

Full Length Research Paper

Mapping the socio-cultural landscape of the Gumuz Community of Metekel, Northwestern Ethiopia

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Received 17 March, 2015; Accepted 17 June, 2015

This study critically examined the socio-cultural practices and beliefs of the Gumuz community of the Metekel such as the process of the traditional medical treatment strategies, dietary habits, marriage practices, and agricultural activities, social and religious institutions. These traditional practices and beliefs symbolize the societal cultures performed by members of Gumuz community and give them sense of ethno-cultural identity and used to distinguish them from other ethnic groups. The cultural practices and beliefs are parts of the social bases that the Gumuz communities use as the guiding lines for conflict resolution, ritual performance, influencing roles and social responsibilities. The finding of this study shows that the Gumuz Community are dependent on traditional medicine in which they widely use medicinal plants for preventive and curative purpose of various health problems and human ailments. The indigenous medical knowledge and practices of the Gumuz determines the extent and use of the traditional medicine, the treatment strategies of the traditional healers, disease identification processes, and identification of the medicinal plants, ingredients added and administration of the medicine. Marriage arrangement, dietary habits, social and religious institutions are the unique cultural elements of the Gumuz society that they use for centuries to fulfill the human needs and resolve the social evils. This study was conducted in Metekel Zone, Bineshangul Gumuz National Regional state, Ethiopia. The Gumuz inhabited areas of Metekel was purposively selected for this study. The data was collected using key informants interview and focus group discussion. Traditional healers, community elders and local religious leaders were independently interviewed and six focus group discussions were conducted. The sources are critically collected, scrutinized and then analyzed. The validities of the sources are cross-checked one against the other.

Key words: Traditional medical practices and beliefs, marriage ceremony and dietary habits.

INTRODUCTION

Culture represents the sum total of all behaviors that are learned, shared by a group of people and passes from generation to generation. The culture is broad in its scope including ritual performance, language, nature and types

of food preparation, childrearing methods, marriage arrangement, death ceremonies and all other societal values. Cultural practices and beliefs symbolize the societal values performed by members of community

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through the passage of time. People living throughout the world have their own cultural particularities which give them sense of identity and distinguish them from other ethnic groups. The cultural values shape one's activity. Every culture has its set of values, social norms, and pattern of behaviors, local responsibilities and expectations in the socialization process (Lindsey, 2005). The cultural practices and beliefs are parts of the social bases that community members use for various social reconstruction and purposes such as for conflict resolution, ritual performance, influencing roles and responsibilities. The cultural practices and beliefs are however, evolving processes and dynamics that can vary over time due to external influences, environmental shifting, variation of the cultural elements, and expansion of the modern education, war, interaction, globalization, and other developments.

Scholarly works indicated that the positive cultural practices constitute parts of the indigenous knowledge and contributes for the betterment of the society. However, some of the traditional practices and beliefs such as early marriage, abduction, female genital mutilation, and discrimination against females during the biological process (menstruation delivery and the like) have negative implication on the health and development aspects of the human society (African Center for Women, 1997). The knowledge gap about harmful traditional practices has an adverse effect on the overall development process of the country in general and health aspects of the society in particular. Ethiopia being a home of multi-ethnic nations and nationalities is characterized by divers culture. Several nations and nationalities of Ethiopia have their own ethno-cultural identity. Among these, the Gumuz communities of Metekel, Northwestern Ethiopia managed to keep their cultural identities where the cultural practices and beliefs have multifaceted purposes in the society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology is employed as an appropriate method to obtain reliable and relevant information for this study since it is essential to collect data about the particular issue in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or determining the relationship that exists between specific events. In addition, qualitative method is a naturalistic approach that helps to understand what had really going on (processes) and human experiences. Accordingly, the reason why the researcher has employed qualitative method as the main research method is the nature of the research problem and research questions.

Data sources

In this study, both the primary and the secondary sources

of the data were used. This includes key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and other sources of data. The applicability of some of the data collection instruments are discussed below.

Observations

A personal observation was conducted together with taking field notes. Personal observation was made when the Gumuz involved in traditional ritual practices, weeding ceremony, *Mesekele* (finding of true cross) celebration, burial ceremony and traditional medical beliefs and practices. These observed facts was further investigated and consolidated through interview, focus group discussions and crosschecked with what is written about the Gumuz cultural practices.

Key informant interviews

Unstructured interviews were carried out with the intention of collecting the needed data for this study. The researcher had conducted face-to-face interviews with traditional medical healers, local traditional religious leaders, traditional conflict resolution bodies, and family head. The selection of the key informant was made based on the nearness and knowledge of the particular issue.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDS)

Focus group discussions with six to eight discussants in each group were carried out on different issues such as the process of the ritual practice and beliefs, the marriage tradition, indigenous medical practices, dietary habits and the like. These discussions were involved unstructured and generally open ended. The selection of the discussants was made based on their nearness and knowledge of the particular issue, social duties and responsibility of ritual practice, family leadership, healing system, marriage arrangement, conflict resolution, and other social obligations.

