

A Sandwiched Identity: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the Kunama People of Ethiopia¹

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Abstract: *This essay is concerned with the Kunama people, a Nilo-Saharan language-speaking people. The Kunama inhabit in Ethiopia, Eritrea and in small tracts of the Sudan. However, the literatures on the academic circle focused on the Kunamas of Eritrea, and the Kunama of Ethiopia are virtually understudied. Hence, this essay attempts to deal with the socio-cultural history of the Kunama of Ethiopia based on studies from field visits and library. The Kunamas have been clustered into four clans each with prescribed social tasks. According to this study, the Kunama people are natives to Ethiopia. They are unique from their neighboring peoples in that they are matrilineal and count descent on the female line. However, this does not indicate their roles in administration.*

Keywords: Kunama, Ethiopia, socio-culture, cultural history

1. Introduction

Social history has been an overlooked area in Ethiopian historiography. Recently, attempts are being made on the cultural history of different peoples of Ethiopia hitherto understudied. The subject is also raised in ethnographic and anthropological studies—with special focus on the marginalized or “forgotten”² part of the Ethiopian society. Yet, the orientation and focus of the researches is twined towards either challenging the so-called established social group/s, or integrating the marginalized ones into the “larger group”,³ or, still, to counteract against the conventional historical research trend of the country. Consequently, many end-up romanticizing their subject even sometimes polarizing social groups. Indeed, it is not un-reasonable to argue that cultural history in Ethiopia is still at its infancy and the approaches remain unstructured. Naturally, as Burke once asserted “...cultural history has no essence. It can only be defined in terms of its own history.”⁴ This, albeit, does not mean formulating a working explanation cannot be attempted.

This paper is initiated on account of the indefinite position of the Kunama of Ethiopia in the academic works; be it anthropological, historical or ethnographic research. Researchers and students in the social sciences and humanities with particular interest on linguistics, folklore and the traditional mechanisms of crime adjudication carried isolated piece of works on the people of Kunama. However, the academic circle gives due emphasis to the Kunama of Eritrea, indeed the majority, and the position of the Kunama people of Ethiopia linger peripheral. Notwithstanding, these academic works are very limited in number and the themes they raise—linguistic studies being the major ones. It is also important to note that the socio-cultural history of the Kunama people of Ethiopia is not attempted yet by means of strict academic research. Thus, this essay draws its attention towards surveying the socio-cultural history of the Kunama people of Ethiopia.

2. Settlement and Economic Activities

The Kunama people live in the regions of Eritrea, Ethiopia and along the Sudan. Large numbers of the people

(estimated 80%) live in southwestern regions of Eritrea along the Gash and Setit rivers.⁵ However, a considerable number of these people live as well in Ethiopia and the Sudan though much of the literatures on these people tend to overlook them. Large proportion of the Kunama people of Ethiopia inhabit in Tigray Regional State, peopling small tracts of land in the northwestern parts of the region in Tahtay Adyabo *woreda* (around 91,379)⁶—in Lemelem, Mentebteb, Shembelina, Adabay, Adameyti and Adigoshu *tabias (kebelles)*⁷, and to some degree in Kafta Humera *woreda*⁸. The settlement areas of the Kunama people of Ethiopia are bordered by La'elay Adyabo *woreda* to the southeast, Asgeda Tsinbila *woreda* to the south, Kafta Humera *woreda* to the southwest and Eritrea to the north.

The Kunama are amongst the widely dispersed people of Ethiopia living mainly in the regions of Tigray, Amhara, SNNP, Oromia and Addis Ababa, according to their number sequence⁹. They are the minority among the three ethnic groups living in the Tigray regional state, the Kunama, Tegar and Irob peoples. The Tigar are the majority numbering about 4,483,892. Next, the Irob took the second place counting 33,372. According to the Central Statistics Agency report of 2007, the total population size of the Kunama people of Ethiopia was estimated to 4,860 making up 0.01% of the population of the country. Of this number, the greater part, numbering 2,976 or more than 61% of the Kunama people of Ethiopia dwell in Tigray. They constitute 0.07% of the population size of the region.¹⁰

The regions inhabited by the Kunama of Ethiopia are sparsely populated areas featured by scattered villages of small huts. These settlement areas are congregated in to small areas. However, the houses are mostly detached from the large tracts of lands used for agriculture and farming. Moreover, settlement and housing patterns are generally supposed to be made along clan-based distribution marked by distinguishing symbols at each individual houses.¹¹

