



History and Culture of Burji People in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Like many other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the origin and history of the Burji people is relatively unknown, making their culture susceptible to subjective interpretations by a coterie of scholars who have studied them. Due to this fact, studies of the Burji people have generally suffered from the opposite defects of insulation and extrapolation. The Burji are Cushitic people who are producers of 'Teff' and 'Buraa Burjee' (Haricot beans) in South Ethiopia region. Farming, livestock rising and trade constitute the major economic activities of the Burji. In farming they are as clever as the neighboring people of Konso and they are also clever trader who runs the highest economic activities in Kenya. However, their history, culture, values and indigenous knowledge have not yet studied and documented properly. Thus, the main objective of this paper was to assess the history and culture of Burji People in Ethiopia. Meanwhile, the specific objectives of this study were assessing the history, language and religious beliefs of Burji people. To that end, this study has employed descriptive and explanatory research designs and qualitative research approach that had involved asking participants about their experiences of things that happen in their lives. Besides, both primary and secondary sources of data were used and the primary data were collected through structured and unstructured interview and focus group discussion. Concerning this, Elders, Clan Chiefs, and Olcho (Province) leaders were important respondents who had offered necessary information in this paper. To select the respondents the researcher has used purposive sampling technique where the elders, representatives of the indigenous governance system (Woma, Dayna, Masha, Jal'aba and Hayoo) and state officials of traditional governance were the core participants of this study. At the end, the research finds Liban was the most acceptable original place of Burji in history and Dhasshatee is the language of Burji people. Also, Burji believe in DhetHila'aleyWonnto (one sky God), common ancestors and spirits.

KEYWORDS: Burji, religious beliefs, Dhasshatee

INTRODUCTION

The Burji are the people who inhabit the localities lying South of the Amaro mountains, situated on the eastern side of the Southern Ethiopian rift valley. Currently, the residential place of Burji is near to the South of Chamo and Abaya lakes. In addition to their homeland, they reside in the Borana Zone (Yabelo, Mega, Hidlola, Dubliqi, Teltele and Moyale) and West Guji Zone (BuleHora) of the Oromia regional state. Also, this great nation resides in northern Kenya, neighboring with Borannas, Garris, Gabiras and Rendiles. They call themselves 'Burje' / 'Dhaashi'. Linguistically, they are part of the 'East Cushitic' language group and their language is called Dhashete (Burjatee). They are owners of various cultures and unexplored indigenous knowledge. They are the most producers of 'Teff' and 'BuraaBurjee' (Haricot beans) in South Ethiopia region. Farming, livestock rising and trade constitute their major economic activities in the region. In farming they are as clever as the neighboring people of Konso and they are also clever trader who runs the highest economic activities in Kenya. In most cases,

they share different cultural values and practices with other bordering nationalities. But, like many other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the origin and history of the Burji people is relatively unknown, making their culture susceptible to subjective interpretations by a coterie of scholars who have studied them. Also, due to low attention given to minority ethnic groups by the government of Ethiopia and external challenges (globalization and modernization), the culture, customary institutions and artistic heritage of the Burji nationality have been influenced in various ways. Above all, globalization and modernization have forcing the youth of the Burji to undermine their own and to adhere to the cultural practices and lifestyles that are alien to the Burjis' way of life. As well, these outside influences have resulted in the misconception of indigenous cultural practices and wisdom among the younger generation of Burji, and it has been eroding the traditions, cultural practices and lifestyles of the nationality at a great level. In general, the culture and values of the nationality have not yet been explored and adequately documented. Likewise, the cultural traits of Burji are exposed to external dominations and are not preserved through time



(Markose, 2011). Therefore, it seems important not to wait too long in the for the research, since it is more likely that soon the nationality and the area could be that to too many influences that would lead to the accumulation and mixing up of cultural practices and lifestyles. Thus, the researcher is highly motivated to fill the aforementioned gap regarding the history and culture of Burji by studying their origin, language and beliefs in detail.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

General Objective

In order to preserve the history and culture of the Burji by recording, popularizing and promoting the tradition, cultural lifestyles, values and indigenous wisdom of the research is a critical tool. Thus, the main objective of this study is to assess the history and culture of the Burji People in Southern Ethiopia.