DOCUMENT REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

During the process of research, the researcher reviewed related literature about the social-cultural practices and beliefs of the Ethiopian ethnicities in general and Gumuz communities in particular. In addition, letters, reports, newspapers, articles, research papers, minutes, diaries, documentary films and other manuscripts were consulted from Mandura Woreda, and GigelBeles towns, Metekel Zone culture-tourism office and department respectively. The written documents are cross-checked against the oral sources. Accordingly, data analysis was made

through interpretation, summarization and description of meanings, views and perceptions.

The Gumuz: A brief historical overview

The Gumuz, linguistically belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language speakers are one of the earliest inhabitants of Ethiopia. In earlier periods, Gumuz were said to have settled in the areas extending from Lake Rodolfo and Turkana as far as Ethio-Sudanese border lands (Bender, 1975: 61; Abdussamad, 1995:53). The various sources in particular travellers account and local oral traditions testifies that Gumuz communities of Metekel first settled what is today Awi Nationality Zone, long years before the coming of *Awigna* speaking people into Gojjam. They were said to have occupied the territories stretching from the shores of Lake Tana to the west and Sekella (Tadese, 1982: 2), source of Gilgel Abay. However, following the settlement of Awi in Gojjam, they were further pushed to the westwards as far as the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands and inhospitable areas of Blue Nile River. The Awi put strong pressure and forced them to leave their early bases.

By now, large numbers of the Gumuz population live in Metekel zone (Benishangul Gumuz Regional State), Deddessa (formerly under Wellega province but currently Khemash Zone), Quara and Mettema (North Godar), Awi Nationality Zone as far as Ethio-Sudanese border (Tadese, 1984: 82-83). The others are living in the Republic of Sudan, particularly in Famaka, Rosaries and borderlands of Fazogile. The Gumuz of Deddessa and Metekel are naturally divided by the Blue Nile River. However, after 1991 political re-arrangement, the Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley, which had been under the former province of Wellega, formed Kemash Zone and placed under the newly established Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State. Similarly, the Gumuz of Metekel which had been part of Gojjamin pre1991 placed under Metekel Zone in Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State.

The Gumuz communities of Metekel were the victims of the slavery and slave trade. They were frequently marginalized, enslaved and deprived from all levels of development for centuries. The state and the neighboring highlanders were the major actors in slave raid. For instance, their neighbor Awi communities enslaved the Gumuz for centuries until 1950s and 1960s in secret manner. Their cultural practices and beliefs were the major survival strategies that the community uses for several health and social problems.

Due to taxation and slave raids, the Gumuz of the Metekel were migrated to Dedessa, Wellega in 1880s (Unseth, 1986:96). The Gumuz of Dedessa Valley (Wellega) originally comes from the Guba and Wombera (Metekel) refusing the taxation system of Gojjam governorate province and its evil activities of slave raid since 1890s and early twentieth century. Some of the

Gumuz population are separated from their mainstream (Metekel) and separately found around Wolkitie, southwest of Addis Ababa. They were taken by *Fitawrari* Habite Giorgis Denaged, war minister of Emperor Menilik II towards the end of nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century (Bender, 1975:62; Unseth, 1986:95) for traditional agricultural fieldwork¹. Moreover, the Gumuz made the massive migration into Wellega in early 1930s due to the harsh slavery policy of the *RasHailu* of Gojjam (Walmark, 1981: 81). Others were left for Sudan, where they were called "*Kuninoar*" meaning "mixed population."

The expansion of the Oromo in the sixteenth century had also an adverse effect on the Gumuz settlement and cultural practices. They lost their bases, like Wombera for them. The Oromo settlement in Wombera, Metekel caused cultural dynamism and shifted the course of interethnic relation in the region (Cerulli, 1956: 15). The Gumuz in Metekel and Awi characterized by the mixed settlement and cross border relations. According to 2007 reports of Central Statistics Authority (CSA), among 670,847 entire population of the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State, 28, 468 (four percent) are Awi people. Similarly, out of 981,491 total population of the Awi Nationality Administrative Zone, about 13, 074 (one percent) are Gumuz (Central Statistics Authority, 2007). Most of the Gumuz population in Awi Zone live in Guangua and newly emerged Zigem and *Jaweweredas*. Some of the Gumuz populations are also settled in remote and lowland parts of Ankeshawereda, such as Enabara, and *Ambelaqebelles*.

What is interesting here is that regardless of the geographical isolation, the Gumuz communities that are scattered in different pocket lands of the country can communicate and understand each other (Bender, 1975:61; Sisay, 1988; Unseth, 1986:96). Different existing literatures indicate that their cultural practices and language was uniform with slight dialectical difference. This uniformity of language and cultural background indicates that the distribution of the Gumuz people was recent phenomenon that was happened due to the pressure of the neighboring people and effect of the slave raids. The slight dialectical difference is relatively observed between the Gumuz of Mettema and Dedessa Valley, which is believed to be the result of geographical isolation (Bender, 1975: 62).

