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Inter-Ethnic Relationships in a Coffee-Growing Community: A Case Study of Gomma *wäräda*, Southwestern Ethiopia

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Gomma is located at the heart of the coffee-growing region in southwestern Ethiopia. Since the beginning of the 20th cent., immigrants have increasingly fled to this area in search of fertile land to produce coffee, a precious cash crop. While some Amhara had established private plantations since the 1950s, ethnic groups from the south, especially Dawro and Konta, have migrated as seasonal coffee pickers and begun to settle down since the Derg era. This paper shows that some settlers have successfully raised their status during the last several decades, and that those newly-arrived outsiders have played a significant role in the region's socio-economic life. Moreover, the ethnic boundaries have recently begun to be more and more fluid mainly because of inter-ethnic marriages. By examining language use and religious conversion, I argue that this ethnic fluidity is made more obvious by the close interactions in the rural community, rather than those in the town. Ethnicity in rural communities is currently in a dynamic process of dissolution and reconfiguration.

Introduction

The issue of ethnicity is still the subject of intense debate in Ethiopia. In the 1990s, under the EPRDF government, the ethnic federalization gave rise to a new situation in rural societies as well as in politics among the central and regional governments. The changes of ethnic relationships that the rural societies have experienced in the 20th cent. have varied by regions. The purpose of this paper is to examine the inter-ethnic relationships in a coffee-growing community, which is an attractive location that draws a large number of immigrants from various areas.

The study area is located in the northern part of the Gomma *wäräda* in the Jimma zone, Oromia Regional State, which is not only known as the center of coffee production in southwestern Ethiopia, but also as the origin of *Coffea arabica*. I have conducted the fieldwork for 12 months in total, between 1998 and 2003, at Qomba village in Gabane Abo *qäbäle*, and at the Gomma II coffee plantation, which is adjacent to that of *qäbäle*. According to the national census in 1994, the population of Qomba was 1,987, with 451 households, and the numbers of workers living in Gomma II was 2,189 (CSA 1996:87). Table 1 shows the ethnic composition of household heads living in ten Qomba settlements from October to November 2002¹.

¹ This ethnic composition is not based on the people's declarations of ethnic identity, but on the interviews with well-versed informants in each settlement. I asked several persons about the ethnic background of each household's heads and cross-checked this information. The 404 households I surveyed are approximately 90 % of all households in Qomba.

Table 1: The ethnic composition of household head's in Qomba (n = 404 households)

Ethnic group	Gomma Oromo	Other Oromo	Amhara	"Kullo" (Dawro-Konta)	Gurage	Kaffa	Other groups*	Mixed parentage**
Number	145	101	72	32	15	8	8	20
(%)	(36.2)	(25.2)	(18.0)	(8.0)	(3.7)	(2.0)	(2.0)	(5.0)

* "Other groups" includes some ethnic groups such as Kambata, Walaita, and Tigre;

** "Mixed parentage" means that the parents came from different ethnic groups.

It is true that more than half of the population is Oromo (61.4 %), but more than a few of the Oromo came from other areas (25.2 %) like Shoa, Ilubabor, Wälläga and the nearby Gibe areas. In this paper, "Gomma Oromo" indicates the native Oromo people who can trace their clan origin to the Gomma monarchy era from the 18th to 19th cent.; and "other Oromo" refers to those who migrated to Gomma area during the 20th cent. The third largest ethnic group are the Amhara (18 %). The fourth group, "Kullo", is an appellative name used in this area for certain ethnic groups such as the Dawro and Konta (8.0 %), which are not distinguished by the local people. The relationships between these ethnic groups have varied across the ages. In this paper, I examine not only such a historical change of ethnic relationships, but also analyze the current dynamic situation in the community.

Historical Background of the Immigration Process

In my research village, until the end of the 19th cent., the Oromo had occupied a large part of the land including the nearby forest areas. At the beginning of the 20th cent., the Oromo monarchy of the Gomma Kingdom fell under the rule of Menelik II (r. 1889–1913)². In 1907, an Amhara noble, *däggazmač* Wossene, became the governor of the Gomma area and took over most of the "land of forest" (*lafa badda*), which covered the west part of Qomba. He claimed the tax payments of the Oromo peasants – who were dispersed and lived on 86 *gašša* land – and finally confiscated the land. It is said that about 300 peasants became the tenants of this governor at that time.

