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## **Current Status and Future Directions of Sociocultural Studies in Ethiopia**

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### **Introduction**

The beginning of sociocultural studies in Ethiopia may be traced to the accounts and descriptions of early travellers, missionaries, and pure adventurers (Shack 1984). These accounts served as rich sources of cultural and historical information on the various peoples of Ethiopia, even though by current standards they may be criticized as lacking in scientific methodology, objectivity, and theoretical direction. Professional anthropological studies of the peoples and cultures of the country are a much more recent phenomena, spanning only the past thirty years or so.

Shack (1984) rightly points out that the desire of these early travellers and adventurers to discover the land of the legendary Prester John or the source of the Nile has had a limiting effect on the scope and coverage of their studies. Traditional Abyssinia and its peoples, the Amhara and Tigray, were the primary focus of their accounts. Until very recently, this limitation continued to be reflected in the studies of professional anthropologists, resulting in a serious gap in our knowledge, especially about the non-Semitic speaking peoples of the country.

The purpose of this brief study is to review the most recent sociocultural studies by trained anthropologists. On the basis of this review, it is hoped to indicate some areas in which future research would be useful in narrowing the huge gap that continues to exist in our understanding of the peoples and cultures of the society.

### **Some Precursors to Modern Sociocultural Studies**

Even though cultural studies by trained anthropologists became more frequent beginning in the 1950's and, especially, after the mid-1960's, it is necessary to mention at least two of the most important precursors to these later studies by professional anthropologists. First and foremost was the Frankfurter Frobenius Institute and, much later, the Ethnological Society of the former University College of Addis Ababa. The former made substantive contributions to our understanding of the cultures of the Cushitic-speaking peoples of southwest Ethiopia, while the student members of the Ethnological Society made valuable contributions through numerous, interesting, essays on a variety of cultural beliefs, practices, and institutions found in multi-ethnic Ethiopia.

Beginning in the 1930's, the Frankfurter Frobenius Institute had been pioneering ethnographic studies in southern and southwestern Ethiopia. The results of the Institute's expeditions, which were carried out at different times, were published in four volumes. First was Jensen's (1936) *Im Lande des Gada*, dealing with those Cushitic-speaking peoples of southwest Ethiopia who share some of the principles and institutions of the Gada system. The findings of the second expedition were published over twenty years later, beginning with the volume by Haberland and his associates (1959) entitled *Altvölker Süd-Athiopiens*, describing the peoples and cultures of southern Ethiopia. This was followed by Haberland's (1963) *Galla Süd-Athiopiens*

and Straube's (1963) *Westkuschitische Völker Süd-Athiopiens*. Undoubtedly, these studies paved the way and served as a basis for later anthropological studies in the south and southwest of the country. Unfortunately, these works remained inaccessible to non-German readers.

The members of the Ethnological Society of the University College of Addis Ababa made useful contributions through short essays and, occasionally, mini-ethnographies. Essays dealt with a variety of cultural topics, ranging from traditional, socioeconomic institutions such as *jige*, *debbo*, and *equb* among both the Oromo and Amhara (e.g. Temesgen Gobena 1957; Asfaw Damte 1958); rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, and funeral ceremonies among the Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, and Adere (e.g. Fassika Belete 1957; Andargatchew Tesfaye 1957; Haile Mikael Misgina 1958; Mohamed Abdurahman 1954); to magico-religious beliefs and practices, mainly among the Amhara and Oromo (e.g. Hailu Gebre-Hiot 1958; Debebew Zellelie 1957; Tadesse Tamrat 1958; Fisseha Haile Meskel 1958). Occasionally, the *Bulletin* of the Society contained some interesting, brief ethnographies on communities (e.g. Abebe Ambachew, et al 1957).