Throughout their history, the Gumuz living in different geographical enclaves of the country had been called by different local names. They were known by different names, such as *Gumis*, *Ganza*, "*Shanqella*", *Sese (Sai)*, *Dukunz*, *Dugunza*, *Disoha*, *Gombo*, *Gumza*, *Baria*, *Kulit*, *Shinafaand Bega* (Unseth, 1986: 95; Bender, 1975: 62). *To begin with*, the Gumuz of Mettema used to call themselves *Baria*, *Kulit*, and *Shinafa*, while the Gumuz of Mettekel and Quara prefer to call them *Bega* (Sisay,

¹ There was a belief that blacks are good in manual fieldwork.

1988). The Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley were also known as *Say Say*. In fact, some of these local names such as "*baria*"² and "*Shanqella*" had negative connotations. For instance, the neighboring highlanders particularly Awi, Amharic speakers and the central government used to refer them "*Shanqella*". By now, this name is out of use because of having pejorative root. The Gumuz elders believed that this pejorative name was given by aforementioned neighboring people and state. In addition, in many works of the foreign travelers like James Bruce, R. E Cheesman, and Hennery Salt, the Gumuz communities were mentioned as "*Shanqella*." The use of the term Gumuzas ethnic name became popular after the change of the government since 1991. In line with the post 1991 federal arrangement, the name Gumuz is made to represent its entire ethnicities because of its free from derogatory connotation.

Social institutions and cultural practices

The Gumuz communities have their own typical socio-cultural characterization such as religious practice, way of life, dietary habit, agricultural activities, process of food acquisition, marriage practice and the like. With regard to these, Dieci and Roscio (1992: 119) noted that the Gumuz have "very different cultural models and customs from the rest of the Ethiopians as well as Negroid-type somatic features which clearly set apart from the other inhabitants."

Unlike their neighboring highlanders, the Gumuz are different in settlement pattern and traditional social organizations. The settlement pattern of the Gumuz is structured based on kinship and clan relationship. The Gumuz that are interwoven each other by blood along the male line inhabit the common villages and form the clan. Those who have the nearest blood relation settle in one compound and the clan members are responsible to defend their community from any external attacks.³ The distance in settlement of the clan increases as distance in kinship increases. The group of clans collectively forms their separate sub-regions such as the Gumuz of the Mandura, Debaṭi, Gublak, Guba, Daban and Amber (Enabara)⁴. In many aspects of socio-cultural practices the Gumuz of the Daban and Amber are similar to the Gumuz of the Metekel, but they have frequent contact and interaction with the Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley. In wider classification, the Gumuz based on their geographical distribution are identified by the name of the regions such as the Gumuz of Metekel, the Gumuz of Mettema and the Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley (Woldesellasié, 2002:1039).

²It means *agelgaye* equivalent to servant.

³External attack refers pressure possibly coming from other Gumuz and/or non Gumuz clans.

⁴ The last two sub-regions currently situated in Awi Zone under Ankesha Guagusawereda, while the rest are parts of Metekel Zone under Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State.

In contrary to their neighbors, the Gumuz do not have religious based associations⁵, but there is closer chain of social ties among the Gumuz of different clans. In fact, clan members are usually respecting each other and feuds are resolved through the involvement of the elders. This traditional conflict resolution process is called *mangima*. They have indigenous traditional conflict management institution called *Siyaha*. In each clan, elders traditionally govern the Gumuz societies. However, there is no formal hierarchy in the structure of the institutions⁶. This *Siyaha* institution and clan based leadership experience was an earliest phenomena that they have been using to manage the conflicts that could happen between different clans. The Scottish traveler, Bruce (1972: 546) had witnessed numerous clannish leadership of the Gumuz society and gave his own accounts about the traditional conflict resolution practices. The elders from their respective clans assigned to lead the *Siyaha* institution. The elevated local appointees are known as *tissa*, who are responsible to maintain peace and stability in the Gumuz community.

The religious practices of the Gumuz communities are largely associated with traditional beliefs. They called their traditional religion *missa* (spirit). According to their belief, there are multiple *missa* that are regulating different aspects of social, economic, natural and political life. Some of the *missa* are, *missa-aya* (river spirit), *missa-kuancha* (sorghum spirit), *missa-gumba* (stick spirit), *missasiila* (hunt spirit), *missa-gitsiya* (possession spirit), *missa-tanqa* (finger millet), *mussa-missa* (house spirit). With regard to the traditional spirits of the Gumuz, Wolde Sellaie (2004: 1039) in his study entitled, *Gumuz and Highland Resettlers*, listed about nineteen different spirits that governs the wellbeing of the Gumuz society. The Gumuz believed that all the *missa* are centrally regulated by the high spirit called *yamba* (supreme deity). *Yamba* is high spirit that controls all the *missa* (spirits). According to their tradition, *missa* are messengers (prophets) of the *yamba*. Like priests of other Orthodox Christian society, the traditional spirit of the Gumuz is led by *gafia*. They are magico-religious heads of the Gumuz society. Their culture allowed both men and women to assume the position of *gafia*, but males mostly took this title⁷. They are intermediaries between the local people and their spirits.

