

**A Study on Esset as a Means of Existence, Social Organization, and Ethnical  
Identification for the Gurage People**



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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### Background

I have been working as a project coordinator for a local NGO, which is dedicated to assist women in their effort in development activities, at the Cheha Woreda of the Gurage zone. In addition, my grand families and all my relatives are living in this area. When school closed, I used to go and stay with my grandparents in the summer seasons. As a result, I can speak the language and I have a shared knowledge about the way of living in the Sebat Bet Gurage society. Therefore, the experience I have with them triggered me to conduct this study.

Gurage zone, which is part of the Southern Nation, Nationalities and People Region, is located in the western part of central Ethiopia. It is bounded with Hadiya zone and Yem special woreda in the south and south-west respectively. The northern, western and eastern portions are sharing border with Oromia state.

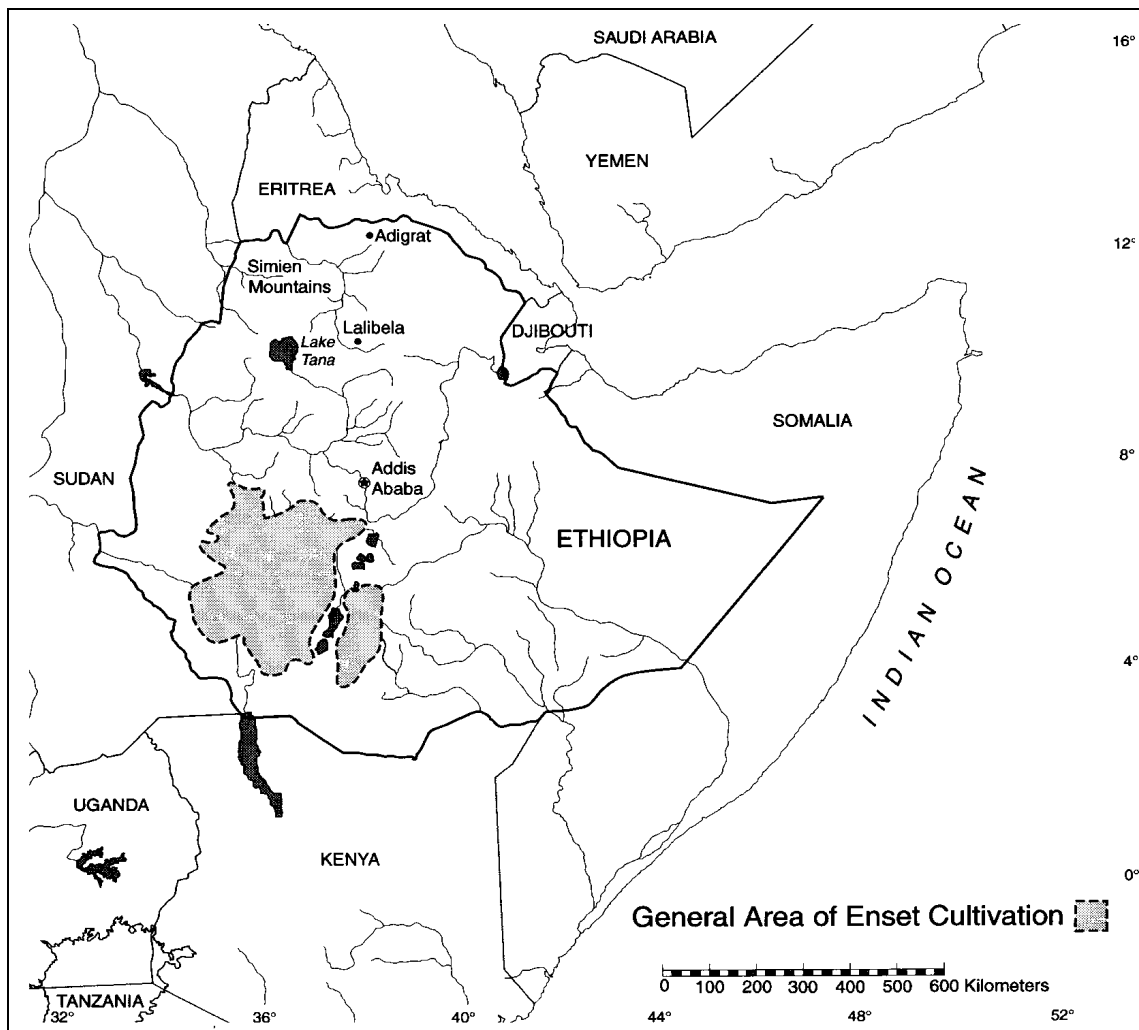
According to the current statistics of the Zonal administration, the zone has an area of 5932 sq.km. The area holds twelve woredas (districts), two provisional city administrations and 421 kebeles (local communities).