#### Recent Contributions by Trained Anthropologists

As pointed out above, studies by trained social anthropologists are more recent. Such studies became more frequent following Simon D. Messing's (1957, now revised and published as Messing and Bender 1985) comprehensive and highly informative ethnography on the Amhara of Gonder. In the 1960's and early 1970's, a number of Western-trained anthropologists, such as Donald N. Levine (1965), Wolfgang Weisleder (1965), Allan Hoben (1973), Allan Young (1970), and Ronald Reminick (1973) followed with their studies of different aspects of Amhara society and culture. The old tendency of studying traditional, Abyssinian society continued to be reflected even in these recent cultural studies by professional anthropologists. It was really only towards the mid-1970's that trained anthropologists began to show interest in the study of the peoples and cultures of other parts of Ethiopia. Soon, an unprecedented number of young anthropologists, mainly from Europe and the United States, descended on Ethiopia, the majority of these conducting their studies among the non-Semitic-speaking peoples of south and southwestern Ethiopia. More recently, there have been a few young social anthropologists concerned with specific social problems and processes (e.g. prostitution, urbanization, political and socioeconomic integration) within contemporary Ethiopian society.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, it is possible and useful to identify these recent cultural studies. Here an attempt will be made to identify those linguistic groups that have been covered by these recent studies. In addition to identifying the researcher and his/her major work, an attempt will also be made to include, in the references, as many of the researcher's relevant writings on the group he/she has studied as are known to this writer. This may provide us with (a) a preliminary list of most of the relevant works by each scholar, and (b) some idea of the scope and magnitude of the work that remains to be done, especially with regard to many linguistic and cultural groups found in the periphery of the country.

First, the earlier studies dealing with speakers of the Ethio-Semitic languages will be identified. These will be followed by brief descriptions of studies covering

speakers of Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan languages, in that order (see Bender, et al (eds.) 1976 for a classification of Ethiopian languages). Finally, a list of some of the more recent studies dealing with specific sociocultural phenomena and processes will be presented.

## **I. Studies Dealing With Speakers of Ethio-Semitic Languages**

Among the speakers of the Ethio-Semitic languages, the Amhara of Gonder, Gojjam, and Shewa, the Tigray of Inderta, the Adere of Harer, and the Gurage in Shewa have been studied by a number of now prominent cultural anthropologists. Simon Messing (1957, 1958, 1968, 1975) was perhaps the first of these. His ethnography on the Amhara of Gonder is a detailed and valuable source of information on the cultural beliefs, practices, and institutions of the Gonder Amhara. He was soon followed by Donald Levine (1965, 1974) who made an interesting, but controversial, psychological study of the Shewa Amhara; Wolfgang Weisleder (1965) wrote on the "ecology of Amhara domination"; Allan Hoben (1963, 1970, 1973a, 1973b, 1975) on the dynamic relationship between principles of descent and land tenure among the Amhara of Gojjam; Allan Young (1970, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1977, 1982) on the traditional medical beliefs and practices of the Amhara of Gonder; and Ronald Reminick (1973a, 1973b, 1974a, 1974b) conducted a psychological study of the Menz Amhara.

A study of the traditional, socioeconomic organization of the Tigray of Inderta was made by Dan F. Bauer (1973, 1977); Harari (Adere) social organization and control was studied by Sidney R. Waldron (1975); and William A. Shack's (1963, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1976) studies of various aspects of Gurage society and culture continue to enjoy one of the dominant positions among recent, cultural studies of Ethiopian society.

## **II. Studies Dealing With Speakers of Cushitic Languages**

Among the speakers of Cushitic languages, the Qimant and the Felasha in northwestern Ethiopia, the Oromo, the Geleb or Dassanech, the Konso, and the Sidama in southern and southwestern Ethiopia have been studied by a number of cultural anthropologists and other social scientists.

Asmarom Legesse (1963, 1973) and John T. Hinant (1977, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1984) have written on the principles and institutions of the Gada system among the Borena and Guji Oromo respectively. P.T.W. Baxter (1965, 1966, 1979) has studied the Oromo of Borena, Arsi, and the Northern Frontier District of Kenya; Karl E. Knutsson (1963, 1967) has written on the Qallu institution of the Wellega Oromo; Herbert S. Lewis (1963, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1973) has written on the political, legal, and other social institutions of the Kefa Oromo; Hector Blackhurst (1978) on changes in the Gada system of the Shewa Oromo; Lambert Bartels (1970, 1975, 1983) on the religious and other cultural institutions of the Wellega Oromo; and Gudrun Dahl (1979) has studied society and economy among the Waso Borana.

