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**Marriage practices and gender role socialization among
the Gumuz of Ethiopia**

Wohabie Birhan and Teka Zewdie

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Full Length Research Paper

Marriage practices and gender role socialization among the Gumuz of Ethiopia

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The Gumuz are indigenous peoples in Northwest Ethiopia having their own unique cultural values and traditions among which marriage practices and gender role socialization are just two of them and this study aimed to explore these practices. The study was conducted in Dibate District, Benishangul Gumuz Region, using inductive qualitative ethnographic design. Participants were adolescent school girls, mothers, elderly women, experts from culture and tourism, and Women, Youth and Children's Affairs offices and experts from non-governmental organizations. Participants were selected using snow ball sampling techniques. Data were collected from twenty-five participants through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. Data collected through these methods were analyzed thematically. Parental beliefs, gender role expectations, menstrual and delivery practices, food taboos, sister exchange marriage, polygyny and females considered as male 'properties' were the major themes emerged from data analysis. The findings of this study imply that there is a need for awareness creation education on gender equality and about the negative consequences of avoiding some types of food items by Gumuz females.

Key words: Gumuz, food taboos, sister exchange marriage, menstrual taboos.

INTRODUCTION

The Gumuz are one of the indigenous ethnic groups who live in northwest Ethiopia. Pertaining to their living arrangements, the Gumuz are organized in clans (Simmons, 1960) and each clan has its own delimited territory and this clan based settlement keeps them cohesive. Accordingly, people who belong to the same clan live in the same or nearby villages and perform all field cultivation activities together. Family is the most important social institution for the Gumuz and consists of

the husband, wife/wives and children (Wolde-Selassie, 2004). A typical Gumuz family is mainly characterized by extended members of multiple generations who live together or in the nearby houses in the compound. A Gumuz man, along with his wife or wives lives (Ruibal et al., 2006) in the 'main' house and the secondary house is occupied by elder sons or by a young married son and his wife. Gender roles are the culturally determined behaviors that a society expects (Nwosu, 2012), from

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male and female members of the society. Male and female children of the Gumuz are thus socialized in line with the cultural expectation within the society. There are typical gender based roles and expectations among the Gumuz society. Thus, parents socialize children based on these expectations. Mothers teach culturally expected roles to their daughters and fathers are responsible in socializing sons in line with male roles in the community. A Gumuz girl is socialized to carry out house hold chores like preparing '*Enga*' (local name for porridge made from sorghum and corn), making *Kiya* (traditional drink), weeding and ploughing on the farm, fetching water, grinding, and taking care of her smaller siblings. She has also the obligation to collect firewood and carry heavy loads to the market, which is very far away from her village. On the other hand, male children are expected to do a few roles compared to females and these include hunting birds and other wild animals starting from their early age.

The Gumuz have a gender based feeding arrangements. Boys eat together with their fathers while girls and mothers have to wait till the male members finish eating their meal. Priority is also given to males while having any meal. All male family members, regardless of age, eat before the females do. There is a food taboo among Gumuz females. Thus a female avoids certain food items, especially during her reproductive ages. These include avoiding eating meat of wild animals, egg, milk and some vegetables. It is widely believed among the society that if a pregnant female consumes meat and milk products, the fetus is perceived to get fat and delivery will be complicated. This will be challenging for Gumuz mothers who are supposed to give birth outside of the home without any birth attendant. Marriage among the Gumuz is exogamous and men have the right to marry wives through one of these ways: sister exchange, bride wealth gifts, elopement, abduction, and inheritance. Sister exchange marriage is the most elaborate form of marriage practiced among Gumuz society.

Meanwhile, males are not allowed to marry a non-Gumuz female despite the fact that there are non-Gumuz settlers such as the Shinasha, Agew, Amhara and Oromo living together within the Gumuz community. This has become a real challenge for men to get wives and remain single unless they get a sister or female relative to be exchanged with a female from another clan. There was no study done to explore practices of marriage and child socialization of the Gumuz. But, a few studies conducted so far emphasized on harmful traditional practices (Zelalem et al., 2011), ethnic relations (Wolde-Selassie, 2004), history (Abdussamed, 1995), language (Ahland, 2012), economic status and role of Gumuz women (Meron, 2011).