Gurage zone has a total area of 8,002 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 2,290,274 (Tekle, 2004). Wolkite, which is 158 kms from Addis Ababa, is the capital of the zone. The major ethnic groups of the zone are Gurage, Kebena and Mareko. About 94 % of the population lives in rural areas.

Among these three, the Gurage live in the western portion of the administrative region. This ethnic group is built up of seven clans called *The Sebat bet Gurages*. These include *Cheha, Eza, Geyto, Muher & Aklil, Ennemor, Meqorqure and Endegagne* (Teferra, 2008:42, Hailemariam 1991:1)

This study is conducted at the *Cheha* wereda, a place inhabited by one of the seven houses. Among these seven houses, although they have few dialect differences, they speak the *Guragegna* language, and they all use the *esset* plant as a source of food.

Esset is a plant which is grown in the southern part of Ethiopia. Wesa, the bread made from *esset*, is a staple food for more than 15,000,000 people in this area. (wergasa, 2006) Thus; the lives of millions of people are almost dependent on this plant. The *Sebat Bet Gurage* region is one of the areas known for *esset* plant.



*Fig 1 Areas where Enset grows in Ethiopia (Brandt and Spring, 1997)*

When Hailemariam describe Enset as a source of beauty, he says that *the beauty of the area just after crossing the Wabe River is admirable to any observer, with the mountains and valleys covered by a perpetually green plant called Enset.* (Hailemariam, 1991:1) In this area, a person's status is determined by the numbers and quality of Enset one owns. Accordingly, Enset serves as vehicle for the social organization of people. Acquisition of wealth, rank, and gender roles are associated with the plant. The wealth of a family is exhibited by number and the quality of Enset they own. In addition, it also serves as a milestone in the description of the Gurage identity.

#### **About the project**

In this project, I conducted a study on this indigenous food plant, Enset, and its relationship with the people; focusing on understanding the plant, ethnical identity of the people, and gender roles associated with the plant. Consequently, the study has two products: a thesis and a short film. The paper tries to illustrate on the Enset plant and some of important issues related with it in the livelihood of the *Sebat Bet Gurage* people

Chapter one of the theses gives a short introduction about the plant and the Sebat bet community. It also deals with the research questions which served as a map to this project. Besides, it draws the overall picture of the project.

Chapter two deals with the methodology employed to conduct the study. I have tried to mention how I got access to the place. This is followed by a description of the place and the people I met.

Chapter three is about the Esset plant. It deals with the overall aspect of the plant, including the kinds and different uses of the plant.

Chapter four is about the ethnicity and ethnic identity of the Sebat bet Gurage people. It raises issues like the kinship system and social organization. .

Chapter five of deals with gender related issues in the Sebat bet Gurage society. It starts with gender based theories in the description of persons in a certain society. It also illustrates how the society is organized based on gender. Gender roles and associated rank and social systems are discussed.

Chapter six shows the overall findings of the study. It also summarizes the issues raised in the previous chapters.

The film, *Esset the Soul of the Gurage*, shows the livelihood of a Gurage family and the dependency on the *esset* plant. The theme of the film is the importance of the *esset* plant in the life of the *Sebat Bet Gurage* people.

At the start it shows the overall harvesting and food making process in an organized way. Then, illustrates how *esset* is tied up with the lives of the people by showing the daily activities and the views of the informants. The narration starts with Mekdes, the main protagonist, baking *wesa* bread. Then she feeds her family with it. Then it demonstrates the harvesting process. In here, the film shows how the activity is gender based and labor is divided accordingly. Then we see how the plant is taken care of. The women feeding it with dung and the men plough the land to protect it from weeds. Then Gebre, the other main character, shows the audience how *esset* is propagated. As part of the daily activity, Mekdes milks a cow and churns it to make butter and cheese. While she churns the milk, she describes the overall social structure of the Gurage people and its tie with the *esset* plant. She starts her narration by telling us Gurage could not have children without *esset*. She mentions the social rank of women according to their working behavior and the preservation of *wesa* and *atmit* for important occasions. Then she tries to show as the importance of being a good farmer in having acceptance and trust in the community by

taking marriage as an example. Families are not willing to give their daughter in marriage to a family that does not have a good working behavior and enough asset to feed the family.