The Gumuz elders associate the frequent happening of the deaths, drought and famine, cattle disease and other natural catastrophic incidents with the anger of traditional spirits. When such events repeatedly occurred, they consulted *gafia* to reconcile with *missa*. If the situation could not stop, they would be advised to shift their

⁵ The Gumuz neighbors such as Awi, Shinasha, Oromo and Amhara have the religious association (*mahiber*) that they use it to consolidate their social and spiritual ties and other multi-faced social issues.

⁶ Interview with: Tufa Duyu and Engida Tessema, interviewed on 03/09/2012.

⁷ Interview with: Tufa Douyo, Amsaya Abawa, Mulugeta Bemaye, interviewed on 06/05/2013

residential sites⁸.

The Gumuz have different burial practices. They buried the dead body in their respective gardens. In the first place, they believed that all the relatives buried at specific garden would have the chance to communicate each other in their life after death. To the contrary, they calculated that if dead buried in isolated areas like church, he/she would live alone forever. Secondly, Gumuz informants described that they buried the dead body in their respective garden to keep the skeleton not to be taken by Awi or Amhara neighbors⁹. The neighboring Awi and Amhara are blamed for taking the Gumuz bones through digging the burial areas. Questions may arise why they are blamed for secretly taking the Gumuz human bones. My Awi, Gumuz and Amhara informants replied that it protects them from the evil spirits. There is belief in Awi and neighboring Amhara tradition that the Gumuz bones cure children and adults that are affected by evil spirits when the victim smokes the Skelton. In order to save their children from evil spirits, Awi and other neighboring people dig the graves and took the Gumuz bones. Therefore, the Gumuz preferred to bury their dead body in the garden for the safety of skeleton.

Although there is religious pressure from triangular directions, the Gumuz of the Metekel still maintain their age-old traditional beliefs. From the western direction, the Funj kingdom and Mahdist Sudan had put strong pressure on the Gumuz of Guba since the sixteenth century. As result of these long years influence of the neighboring Muslim Sudanese states, the Gumuz of the Guba professed Islam. From southwest, the local Oromo Protestants influence the Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley to embrace Protestantism. (Wolde Sellasie, 2004: 270). Similarly, from the east, the Awi made several attempt to Christianize the Gumuz of the Mandura, Debaṭi, Dangur, Zigem, Daban, Amber and others that inhabited the contiguous territory. Orthodox Christian Priests particularly from Awi community frequently attempting to baptize the Gumuz and invited them to take part in religious observances. In addition, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Sunday Education carried out several evangelical works towards the Gumuz lands. Now a day, in very few areas of Mandura, Debaṭi, Dandura, Zigem, Daban, Amber, very few Gumuz are baptized and becoming member of Sabbath association (*senbtiemahiber*) and other religious based associations with Awi. There are also improvements that the Gumuz are burring their dead inside the church compound. However, religious conversion is yet and at its infancy stage. One who symbolizes to accept Orthodox Christianity is not truly performing religious obligations like fasting and respecting other religious dogmas. We find no Gumuz priests, *debtara*¹⁰ and deacons. In addition, yet no churches and traditional

church education centers are instituted by the Gumuz in their own separate residential areas¹¹.

Livelihood strategies and nutritional system

The Gumuz are shifting cultivators and dependent on hunting and gathering in their history. They are still poor in oxen and horse plough, instead, they use simple hoe for agriculture purpose. They set fire on the field to make it ready for cultivation. They successively cultivate a plot of land averagely from four to eight years (Berihun, 2009; 351-355, Walmark, 1981: 85) until the soil loses its fertility. Traditionally, the Gumuz knew that the change of the color in soil is an indication of the loss of fertility. Then, they left it, set fire on the new land, and continued the cultivation. However, when the left land recovers its fertility, the previous owner could not necessarily possess it. Another individual from the same clan could own it.

They cultivate different crops like sorghum, finger millet, maize, sesame, cotton, tobacco and ginger. *Nga* (porridge) is the staple food in Gumuz culture. It is prepared from sorghum, finger millet or corn powder. To make the porridge testy, they used various leaves and root species like fungi/mushroom, bamboo roots and leaves and groundnuts for centuries (Walemark, 1981:106).

The Gumuz do not relate food selection with Biblical restrictions and indiscriminately eat plant and animal species. Their culture allowed them to consume plant and animal species. With regard to food menu and cultures of the Gumuz, Taye noted that the Gumuz of the Gojjam “eat anything, wear nothing and maintained large family, because they practice polygamy.”(Quoted in Rahamato, 1998:122). Similarly, Cerulli (1956:11-17) described as Gumuz indiscriminately eat plant and animal species.

