility is women's exclusive work. They also harvest *teff* (*Eragrostis teff* L. *Gramineae*) and barley, even though this is not their primary task. Before threshing, women have to make the threshing ground smooth with cattle dung, while threshing with sticks is the task of men.

Men's task has a seasonal nature; men become busy during the plowing and sowing seasons and they relax during the dry season. Unlike men, women remain busy throughout the year with routine domestic chores and agriculture-related activities although they have little control over agricultural products. Therefore, the expansion of agriculture increased women's work burden and reduced their control over resources.

## PROPERTY OWNERSHIP AND INHERITANCE

There has been a plethora of literature on the low status of pastoral and agro-pastoral women elsewhere in Africa (Coppock, 1994; Dupire, 1963). However, an increasing number of works have also recognized that pastoral women have more subtle rights and claims to family property than is immediately apparent (Coppock, 1994: 125; Hinnant, 1984; Hodgson, 2000). These observations are consistent with conditions of women among the Guji, where men dominate the political, economic, and social life of their society, but there is a room for negotiation for women at the same time. There are, for example, several cultural and ritual practices through which property is transferred to men and women.

Among the Guji, birth and marriage ceremonies are important events where children are granted property and symbolically assigned their gender roles. Preference for males in the Guji culture is apparent from the birth ceremony. Male children are preferred by parents at birth because it is believed that life is not possible without males in the pastoral system. The challenges of herding at distant places, where herders may face enemies, robbers, and raiders, can only be overcome by male members. Therefore, preference for males is expressed at birth through ululation (howling or wailing in jubilation), which is repeated four times for males and three times for females. Haberland (1963: 775) notes that “among most Ethiopian peoples the number four is the symbol for the masculine principle, and three the symbol of the feminine principle.”

Male children are given cows, known as *handhuura*, at birth. *Handhuura* means umbilical cord, which dries up in three days after birth and is fed to a cow chosen as a gift for the child. There is no *handhuura* for female children, but *hameessa*, a cow for temporary use of its products, may be given to girls when they grow up so that they can cover their petty expenses. They do not own the *hameessa* cows and return them to their parents during their marriage.

In a marriage proposal, women often are seen as passive actors where requests are made only by men. Hussein (2004: 108) states that among the Oromo “a man is deemed *fuudhe* (married) by virtue of his taking a woman to his homestead while the woman is deemed *heerumte* (been wedded) since she is taken away from her parental home.” Hussein also cites Sapiro and remarks that this passiveness shows that men are possessors while women are the possessed. Among the Guji, however, one of the four major marriage types, *addibaana*, empowers women and allows them to choose their partners.

Marriage among the Guji takes several forms, the most common practice being arranged marriage. Rituals performed following such marriages stress the role assignments given to the couples. A day after their marriage, the couple is told to practice *okee*, where the husband and wife go outside and return home, the husband carrying a spear and the wife carrying firewood and grass. Upon entering the house, she puts the firewood in the fire and the grass in front of calves. This symbolizes their future tasks, where the husband is responsible to protect the cattle from raiding and other enemies, and the wife is responsible

for homestead tasks. After this rehearsal, the boy's father guides the girl to the kraal and asks her to touch one of the cows with her *siiqo*, ritual stick, which henceforth is called *siiqo* and belongs to her. Going back to the house, the girl mixes her and the bridegroom's *miju* (marriage milk) and churns it, symbolizing the union of the two unrelated persons. If she happens to be a virgin, she is also given an additional cow known as *quuttoo*.<sup>(11)</sup>

If a girl is of an advanced age for marriage, she is entitled to choose her marriage partner. According to the *addibaana* rule, any girl who is unable to find a partner can move into the house of someone she loves and claim a marriage to him. Under the customary law, such proposals have to be accepted by the boy and his family.

Marriage is an important institution among the Guji that it is not allowed to terminate even when one of the partners dies. *Dhaala*, widow inheritance by the husband's brother, known in anthropology as liverate marriage, ensures the continuation of the marriage as well as the bonds with the affinal groups. Similarly, they practice sororate marriage, where girls inherit their sisters' husbands at their sisters' death. The reason behind these practices is to protect the property and provide children with a social father and mother from among close kin.