### **Research question**

This study tried to answer the following research questions

- To what extent Asset is important in the livelihood of the Sebat Bet Gurage people.
- How is the social organization in the Sebat Bet Gurage village and how is gender linked to the Asset plant?

## Chapter Two

### Methodology

For this study I have used participant observation as a main tool. Spradley (1980:5) says that what people do, what people know, and the things people make use of are fundamental aspects of human behavior. He argues that *whenever you do ethnographic field work, you will want to distinguish among these three* (Ibid). In order to distinguish between them there is a need to go closer and observe.

Participant observation is not simply approaching people and seeing what they do but goes beyond that. For example Crang and Cook argue that *it is an immersion of the researcher's self in to the every day rhythms and routines of the community, a development of relationships with people who can show and tell the researcher what is 'going on' there* (2007, 37). It became clear to me that it is about being there, taking part and understands the way of life. Thus I preferred to use observation as a tool for my study.

A video camera was used to record important social and economic situations like farming, harvesting, making food, eating together. I used the camera because, as Barbash and Taylor argue, *film offers possibilities of its own, such as the portrayal of living experience, in ways that are unavailable to writing* (1997:35) there are things in our relationships we can not tell in words only, there are feelings that can not be written, but can be recorded with a camera. Therefore, I used camera to observe the way of life in and around my subjects.

My focal area was the daily life of the Gurage village in the *yefwerehena* kebele of the Cheha woreda. I have tried to learn to what extent *esset* is important in the livelihood of the Sebat bet Gurage people. I have also tried to study the gender based activities related to the plant.

In addition, I have also employed semi-structured interviews. *Semi structured or in-depth interview is a scheduled activity. It is an open ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics* (Bernard 2002:203). I needed to be structured to follow my project plan and to get the data required. At the same time, I do believe that freedom should be given to my subjects to express their views in the way they like. Therefore, this method allowed me to do both things at the same time. By doing so, I have tried to assess the social organization of the community. I also learned about the social structures, such as the kinship system, rank and other related issues among men and women of the community.

### **Description of Subjects and settings**

The study was conducted at the cheha woreda in the area called *yefwerehena*. This area is a 30 minutes walk from the woreda (the district capital) town *Emdeber*. The village is divided into two sections based on the location of the houses for the main road that crosses the village, and proceeds to the northern part of the Gurage land. The area around the road is called *fwer jefwere*, (the upper village), and the settlement at the back side of the *fwere jefwere* is called *west jefwere*: (*the lower village*). In this village most of the residents are from the cheha section of the Sebatbet. I have stayed with a family for more than three months. In the process, I have selected Mekdes and her family as the main informants for my study. I did this because she is an active member of the community. I thought she her excellent knowledge about the community would help my effort to learn about them. At the end of my project work I have learned that she was the right choice. This is also clearly shown in my film; through her narrations about her fellow people. Mekdes is a 32 year old woman who lives in the village with her husband Gebre and their four children.

### **Approaching the area and the people**

In my project plan, what I envisaged as a way to access the place and the people was to have a middle man: someone from the community. I had two reasons to do that. Firstly, since it was a long time since I had been there, he would help me to re-familiarise myself with the place. Above all, I had some doubt about their welcome on my arrival. In our tradition land is a property of a man. In this instance, after I came to Norway, my grandfather had passed away. His land should be transferred to my father, who was the only man in the family. Unfortunately, he had also passed away. Therefore, as a first born to my father, the property in principle belongs to me. Consequently, I thought that when I got there people might think that I was there to claim my property right. This in return might have a negative impact on my project. For that purpose, I talked with a man living in Addis to go with me for the field work as a sound assistant. But his role was to help me convince people that I am there not to talk about my property, but to conduct a study.

To make things friendlier, we bought salt, soap, and kerosene as gifts for the family we stayed with. According to the tradition, when someone comes from town, it is a sign of respect and care to bring salt, soap and kerosene, so this helped us to get a good welcome.

At first, what I did was, to adapt to the setting, hanging around without the camera. Little by little, I started to introduce my camera. Eventually, I have managed to collect my data about



asset. I interviewed many people about the plant's important role in their lives. I managed to film about the plant, the harvesting of the plant, how they take care of the plant and how they use it for different purposes.

