

# Navigating and Defying Patriarchy: A Moment of Empowerment for Women?

Ambaye Ogato Anata

Max Planck institute for Social Anthropology, Germany

**Abstract** This article gives a brief ethnographic description of the social life of Sidama women of Ethiopia in a society where patriarchy is the major suppressing arsenal against women. It highlights how the Sidama women negotiate their social identity in demanding social respect and recognition. Ironically the very patriarchal system that suppressed women gives room for their promotion through their husband. After promotion of women through their husband, women use this position to organize themselves to pray for fertility and rain. Moreover, the new position would be an important arsenal to protest and punish a husband who abuses them. Here, the study reveals how women consider certain types of abuses by man as a collective abuse against all women and punish the culprit in mass by going out and declaring all round assault. Finally, the article illustrates how the social class seniority for a woman is kept through a status of her husband regardless of her wealth and age.

**Keywords** Sidama, Women, Patriarchy, Defiance, Punishment

## 1. Background

Today, the Sidama are found in the northeast of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS). The boundaries of the Sidama are the Oromia region in the north, east and southeast, the Gedeo zone in the south, and the North Omo zone in the west. The Sidama zone lies between latitude 5° 45' north and longitude 38° and 39' east, constituting a total area of 76,276 square kilometers. The topography ranges from 500 to 3,500 meters above sea level, and the area generally has a mean annual temperature of 18 degrees centigrade and a mean annual rainfall of 1,253 mm (Sidama Administrative Zone Socio-Economic Profile 1996: 1-8).

The Sidama are predominantly agriculturalists and there are some pocket areas in the lowlands where they practice pastoralism (Vecchiato 1985; Almaw 2005; Hamer 1987; Girma 2001). The production of *Ensete ventricosum* is a very important element of the Sidama economy. Before the incorporation of the Sidama into the 'modern Ethiopian empire', the Sidama had a tradition of keeping large herds of cattle, and coffee was grown mainly for local consumption and exchange with neighboring ethnic groups on a small scale (Ababu 1995).

The Sidama are divided into exogamous Patri-clans, each headed by a largely symbolic chief called *Mote* (Hamer,

2007). Moreover according to Hamer (1987), Patri-lineages have politico-ritual functions, with the elders often being important in settling disputes and making policy concerning closely related kinsmen. And in crisis situations such as drought or widespread dissension among relatives, the elders will call all of them together to sacrifice an animal in honor of the apical lineage ancestor.

The Sidama rule of inheritance is patrilineal in which heirs validate their claims by tracing ties to the deceased person through the male line. This does not, however, adequately explain the complex nature of the Sidama inheritance rule (Sintayehu, 2000:77). Due to the dominant patrilocal residence, rule of exogamous marriage and patrilineal descent, women are not eligible to inherit either their husbands' or their father's property.

As in most patrilineal societies, daughters possess no rights of inheritance over the family property, and sons are the only heirs. Therefore, there exists a clear differentiation in inheritance rights between the sexes (Ibid, 77-78).

In the Sidama tradition siblings are co-heirs of family estate. All male children, regardless of their birth order or seniority, have rights to inherit family property. Thus, the Sidama system of inheritance is neither primogeniture (inheritance rule in which only eldest sons are heirs of family property) nor ultimo-geniture (a rule in which family property is transmitted to the youngest son) (Ibid, 78).

Although, all male children are eligible for inheritance, the eldest and the youngest sons obtain slightly more property than their other siblings'. The former takes more property due to the principle of seniority, while the latter receives additional property, as he is held responsible for the care and

\* Corresponding author:

ambaog@yahoo.com/ ambaye@eth.mpg.de (Ambaye Ogato Anata)

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support of the parents in their later life (Ibid).

If a man dies without a surviving son, the property will go to the deceased man's brother or his close male agnates. On the other hand, if a man dies before his sons reach marriageable age, his elder brother will hold and keep the land in trust until the sons establish their own households. This is a norm only when the widow accepts leviratic marriage. However, when a widow rejects the marriage the widow herself keeps her son's property in trust.

The Sidama's rule of inheritance exhibits another complication. According to the Sidama's long established traditions, if a woman divorces and remarries another man, the first child she bears from the second husband is labeled as *Siwilu Betto*, "illegitimate child." However, if the first birth is preceded by miscarriage or abortion the child will be taken as legitimate. This situation has an implication for inheritance rights. The *Siwilla betto* is not eligible to inherit the property of his mother's second husband, even if the latter is the child's genetic father. However, he has the right to claim property right upon the death of his mother's former husband (Ibid, 78-79).