The objective of this study was to explore marriage practices and gender role socialization practices of the Gumuz. Specifically, the study emphasized on practices of sister exchange marriage, gender role socialization,

and menstrual and food taboos.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This chapter deals with the research approach used to conduct the study, the study sites, the procedures followed while conducting the study, data sources, sampling and data analysis techniques.

Research approach

This study employed inductive qualitative ethnographic approach.

Qualitative design offers rich descriptive reports of participants' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views and feelings as well as the meanings and interpretations of the issue under investigation (Creswel, 2012). Qualitative approach was employed since gender role socialization and marriage practices of the Gumuz are unique and unexplored phenomena which demand extensive field work.

Study sites

This study was conducted in three selected sites of Dibati District, Metekel Zone, Benishangul Gumuz Region, Ethiopia, namely, Dibati town, Geerz and Qido 'kebelles'. These are the areas which are mainly inhabited by the Gumuz, Shinasha and other highland re-settlers such as the Amhara and the Agaw.

Participants

Participants were adolescent school girls, mothers, elderly women, experts from culture and tourism and Women, Youth and Children's Affairs offices and experts from non-governmental organizations. The investigators collected extensive data from a total of 25 key informants (8 adolescent girls, 7 mothers, 3 elderly men, 3 school teachers, and 4 cultural experts) all of whom were living in Dibate District.

Sampling

Sampling was done based on the relevance of cases to the issue of investigation. Hence, all participants were selected by using snowball sampling. These techniques were preferred to select potential key informants for the study who have ample knowledge and experience on marriage practices and gender role socialization.

Data sources

This study employed multiple sources of data. Extensive qualitative data were gathered from participants through in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and field notes.

Data analysis procedures

Qualitative data collected using in-depth interviews and FGDs were transcribed and organized into codes, themes and categories. As data collection went on, analysis was also done simultaneously till the point of data saturation. Data collected through multiple techniques were analyzed and themes were formed based on

recurring concepts and ideas. Data analysis involved activities such as listening to the audio-recorded data thoroughly, observing the image and video data to get meaning behind them, reading the transcribed data carefully several times to understand key concepts, underlining and highlighting the key concepts, reducing and categorizing codes, writing memos under quotations and so on.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, FGDs, and participant observation resulted in the emergence of different themes and subthemes related to marriage practices and gender role socialization among the Gumuz. These themes are parental beliefs about children, gender role expectations, menstrual and delivery practices, food taboos, sister exchange marriage and polygyny and females perceived as 'properties'.

Parental beliefs about children

The primary goal of child socialization by the Gumuz parents is that the child should be psychologically strong to withstand the physical challenges of life. This can be inferred from the activities that children are engaged in their daily activities. Both boys and girls are taught gender specific adulthood skills and responsibilities starting from their earlier ages with the close supervision of parents.

Societal expectation is the guiding principle on how parents socialize their children. Accordingly, the society expects that female children shall be good wives and male children should be good hunters. It is widely perceived among the Gumuz society that a good girl is one who can achieve these roles and expectations by the community. Data analysis revealed that senior female family members have the responsibility to teach and oversee little girls while doing household chores to achieve societal expectations. Women and girls in general are highly needed for their economic contribution before and after their marriage. They are expected to serve the family in doing labor work such as cooking, grinding, collecting firewood, weeding and harvesting.

Gender role expectations

Gumuz parents have the belief that children have to learn appropriate gender roles based on the developmental goals set by the society. Parents expect that a girl shall spend time with her mother and learn to perform activities through observation. For example, informants in 'Geerz' explained that a female child is socialized to be a good wife, a good cook, a good house keeper, and house cleaner. In addition to these, parents have the expectation that a girl should be strong, polite, nurturing and respectful of elders.