Specific Objectives

This study was intended

- To assess the Burji's history of origin
- To overview the Burji language
- To discover the religious beliefs of the Burji nationality

METHODOLOGY

In this study, both descriptive and explanatory research designs were employed. Besides, a qualitative research approach was used in order to record and analyze the data obtained from representatives of cultural groups. Because qualitative research involves asking participants about their experiences of things that happen in their lives. Also, the necessary information was collected from both primary and secondary sources of data. Meanwhile, the primary data of this study was collected through structured and unstructured interviews and focus group discussion. For interview and focus group discussion, the elders, clan chiefs, representatives of the indigenous governance system (Woma, Dayna, Masha, Jal'aba and Hayoo) and state officials of traditional governance were used as sources of information and their selection was through the purposive sampling techniques based on their knowledge, the experience and leadership role within community of the Burji. Because the knowledge of origin, history and culture of a given nation is not a popularly distributed issue, but accumulated in the hands of experienced cultural consultants. In relation to this, to supplement the primary data of the study, the secondary data were collected from books, articles, conference proceedings, and working papers. Finally, the findings of the study were analyzed by narrative ways.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The Origin of Burji and Pattern of Movements

There are three assumptions in history regarding the Burji's history of origin and pattern of movement. One assumption is that the origin of Burji was from Northern Ethiopia (current days of Amhara region) in which the ancestors of Burji were

moved towards the South. In this assumption, the elders of Burji replied that the people of Burji stood from Northern Ethiopia, then reached the Halaba area and crossed the river Gidabo (Sidama region) to move toward the South East of Ethiopia, i.e. Liban. At this juncture, Liban is a place that is found in southeast Ethiopia, near the meeting border of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. During this moment, some Burjis were taken away by the Gidabo River, and still today, when Burji want to curse, someone says 'Gidaboo Shee Gadhato'u', meaning let the Gidaboo River take you away. The second view of elders was reflected as the original land of Burji was central Ethiopia around the Halaba and Sidama area. Then, they moved towards the South East to reach Liban. The third and widely acceptable assumption of the Burji's origin is stated as the people of Burji originated from Liban, a place that is found between a Dawwa and Gannalle rivers around the current Negele Borena. According to this view, Worra Liban was an original place for ancient ancestors of three nationalities, namely Orrim (Borana), Burji and Konso. That is why all Burjis begin telling their history by saying "Nu Warra Warra, Nu Warra Liban, Akanna Ta'au Betta?" Meaning, 'Do you know that we are from Liban? When the Burji lived in Liban, they lived as human fellowship with the people of Borana and Konso, they lived in one province, and they worshiped one sky God together for a long period of time. But, the ancient country (Warra Liban) disintegrated because of the disagreement created between the three peoples. When Burji left the Liban king Ammarro was the first leader of Burji who established a new society, a new sovereign state and country called Biya Ammarro in no man's land called Abbunno in the current days of the North East of Yaebaleo town before 700 years ago. Eventually, they start searching for other people with whom they want to establish a new friendly relationship. Fortunately, they found the Gedeo/Darassa people around the Yebasire, Gattallo and Tore areas. Therefore, Gedeo was the exact neighbor of Burji in history. Then they continued searching for other people and found Tsinse Koree while climbing the mountains between two southern rift valleys of Ethiopia (Gellana and Segen). They established relationships with them too, and they called these new neighbors "Ba'ad", which means in the Burje language, "While climbing". Because they found them while climbing the mountain currently called Ammarro Highland. Yet the people of Burji call the people of Kore by the name of Ba'ad. Then Burji shifted the center of their residence from Abbunno to the place called Alliga, nearer to their new neighbors (Kores and Gedeos) and continued a strong relationship with both of them. Here, Alliga was the ancient Burjis province that incorporates specific locations like Chamhari, Harraka-koge, Soyamma-Surro, Burguda near to Bule Hora town where ancient Burjis lived and buried. Because of this, the Kore people are called Burjis by the name of Alliga, meaning the people who came from the place of Alliga still to this day. Besides, because of their friendly relationship, Burjis and Kores established a common state called Ammarro until Burjis and Kores separated to establish different woredas before 300 years ago. After the separation of Burji and Kore from Amaro state, the name

Amaro was left only for Kores and now it serves as the name of Kore nationality. After the passage of king Amaro of Burji, king Burje came to power and shifted the center of the Burji country from Alliga to the current Burji Zone.