## 2. *Luwa* and Sidama Women

It is indispensable to interrogate the *Luwa* system of the Sidama as it is an epicenter of sundry Sidama social, political and economic lives. Hence the merit of its discussion is unquestionable (see also Ambaye 2012).

The patriarchal power of the Sidama is reinforced and consolidated by the *Luwa* System ('Age grade' system). The *Luwa* system forms the structural core of the patriarchal power. It stipulates status difference and enables some institutions including the council of elders (*songo*) that play a pivotal role on societal matters. These institutions often condone and remain indifferent on how women get treated in the society.

The Sidama 'Age grade' system called *Luwa* has a leader called *Gadana* and this leader will be selected with an elaborate ceremony. The wife of the *Gadana* is accorded the title *Qarichcho* (literally, 'the first'), and when she passes away she is mourned as *Ayo Qarichcho*. The mourning at the funeral is very elaborate and the tomb of the *Gadana*'s wife is fenced in with bamboo, both indicators of her cherished status among the Sidama. When a wife whose husband has not passed through and participated in the *luwa* ceremony dies, the mourners say only '*Hololame*', and her tomb can be fenced in with any wood but bamboo (discussions with Gelo Gebre Michael, Weseto Dasa, Tumato Dilbato, Ebiso Gasaso, Didamo Lengisho, Hanaro Weyamo, Borsamo and Egata Anata, 2009, 2010).

Circumcision is an integral part of *Luwa* system and its performance will take quite a time in deciding the date. Once the final date for circumcision is decided, the person to be circumcised constructs a small seclusion hut in his compound, usually to the right of his residential hut. Furthermore, if the person to be circumcised had a *semmo*

wife (a girl who was a virgin at the time of marriage) whom he has since divorced, he goes to her and tells her to be present at his circumcision. They say that 'the truth belongs to her' ('*halaalu iseho*'). This is meant to acknowledge her primacy in the household despite the divorce and to avoid any grudges or bad feelings that may be held against the initiate, because circumcision sets in a motion that leads to the process of purification and promotion to an esteemed status in which the initiate becomes a guardian of the Sidama moral code. At this time the initiate also prepares his new stool, called the *Barcuma*, on which he will sit during the circumcision. Women are not allowed to sit on it, and typically the initiate keeps a close eye on it to ensure that no one else sits on it, since it symbolizes his promotion to manhood and highly esteemed social status (ibid.). It gives the person what is called a *Cimeessa* status which is highly revered and respected.

After the above ceremonies have been concluded, a parallel ritual purification called *logo* is performed on the newly promoted elder's wife. To commence the ritual, a male child whose mother and father are alive are brought to the scene. A *cimeessa* who has *anga* purity (lit. a person who went through the processes of purification and reached the ultimate level of purity) slaughters a sheep. During this time the child holds the head of the sheep and then takes blood from the sheep and smears it on the wife of the newly promoted elder, saying 'be my *ilmo*'<sup>1</sup> and she in return says 'be my *haato*'<sup>2</sup>. A special relationship of bond is formed between the woman and the child, and afterwards the child addresses her as '*ilmo*' and she addresses him as '*haato*'. The *cimeessa* who is administering the ceremony sprinkles blood on her and utters words of blessings. This seals the purification of the wife of the newly promoted elder and hence she now is fully able to serve him and provide him with food, meaning that he attains the status of '*anga* purity'. If she does not go through this purification, her newly promoted *anga* husband cannot eat food brought or prepared by her, since the purpose of the *logo* ritual is to remove 'uncleanliness' from his wife. She must undergo ritual purification just as he underwent ritual purification. Moreover, a man who has achieved 'ritual purity' cannot eat meat slaughtered by anyone who has not achieved or possesses 'ritual purity' (ibid.).

As can be deduced from the above brief illustration of the *Luwa* system of the Sidama, women are at the center of its concretization and solidification of the very system which highly empowers man although in many circumstances the role of women is often muted.

## 3. Placing Patriarchy in Context

Like many other societies the experience of women in Sidama is often characterized with some complexities in

<sup>1</sup> Roughly it means 'be my mother and my protector'.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly it means 'be my son'.

defining their role, position and even at times their achievements. This could be partly explained with the understanding of patriarchal system that mostly structures the Sidama.

For quite a long time many discussions have been streamed about patriarchy by anthropologists as well as contemporary feminist theory. While appreciating the wealth of knowledge unearthed by the anthropologists and feminist theorists, this article contends that the understanding of patriarchy clouds some important elements of women contribution and fails to take on board, yes the courageous achievements of women in a highly male dominated society like that of the Sidama.