The Kunama are sedentary agriculturalists who depend for their living on farming and animal husbandry. Formerly, they are considered to have been nomadic pastoralists living by keeping cattle, camel and goats. Through time, they adopted farming.¹² On the contrary, oral sources contend

that they were the first among the indigenous peoples to have practiced agriculture since time immemorial.¹³ The main crops cultivated by the Kunama include sorghum, millet and maize, which are the staples of the people, and raise camel, cattle, goat, and sheep.¹⁴ Donkey has a prominent role among the Kunama that it is used as carrier of goods and for transportation. Though the climatic condition of the areas is classified as *Qola* (hot climatic zone), characterized by heat and high humidity, it is among the fertile areas of the region. Beside to the above stated crops, the people produce a variety of oil seeds, cash crops and incenses.¹⁵

The Kunama are also distinguished for their production of baskets, pottery, and other wooden artifacts that they marketed with their neighboring peoples. Besides its economic significance, their engagement in such activities helps in identifying the Kunama from their neighboring Tigrisians. They inhabit in the highly contested region of Tigray—being located proximate to the border with Eritrea, they were the first to feel the effect of the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict (1998-2000). Because of this war, large numbers of the Kunama were forced to flee their homelands to other areas. Simultaneously, a number of Kunama of Eritrea also infiltrates seeking refuge and political asylum in Ethiopia. Consequently, the Kunama were forced to engage themselves in other businesses for their living such as traders and civil servants in local government offices.

3. Notes on the Origin of the People

Like other non-literate societies, the major source for the study of the history of the Kunama people are obtained from the elderly and their orally transmitted traditions and beliefs. In this regard, I am not in a position to corroborating the current information with any form of written documentation or archaeological research. However, this by any means does not mean the society was a tabula rasa. It is hoped that, serious research efforts with the oral sources and material culture of the society, travelers' accounts and the isolated studies in different disciplines will piece together the unaccounted history of the people. Indeed, according to my field observations, one of the major problems with the oral sources is that the oral tradition is being losing ground within the social construct.¹⁶

The Kunama people are one among the Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups.¹⁷ They share a tradition that draws the same ancestry to a female origin. Oral tradition of the people link the origin of the Kunama to a king (?) called Baden/Bazen and his wife Kuname.¹⁸ According to these elders, the ancient home area of the Kunama was Aksum and even the origin of the name of Aksum town itself was a Kunama name.¹⁹ As has already been shown, scholars incline to embrace this assertion of the oral traditions owing to the lack of tangible sources to either attest or refute the claim. However, making Conti Rossini's work as his major source, Tadesse Tamrat has left us a passing reference about the ancient location of the Kunama. While discussing the early contacts of the earliest immigrants from South Arabia with the native population, he stated that the Kunama appeared to have had the earliest contact with these new settlers some time before the 5th century B.C. Nevertheless, he put the location of the

Kunama further to the north in the Marab areas in between the Beja and Agaw peoples, not Aksum.²⁰ In the absence of reliable sources to substantiate the claims of oral sources about the nativity of the Kunama to Aksum, this reference of Conti Rossini can give us a hint that these people are indigenous to the heartland of ancient Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, it should be underlined that Conti Rossini and the oral sources differ in locating the original land of the people. Moreover, even if the new settlers ('immigrants') made their earliest contact with the Kunama, history has it, it was with the Agaws that they left a lasting imprint on the cultural and political construction of the natives who afterward are supposed to have had evolved to develop a kind of centralized political entity. Presumably, at the time of the arrival of the new settlers, the native people including the Kunama, written history says, had no centralized political entity or a state. They, most likely, were organized in groups of clans.²¹ Thus, the history of the Kunama people for the period before the birth of Christ is largely dubious.

Though we cannot claim at this point for the total absence of data with regard to the origin of the Kunama people, it is clear that, lack of dependable sources inevitably had hindered researchers from doing successful ethnographic and historical works about the people. It also is idealistic to believe that the oral history of the Kunama alone is capable of telling the origin of the people—in which the elderly of the people are uncertain, or, at least, are not unanimous²² in telling the historical genesis of the people. In fact, my field observations reveal that, their culture of transferring oral traditions to the next generation is diminishing in quality and content. It looks that because of their close contact with the neighboring peoples they are overshadowed by the neighboring Tigrayan culture. Since they are living in close contact with their neighboring Tigrayans, now a day, it seems challenging for the Kunama to maintain a pure and intact tradition of oral culture.