Even though no comprehensive ethnographic studies of the Ethiopian Somali are known to this writer, I. M. Lewis (e. g. 1955, 1961) has written extensively on the

Somali of Somalia, as well as on the related peoples of the Horn, i.e. the Afar, Saho, and Somali.

The pastoralist Geleb or Dassanech have been studied by Uri Almagor (1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1985, 1986) and Claudia J. Carr (1977), while the related Qimant Agaw and Felasha in northwestern Ethiopia have been studied by Frederick C. Gamst (1969) and James A. Quirin (1977) respectively. Christopher R. Hallpike (1968, 1970a, 1970b, 1972) and, before him, Richard Kluckhohn (1962) have both been particularly concerned with Konso society and economy. Sidamo society and culture has been the subject of John and Irene Hamer's studies (1966, 1970, 1971, 1972a, 1972b, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1987). Another student of Sidamo society is Jan Brogger (1986) who has published an interesting book on their cultural beliefs and practices.

### **III. Studies Concerned With Speakers of Omotic Languages**

Among the speakers of Omotic languages, some six out of eighteen groups, consisting of the Malle, Dimam, the Hamar, the Gamo, the Dorze, and the Kefa, have been studied. Donald Donham (1977, 1979a, 1979b, 1982, 1983) has written on Malle society and economy; David Todd (1974, 1975, 1978) on Dimam politics; Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall (1979, also Ivo Strecker 1988) have used an interesting approach to describe Hamar society and culture; Jacques Bureau (1979, 1980), Judith Olmstead (1972, 1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1976) and Marc Abélès have written on Gamo politics and social organization; Dan Sperber (1973, 1978) and Judith Olmstead (1976) have studied the Dorze; and Amnon Orent (1969, 1970a, 1970b, 1978) has written on Kefa kinship and social organization.

### **IV. Studies Dealing With Speakers of Nilo-Saharan Languages**

Speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages are perhaps the least studied. Only four of the eighteen or so linguistic groups found in Ethiopia appear to have been covered by cultural studies. The Nuer living on the Sudan side of the border have been studied by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1951, 1956, 1969); within Ethiopia, the Mursi have been studied by David A. Turton (1973, 1978, 1980); the Majanjir by Jack R. Stauder (1968, 1970, 1971), and the Uduk of the Ethio-Sudan border by Wendy James (1979).

### **Other Sociocultural Studies**

A few social anthropologists have been concerned with the study of specific social issues and processes rather than with ethnographic studies of any particular ethnic or linguistic group. Among these recent studies are the following: Fecadu Gedamu (1966, 1986) has studied the role of Gurage ethnic associations in maintaining rural-urban relationships; David Sperry (1973a, 1973b) has been concerned with directed politico-legal development among the Oromo of Wellega; Laketch Dirasse (1978) has written on the socioeconomic position of Addis Ababa women, especially prostitutes; Jordan Gebre-Medhin (1979, 1982/3, 1983/4) has dealt with politics, modernization and the peasantry in Eritrea, and Mullenbach (1976) has written on urbanization and urban processes in Akaki Beseka, a satellite town of Addis Ababa.

## Future Directions for Cultural Studies

Considerable work has already been done with regard to narrowing the gap in our knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Ethiopia. As pointed out above, most of this work was accomplished during the past two decades. Unfortunately, many of the works mentioned above are unpublished dissertations and their accessibility to Ethiopian scholars remains limited.

A great deal more remains to be done. At least two major areas may be identified for future research by cultural anthropologists and other social scientists. First is the need to cover those linguistic, cultural, or regional groups that have not been studied so far. Second, it may now be possible to embark on more systematic, comparative studies of the cultural beliefs, practices, and institutions of the various groups on which ethnographic works are already available.

The disparity that existed between the scholarly attention accorded traditional Abyssinian society and other groups in contemporary Ethiopia is probably being corrected. Still, many groups, especially among the speakers of Omotic and Nilo-Saharan languages but also among Cushitic-speaking groups, remain very little known (see summary table below).

In view of the rapid changes taking place in the country as a whole, the need for ethnographic studies of these groups becomes all the more urgent both for historical and practical purposes. While theoretical generalizations about Ethiopian society can be "hazardous" if based on a partial understanding of the cultures of just a few groups (Shack 1984:414), such a practice is bound to be even more hazardous if our limited knowledge of a few groups is used as the basis for formulating and implementing national policies.