Divorce is discouraged both by the wife's and the husband's parents and every possible measure is taken to solve their problems. Divorce occurs under two conditions, (1) if her fortune turns out to be bad; and (2) if a serious misunderstanding between the couples occurs. For example, if the woman grinds her teeth with a grating noise while sleeping, it is believed to be bad fortune because the husband would die. Once this behavior is observed or reported by the husband, her parents are informed about the mishaps and discussions for divorce take place between the kin groups of the couples. Since the parents of the girl know the likely outcome of these bad omens, they accept the divorce without any preconditions. She would then take her own cow, *siiqoo*, which she was given upon marriage. No other sharing of property is involved because these behaviors are often revealed within a few months after marriage.

Misunderstanding between the wife and the husband could occur for various reasons. If the complaint comes from the wife, the husband is reprimanded as the first measure and, if he continues to mistreat her, he is flogged by his clan. If they see no improvement, the clan would put her in custody of one of the husband's brothers to control the property. Under such conditions, the husband cannot sell any property or expect any obligation from his wife except food. On the other hand, for alleged misconduct of a wife, a husband or the women's group of the man's clan might beat her. If this does not remedy the problem, divorce might be considered as the final resort.

An exception to divorce rules is when married women desert their husbands and choose to live elsewhere. In spite of the legal protection for women from the males' clan or lineage members, sometimes women may feel mistreated by their husbands. If repeated attempts to solve the problem fail, they flee to the neighboring groups where they are more valued. There is a widely held belief

by the Borana and the Guji that children born from mothers belonging to the opposite group will be strong fighters.

Widow inheritance has significantly reduced the number of female-headed households by providing widowed women with an opportunity for a second marriage. Arranged marriage also discourages divorce by allowing parents to have supervision over the couples. Among subsistence producers, female-headed households are the most disadvantaged in terms of resource and labor endowment. In fact, divorcees and widowed women are known as *hadha iyyessa*, poor women, among the Guji. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of *hadha iyyessa* in the Guji area as a result of the expansion of the Protestant Religion, which opposes the practice of *dhaala*. In this regard the influence of Protestant Religion is considerable.

Some studies indicate that couples' bargaining position is contingent upon the resources they bring into the marriages and the divisions of assets upon divorce (e.g., Thomas, Contreras, and Frankenberg cited in Fafchamps and Quissumbing, 2004). In cases where divorce takes place, women do not share any assets from their marriage. If this is considered as criteria for determining their bargaining position, Guji women would be the most disadvantaged. However, this is irrelevant to the situation among the Guji since divorce, as shown above, rarely occurs and the culture does not expect women to bring assets to their marriage. In addition, their bargaining power emerges not only from the assets they control, but also from the customary law as well as the security and protection provided by the males' patrilineage or clan members.

One of the major issues deliberated at clan meetings and tribunals concerns family disputes. In these contexts women are provided with a forum to expose their domestic and marital problems. Hinnant (1984: 805) reports that "quite often, the kinsmen find the husband at fault and reprimand him, even beat him if he does not heed repeated warnings." This practice provides a powerful bargaining position for women within the context of Guji social convention. There are also other cultural practices in place to ensure that women establish their own assets in several indirect ways.

Among the Guji, considerable energy and time is invested to ensure that customary procedures are followed during inheritance. While the father's brother is considered a legal custody holder of the property of his deceased brother and his family, the legitimate heir is, however, the elder son, the practice known in anthropology as primogeniture.<sup>(12)</sup> The elder son inherits the livestock, farmlands, the house, and, indeed, the social and political responsibilities held by his father. He presides over his sister's marriage negotiation, together with his paternal uncle, now his social father, and receives a heifer as other fathers do. The youngest son is the second beneficiary.