Indulging into the wide range of definitions and debates is not the intension of this study (see. Barret 1980; Beechey 1979; Delphy 1977; Eisenstein 1978; Hartmann 1981; McDonough and Harrison 1978). The object of my paper is rather to show how the Sidama women navigate through the fierce realities of patriarchy in order to repel violence against them. In this paper, I argue, casting a blanket of categorical definition of patriarchy overlooks the significant role women play in society. These findings suggest that efforts to stop wife abuse need to focus not only on increasing women's economic independence but also on eliminating culture-specific ideologies of male supremacy.

Thence let's consider couple of definitions of patriarchy as a definitional morsel that could help us understand the question at stake. Then what is patriarchy? Bennett (2006) defines patriarchy as "a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Bennett, 2006, p. 55). Allan Johnson (2005) believes that "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privileges by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (Johnson, 2005, p. 5).

Patriarchy, Johnson further states, is a system, including "cultural ideas about men and women, the web of relationships that structure social life, and the unequal distribution of power, rewards and resources that underlies privilege and oppression" (Johnson 2005, p.38).

These definitions although illuminating and reveal a great deal of power imbalance in favor of men, they fail to address and understand the creative genius of women to navigate their way through such suffocating power structure. These could be evidenced with some courageous ways that the Sidama women negotiate in the male dominated power structure. Moreover, the very structure that promotes male dominance is legitimized by the very contribution of women.

The above sorts of definitions are wittingly and/ or unwittingly custom made for the very overlooking of the role of women. The power of such definitions sets the narratives that mostly silences women. However, close inspection of

actual dynamics at work within a patriarchal society shades much more.

#### 4. Women and Social Status: The *Yakka* Punishment

Paradoxically, the very institution – *Luwa* – that promotes males to a higher status, and in effect institutionalize male supremacy, also promotes the status of certain women. As discussed earlier when a man passes through the different initiations in his *luwa* set and by doing so consolidates his status, his wife experiences a similar increase in her status and is accorded respect as the wife of a respected elder (*cimeessa*). She is next in order of importance to a *Qarichcho* ('first lady'), who is the wife of a clan leader or *luwa* leader (discussions with Della Wako, Doshu Lencho and Baratu Tumato, 2009). While primacy and seniority therefore are always granted to the wife of a clan leader or the *luwa* leader (*Gadana*), the wife of a *cimeessa* always retains the respect that comes with the promotion of her husband to *cimeessa*. In that role, her blessings are sought after from the outset and highly regarded in the case of planning feasts (*safa*). Her blessing is also sought in the inauguration of a newly constructed house, and cattle will be slaughtered by a *cimeessa* as a sign of happiness and to chase away 'evil spirits' and give thanks to the Creator (*Magano*). In the past, an elder would not slaughter cattle for the inauguration unless the *safa* is made by a *Qarichcho* (discussions with Sarmissso Samago, Wayiso Wesa and Egata Anata, 2009).

When a woman becomes a *Qarichcho* through her husband's position as a clan leader or *luwa* leader, she gains the 'right' to organize other women. As a *Qarichcho* she gathers women together to pray for fertility and for rain in times of drought. More significantly, a *Qarichcho* can initiate a rally to protest against a man who has humiliated or harshly abused his wife or women. This does not mean that a *Qarichcho* simply interferes in the internal affairs of a household; rather, she is at the forefront of exposing intolerable abuses against women in male-dominated Sidama society. This act of protest is called *yakka*.

According to my informants, there are three major areas of abuse that prompt a *yakka*. One action that can trigger a *yakka* punishment is insulting a woman by referring to her sexual organ, whether the insult is delivered by a husband or any other man. This sort of insult is perceived as a total devaluation of the woman as a mother and regarded as intolerable. The resulting *yakka* punishment is intended to inflict embarrassment on the man (discussions with Gujo Noora, Tumato Dilbato, Wayiso Wesa, Borsamo and Egata Anata, 2008, 2009).

The Sidama have respect for women in their roles as mothers. An elder woman is respected and given due respect as a *randicho*, who is feared for her power to deliver curses. If a *randicho* curses someone, it is widely feared that bad luck will hound such person and make life miserable. Moreover, a *randicho* is highly esteemed for her role in

conflict resolution, as she is the one responsible for concluding the last reconciliatory phase by sprinkling water (see Ambaye 2008).

Another action that may invoke *yakka* involves the domestic relationship between a man and a woman (i.e., a husband and wife). According to my informants, a Sidama woman generally retires quite late after making sure every household chore is in order. She also wakes up early in the morning to make sure that food is prepared for her husband and the family. She bears the brunt of milking and many domestic chores. If the husband, who spends most of his time on the farm looking after his cattle, or in a *songo* (council of elders) meeting, were to come home and wish to go to bed early, his wife may be late to join him in bed because she has a lot to do before retiring. Should the husband lose control of himself because she is not in bed with him, and begin to insult her with demeaning words that she finds unbearable to her or even to beat her, she can then seek *yakka* punishment (ibid.).