Regardless of this fact, the oral traditions of the Kunama attempts to reconstruct the history of the people as far back as the early Christian period associating the origin of the people with king (?) Bazen (Baden) and his wife Kuname. According to this tradition, Bazen or Baden, according to the Kunamas, was a king of the Kunama in Aksum who ruled in pre- and post-Christian period.²³ The obscurity of the history of the people hence perpetuates with this story, as it is not clear whether Bazen is the Aksumite king or other local ruler of the Kunama with the same name. Likewise, concrete evidence that can assert the association of the origin of the people with Bazen's wife, Kuname, is none existent. Obviously, until much later in time, history used to be mostly silent about the women. Probably because of this, it is also difficult to find from the literature about the identity of Queen (?) Kuname. As a result, no one is sure if the story is about Bazen, the king of Aksumite kingdom or other local ruler.

Moreover, though his identity is questionable, in the oral history of the Kunama Bazen/Baden perpetuates to be a milestone for the history of the people.²⁴ The periods before and after his death are unclear. Oral traditions of the people could only uncertainly draw line for the appearance of a king

who had ruled the Kunama in the early days of the Christian period. Several questions remain unanswered and it is difficult to ascertain whether this king (?) had a Kunama identity, or he was an Aksumite king who had also ruled the Kunama as part of the peoples of his kingdom, or if he simply was a local ruler of the Kunama whose reign was in and/or around the present day Aksum. What seems obvious is that, establishing the identity of this king in one way or the other may help to draw the origin of the people; but it is subject of future research.

Regardless of this fact, oral tradition and other sources indicate that King Bazen of the Aksumite kingdom had ruled over the kingdom of Aksum for about seventeen years, nine years in the pre-Christian, and eight years in the Christian periods, or from 9 BC to 8 AD. The assertion of the oral tradition of the Kunama likewise draws a parallel history with the Aksumite king Bazen. If that is the case, it gives us additional hint for the nativity of the Aksumite king. The Kunamas did not draw their genesis from any outside descent; rather they claim their origin to Africa and specifically the land of Ethiopia. According to the traditions of the elders of the people, the original home places of this people, varying, extend from Shire through Aksum, Adwa and the surrounding areas with their center at Aksum.²⁵ They tried to substantiate these claims with the naming of the areas. According to this tradition, these areas are believed to have taken their names from the names of prominent Kunamas who had resided in these respective places. Nonetheless, due to series wars they, according to oral tradition, were defeated and their ruler king (?) Bazen died in battlefield. Henceforth, the neighboring people drove them out to the northern and western directions towards their present day locations.²⁶

It is obvious that any society is not static and change is always expected in space and dynamics. As such, there might be movement of the Kunama precipitated by several factors. However, the question is which direction the movement took, Aksum-Mereb, or Mereb-Aksum, or Mereb-Aksum-Mereb, or any other direction. At this point, it is difficult to have a definite answer. Despite such uncertainties, oral traditions of the Kunama appear to prefer the previous one and many scholarly works had also adopted this assertion. According to this tradition, after the defeat of Bazen's forces, the Kunama evacuated from their home lands taking two directions—one section of the people cross the Marab river towards today's Eritrea while the others occupied areas where they are today residing in the western and northwestern parts of Tigray Regional State.²⁷

Nomenclature of the People

There is no plausible explanation about the etymological origin of the name of the people—Kunama. One of the dominant traditions of the Kunama, as we have seen earlier, maintained the name of the people to have come from the Queen (?) Kuname, the wife of Baden/Bazen.²⁸ They try to reinforce this assertion in relation to their system of family relationship—that they count their descent using the female line.

Alternatively, Thompson mentions that, “Some compare it [the etymology of the word *Kunaama*] to Oromo *nama*

‘person’, others mention *ke-naama* or *kwe-naama*, ‘men I call them, those whom I call people’,²⁹ or “my people”³⁰. Similarly, however, we have no authenticated justification or evidence that indicates the word to have a connection with Oromo language or in what circumstance came to have such a significant historical linkage with the Kunama people. To look broadly, if that is the case it will take us to other historical trajectory which will have a huge meaning not only on the history of Kunama, but also on the history of the nation as a whole.

In the ancient times, it is also believed that other people called the Kunama as Bada/Baden, Baza/Bazayn and Dilla.³¹ The association of the later word with the nomenclature of the people is unclear. However, for the former two naming, the explanation is given in connection with the story of king (?) Bazen, who, as we have described earlier, was believed to be the King of Aksum, or a king of the Kunama, or, still, a Kunama King of Aksum.