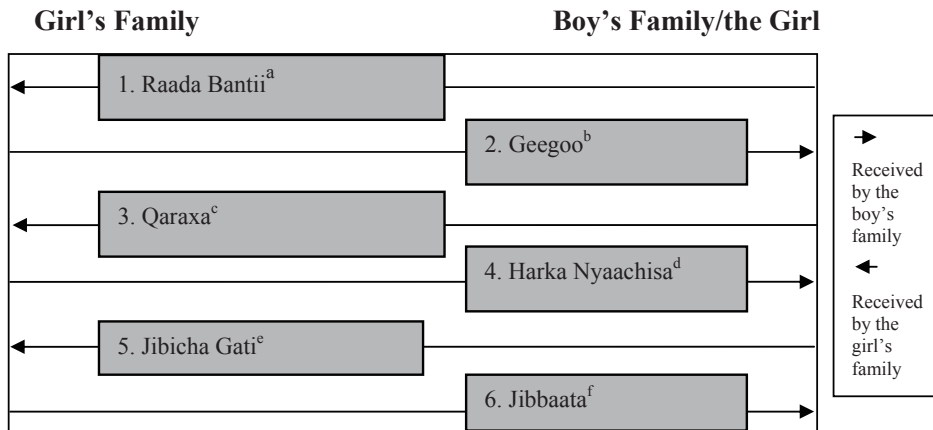
The elder son, after taking the larger share of the livestock and the farmlands, distributes the remaining to his younger brothers. Privately owned animals, such as *handhuura*, are not included in the sharing. What is evident from this inheritance practice is that the widowed mother and her female children are not culturally entitled to inheritance. However, the elder son is obliged to care

for his mother, while the younger sons who receive the smaller share of the property are not culturally obliged to care to their mothers, unless they want to. This observation is consistent with the survey result in Table 1 that shows more mothers living with their sons than with their daughters.

After taking the bulk of the family property, the elder son disposes of the livestock in various ways for matters related to ritual slaughtering, inheritances, and bridewealth payments. With regard to bridewealth payment, three animals are given to the mother’s family as the final payment of the bridewealth. When the payment is completed, after a husband’s death or before, the woman refuses to visit or eat anything from her parental house, as part of the avoidance rule. This is because she considers that now she is completely “sold-out.” To remove the avoidance rule, the parents of the woman slaughter a bull and invite her to their house, known as *harka nyachisa*, which literally means eat out of the hand, and returns back with a gift of a heifer or a cow, known as *gego*. Meanwhile the deceased man’s sister receives a cow, known as *jibbata* from her nephew.

If we look at the exchanges of livestock, as described above, that takes place between in-laws, we find that finally they cancel each other out. The woman’s family receives three animals—*rada banti*, marriage gift (a heifer given to the girl’s family for her virginity), *qaraxa*, a bridewealth received by the girl’s

**Fig. 1.** Animal gifts and exchanges involving marriage (Bridewealth) and inheritance



Source: Developed from Fieldwork Interviews

- a. A heifer given to the girl’s family for her virginity.
- b. A gift of a heifer or a cow to a married daughter.
- c. A bridewealth received by the girl’s brother.
- d. Sacrificial animal in exchange for receiving a bridewealth.
- e. A bridewealth received by the girl’s father.
- f. A cow received by a daughter as a share of her father’s property.



brother (a heifer), and *jibicha gati*, a bridewealth received by the girl's father (a bull)— generally known as *gatii hadha*, bridewealth, literally mother's price, during and long after marriage. These three animals would in the meantime be received back by the couple in different ways: as *gego* (a heifer or a cow), as *jibbata* (a cow received as a share of her father's property), and the bull that is slaughtered as *harka nyachisa*. This indicates that bridewealth in Guji is symbolic and serves as an investment in long term relationships. The Guji say, "*intalti duutef soddummaan hin bahu*," meaning "the death of a wife does not end the ties with in-laws."

These six bridewealth and inheritance animals, generally known as *ja'an jabbi qaraxa*, are gifts and exchanges, as well as sacrificial animals that involve marriage. *Gego* and *jibbata* can also be considered as women's inheritance of their parents' property.