A third action that can invoke *yakka*, which is often mentioned, is the insulting or beating of a woman while she works in the backyard in what is sometimes referred to as the 'false banana' (*Ensete ventricosum*) farm. Among the Sidama, women assume the sole responsibility for preparing food from *Ensete ventricosum*, and thus the backyard is considered to be their private area (space). If a man insults her or beats her in that area, she can enact a *yakka* punishment (ibid.).

When a woman is abused in any of the above situations, she goes to a *Qarichcho*. These offences are considered to be offences against all women, and the *Qarichcho* will utter '*aliwelo masange Oso*' (which literally means, 'a woman is unnecessarily abused and disgraced') and start to shout. When she shouts she usually holds her breasts, signifying that she who gives birth has been unfairly abused. Women from different groups will hear the persistent shouting of the *Qarichcho* and come out to express solidarity with her. Led by the *Qarichcho*, they add to the volume of her shouting so that all of the women could come out from the neighborhood and join them. At this point, the insult or abuse by the man is no longer against that particular wife or woman alone, but rather is considered as an insult or abuse against all women. During such a rally a husband cannot force his wife to stay at home. The women rise to a state of defiance against any authority that attempts to stop them (ibid.).

Once all of the women have assembled, they march to the house of the man who humiliated the woman. Upon their arrival, they demolish everything in their path, including the hut itself. If they manage to capture the culprit, they strip off his clothes, beat him, and make him carry '*mocaa*' (a juicy fluid that comes from the preparation of *ensete ventricosum*) through the village. When a man carries *mocaa* in Sidama, it is a sign of humiliation and disrespect. In other words, such situations would empower women and take the upper hand in punishing and taking the matter in their own hands. In the face of such dramatic actions by the women, elders try to calm the rage by calling a meeting among themselves and

taking matters into their own hands. Although women cannot directly participate, their cause and concern will be seriously discussed in the *songo* (council of elders) meetings and the culprit will be punished (ibid.).

A last issue with regard to the status of women in Sidama society concerns a woman's burial ceremony. As mentioned above, the promotion of a wife's husband through one of the rituals of *luwa* elevates her status accordingly. For a wife whose husband has gone through the *luwa* rituals, upon her death there is an elaborate mourning ceremony and her grave is fenced in a distinctive way (discussion with Egata Anata and Gujo Noora, 2009). This level of mourning and style of grave demonstrates how the Sidama adapt funeral rites to accord with a woman's social worth and status.

This section has shown how the very *luwa* institution that grants high status to a man also elevates the status of his wife or women with regard to certain activities. It also has shown that, although the status of women in Sidama society is subservient to the status of men, women have recourse to the *yakka* punishment against men who denigrate or abuse them to an extent that is considered intolerable in Sidama society.

## 5. Conclusions

This study highlighted that the different ways women navigate through and at times earn respect in a highly patriarchal system of the Sidama. Taking up women issue needs a meaningful recognition of the efforts of women in navigating the rugged terrains of life which are systematically constructed by male and society at large.

I posit that to understand the whole gamut of issues about Sidama women in particular and Ethiopian women at large requires a revisit and interrogation of widely male dominated institution whereby the role of women is of paramount importance.

Paying close attention to details and social context, so as to bring to light a number of important issues. I specifically point to the need to understand the very institution of *Luwa* 'Age grade' system which has been the epicenter of various relationships. This helps us to fully comprehend and appreciate the courageous acts of women within their societies, and the particular configurations of gender relations that have developed. Failure to comprehensively understand the various institutions involved in society *vis a vis* patriarchy would cloud various explanations in relation to patriarchy and power structure. Furthermore, blanket perception of patriarchy will make such gallant efforts of women in ensuring their rights inaudible in public discourses and perpetuates a persistent paternalistic view that diminishes women's position.

I am not suggesting that women are not underprivileged; of course my point is quite the opposite but by emphasizing into the creative genius of women in the mist of such oppression, we can set a discourse that could acknowledge and craft a promising environment for empowering women.

Finally, I posit that a clear comprehension of patriarchal

system needs an in depth investigation of the very components that make, sustain and reinforce it. I, therefore, contend that the different layers of discrimination against women need such a comprehensive understanding as well as a grasp of the various mechanisms used by women to cope up and make a meaningful contribution for the very system.

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