THE LANGUAGE OF BURJI

For a long period of time, the language of Burji has been a topic of debate. Because some Burjis agree that Burjatee is the language of the Burji people. But, the majorities deny this ideology and accept Burji as people and *Dhashaate* as the language of Burji. As well, the respondents to this paper retorted that Burji are the people who speak the *Dhashaate* language and *Dhashaate* is the language that is spoken by the people of Burji. Similarly, Hudson (1981) explained that *Dhaashatee* is the language of Burji that belongs to the Cushitic sub-branch of the Afro-Asiatic languages. Inside East Cushitic, *Dhaashatee* belongs to the Highland East Cushitic (HEC) sub-branch. Besides, Bender (1971) has reported as *Dhaashatee* shares 60% of its basic vocabulary with Sidamo, and 37% with Gedeo. In the same way, Wedekind (1990) found that *Dhaashatee* shares 47% of its basic vocabulary with Sidamo, 45% with Kambaata, 44% with Hadiyya, and 43% with Gedeo. In another concern, *Dhaashatee* has two major dialects: Highland *Dhaashatee*, which is spoken in the north of the language area, and lowland *Dhaashatee*, spoken in the south. Unfortunately, the language of Burji is not developed in the education system and served as a working language of the nation for a long period of time by having a writing alphabet. But, recently some attempts have been made and the Burji language (*Dhaashatee*) has been offering to elementary students in their area.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF OF BURJI

According to the elders, God, spirits, and ancestors are the foundational elements of faith for the Burjis, and they have a staunch belief in a supreme being and a creator God named *Wonnto*. They believed that there is only one sky God, and they call it '*DhetHila'aley-Wonnto*' or '*HamileHarshee*'. Among Burjis, the attributes of *Wonnto* include *Abba Wonnto* (Father), *Bubintaamaano Wonnto* (the Creator), *BubintaaDantaa Wonnto* (the Almighty) and *Dhugataa Wonnto* (the True One). Also, Burjis have beliefs in their common ancestors. Common ancestors are regarded as very blessed and filled with *wonnto's* spirit, living in a state of divine. They make an offering to *Wonnto*, asking for forgiveness and protection from the eventual dangers. Burjis believe that the ancestors lived with *Wonnto*, who granted them special power to act and they play a mediating role. Due to this, during prayers, Burji says *Wonnto....wonnto*, then *aboo....aboo* or

endoo....endoo. Apart from acting as mediators, the common ancestors are seen as blessing and protecting the people and their ethical and religious values. They communicate with their people through dreams and warn them against human abuses of the defenseless, animals, and nature. Additionally, Burjis believe in spirits. They believe that good and bad spirits exist. The good spirit, *DanssaAyyaana*, is identified as God's spirit, as the spirit coming from God that gives life and blessings to people. On the other hand, the bad spirit, *YarraAyyaana*, is also seen as real and is hated by religious leaders and community elders. They curse it whenever they offer sacrifice to *Wonnto*. The Burji people also say that evil spirits can cause diseases. Consequently, some Burjis fear evil spirits. The individuals called *Murrumi* are seen as the medium of the bad spirits through which communication with them is enhanced. In order to avoid getting sick, some people give animals (male sheep or goats).

CONCLUSION

The Burji are the people who live in South Ethiopia near to the South East of Lake Chamo and Abaya. Linguistically, they are part of the 'East Cushitic' language group and their language is called *Dhashete* (Burjatee). Also, they are the biggest producers of 'Teff' and 'BuraaBurjee'/Haricot beans) and farming, the rising in livestock and trade constitute their major economic activities in the region. Regarding the religious belief, Burjis believe in God, spirits, and ancestors. Above all, they believe that there is only one sky God, and they call it '*DhetHila'aley-Wonnto*'. Besides, the people of Burji have historical evidence of living with their neighbors in peaceful ways. Unfortunately, for various reasons, their history, culture, value and indigenous knowledge have not been studied and documented. So, the federal and regional governments of Ethiopia should give attention to save the history, culture and language of the Burji from devastation and researchers also should take part in studying their history and culture.

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