The major activities that a pre-pubertal girl has to achieve just before she is socially known to be a *Daguna* (local name for a female adolescent) include learning to prepare 'Kiya' (traditional Gumuz drink) and 'Enga' (porridge); learning the skills of making *chicha* (locally produced sanitary pad from a tree bark which is mainly used by females during menstrual blood flow). Each Gumuz female learns to prepare her own *chicha* to manage her monthly menstrual cycle in the future, collecting firewood, grinding corn, taking care of her small siblings, working on the farm, be loyal to her husband and respect elders. In relation to this, a key informant in culture and tourism office in *Dibate* explains:

"...A Gumuz female child learns from her mother all activities that an adult woman can do and ...by the time she reaches puberty, she has already learned collecting fire wood, fetching water, preparing porridge, carrying heavy loads, grinding at night, ...hoeing during the day time and so on. In short, the girl can perform almost everything that her mother can do because she has been socialized by her mother to do these activities her childhood years. A girl who successfully performs the aforementioned tasks is supposed to be ready for transition to Daguna (adolescence) stage, but she has to remain in Didea (child) stage till her menarche, which is a confirmation for the end of childhood stage and the beginning of transition to Daguna."

In general, Gumuz females face more work overload than their male counterparts. The following quote which was taken from one male key informant during field work elaborates this fact:

"...she wakes up at midnight and grinds millet for 'enga' and when day time begins she will go to the river to fetch water with her 'siaya' (traditional apparatus made up of wood and netted rope for carrying water and other liquids by females). Then, she cleans the house and makes a fire, and prepares 'enga' for the family. After feeding the family, she will go to the forest to collect firewood. Gumuz children learn culturally and developmentally appropriate gender roles informally with the guidance of their respective parents. The major developmental task of a pre-pubertal girl is to learn future roles of womanhood. The mothers (co-wives) play a central role in providing support to the young girl to master these tasks".

With the advent of modern education in recent years, Gumuz boys and girls are engaged in formal schooling. Regarding this, we tried to assess the enrolment rate of boys and girls in formal education. Accordingly, teachers in *Dibati* and *Geerz* primary schools informed us that in the first cycle, the number of boys and girls are almost similar. However, in higher grades, the number of girls in each classroom decreases because they are forced to get married. We observed the fact that the number of girls enrolled in formal education is less than that of boys.

One of the major reasons for this is that school age corresponds with pubertal development and a girl is forced to abandon her education due to marriage which is more valued than formal schooling by parents. A young girl whom we interviewed in Geertz informed us that she just dropped out of school because she had to be exchanged with a girl from another clan to be a wife for her brother. Some Gumuz parents have also misconceptions about girls' education. For example, one key informant from the Women, Children and Youths' Affairs Office informed us that parents have the belief that if a girl advances in her education, she would turn to be a prostitute. Parents believe that it is enough if a girl is able to read and write her name.

Menstrual and delivery practices

There is a belief among the Gumuz community that menstrual blood is conceived to be powerful and associated with several negative consequences. As a result, once a girl reaches puberty, she will be instructed about what to do and not to do in the course of her monthly cycle. This includes cautioning her not to touch utensils that the family uses because of fear of contamination, making her live separately till she becomes 'clean', and restricting her from household chores like cooking and fetching water. Besides these, a menstruating girl is also advised to avoid going to the farm area for fear the fluid coming out of her body wilts crops. Such restrictions continue throughout her fertility years. For example, a female informant from Dibate mentioned that she was really confused about what to do when her menarche suddenly occurred while she was working on the farmland and she felt as if she were causing a disaster to herself and to her family. Menstrual blood is thought to be dangerous to the wellbeing of the menstruating girl herself as well as for others. That is why a menstruating Gumuz female has to be kept in a separate hut till the flow is over. "If one eats food cooked by a menstruating girl or shakes hands with her, he will be affected by illnesses such as epilepsy" (male key informant in Dibate).