This is not to deny the possibility or, perhaps, the fact that the long historical interaction among the various peoples and cultures of the country has led to the evolution of what Levine (1974:47ff) calls "pan-Ethiopian culture traits". It is, rather, to point out the need for systematic and detailed comparative studies. Detailed descriptive studies of individual cultural groups are undoubtedly the bases for comparative studies. The numerical inadequacy, to say nothing about the theoretical and methodological differences, of the existing descriptive studies may pose serious problems for those wanting to embark on comparative studies. Nevertheless, the growing number of ethnographic works may provide the basis for some preliminary comparative work on the peoples and cultures of modern Ethiopia. In the words of Levine (1974:47)

... one of the more fruitful ways of characterizing the differences among Ethiopian peoples is to show how they elaborate these common (cultural) themes in different ways and to varying degrees.

**Summary Table Showing Major Linguistic Groups and the  
Anthropologists who have done some Scholarly Work on Them**

Linguistic Group	Name of Anthropologist
<b>I. Ethio-Semitic Speakers</b>	
1. Argobba	
2. Amhara	✓ Hoben, Levine, Messing, Weisleder, Young
3. Gafat	
4. Gurage	Shack, Sanchez
5. Adere/Harari	Waldron
6. Tigre	✓ Bauer
7. Tigrinya	
<b>II. Cushitic Speakers</b>	
1. Afar	✓ I.M. Lewis
2. Arbore	
3. Awnji/Agew	
4. Bayso	
5. Beja	
6. Bilen	
7. Burji	
8. Bussa	
9. Dassanech/Geleb	✓ Almagor, Carr
10. Dersa	
11. Felasha	✓ Quirin
12. Gawwada	
13. Gidole	
14. Hadiyya/Libido	
15. Kembata/Timbaro/Alaba	
16. Konso/Gato	✓ Hallpike, Kluckhohn,
17. Oromo	✓ Asmarom Legesse, ✓ Bartels, ✓ Baxter, ✓ Blackhurst, ✓ Haberland, ✓ Hinant, ✓ Jensen, ✓ Knutsson, H.S. ✓ Lewis, ✓ Straube, ✓ Fleming, ✓ Sanders, ✓ Sperry
18. Qimant	✓ Gamst
19. Saho	✓ I.M. Lewis
20. Sidamo	✓ Brogger, ✓ Hamer
21. Somali	✓ I.M. Lewis
22. Tsamay	
23. Xamanta	
<b>III. Omotic Speakers</b>	
1. Ari	
2. Banna/Hamer/Karo	✓ Strecker/Lydall
3. Basketo	
4. Chara	

- |                   |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 5. Dime           | ✓ Todd                |
| 6. Dorze          | ✓ Olmstead, ✓ Sperber |
| 7. Gamo           | ✓ Bureau, ✓ Abélès    |
| 8. Gimira         |                       |
| 9. Janjero        |                       |
| 10. Kachama       |                       |
| 11. Kefa/Mocha    | ✓ Orent               |
| 12. Koyra/Gidicho |                       |
| 13. Maji          | ✓ Donham              |
| 14. Male          |                       |
| 15. Nao           |                       |
| 16. Sheko         |                       |
| 17. Shinasha      |                       |
| 18. Southern Mao  |                       |
| 19. Wellamo       |                       |
| 20. Zayse/Zergula |                       |

#### IV. Nilo-Saharan Speakers

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Anyuak        |                   |
| 2. Gabra         | ✓ Torry           |
| 3. Gumuz         |                   |
| 4. Koma          |                   |
| 5. Kunama        |                   |
| 6. Kwegu         |                   |
| 7. Langa         |                   |
| 8. Mahaan        |                   |
| 9. Majanjir      | ✓ Stauder         |
| 10. Me'en        | ✓ Turton          |
| 11. Mursi        |                   |
| 12. Nara         |                   |
| 13. Northern Mao |                   |
| 14. Nuer         | ✓ Evans-Pritchard |
| 15. Tirma        |                   |
| 16. Turkana      |                   |
| 17. Uduk         | ✓ James           |
| 18. Wetawit      |                   |
| 19. Zilmamu      |                   |

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