## Chapter Three

### Esset

#### Esset the soul of the Gurage

*Gordera* is a very strong log of wood Gurage use to build a house. It prevents the house from falling for years. The *Sebat bet Gurage* call *esset Yafeya Gordera*, equivalent to the pole of the soul. For generations, The *Sebat bet Gurage* have been using *esset* as a source of food. In my stay I have tried a lot to understand how far this saying is true. In all the meals, they serve *Wesa* with different sauces. When there is a coffee ceremony, which is very important here as in many other parts of Ethiopia, the snack is *wesa*. When women or men are working in the field, the lunch they serve is *wesa* with varieties of sauces. I have observed that they have no meal rather than *wesa*. What makes the dish they serve different each time is the kind of sauce they serve with it, but there is *wesa* all the time. When her child cries, a mother gives it a piece of *wesa* and the child immediately stops crying. They feed their dogs, cats and chicken with *wesa*.

When they prepare a wedding ceremony, the food they prepare for the bride and the guests is *wesa* with *kitfo*, *zemwamwejat* and cheese. When a member of the family dies, they prepare a prayer ceremony: *tezkar*, and the food they prepare is *wesa* with raw meat or with *welanda*. This all tells us that *Esset* truly is the *gordera* of the Gurage people.

As *Wergasa* mentions there is no recorded evidence that tells how and when *esset* became food and part of the livelihood of the *Sebat bet Gurage* people. But he mentions of a myth:

...because of administrative reasons one family was forced to leave their house and move in to another district. When the decision was made, *Berehute*, the wife, was pregnant. Thus, *Berheta*, the husband, asked the king to let them stay until she gives birth. She gave birth to a twin babies. Since the mother can not feed two children in their journey, he asked the permission of the king to take his cow, *Werqe*, with him. Because of the children, the king allowed him to take the cow and its calf with him. They had a bad journey. Carrying two infants in the sun, dragging a hungry cow and caring some important staff were very tiresome. Meanwhile, in their journey *Werqe* used to feed the two infants and the rest of the family with milk. After the long journey, *Berheta* together with his family, the cow (*Werqe*) and its calf reached to the place now called the Gurage land. He built a house and started a new life there. After few years, their cow *Werqe* died. *Berheta* called all the villagers and told them about what she did to the family in their effort

to reach the Gurage land. He buried her in a big ceremony. Then, five strange plants which were never seen before grew up on Werqe's grave. They had wide green leaves. They were all surprised so followed the growth of the strange plants for some time. Then they agreed to check the whole part of the plant by uprooting one of them. By looking at the structure of the root, they thought that it might be edible. They boiled it and tasted it. It was delicious. They named the plant after the caws name Werqe .they took care of the rest of the plant for some time. One morning they saw that the root of one of the remaining four werques was eaten by a wild animal. After few days, they have observed that the part eaten by the animal grown many small off springs. This gave them a new thought that if they plant the root they can spread the seed, and tried it. They started the farming of werqe( the other name for esset) as their food plant. In times the system started to spread to Kembata, Janjero, Kefa, Kulukonta, and other southern regions which grow esset at this time. (Wergasa, 2006, 17-34 (I Translated from Amharic language)

### **What is Esset?**

Esset resembles a banana tree. Because of the resemblance, it is a so-called false banana. It has evergreen long leaves, a big stem and an edible bulb-like root. According to the type and the age of the plant, it has different color, and also has different names. As compared to other plants, Esset is not grown for its fruit. The whole plant, the stem or trunk and the root, is used as food after careful preparation (Hauilemariam, 1991:73). It is produced primarily for the large quantity of carbohydrate-rich food found in the false stem (pseudo stem), and the underground bulb (corm) (Brandt and Spring, 1997:1).

Esset is the main agricultural product of the *Sebat bet Gurage* people. As Hailemariam mentions it, the Gurage's dependency on esset growing as their primary agricultural occupation is perpetuated by the following reasons.

- Scarcity of farm land because of over-population
- Overuse of the available land for such a long period that the soil has become seriously impoverished
- Exposure of the land to soil erosion because of the rolling hills and deep gorges that form the physical features of the land

- Lack of adequate and easily accessible water supply to make for crop diversification.(Hailemariam,1991:73)



**Fig 2 Esset plant**

Growing this plant is a tiresome venture. From birth to harvest it takes many years. In all these processes it needs a lot of work intensive activities such as cultivation of the land at least once in a year, provision of animal dung as a fertilizer on every third day, cleaning of the plot at least once in a year and so on. Meanwhile, since it does not require a large area of land it remained the major means of livelihood to the *Sebat bet Gurage*.