Women are isolated from the family and the community not only during their menstrual cycles but they are also made to deliver outside of home without any birth attendant. With respect to this belief, an elderly woman informant in Geertz said that she delivered all her ten children in the forest in order to avoid anger of spirits and retributions that may occur due to blood drops inside the main house.

Food taboos

Gumuz females, especially those who are in their reproductive ages are restricted from eating certain food

items that are perceived to have negative influences on a female's pregnancy and delivery. For instance, a woman informant in Geertz indicated that eating some types of food especially flesh of wild animals like meat of an antelope, pig, birds and eggs is dangerous for the wellbeing of a sexually matured female. Eating these food items is believed by the Gumuz society to affect the young girl's fertility negatively. Thus to avoid this, a Gumuz female is advised not to eat these food items starting from her menarche and this restriction continues until her menopause stage.

Polygyny and sister exchange marriage

A Gumuz girl is made to get married usually with a form of sister exchange even before she achieves sexual maturity. In this form of marriage, two females from different clans will be exchanged to be wives for male members. Sister exchange marriage is widely practiced by the Gumuz society. We were informed that males could marry if they have sisters or closer female relatives to be exchanged but would remain single if they do not have a sister or female relatives.

Polygyny is common among the Gumuz society in which men are allowed to marry more than one wife. Polygyny mainly occurs among the Gumuz society if there are no 'matured' daughters at home who can contribute labor for the family or if the first wife gets older; physically weaker; reaches menopause and could no more bear children.

Marriage at an early age is practiced among the Gumuz and this implies that social and biological puberty do not necessarily coincide each other. Early marriage is especially common in families that practice sister exchange. In sister exchange marriage, age cohort or being in the same developmental stage between the would be husband and wife is not compulsory. For example, the husband may be in *Didea* stage while the wife might be in a *Dagunaa* (adolescent) or *Mitichpega* (Gumuz adult female who have formed a family and who is in the state of the motherhood) or a widow and vice versa. Marriage for a girl depends upon two main conditions: one is the developmental condition of brothers or male clan members and the marital condition of the father. For instance, a girl is made to get married at an earlier age if her elder brother wants to marry or her father needs an additional wife. In such cases, the young girl will leave her family and move to the house of her husband's family from another clan.

A female child is sent to other clans to be a wife usually in the form of exchange marriage. This would help her father to be in a better position in terms of economy and social status. In exchange marriage, one clan exchanges females with another clan to be wives of male members of the kin. A father has full autonomy on his daughters and according to key informants, the presence of more

daughters in the family means that the father can exchange them with females from another clan and these females would be his wives or he can exchange with money with another clan. Key informants also mentioned that the fertility of a girl is the most important component of stable marital life. Failure to give birth by a female is really a disaster for the couples and believed to be a great misfortune which may ultimately lead to divorce. In the case of exchange marriage, the girl would be sent back to her family if she is not fertile and a replacement with a fertile one is requested.

Females perceived as 'properties'

Females are considered as 'properties' of the male members of the society among the Gumuz. They serve male family members at household level before marriage in terms of contributing labor and they are exchanged with females from another clan to be wives. Besides, females have no decision making power about whom they are going to marry and accept orders from males. Once a Gumuz female gets married, she belongs to her husband, his family and clan members. Therefore, she identifies herself with the new clan and sometimes she is considered as a property of her husband's clan. For example, if her husband dies, she would be inherited by his brother or other family members.

The aim of this study was to explore about gender role socialization and marriage practices among the Gumuz. Therefore, this section discusses about the themes emerged during data analysis. Gumuz females live away from their clan members once they get married. Thus, when there is a dispute between the husband and wife in one of the families, there is also a chance for the other family to physically abuse the exchanged female as a way of retaliation. This will ultimately lead to divorce and the situation will be critical for couples having children. Gumuz females build a new form of identity with the clan that belongs to their husbands' after they have been sent to another clan in the form of a wife. This reality seems to correspond with Erikson's idea that women achieve their identity after marriage. Example, previous research demonstrated that male psychosocial development corresponds with Erikson's theory where identity development influences intimacy development. Additional research based on Carol Gilligan's ideas suggested that identity and intimacy development may be fused in females (Gilligan, 1982).