Another hypothesis attributed the naming of the people to the historical circumstances that the Kunama have had endured in history. Kunama or *Kunamaa*, in the local language, is a combination of two words—*Ku* and *namaa*, and they literally mean, “I did leave [the place]” or “I had evacuated from”³².

Similarly, another assertion with regard to the etymology of the word Kunama is associated with, a Kunama word meaning ‘to leave/evacuate’.³³ According to this tradition, the people adopted this because of the wars that the Kunama confront with their neighboring people. In these combats the people choose to leave their areas than engaging in battles—*kuneka*, hence, through time it had evolved into *Kunamaa*.³⁴ As we can see from the above discussions, there is no satisfactory explanation for the etymology or origin of the nomenclature of the people. Nevertheless, now a days the latter explanation predominate the others and the elderly rarely know the former assumptions. Moreover, the people prefer to call itself as Kunama and consider the other names improper and belittling.

Culture

The Kunama people had kept themselves isolated from the neighboring ethno-cultural groups, and were able to maintain their cultural uniqueness in every walks of life, including religion, socio-cultural organization, kinship, marriage, art, etc. However, their original cultural ecology has recently undergone some remarkable changes due to some socio-political changes taking place in and around the community. General factors as modernization, urbanization, and immigration are assumed to have been playing part among others. Specific interlinking conditions such as change in their way of life from nomadic to agrarian, their conversion to Christianity, introduction of modern administrative and service giving institutions and the likes can be accounted for the cultural contact and/or change. Despite some cultural innovations and changes, for example religion, there are still some cultural realms where the uniqueness of the Kunamas can be noted such as language, customary legal orders, kinship relation.

Until very recently, Kunamas had had their own traditional religion. Particularly, they are indicated to be worshipers of special graves (graves of elders) and aged trees.³⁵ As Trimingham has noted:

*The chief feature of Kunama worship is ancestral conciliation which has as its object the maintenance of the link that secures supernatural support in the conduct of the clan's affairs and has resemblances to the rites of certain Nuba peoples of Kordofan. They have a remnant of conception of a high god, Anna, who created the heavens and the earth, but having done that takes no further interest in the clan's affairs. Far more effective are the spirits of their dead who, though freed from the body, remain imprisoned on earth and bring good and evil to the living, wherefore they are propitiated with offerings and sacrifices...*³⁶

He further states, "They [Kunama] have no order of priests, sacrifices and other rites being performed by elders..."³⁷ However, the role of elders is not left only to men. Women also have an important role as healers. These elders took the position of tribal priests or priestess, or as shaman healers, bestowed with supernatural power to heal illness, and their chief is referred to as *Saadalla*—the chief spirit of healing/medicine (*saada*).³⁸ More importantly, each clan among the Kunama have defined function. Accordingly, some clans are believed to have the power of controlling rain, while others protect locust invasions.³⁹

Currently, many of the Kunama are Christianized and Islamized and the great majority of the Kunama people of Ethiopia are followers of Christianity. Some sources indicate that Christianity has been introduced to the people only recently, six or so decades ago.⁴⁰ The Swedish Evangelical mission that had left a lasting impact on the Kunama entered into the Kunama area in the second half of the nineteenth century,⁴¹ in fact through Eritrea, and a large number of the people were received into this religion. Moreover, Islam, Catholic Christianity and Orthodox Christianity had taken enough shares through long processes of peoples' contact. Consequently, these religions had affected the culture, and the Kunama had been accepting not only new religions, but also personal names and dressing styles.⁴²

Socio-Cultural Organization

Here is where the Kunama markedly distinguished from their neighboring people. The Kunama have a clan-based social organization.⁴³ Each Kunama clans are presumed to have sacred symbolic representations⁴⁴ in a way it reflects its animistic beliefs. According to Trimingham, the Kunama Gumma has a totemic representation of elephant, the Karka/Karua a moon and the Semma buffalo.⁴⁵ In addition, Kunama huts are easily distinguishable based on the symbols they put at the tops of their huts. Individual huts are easily identifiable to which clan they belong according to these symbols.⁴⁶ Furthermore, some clans are believed to have supernatural and/or magical power. Nevertheless, this magical power does not allow them to have a political significance beyond their day-to-day societal services.⁴⁷