The Gumuz hunt various types of terrestrial and aquatic animals for food. Hunting is one of the most respected professions in Gumuz culture. They hunt different arboreal animals (ape, monkey etc), reptiles, birds, rates, frogs, antelope, elephants, rhinoceros and the like. Wolde Sellasie (2004: 81 and 84) in his study mentioned thirty-one terrestrial and aquatic animals and twenty-one bird species that the Gumuz hunt for food. Indeed, Wendy James noted as Gumuz more benefited from the meat of the wild animals rather than the meat of the domestic animals (James, 1986: 32). In addition, the Gumuz collect various types of fruit, leave and root species for food. In relation to this, Sellasie (2004: 81) also identified eighteen fruit species, twelve leave types and three root plants that Gumuz used as the potential sources of food. However, the supplies of these forest resources are seasonal and affected by the environmental changes. In dry seasons, their availability became scarce, while in rainy months it revives. Wendy James (1986: 32)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, AmsayaAbawa, MulugetaBemaye and BirhanuAsres, interviewed on 24/05/2013

¹⁰ They are church educated who attended high level of the learning.

¹¹ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, MulugetaBemaye and BirhanuAsres, interviewed on 24/05/2013

recognized as forest resources constitute major seasonal food since time immemorial. During the fieldwork, the researcher interviewed the Gumuz elders with regard to the role of dietary habits in developing natural immunity. They state:

We eat what is available, either animal or plant varieties. We do not discriminate food like Awiand Wello. This prevents us from getting sick. In our community, no one is seeking medical assistance. We eat balanced diet. As we eat various kinds of plants and animals, we get no stomach aches and headaches, no swelling of the foot and lead a healthy life in our society. No infirm individuals in Gumuz. We do not engage in begging like Awi. Unfortunately, Awiand Wello, because of the discriminatory food practices, are highly exposed to diseases such as swelling of legs, stomachache, headaches.

The Gumuz believed that absence of restrictions on nutritional system helps to maintain their body balance and prevent them from any disease. The Gumuz criticize their neighbors (Awi, Wollo, Gojammé settlers and Oromo) for their religious restrictions on food selections.

Marriage arrangement

In any mixed settlement and cross border contact areas, marriage between different ethnicities can be taken place. The diverse ethnicities in Metekel such as Oromo, Shinasha, Amhara settlers, Hadya, Kembata, Tigre and Awi are intermarrying each other. However, this inter-ethnic marriage tie with the Gumuz is not common. Gumuz informants described as marriage ties between their community and, non-Gumuz is strongly condemned in their culture and they replied, as it is similar to the union of sheep and goats.¹² In their speech, they underlined that how can unrelated races live together. On the other hand, Non-Gumuz highlanders' are not happy to select spouse from the Gumuz clan because of difference in ethnic line, cultural background, food menu, religion and the like. Awi, Amhara and other highlanders' elders responded that their members marginalized the Gumuz community due to their traditional religious practices, dietary habits, physical darkness, and the like

In recent years, very limited Gumuz individuals appeared in marrying particularly Awi women. However, the Awi females married the Gumuz individuals mainly for economic purpose, because the Gumuz possessed the ample lands. The Gumuz informants described that getting wife from Awi is easier than getting marriage from the Gumuz clan, since marriage system in Gumuz culture is too complex.¹³ According to their culture, if an

individual has no sister or female relatives, he can get wife through bride gift. The bridegroom is required to provide the bride's family with guns, cattle, goats, Ethiopian birr note and several traditional agricultural tools.¹⁴ In addition, traditionally, Gumuz females are too resistant in getting marriage arrangement with non-Gumuz.

In any traditional society, spouse selection is made based on the cultural and racial background, family and economic base. Marriage arrangement in Gumuz culture is different from other highlanders. The Gumuz individuals can get wives through sister exchange, bride wealth gifts, elopement, abduction, and inheritance (Kalkidan, 2007: 48-52). The marriage practice is exogamous. Marriage in one clan is not allowed, since they belong to the same blood.

Sister exchange is mostly practiced and dominant marriage arrangement practice among the Gumuz clans. Girls are considered as the potential assets that could satisfy the interest of their brothers, uncles, cousins and even father. If an individual do not have sister, he can get wife through aunt, or other female relative exchange. In relation to such arrangement, James (1986: 133) noted that sister exchange marriage in Gumuz clan is "long standing contractual relationship which last a full generation and is fulfilled by the plentiful birth and the survival of the children on either side". In Gumuz culture, an individual can have many wives as far as he has multiple sisters or female relatives. The more sisters an individual has, the more wives he can marry. The only problem that limited the Gumuz individuals from having multiple wives is lack of sisters or female relatives. However, spouse selection do not consulted the girls. In addition, the economic ability did not taken into consideration while getting multiple wives.