This "land of forest" in Qomba was inherited by *däggazmač* Wossene's sons and grandsons, and certain portions were given to some of his followers. It was a grandson, *fitawrari* Gebre Kristos, who first opened a private plantation with waged laborers in Qomba³. In 1959/60 (1952 E.C.), he transformed this land to a commercial farm of maize and coffee by expelling a large number of peasants. In the late 1960s, several other Amhara, working as local government officials in Agaro, acquired the government's lands and began to establish coffee plantations. Whereas local farmers were employed as waged

² In 1882, Gomma kingdom surrendered to *ras* Gobana, who was an Oromo general of Menelik, without any resistance and began to pay tribute to the Shoan state (GULUMA GEMEDA 1984:159f.). In 1886, the first Shoan governor, *däggazmač* Bashah Aboyye, was appointed and sent to Gomma with his soldiers to incorporate this area into the empire.

³ GULUMA GEMEDA (1994) describes the life of Gebre Kristos as one of the new coffee growers that appeared in 1950s and 1960s in the Jimma-Limmu area of the Gibe region. Gebre Kristos developed his plantation into a profitable enterprise and, in the middle of the 1960s, established the "Gomma Coffee Farmers' Cooperative" with other coffee growers, aiming to protect the interests of the farmers against the state and coffee merchants (GULUMA GEMEDA 1994:727).

laborers, many people – mainly from the south such as Walaita, Kambata, Dawro and Konta – were sometimes forcefully recruited, and began to work on the plantations as seasonal coffee pickers.

After the 1974 revolution, all of these plantations were confiscated under the newly established Derg government, which nationalized all rural land, and then transformed it into a state coffee farm, Gomma II. In the mid-1980s, as the state farm began to expand its coffee cultivating area, many farmers were forced to leave their homestead. The expansion of the state farm and the rise in value of coffee as an export crop caused a further arrival of immigrants. Above all, we should note that many coffee pickers came from specific ethnic groups, such as the Dawro and Konta.

In order to research the immigration process, I conducted a sample survey on when 122 household heads in six settlements of Qomba moved to this area. The results, shown in table 2, reveal that about 30 % of them arrived during the Derg era. It also suggests that the immigration of Amhara and Oromo from other areas was dominant during the Haile Selassie era, while “Kullo” (Dawro and Konta) from the south increased in the Derg era. Back in the 1960s as well, some “Kullo” people used to come to this area for the seasonal work of coffee picking in the peasants’ coffee plots. In those days, however, such migrant workers from the south did not settle in the village, but returned back to their homeland at the end of the coffee season. It was during the Derg era that certain “Kullo” began to acquire lands in the village and settle down. At the beginning, the state farm offered them houses and some small plots of crop fields in the workers’ village. After earning a certain amount of money, they finally bought lands in Qomba from local peasants. The state farm, it can be said, provided “Kullo” with the opportunity to settle down in this coffee-rich area.

An Oromo peasant said, “In the Derg time, landless tenants got lands and many newcomers began to settle down in Qomba. Some Oromo sold their lands to Kullo for money. Amhara chairmen of PA gave lands to peoples other than Oromo. Nowadays, Qomba is no longer an Oromo land.” The influx of migrants, which had slowly started at the first half of the 20th cent., was accelerated after the revolution. In that process, the main group of immigrants has changed from the northerners, who mainly consisted of the landlords’ class in the Haile Selassie era, to the southerners who started their life as waged laborers of the state farm in the Derg era.

Table 2: The time frame of the arrivals for different ethnic groups (n = 122 households)

Ethnic Group	Born in Qomba		Haile Selassie era (1930–74)		The Derg era (1974–91)		The EPRDF era (1991–)	
	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)
Gomma Oromo	58	(87 %)	3	(15 %)	3	(9 %)	–	(0 %)
Other Oromo	2	(3 %)	7	(35 %)	10	(29 %)	–	(0 %)
Amhara	5	(7 %)	7	(35 %)	3	(9 %)	–	(0 %)
“Kullo” (Dawro-Konta)	–	(0 %)	2	(10 %)	10	(29 %)	–	(0 %)
Others*	2	(3 %)	1	(5 %)	8	(23 %)	1	(100 %)
Total	67	(100 %)	20	(100 %)	34	(100 %)	1	(100 %)

Note * “Others” relates to ethnic groups such as Kaffa, Kambata, Tigre, Walaita and Gurage.

