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0521818540 - Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation

Dena Freeman

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Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation

In a rural community in southern Ethiopia, there are two types of rituals performed by the same people. Historical evidence suggests that one has shown remarkable stability over the years, while the other has undergone massive transformations. External factors are the same, so how is this to be explained? Dena Freeman focuses on new ethnographical and historical data from the Gamo Highlands of southern Ethiopia to tackle the question of cultural change and transformation. She uses a comparative perspective and contrasts the continuity in sacrificial rituals with the rapid divergence and differentiation in initiations. Freeman argues that although external change drives internal cultural transformation, the way in which it does is greatly influenced by the structural organisation of the cultural systems themselves. This insight leads to a rethinking of the analytic tension between structure and agency that is at the heart of contemporary anthropological theory.

DENA FREEMAN is Research Fellow of Queens' College at the University of Cambridge. She is the co-editor, with Alula Pankhurst, of *Peripheral People: The Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia* (Hurst & Co.), and her essay, *From Warrior to Wife: Cultural Transformation in the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia*, won the Curl Essay Prize in 2000.

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Select glossary

A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION OF GAMO TERMS

<i>ch', k', p', t' and ts'</i>	all explosives (also in Amharic)
<i>d'</i>	an implosive that has a sound between d and t
<i>ʔ</i>	a glottal stop
<i>e</i>	at the end of a word, pronounced like the French <i>é</i>

GAMO TERMS

<i>ade</i>	father, owner, boss, senior
<i>angisa</i>	lineage head
<i>atuma</i>	type of <i>halak'a</i> in some <i>deres</i>
<i>ayle</i>	slave
<i>bekesha baira</i>	head of sub-lineage, i.e. senior to four generations of patrilineal descendants
<i>bitane</i>	type of <i>halak'a</i> in some <i>deres</i>
<i>dana</i>	initiate in the large <i>dere</i> of Doko
<i>degala</i>	caste-like group of artisans who do not have full status in the <i>dere</i> ; mainly work as tanners and blacksmiths today
<i>dere</i>	Gamo community
<i>demutsa</i>	type of sacrificer
<i>dubusha</i>	assembly place
<i>ek'k'a</i>	sacrificer; <i>dere</i> senior
<i>guyhatets</i>	ceremony of togetherness which establishes formal relations between wife-givers and wife-takers
<i>halak'a</i>	initiate in a small <i>dere</i>
<i>hudhugha</i>	initiate in a medium-sized <i>dere</i>
<i>gach'ino</i>	state in which one must rest, eat well and do no work; women are <i>gach'ino</i> after marriage and childbirth, men are <i>gach'ino</i> after circumcision and during part of the <i>halak'a</i> initiations

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<i>gatuma</i>	stick given to <i>halak'as</i> in Doko Masho
<i>gazo</i>	large bamboo poles erected in <i>halak'a's</i> compound
<i>gome</i>	transgression of a traditional rule, which is thought to lead to misfortune
<i>gufe</i>	wooden walking stick
<i>gu?a</i>	gift taken to father-in-law after wife has reached menopause and all <i>kumets</i> gifts have been taken
<i>horoso</i>	ceremonial staff carried by <i>halak'as</i> and <i>ades</i>
<i>k'ach'ina</i>	men who have not been initiated as <i>halak'a</i>
<i>kallacha</i>	metal phallus, worn on the forehead during ritual occasions by <i>hudhughas</i> , <i>danas</i> and, in some <i>deres</i> , <i>ek'k'as</i>
<i>kawo</i>	senior sacrificer in the <i>dere</i> ; ritual leader
<i>korofine</i>	clan head
<i>kumets</i>	full, complete: name given to gifts taken to certain people, particularly fathers-in-law
<i>k'olla</i>	private part of the house
<i>lashuma</i>	stick given to <i>halak'as</i> in Doko Gembela
<i>lazantsa</i>	intermediary in wedding negotiations and <i>halak'a</i> initiations
<i>maaka</i>	type of sacrificer
<i>maggana</i>	offerings made to the spirits
<i>mala</i>	farmers and citizens in the <i>dere</i> ; not <i>mana</i> or <i>degala</i>
<i>mana</i>	caste-like group of artisans who do not have full status in the <i>dere</i> ; work as potters
<i>Mesqalla</i>	Gamo New Year Festival; name derives from Amharic, <i>Mesqal</i>
<i>perso</i>	wheat beer
<i>p'o?ets</i>	horn blown by <i>mala</i>
<i>sha?a</i>	plot of farmland by the house
<i>sofe</i>	public parade that marks a change of status
<i>ts'omma</i>	general term for the artisan castes, <i>mana</i> and <i>degala</i>
<i>u?e</i>	intermediary in <i>halak'a</i> initiations in Doko Gembela; also the name for small flies
<i>uts'uma</i>	<i>stellaria media</i> , a common grass that grows well anywhere
<i>woga</i>	law, tradition; the right way to behave
<i>zurra</i>	neighbourhood work-group in which one man from each house must participate

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AMHARIC TERMS

<i>balabbat</i>	administrative position in the Imperial government; intermediary between the state and local communities; position given to <i>kawos</i> in the Gamo Highlands
<i>gebbar</i>	tenant farmer who had to provide food and labour for Amhara settlers during the Imperial period
<i>neftenya</i>	Amhara soldier-settler
<i>zamach (zamacha)</i>	campaigners; students who were sent to the countryside to teach Socialism, nationalise land, improve schools and clinics, and ban traditional practices at the beginning of the Derg period