Unlike other highlanders, the Gumuz females encourage their husbands to have multiple wives. In Gumuz culture, wives do most of the home and field activities such as food preparation, fetching water, collecting firewood, childcare and field cultivation. Thus, most of the labor burdens left on the shoulders of the females and they are active agents of the society. In relation to this, Berihun (2009: 355) in his work noted that females are "pillars" of the home and huts could not stand alone without their active involvement. Therefore, senior wife is more beneficial, because multiple wives simplify the home activities and other labor works. In addition, the Gumuz women believed that if their husband has many wives, they could keep his nutritional balance by providing him with diets. Above all, many wives give many births. The number of the sons that he has born measures the prestige and the dignity of the Gumuz individuals. They used to consolidate the security position. They have the tradition that no one can threat, if an individual has many sons. To this effect, the senior wife always encouraged

¹²Interview with: Tufa Douyo, AmsayaAbawa, MulugetaBemaye, interviewed on 26/05/2013

¹³Interview with: TadeseMulugéta, Tufa Duyu, AmsayaAbawa, interviewed on 24/05/2013

¹⁴Interview with: Tufa Duyu, AmsayaAbawa, MulugetaBemaye, interviewed on 24/05/2013

her husband to marry additional wives. She is the main actor in weeding ceremony and responsible to prepare weeding feasts. The later wives can share the same house until they give births. When they give many births, their husband built separate huts and the later wives began to lead independent life. The senior wife remains in the old house.

Bride wealth payment marriage took place in the absence of the sisters or female relatives. As stated earlier, this type of marriage arrangement is too decisive, since the bridegroom is required to provide the bride's family with cattle, goats, rifles, birr note and agricultural tools. The amount of the bride wealth payment would be decided by the community elders. Therefore, an individual should have to work for many years to accumulate capital and other properties needed to provide gifts for bride. Lack of bride wealth payment leads to elopement and abduction marriage.¹⁵ It is another alternative means that the Gumuz individuals use to get wife.

Elopement is a kind of marriage in which both boy and girl love each other and established based on the will of the two couples. However, their parents do not have knowledge about it. Elopement may lead to clan feud and blood bathes. In order to prevent the possibility of the clan feud between girls and boys family, the two couples temporarily hidden in somewhere. The incident may highly anger the girl's clan, because on one hand, they lost her in which bothers, uncles or cousins used to get wives. On the other, it is considered as immoral which reduces the dignity of her family. Later, elders from the neutral clans intervene and would normalize the marriage by arranging compensation payment (Kalkidan, 2007:51-52).

Abduction marriage sometimes occurs in Gumuz community. It is made without the interest of the girl. Abduction happens mainly on market days. As stated above, such marriage happens due to the lack of wealth for bride wealth payment and refusal of the girl's family to accept the formal marriage question.¹⁶ After the incident took place, elders would intervene and arrange the compensation that would be given to the girl's family. Usually the girl's parents accept the abduction after they receive the compensation in goat, cattle and one sister of the kidnaper. However, the girl's family will accept abduction if the kidnapper is from a socially recognized family and has a substitute sister. Sometimes this may create conflict between the kidnapper and the girl's brother, particularly when the kidnapper has no substitute sister or female relatives. But if the kidnaper has a substitute sister, the girl's brother can exchange the substitute one for his marriage.

Inheritance marriage is also common in the Gumuz tradition. In Gumuz culture, when husband dies, the elder

brother of the dead individual inherits the wives. If the dead has no brother, they would be remarried to the nearest relative of the death. Inheritance marriage is made to take care of the daughters and sons of the dead within the deed's family. In addition, they believed that inheritance marriage increases the blood ties between the former and later born children from different father.

Marriage between the Gumuz and non-Gumuz community is not common. In any mixed settlement and cross border contact areas, marriage between different ethnicities can be taken place. The diverse ethnicities in Metekel such as Oromo, Shinasha, Hadya, Kembata, Tigre and Awi are inter marrying each other. However, no interethnic marriage ties between the Gumuz community in one hand and these societies on the other. Gumuz informants described as marriage ties between Gumuz and non-Gumuz is strongly condemned in their culture and they replied, as it is similar to the union of sheep and goats.¹⁷

In Gumuz culture, females would stay at outside during childbirth and menstruation. The menstruated women isolated and forced stay outside until she becomes clean. Child delivery takes place out outside home and would stay there from three to five days (Kalkidan, 2007: 54). Their traditional religion prohibited the menstruated female not to inter into main house. They believed that the menstruation bleeding and fluids flow during child delivery would pollute the house causing *mussa-missa* (house spirit) to be anger. If any family member got sickness or injures, they suppose that it is the punishment of the *mussa-missa*.

In addition, smoking among men and women is common in Gumuz community. They associate smoking with disease prevention.¹⁸ They have the tradition that smoking prevents them from malaria. In the absence of tobacco, they used to smoke even the leaves of the different plants.