Ethnic Relationships in Socio-Economic Life

The increase of immigration to this coffee-growing village has made an impact on the economic class formation and the social status structure within the community. As noted above, during the Haile Selassie regime, the newly-arrived Amhara landlords and some Amhara government officials had an economic advantage by acquiring large amounts of land, though many local Oromo landlords still occupied a substantial amount of the land⁴. These landlords, however, lost most of their lands by the socialist policies in the Derg era, and the question now arises: which ethnic group now holds an economically dominant position in this coffee-growing community?

I investigated the land area of farmers' households in Qomba from the land tax register and it revealed that no Gomma Oromo farmers are ranked within the eight largest landholders. Although the descendant of an Amhara landowner still owns a large amount of land, in spite of the land redistribution policy during the Derg, there are many successful settlers who came to this area before and during the Derg era as landless tenants or domestic laborers. Those farmers have expanded their lands through various ways. For example, some had expanded their lands whilst serving as chairmen of Peasant Associations during the Derg regime. Several large landholders also earned money through other businesses ventures, such as: a coffee trader, a moneylender and a mill owner. In terms of the landholding, the successful settlers who had been landless until the Derg era are now in a superior position. They all play a significant socio-economic role as dominant coffee producers of the region or influential entrepreneurs.

Table 3: Average land area of each ethnic group's households (n = 217 households)

Ethnic group	Gomma Oromo	Other Oromo	Amhara	"Kullo"	Gurage	Others
Average land area (ha)	0.727	0.770	0.989	0.339	0.393	0.723

Source: this land area is calculated on the figures of the *qābāle* document on land tax register.

Table 3 shows the average land area held by each ethnic group's household⁵. According to the data, the average land areas owned by families of smaller groups such as "Kullo" and Gurage are only half the size of those owned by other groups. This implies that the latecomer immigrants like the "Kullo" are economically in an inferior position as landless tenants or day workers. The local farmers usually hire them for various purposes such as coffee picking, weeding, maize harvesting, house construction and fence building. Their work force has become indispensable in this coffee-growing community.

However, some of them have other functions within the community. In Qomba, there are two magicians (*tānq'ay*), one male and one female. Both of them are said to be "Kullo". Moreover, out of seven magicians in adjacent villages, four are "Kullo", two are Amhara, and one is Arsi Oromo. It should be noted that they are not the local Gomma Oromo, but

⁴ GULUMA GEMEDA (1996:56–59) pointed out that in the Gibe region, especially in Gomma where the Oromo rebellion seriously threatened the Shoan soldiers in the late 1880s, the governor tried to integrate the indigenous elite into the administration of the region. As a result, the Oromo landlords remained strong and acted as important intermediaries between the settler soldiers and the peasantry.

⁵ These figures include only the farmers' households living in ten settlements of Qomba, but not plantation waged workers. Most of the waged workers have no land other than that upon which their houses are built.

outsiders. Those magicians play a significant role within the rural society in healing the sick, settling disputes and solving the mysteries of one's misfortune. People say that the "Kullo" magicians have an especially strong magic power. Strangers who came from the remote south seem to invoke the people's fear. This fear to the "Kullo" is a reminder of the potential tensions between ethnic groups in the community. An old Oromo farmer said, "Formerly, there were not so many magicians around here. Since lots of Kullo came, Qomba has begun to be flooded with bad things (like magic and sorcery)." The rise of magic might be closely related to the fact that more and more immigrants have flowed into the community, and as a result its conventional social order has been compelled to change. A "Kullo" magician in Qomba, for instance, first arrived as a landless waged worker of the state farm during the early Derg period, and then became a magician some years later. He recently built a big tin-roofed house and became the owner of a *täggi bet* (a bar that sells "honey wine").