The Kunama society is constructed along matriarchal system of family relationship and count family descent in the female

line. They claim, as we have seen earlier, the same ancestry from Kuname, the wife of (King?) Baden/Bazen and they claim to have adopted the name of the people from her. Descent from Kunama family continues properly only through the female line for the reason that it is in the mothers' womb that the bones of the offspring shaped. There are more than a dozen of matrilineal sub divisions of the Kunama people.⁴⁸ The socio-cultural organization of the society is thus built along this matriarchal structure and Kunama women especially the elderly have an important role in the society. Of course, elders, both men and women, have significant place among the Kunama community. (But, still the men are better off in authoritative communal roles—like their roles in traditional criminal administration and conflict resolution.) According to Alexander Naty, one of the scholars who devoted their efforts in studying the Kunama society, two main criteria are used in distinguishing elders from the rest of the society—age and rites of passage. Without fulfillment of these two criteria, no one can attain the roles ascribed to elders.⁴⁹

Notwithstanding, it does not mean that both men and women have identical roles. As Alexander Naty has stated, "...The traditional Kunama society was administered by council of elders (excluding the female elders in this politico-judicial aspect); even though juniors had the right to participate in the assembly, the decisive voice, usually, was that of the elders."⁵⁰ As it can clearly be inferred from this, the elderly has a significant place in the socio-cultural structure of the society. Nevertheless, the women are not given the political and administrative roles. Even though the society is constantly identified as matriarchal and women are believed to have a better place among the Kunama, my fieldwork shows that, women seem to be disfavored.

What is more significant to note here is that the higher position of the elders is attained not because of wealth or physical might, but it was a role that the society bestow to a person as per the standards laid down; and these elderly are not exploitative. They are required to participate in all affairs of life and share all the socio-economic burdens, including plowing the agricultural fields.⁵¹

The Kunama people have been clustered into four major clans: Karua/Kalua (clan of beauty), Shua (clan of silo/grain storage), Semma (clan of bee) and Gumma (clan of river). Each clan is designated to have separate socio-cultural role. For example, some clans are responsible for bringing rain (Gumma); others are entrusted the role of warding off locusts and insects from damaging crops (Semma).⁵² It has traditionally been the mandate of members of the Karua clan to settle cases of homicide through a customary legal system known as *Senganena* (bone reconciliation). In addition, clan has to do with patterns of marital arrangement of the society. The social order allows inter-clan marriage, though with restriction: marriage union is not allowed between Karua and Shua, and between Semma and Gumma? It cannot be otherwise for a belief that there is close blood tie between these pairs of clans.

The matrilineal system appears to reflect the fact that Kunama women have had remarkable social position unlike most women elsewhere. Some sources even claim that Kunama women have enjoyed a higher social status

compared to others societies. Nevertheless, on the surface, close examination on the ways of life of the Kunamas, such as practices in their customary laws, reveals more or less

contrary to expectation; the cultural setup of the community, by and large, appears to be patriarchal.⁵³

Endnotes

¹ I took an interest to study this topic because of a research project that I was a part on “Customary Law of the Kunama and Irob people” which was funded by Aksum University. The result of the project on the customary law was submitted to the Research and Community Services of AKU, but, as a history student, my observation in the fieldwork triggers an interest in me to make a historical commentary on the topic that, as could be discovered, remains understated. Thus, this paper is a product of such my interest and is limited only to the Kunama of Ethiopia. I owe gratitude to my team members Yared Arefayne, Haftom Tesfay and Degisew Tilahun.

² No thorough attempt has yet been made on the cultural history of any of the Ethiopian peoples, and a bulk of the historical works on Ethiopia focus on the ruling class and the larger population remains subordinate. Hence, when we come to cultural history, dividing Ethiopian society as ‘central or established’ and ‘peripheral or marginalized’ lacks merit. None of the Ethiopian people is satisfactorily studied.

³ Such endeavour appears to serve political purpose rather than academic—either in the form of call for representation or as propagandas of domination.

⁴ Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*; E. David Thompson, “Kunama: Phonology and Noun Phrase”, in M. Lionel Bender (ed.), *Nilo-Saharan Language Studies*, Michigan, (1983), p. 281.

⁶ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission, *Summery and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census*, (Addis Ababa, December 2008), p. 57.

⁷ *Tabia* or *Kebele* is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia.

⁸ *Woreda* is almost synonymous to district and it is an administrative unit bigger than *Kebele*.

⁹ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission, 87-105.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 84-87.

¹¹ Series of field visits by the researcher conducted in the year 2015.

¹² Gianni Dore, “Kunama Ethnography”, in Siegbert Uhlig et. al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, p. 453; Thompson; 284; Alexander, 2.

¹³ Informants: *Ato* Musie Ali; *Woizero* Hawa Hanisho, May 17, 2015.