Traditional Medical Practices and Beliefs

Traditional medical practice is an age-old treatment in which human beings relied on for the prevention of health disorder. It is still widely in use for preventive and curative role of the various health disorders and human ailments. The process of the traditional medicinal preparation and the method of the treatment is an indigenous knowledge application that the healers produced it from locally available plant, animal and the mineral products. World Health Organization (2000:1) defined the traditional medicine as "the sum total of knowledge, skill and practice based on the theories, beliefs and experience indigenous to different cultures whether explicable or not,

¹⁵Interview with: Engeda Tesemma, Tufa Duyu, Amsaya Abawa, Mulugeta Bemaye, interviewed on 24/09/2012

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Amsaya Abawa, Mulugeta Bemaye, interviewed on 24/05/2013

¹⁸Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Amsaya Abawa, Mulugeta Bemaye, interviewed on 24/05/2013

used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of the physical and mental illness.”

In its broader classification, traditional medical treatment has two features namely, natural folk medicine and magico/spiritual healing system. The former is extracted from plant, animal and mineral products by local healers, while the magico religious practice is the process of curing the patient through spiritual healing system by *debtaras*¹⁹, *kalichas*²⁰ and witchdoctors.

The Gumuz communities of Metekel which have unique socio-cultural practice are largely dependent on traditional medicinal plants for several health problems throughout their history. Because of their socio-cultural practice, the Gumuz prefer the traditional medicine and relied on it for their daily health care rather than in getting medical treatment at modern clinics, health centers and hospitals. For instance, Kaldidan (2007: 68-69) in her finding shows that the Gumuz society have very low concept about the significance of the modern medical treatment and family planning. Instead of the modern treatment, they use leaf, root, fruit, bark, stem cover of the various plant species. The traditional medical practice, knowledge, and belief among the Gumuz society is influenced by their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, genetic inheritance, and the natural environment (hot climate) of the region. The Gumuz traditional medical healers underlined that the plant species grown particularly in the banks of the Dura and Blue Nile Rivers locally called *yeqola (yebereha) zafoch* (low land or desert trees) are known for relief from various human ailments²¹. They constitute the major source of the traditional medicinal plants which has high medicinal value not only for human disease but also animals.

Some of the medicinal plants identified by the Gumuz traditional medical healers that are known for disease relief are listed in Table 1.

The process of the drug preparation varies from healer to healer depending on the nature of illness. As stated by healers, some of the medicinal plants would be grinded and mixed together with other ingredients such as honey, butter, sugar, milk, salt and coffee powder.²² According to the Gumuz traditional medical healers, the medicinal plants listed in the above table are very important to treat several human diseases such as headache, stomachache, intestinal parasites, air and water born disease, bleeding, wound/injure, snakebite, coughing, malaria, diarrhea, skin disease, fire burn, hemorrhoids and bone fractures. Orally administered and ointment traditional medicines are advised to be taken before the patient tests any food and drinking substances. In fact,

depending on the nature of the disease/pain, healers advised the patient to administer the traditional medicine orally, ointment, and smoking and through other means.²³ The nature of the disease identification is made through intensively asking the patient about its symptoms, duration of the pain, urine color, types of the faces, food appetite and the like. It is after intensive interview that the healers reached on the decision about the treatment. The healers measure and determine dosage using the local unites. The dosage recommended for children, adults, youth and aged individuals are measured by the local unites.²⁴

The traditional healers use spear, sharp tip hoe, horn cupped knife for chopping and digging medicinal plants. They do not use any sharp instruments for collecting medicinal plants due to the socio-cultural beliefs and the psychological makeup. In addition, the healer will not sleep together with his wife/ husband if he/she is going to collect medicinal plants on the next day.²⁵ Because they have the belief that such activities will affect the proper functioning of the drug.

The traditional medical practitioners prefer to collect medicinal plants at early morning. There is belief that medicinal plants collected at the mid-noon and afternoon may not properly function (not appropriately cure the patient). This is because in the first place, medicinal plants would be seen by other individuals when they are collecting; secondly, the drugs could properly give relief for the patient if the healer collects them before he/she tests food, drinking and started interaction/communication with other individuals.²⁶ The healers never show the patients or any other individuals about their traditional medical knowledge. Rather the healer passes his medical knowledge to only his/ her favorite son/daughter. This is done because of the belief that announcing their secret medical knowledge to everybody reduces the confidence of the drugs. In other words, if everybody is informed with the knowledge of the traditional medicine, it may not provide the patient with relief, rather they secretly kept it. It is only when healer's health condition threatened that he/she passes his/her medical knowledge to the favorite son.

However, there is variation between the traditional medical healers with regard to the nature and process of drug preparation, administration, ingredients added and specification of medicinal plants recommended for specific disease. In addition, the healers are criticizing each other. This is made to win the popularity in the society. Nowadays, the access and the availability of the traditional medicinal plants are under serious threat. The forest resources in which the Gumuz community relied on

¹⁹ Church graduates attended high level of learning

²⁰ Graduated from the Quranic schools.

²¹ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Mulugeta Bemaye, Birhanu Asres, interviewed on 20/05/2013

²² Healers refused to show the researcher about the details of the preparation and their knowledge because it is secret.