In the multi-ethnic community, two types of outsider play significant but differing socio-economic roles. One is the successful large landholder who retains a dominant economic power, and the other is the "Kullo" who play an important role as day workers and magicians. It may be argued that the indigenous social structure of the local Oromo has been continuously challenged and transformed by these outsiders, who are no longer *marginal* people in this community.

Dissolution and Reconfigurations of the Ethnic Boundaries

Because these outsiders have been deeply involved with the area's socio-economic life, the ethnic boundaries have become more and more fluid. In fact, nowadays, ethnic identity is often a fragile issue in Qomba. This mainly because inter-ethnic marriage has recently become rather common. Table 4 shows the number and percentage of inter- and intra-ethnic marriages in ten settlements of Qomba. There are some variations in the marriage patterns between the ethnic groups.

First of all, the local Gomma Oromo men usually get married to Gomma Oromo women (73.7 %). This could be due to the fact that the Gomma Oromo people consider the partner's clan to be significant for their marriage. The clan names of the Gomma Oromo are well known and shared among the people, but this is not the case with other ethnic groups. It is quite rare for Gomma Oromo men to marry "Kullo" women (1.8 %). Secondly, while more than 80 % of Oromo men coming from other areas marry Oromo women, including Gomma Oromo (83.3 %), Amhara men do not exclusively marry Amhara women. Out of all marriages involving Amhara men, 59.3 % of them marry women of other ethnic groups. Above all, it is notable that marriage between Amhara men and "Kullo" women is far from negligible (24.1 %). Because men do not have to pay any kind of bride price to the wives' family – in most cases "Kullo" women work as seasonal workers to free the men from any dowry obligations – the marriage with "Kullo" women can be seen as a "cheap" alternative. In this environment, the Christian Amhara are more likely to marry Christian "Kullo" women as opposed to Muslim Oromo. People often say, "Kullo women are all good housewives, because they work very hard." This statement could be considered justification for inter-ethnic marriage, which was not so commonly observed formerly. Thirdly, most of the "Kullo" men marry "Kullo" women (80 %), although the men of other minority groups such as Kaffa and Gurage are not limited to such intra-ethnic marriage. This fact implies a significant difference of social status between the "Kullo" and

other ethnic groups. While Amhara men have a variety of options for their marriage partners, “Kullo” men have no choice but to marry “Kullo” women.

Despite all these tendencies, it is apparent that inter-ethnic marriage nowadays is far from an extraordinary phenomenon. As table 1 shows, the percentage of household head's with mixed parentage is only 5 %. This percentage, however, will by all means increase in the next generation. Even if Gomma Oromo and other Oromo are considered an ethnic group, more than 25 % of all couples are now in inter-ethnic marriages, and their children's ethnic identity becomes more and more ambiguous. In a case of a young man in his twenties, whose grandfather was Kaffa, grandmother Tigre and his mother Dawro, he once declared himself as “Tigre”. But when he told me this, one of his friends denied it and called him a “Kaffa”. It seems to me that he himself did not believe he was a “real” Tigre (I would argue that this informant's ethnic identity is contested, however the notion of contested ethnic identity is a subject for further research).

Table 4: The number and percentage of inter- and intra- ethnic marriages (n = 272 couples)*

Husband's ethnic group	Wife's ethnic group					
	Gomma Oromo	Other Oromo	Amhara	“Kullo”	Kaffa	Gurage
Gomma Oromo	84 (73.7 %)	20 (17.5 %)	7 (6.1 %)	2 (1.8 %)	–	1 (0.9 %)
Other Oromo	32 (44.4 %)	28 (38.9 %)	4 (5.6 %)	5 (6.9 %)	1 (1.4 %)	2 (2.8 %)
Amhara	10 (18.5 %)	9 (16.7 %)	22 (40.7 %)	13 (24.1 %)	–	–
“Kullo”	1 (6.7 %)	–	–	12 (80.0 %)	2 (13.3 %)	–
Kaffa	–	2 (22.2 %)	2 (22.2 %)	3 (33.3 %)	1 (11.1 %)	1 (11.1 %)
Gurage	1 (12.5 %)	2 (25.0 %)	2 (25.0 %)	–	–	3 (37.5 %)

* Source: the household survey that I conducted in ten settlements of Qomba from October to November 2002

After the decentralization of language education was implemented, Oromiffa replaced Amharic as the principal teaching language in the Oromia Region. The children had to learn Oromiffa at school even if they had never spoken it before. At the same time, in order to move on to higher education, all students in this region must take an exam in which Oromiffa forms an important part. In terms of language, it is likely that a sort of “Oromization” might be advanced in the future. This circumstance, however, is not necessarily peculiar to the recent phenomenon.