Ethiopia is a country which has a long history of drought and famine. At least every tenth year, the northern part of the country falls victim to this natural disaster. Surprisingly, since esset can resist drought, places that grow esset, like the *Sebat bet Gurage* have no history of severe food shortage.

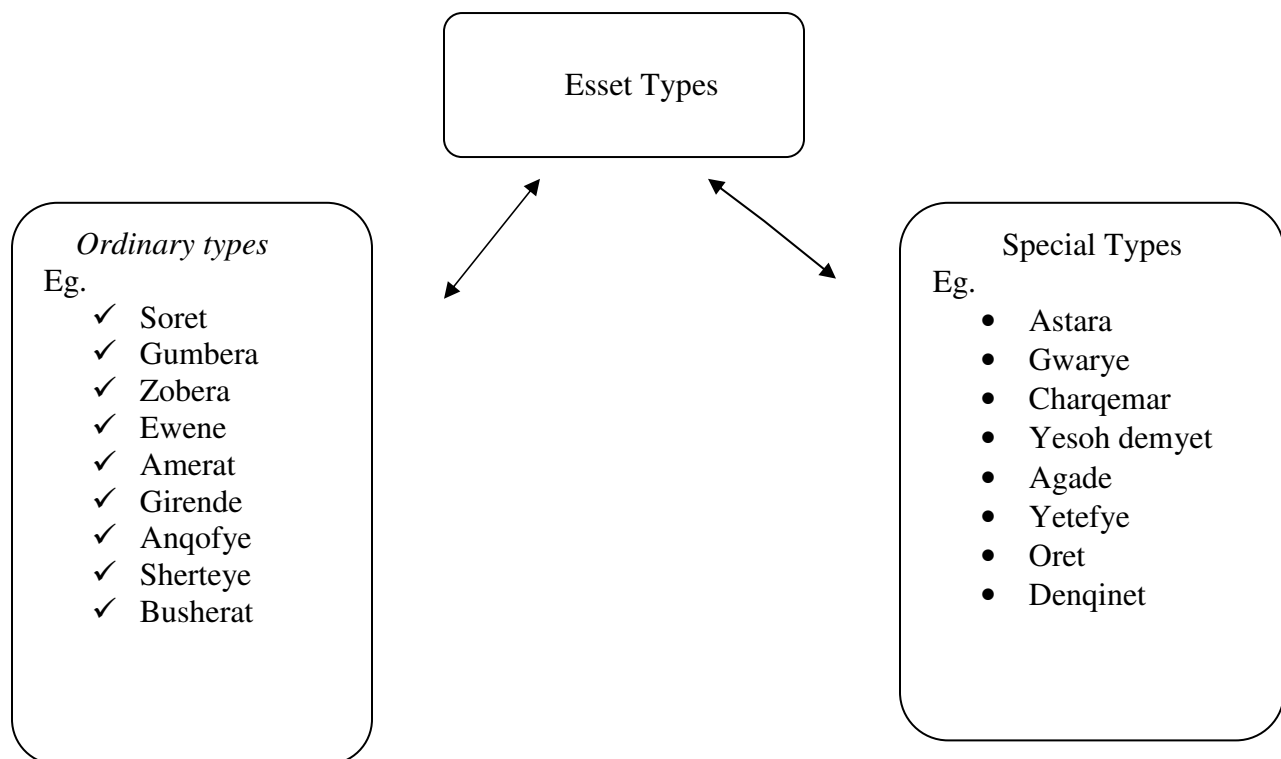
The other reason that made esset remain as a staple food and means of existence for the *Sebat bet Gurage* is its yield. The product from one esset can weigh as much as 75 kg, and the food lasts a family for fifteen to twenty days depending of the size of the family. (Hailemariam, 1991: 74)

## Types of Esset

There are many types of Esset. According to Wergasa, there are Around 66 well-known types of esset. Astara, Guarye, Qemnar, Agaz, Bosere, Tegade, Qeswe, are some of them (see appendix II). The difference is based on height, width, strength, texture, color, growth rate, and their use.

Most of them are used for the making of food after decortications. As I have learned from the community, and as it is recorded by Shack, there are a number of Esset types that serve different purposes. For example, Astara, Charqema, Orret, and Gwarye are used as a cure for many types of disease. They are called the *yergus esset*: the esset of the kings (Shack 1966:53).