¹⁴ Gianni Dore, p. 453; Thompson, p. 284; Alexander Naty, “Elders and Juniors in Kunama Society”, A paper presented for the International Symposium on History and Ethnography on Ethiopian Studies, (Nov. 18-25, 1982), p. 2.

¹⁵ Field visits in the Kunama settlements around Sheraro and Humera.

¹⁶ The interviews conducted with the elders in the towns of Sheraro (Lemlem) and Humera (Adi Goshu) prove that the Kunama are in a difficulty to maintain a solid oral tradition. Hence, the stories with regard to their origin were far from complete and consistent.

¹⁷ Gianni Dore, p. 453; Alexander Naty, “Elders and Juniors in Kunama Society”, p. 1.

¹⁸ Informants: *Ato* Tekle Abas; *Ato* Leake Ckekole; Gianni Dore, p. 454; Thompson, p. 281.

¹⁹ It seems difficult to substantiate this information with reliable sources. The only information that claims this assertion is found in oral information.

²⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1972, pp. 5-6, footnote 5 and a map on page 10.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 5-8.

²² During the field works in Shiraro and Humera towns and their surroundings, we had conducted formal and informal interviews. These interviews attest that the oral information have no common stand where the elderly draw different traditions.

²³ Almost all interviews conduct in Shiraro and Humera particularly in Lemlem and Adigoshu areas show that the Kunama share this tradition with slight inconsistency in narrating the oral tradition, some claiming King Bazen of Aksum while others referred him as King of the Kunama.

²⁴ Informants: *Ato* Musa Ali; *Ato* Leake Chekol.

²⁵ Informants: *Ato* Musa Ali; *Ato* Leake Chekol.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Gianni Dore, p. 454; Informants: *Ato* Musa Ali; *Ato* Leake Chekol.

²⁹ Thompson, p. 281.

³⁰ Alexander Naty, “Political and Cultural History of the Kunama People”, part III, ND, NP.

³¹ Gianni Dore, pp. 453-454; Thompson, p. 281.

³² Informants: *Ato* Le'ake Chekol and *Ato* Musa Ali: Haftay, Bahilawi yegichit afetat zede be kunama biherseb”. MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, p. 18.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ Birhane, *Rahwa*. Mega Printing, 2005 E.C., pp. 2-3.

³⁵ Birhane, 2003, p. 30.

- ³⁶ Trimmingham, J. Spencer, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 18.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Thompson, p. 284.
- ³⁹ Trimmingham, p. 18. These roles, according to our interviews, are given to the Gurma and Serma clans, respectively. However, Trimmingham note these clans as Awla Manna and Ula Manna.
- ⁴⁰ Birhane, 2003; Haftay.
- ⁴¹ Gianni Dore, p. 455.
- ⁴² In our field works, we have observed that a large number of the Kunama have Muslim as well as Christian names and have dressed in a way that distinguish them one from the other.
- ⁴³ Nikodimos Idris, "The Kunama and their Languages", MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 1995, p. 18.
- ⁴⁴ Trimmingham, p. 14.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ According to the interviews in the fieldworks, when a Kunama guest arrived from other places s/he will not wonder to find his clan members given that each Kunama houses are marked with symbols to which clan they belong.
- ⁴⁷ Trimmingham, p. 14.
- ⁴⁸ Gianni Dore, p. 454; Nikodimos, p. 18; Thompson, p. 284. More than eighteen matrilineal sub divisions are believed to have existed among the Kunama people of both Ethiopia and Eritrea. Gianni Dore, p. 454.
- ⁴⁹ Naty, pp. 1-2. Alexander Naty has summarized the stages of rites passage for both men and women. Accordingly, men went through—birth→ circumcision→ hair shaving→ marriage→ elderhood and death; while on the women side he stated birth→ clitoridectomy→ first menses→ marriage and death as major life stages of Kunama women. Consequently, the role of individuals depend on theses stages they reached in.
- ⁵⁰ Naty, p. 2. Alexander Naty also added that "In the set of folk-wisdom functions such as clitoridectomy, circumcision, purification ritual and folk-medicine fall under female elders' domain of performance whereas, hair shaving rite for boys, burial custom, folk-medicine, wisdom as regards to marriage, etc. pertain to male elders."
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.
- ⁵² Informant: Ato Musie Ali; Trimmingham, p. 18.
- ⁵³ Contrary to the widely held view, the interviews with members of the Kunama in Humera and its environs and our field observations in Shiraro areas reveal this fact.