The forgoing discussions have shown that there are several cultural and ritual mechanisms through which women in Guji may acquire personal/private property. Marriage gifts such as *siqqo* and *quuttoo*, and other indirect forms of inheritance from their parents' property, such as *gego* and *jibbata*, are a few of these mechanisms.

It is not clear to what extent animal assets and other personal possessions brought to a marriage by women contribute to their bargaining power among the Guji. Even in agricultural areas of Ethiopia where private control of resources appears a determinant of bargaining power, the relationship is weak. For example, Fafchamps and Quisumbing (2004: 15) show that assets held in sole ownership by the wife during marriage do not raise her bargaining power since it is likely to be shared equally between spouses upon no-fault divorce. In addition, resources brought to marriages are mostly controlled by household-heads, who are almost always males.

Among the sedentarized communities in southern Ethiopia, statutory laws have a stronger presence than in pastoral areas, and in most areas they have almost entirely replaced customary laws. This has not necessarily improved women's status; it might have made it worse by eliminating some important customary economic securities and customary legal protections. Gopal and Salim report that in Ethiopia "neither rape nor abduction [is] punishable by law if the victim 'freely' contracts a valid marriage with the abductor" (cited in Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2002: 78). No such crimes are tolerated where customary laws still operate. For example, among the Guji the customary law protects girls against any sexual predation. Transgression against such law is punishable by a fine of 30 animals and exclusions from social relationships.

Where communal ownership is emphasized, animal gifts received during marriage or otherwise might not be more than additions to the family herd. Among the Guji customary legal restrictions are so high that both men and women cannot easily dispose of their assets. To sell animals that they have received as gifts, wives have to obtain their husbands' approval. Similarly, husbands cannot sell any animal belonging to their households without due discussions with their wives and their approvals. However, men have more leverage from elders and

clans to break the rules than women do.

Women not only negotiate the sale of family herds but also make decisions on how the money should be allocated for different family needs, and even how herds should be managed. During seasonal food shortages, she suggests the sale of animals to buy food grains. If pastures are degraded, she suggests migration to other areas where pastures are plenty. With changes from communal ownership of land and production of livestock to exclusive land rights and agropastoralism, women have lost some of these rights.

## LAND TENURE CHANGE AND WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

The land tenure system among the Guji has undergone several important changes and women have lost some rights they had over resources under the customary system. The transformation from pastoralism to agro-pastoralism means a shift from herd-owning to farmland-owning, which currently is under state control. In other words, communal ownership of lands combined with family-based herds guaranteed the rights of pastoralist men and women in the past. The "ownership" part has been lost in the transformation because land currently belongs to the government. Its implication for gender relations can be seen in terms of its impact on the socially constructed idea of a public/domestic dichotomy and its contribution to subsistence economy.

The increasing transformation of the livelihood system from pastoralism to crop production has increased women's burden and has taken away what little rights they had under a pastoral way of life. Flintan (2003: 8) aptly captures these changes and their effects on pastoralist women in Ethiopia:

Women have suffered disproportionately from the increasing shift of control over land from community-based ownership to smaller male-dominated elites. Privatisation of property has broken down the support mechanisms that helped poor households by providing gifts and loans of livestock in times of need. Cooperative work groups, upon which women particularly depended for access to additional labour, have also broken down. Thus, women are suffering from loss of animals, labour and land.

It also means that women are persistently losing the control they exercised over livestock products. Cereals are mostly controlled by men, even though their production involves women more than pastoralism. Lastarria-Cornhiel (1997: 1318) compares women, who work family land over which they do not have ownership, with sharecroppers.

The recent land certification scheme, authorized by Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation no. 456/2005, although not yet implemented in pastoral areas, would undoubtedly worsen women's land rights. Regarding women's entitlement to land under the new law, article 5 (1c) states that "women who want to engage in agriculture shall have the right to get and use rural land," but it is not stated in the law if women have the same right to engage in pastoralism.

In addition, given the controversial nature of land titling regarding its impact on women's access to land, clearer statements need to be included. From this provision it is not clear whether joint or private titling would be carried out for husbands and wives.