In Gumuz culture, a female who had been given to another clan in the form of exchange marriage is the property of the clan of her husband. In case her husband dies, she will be inherited by the clan and continue to be the wife of her husband's brother or his relatives. This implies that women have no power to make decision about their life. The current finding is in line with theoretical literature which mentions that women in

Zimbabwe (Chimbandi, 2014), face various kinds of exploitation like forced marriage, early marriages, and polygamy.

In any society, there is gender-typed behavior whereby specific roles and responsibilities are attached to men and women (Markstrom, 2008). Yet, this contradicts feminists' assumption which underlines that both men and women can play all roles regardless of some biological differences between the two sexes (Olson and Defrain, 2000). However, gender roles and responsibilities are not somewhat balanced among the Gumuz. Females in Gumuz are responsible for the majority of activities in the day to day activities for earning a living in a given family of the Gumuz. They are engaged in cooking, grinding, and washing, taking care of children, housekeeping, collecting fire wood, going to the market by carrying heavy loads, and working on farmlands. Our finding is similar to gender role socialization in Zambia in which females are responsible for many activities compared to their male counterparts (Kanyimbo-Maambo, 2015).

Gender-role theory states that power is in the hand of males (Markstrom, 2008). Likewise, underlining on the presence of gender inequality in different societies of Africa, Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui (2009) argue that the gender roles assigned to men and women are defined in ways which create, reinforce, and perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. Similarly, feminists' argue that men have to take responsibility for many tasks which women have traditionally undertaken within the domestic realm including doing housework, child care and elder care (Segal, 1983; Walby, 1990).

Feminists also argue that there are gender biases and inequalities embedded within the society's culture, norms, values and expectations (Gilligan, 1982). Unlike that of females, males' work is limited to outside of home such as hunting. Sociological feminist theory severely criticizes the society for burdening women with most of the domestic and child-care work and of conventional marriage for causing women's economic dependence and limiting their autonomy (Agassi, 1989).

Gumuz children learn gender-appropriate roles at their earlier ages. For instance, we observed that female children carry water from the nearby river along with their mothers with a *siaya*. Theoretical literature also reveals that such gender-linked socialization frequently begins prior to the onset of puberty (Markstrom, 2008; Ramokgopa, 2001).

Gumuz culture demands menstruating females to live in *Jibita* (a small hut made from wood and grass in which menstruating females temporarily reside till they become 'clean'); not to participate in community life; not to greet others and avoid eating certain food items. Staying isolated throughout the menstrual period has a negative impact on the girl's social and psychological wellbeing at least at that moment. For instance, people especially males, are advised not to approach a menstruating girl

because she is perceived to be dangerous to the wellbeing of others. Our finding corresponds with girls' socialization practices in Zimbabwe whereby girls are restricted from social activities (Shoko, 1997), during their monthly cycle. Gumuz females are taught to avoid certain food items during their reproductive age. This is due to the societal belief that if a female, especially a pregnant one, eats some food items like meat and milk, the fetus will grow fatter and cause delivery complications. Similarly, previous research indicates that people in different cultures avoid certain food items during their specific developmental life cycles particularly, during pregnancy, birth, and lactation (Shomya, 2015). Gumuz mothers give birth outside of home without any birth attendant due to the societal belief that any drop of blood at the main house will cause anger of spirits. The findings of this study imply that there is a need for awareness creation education on gender equality and teaching mothers and the society at large about the negative impact of avoiding some types of food items by young Gumuz females, who are pregnant or at fertility age. For pregnant women, the risk of malnutrition not only will affect their wellbeing but also that of the unborn child.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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