I investigated the people's language skills by collecting data from 151 Oromo and non-Oromo villagers living in a settlement of Qomba. Whilst more than half of the Oromo females at aged 40 or over cannot speak Amharic at all, every Oromo male at age 20 or over can speak both Amharic and Oromiffa. It might be essential for adult men to speak Amharic, which is frequently spoken in various social environments. At the same time, non-Oromo men also need to speak Oromiffa. Most non-Oromo men and women at age 20 or over can speak Oromiffa to some extent. It may be argued that people in a multi-ethnic rural community, especially adult men, have to be multilingual in order to advance in their social life by communicating with other ethnic groups. You can find in a share-

ride car or in the home of a deceased man's family, that people can switch their languages quickly between Amharic and Oromiffa.

Because the official language in this area is now Oromiffa, people are expected to speak in Oromiffa at *qäbäle* assemblies. More and more people should now be able to speak Oromiffa than ever before. However, because of the fact that most elder non-Oromo people can speak Oromiffa, this tendency is not confined to the current situation, but it might have been the case even before and during the Derg era in which the common language was Amharic. The ability to speak Oromiffa can sometimes be a crucial tool for survival in rural communities. Once I observed an interesting case, in which an old poor Amhara woman begged taro from an Oromo farmer. She explained in Oromiffa how she was in difficulty without any food. Then when she finally got something from him, she expressed her pleasure with a traditional Oromo phrase, *Abbaiyyoo yaa Boranii akka ajeesan koranii* ('Just as our Borana ancestor killed [an animal such as lion], I boast it').

This flexibility of language use may give people room for pretending they belong to a different ethnic group. Of course, the distinction of religion then becomes crucial. These days, however, conversion from Orthodox Christianity to Islam has often been observed. The proportion of Muslims in Qomba is now 72 %. Out of those Muslims, 13.1 % have converted from Orthodox Christianity (they or their parents). At a settlement in Qomba, for instance, whose location is slightly isolated, all Christian inhabitants have recently become Muslims. In addition to the rise of the Muslim Oromo in this area, Islam is spreading quickly among the local peoples. People who live in towns can better maintain their religious beliefs because each person belongs to his/her own religious community. In Agaro, for example, there are four local funeral corporation groups (*əddäl*) and also four independent groups of the Wollo Amhara, Soddo Gurage, and two kinds of Protestant denominations. In Qomba, there are only local groups based on the settlements' unit, in which all the residents of different ethnic groups or of different religions join together. Consequently, a certain numbers of people have chosen to be Muslims and have also begun to speak Oromiffa on a daily basis, even though they are not "real" Oromo. In this multi-ethnic community, because signs of distinguishing ethnic identities are becoming more and more ambiguous, people are now in the position to be able to adjust their ethnic identities according to their social relationships and interests. The ethnic identities in such a rural community are therefore in a dynamic process of dissolution and reconfiguration.

Conclusion

The coffee growing village has experienced a process of ethnic diversification by the continuous immigrant influx during the 20th cent. As a result, the socio-economic relationships between various ethnic groups have changed in last several decades. In that process, the newly-arrived outsiders have played a central role in transforming the local Oromo society. Furthermore, as a result of blurring the apparent distinctions among the ethnic groups, the ethnic boundaries have been more and more fluid. This blurring creates a situation in which the people have the option to belong to a certain ethnic group by acquiring the desired languages or even changing their religious practices. Due to the closer interactions in the rural community, this ethnic fluidity is more obvious in villages than towns. This dynamic situation of ethnicity furthers the argument for the decentralization policy on the basis of the ethnic boundaries: who knows and decides where the boundary between a people really lies?

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