Article 6(4) of the proclamation states that "where land is jointly held by husband and wife or by other persons, the holding certificate shall be prepared in the name of all the joint holders." This statement is seemingly perceptive of women's rights, but actually it merely confirms men's *de facto* control. Joint holding of land by husband and wife, if any, exists in farming areas, but certainly not in pastoral areas.

Beginning in January 2005, the certification process has been implemented in farming areas, although there is no clear procedure how certificates might be given to individuals in pastoral areas, where land is communally owned. It is yet to be seen whether *de facto* exclusive land rights (where this has already emerged) would be recognized or land redistribution implemented. Either way, it will be detrimental to pastoral livelihood, and even more so to women's land rights. Where land titling has been implemented in Africa, the result was often dispossession of women's right to land. Such measures suspend diverse claims to a particular piece of land, which individuals had under the customary system. Lastarria-Cornhiel (1997: 1326) argues that:

While under customary tenure different persons held different rights to a piece of land, titling and registration gives just one of those persons absolute and exclusive right to that land. Usually, women lose access or cultivation rights, while male household heads have strengthened their hold over the land.

Female-headed households benefit even less from the expanding agriculture and increasing land tenure change. Studies in Africa demonstrate that privatization of land privileges certain groups such as community leaders and household heads to the detriment of women and some minority groups (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997: 1318). Divorced or widowed women are constrained by multiple factors such as prevailing gender ideologies, lack of bargaining power in the public sphere controlled by men, and lack of male labor. Access to land, which requires clearing new fields and lobbying elders or Peasant Association (PA) officials for lands, remains in the male domain and it is simply inaccessible to females. Confirmation of household *de facto* control of land, therefore, only strengthens males' and politically dominant individuals' land possession.

## CONCLUSION

The social and political history of the Guji-Oromo society demonstrates turbulent social changes in the past until the transition to the *gada* administration occurred. The analysis of myths and legends sheds light on the gendered

politics and power struggle between men and women. The *gada* system, albeit dominated by males, seems to have provided solutions for the problem of governance that characterized the Guji society before its invention. The analysis of recent changes demonstrates that customary laws and institutions provided protections for women much better than statutory laws have delivered.

Past academics constructed and perpetuated the image of pastoral society as essentially patriarchal. This position is misleading without considering the socio-political changes that have affected pastoralists. Colonialism and political incorporations into nation-states in Africa have strengthened gender gap among African societies. The Guji case shows how women lost much of their customary rights with the increasing loss of their cultural autonomy and property rights. Contrary to conventional expectations, settled farming, which has been encouraged by Ethiopian governments, has increased women's work burden and eliminated their customary rights.

#### NOTE

- (1) Although ten female-headed households have been recorded through the household survey, none of them consisted of extended households, and only male-headed households are included in Table 1.
- (2) One of the requirements for widow inheritance is migration of a family as a whole, which today has become impossible to maintain due to the expansion of agriculture and restrictions on mobility.
- (3) Customarily children born to single mothers are considered illegitimate, and this perception is strengthened by the patrilineal ideology which stresses inheritance and lineage through the father's line. Having children under such circumstances has a structural implication since children cannot trace their descent back to any particular clan or lineage.
- (4) *Gada* rule doesn't allow members to marry and sire children before the *raba* grade which theoretically is attained at the age of 32. Practically, however, one may enter the *raba* grade much earlier or later due to the logic of generation grading, i.e., sons enter a grade five grades after their fathers.
- (5) For cultivators food shortage occurs during the wet season during which grains are in short supply and, therefore, the animals are sold to purchase food grains.
- (6) There is a conflicting story told about who was the first king. Some stories refer to Hiyyo Kulle, the poor wise man who orchestrated the death of the last queen, as the first king.
- (7) Burial ceremony among the Guji reflects individual's status in the *gada* grades during his/her lifetime.
- (8) For review of literature on women and their social and political role in Ethiopia, see Bizuneh (2001).
- (9) A *lichoo* carries a whip while travelling in the territories of an enemy, and this symbolizes that she is a peace messenger.
- (10) See p. 19 for the discussion of *okee* ritual during marriage and its cultural interpretation. During birth the number of times women ululate to celebrate the birth of a child depends on the gender of the child.
- (11) *Quuttoo*, an animal gift which is given to a girl for her virginity, is different from *raada banti*, an animal gift to a girl's family for the same reason.