²³ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Mulugeta Bemaye, interviewed on 22/05/2013

²⁴ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Engida Tessema and Birhanu Asres, interviewed on 24/05/2012

²⁵ They have the belief that sexual intercourse may devalue the workability of the medicine.

²⁶ Interview with: Tufa Duyu, Engida Tessema and Birhanu Asres, interviewed on 24/05/2012

Table 1. Some of the medicinal plants identified by the Gumuz traditional medical healers.

No	Local names	Scientific names	Part of the plants used for medicine	Disease treated	Ingredients added
1	<i>Kai emboy</i>	Solaum	Fruit	wound/injure infection	Butter
2	<i>Andehula</i>	Ximenia Americana	Root	wound/injure infection	Butter
3	<i>Kinibo</i>	Calotropis Procera	Leaf & root	wound/injure infection	Butter
4	<i>Marez</i>	Acokanthera Schimperii	Leaf	Bone fracture	Honey & salt
5	<i>Kerit</i>	Osyris Abyssinica	Leaf	Bone fracture	Honey & salt
6	<i>Dedehuo</i>	Eulea Schimperii	Root	Bone fracture	Honey & salt
7	<i>Kemajer</i>	Polygonum pulehrum	Leaf	Bone fracture	Honey & salt
8	<i>Kosso</i>	Hagenia abyssinica	Fruit	Intestinal parasite/diarrhea	Salt & gum
9	<i>Selit</i>	Sesamum indicum	Fruit	Snakebite	Salt & gum
10	<i>Qulqual</i>	Euphorbia abyssinica	Blooding	Rabies	Honey
11	<i>Etse Yudit</i>	Habenaria sp	Root	Snakebite	Salt & gum
12	<i>Gezawa</i>	Withania somnifera	Bark & leaf	Malaria	Honey & boiled water
13	<i>Sansebo</i>	Adathoda Schimperii	Root	Malaria	Honey & boiled water
14	<i>Tenbalel</i>	Jasminum Abyssinicum	Root	Malaria	Honey & boiled water
15	<i>Ame'ra</i>	Plumbago zeylanica	Root	Hemorrhoids	Honey & salt
16	<i>Beles</i>	Ficus Palmata	Root & leaf	Hemorrhoids	Honey & salt
17	<i>Moye'ider</i>	Periplocalarifolia	Root	Hemorrhoids	Honey & salt
18	<i>Telenja</i>	Achyranthes aspera	Leaf	Coughing	Honey & boiled water
19	<i>Chegogot</i>	Bidens Pilosa	Leaf	Coughing	Honey & boiled water
20	<i>Etsekidus</i>	Zehneria scabra	Root	Diarrhea	Noog?
21	<i>Materi</i>	Glinus lotoides	Fruit	Diarrhea	Goog
22	<i>Wodecha</i>	Cordia Africana	Root	Toothache	Honey
23	<i>Dokima</i>	Syzgium guineense	Fruit	Goiter	Salt & honey
24	<i>Lam'iro</i>	Arachis hypogea	Root	Goiter	Salt & honey
25	<i>Kochamch</i>	Maytenus Senegalensis	Flower	Fire burn	Butter
26	<i>Kukuasha</i>	Zizyphus spina-christi	Root	Fire burn	Butter
27	<i>Waweti</i>	Cadaba longifolia	Root	Asthma	Honey, butter & egg
28	<i>Lite</i>	Malva Parviflora	Root	Asthma	Honey, butter & egg
29	<i>Etse Meaza</i>	Verbena	Root & flower	Asthma	Honey, butter & egg

Source: Field survey (2014).

For source of traditional medicine and food supplies are depleting from time to time due to resettlement, environmental degradation, and expansion of the agricultural land, destruction of the forests, wildfire, overgrazing, urbanization, and cultivation of the marginal lands. The resettlement program has an adverse effect on the existence of the medicinal plants. The Gumuz elders pointed out that bamboo, dokima, kosso, kucha, beles, etsekidus, and graza which have high medicinal value are becoming out of the sight due to human pressure on the natural environment. The extinction of the natural resources ignited the conflict between Gumuz and resettlers.

Conclusion

The Gumuz communities are one of the ethnic

nationalities living in Ethiopia along the Northwestern frontier of the Blue Nile River. Physically and in cultural practice, the Gumuz are different from the other Ethiopian highlanders. Sources left by the foreign travellers and the local accounts reveal that the Gumuz communities had been marginalized by the neighboring people and the ethnic policy of the highland Ethiopian kings. Though challenges and pressure were not an easy, the Gumuz kept their ethno-linguistic identity and cultural practices till this day. These cultural practices constitute indigenous knowledge that the community members were applying in social phenomena for survival through the passage of times. To begin with, the dietary habits, medical beliefs and practices, nature of the agricultural activity, resource management, indigenous conflict resolution process, social institutions and nature of the marriage arrangement purely constitute body of indigenous knowledge that the community applied to cope with the environment and

solve various social problems.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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