- (12) The inheritance system in Guji refuses easy categorization into primogeniture which, at first glance, seems the case. The primogeniture prescribes the inheritance of property and office by the elder son (remember that no preference is given to elder sons in succession to *gada* office).

## REFERENCE

- Berisso, T. 2002. Modernist dreams & human suffering: Villagization among the Guji Oromo. In (W. James, D.I. Donham, E. Kurimoto & A. Triulzi, eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, pp.117-132. Ohio University Press, Ohio.
- Bizuneh, B. 2001. Women in Ethiopian history: A bibliographic review. *Northeast African Studies*, 8(3): 7-32.
- Coppock, L. (ed.) 1994. *The Borana Plateau of Southern Ethiopia: Synthesis of Pastoral Research, Development and Change, 1980-91*. ILCA (International Livestock Centre for Africa), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Dupire, M. 1963. The position of women in a pastoral society. In (D. Paulme, ed.) *Women of Tropical Africa*, pp. 47-92. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Durkheim, E. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields. The Free Press, New York.
- Fafchamps, M. & A. Quisumbing 2002. Control and ownership of assets within rural Ethiopian households. *Journal of Development Studies*, 38(6): 47-82.
- 2004. *Assets at Marriage in Rural Ethiopia*. FCND Discussion Paper No. 185. Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, International Food Policy Research Institute.
- Flintan, F. 2003. *Women's Land Rights in Pastoral Communities (Ethiopia)*. Report of the FAO/Oxfam GB workshop on women's land rights in Southern and Eastern Africa, June 17-19, 2003. Pretoria, South Africa.
- Haberland, E. 1963. *Galla Sud-Athiopiens*. W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.
- Hammond, J. 1989. *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women*. Third World First, Oxford.
- Hinnant, J. 1984. *The Position of Women in Guji Oromo Society*. Proceedings of the 8th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Hodgson, D. 1999. Pastoralism, patriarchy and history: Changing gender relations among Maasai in Tanganyika, 1890-1940. *Journal of African History*, 40: 41-65.
- 2000. *Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa: Gender, Culture & the Myth of the Patriarchal Pastoralist*. James Currey, Oxford.
- Hussein, J. 2004. A cultural representation of women in the Oromo society. *African Study Monographs*, 25(3): 103-147.
- Kumsa, K. 1998. Oromo women and the Oromo national movements: Dilemmas, problems, and prospects for true Liberation. In (A. Jalata, ed.) *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*, pp. 153-182. The Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, N.J. and Asmara.
- Lastarria-Cornhiel, S. 1997. Impact of privatization on gender and property rights in Africa. *World Development*, 25(8): 1317-1333.
- Legesse, A. 1973. *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*. Free Press, New York.
- Luckham, R., I. Ahmed, R. Muggah & S. White 2001. *Conflict and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Assessment of the Issues and Evidence*. IDS Working Paper 128.
- Obi, C. 2005. *Environmental Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Political Ecology of Pow-*

- er and Conflict*. UN Research Institute for Social Development, Civil Society and Social Movements Programme, Paper No. 15, January 2005.
- Olmstead, J. 1975. Farmer's Wife, Weaver's wife: women and work in two southern Ethiopian communities. *African Studies Review*, 18(3): 85-98.
- Schroeder, R. 1993. Shady practice: Gender and the political ecology of resource stabilization in Gambian garden/orchards. *Economic Geography*, 69(4): 349-365.

——— Accepted November 25, 2008

Author's Name and Address: Dejene Negassa DEBSU, *Department of Anthropology, Miami University, 64B Upham Hall Oxford, OH 45056, USA.*  
E-mail: [debsudn@muohio.edu](mailto:debsudn@muohio.edu)