Accordingly, based on their contribution I have tried to categorize the types of the Esset in to two broad sections. The first groups are the ones that are used only for the production of food and *kacha*. The others types, alongside with their use for food and the production of *kacha*, they are planted and also be eaten because they can cure disease. For example the root of *Astara* uses to repair a broken bone

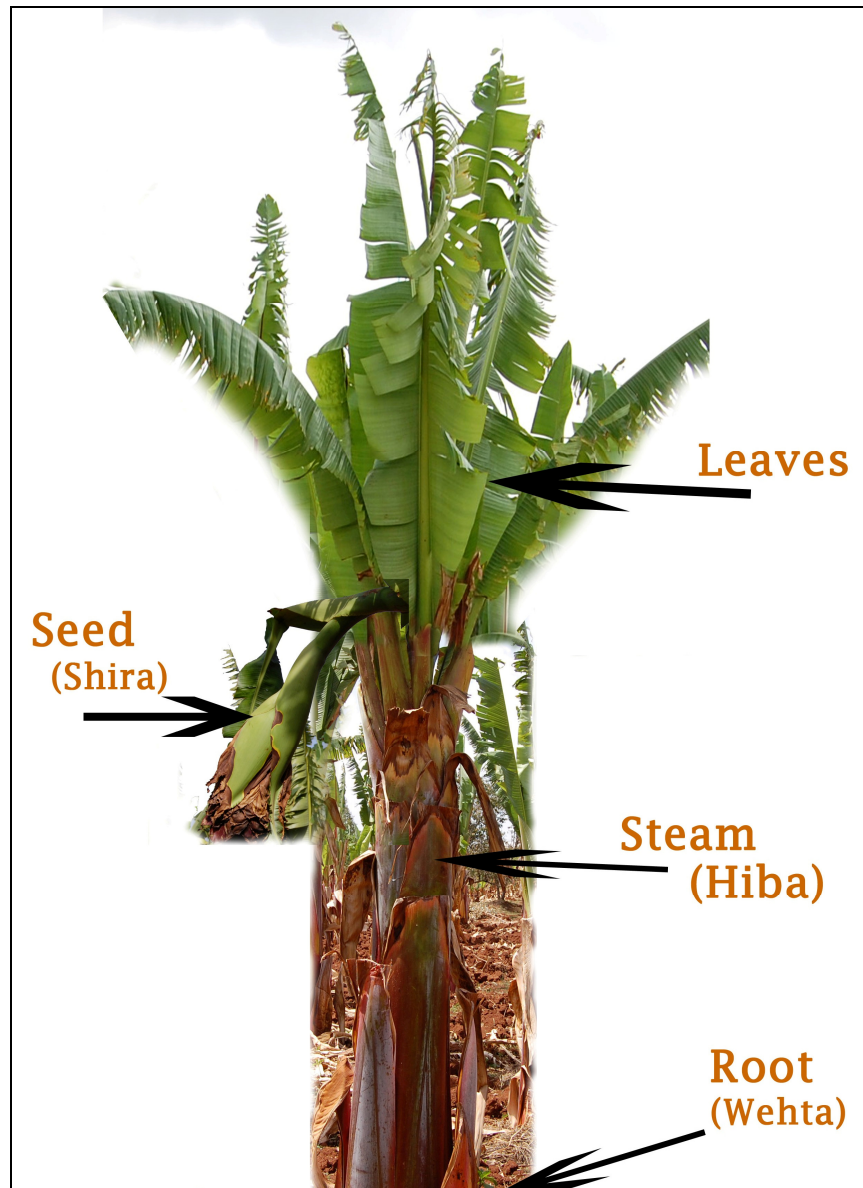


**Fig 3,** Categories of the Esset types

## Parts of the Esset

The Esset plant has four parts, the leaves (*keter*), the stem (*Gupa*), the fruit, (*shira*) and the root (*Wehta*). The number and the size of the leaves and the stem depend on the age and the size of

the plant. The *fwenfwe*, which are the new shoots, have very short stems and also a small number of short delicate leaves. A fully grown Esset will have many leaves and a number of layers on the stem.



**Fig 4. The Esset Plant**



## The Esset Cycle

Esset passes through a certain pattern of cycle in its growth. It passes through five stages before it become a mature plant. These are

1. Fwenfwe
2. Teqiet
3. Metkeya
4. Hiba
5. Esset

Luckily, in the time of my field work one of my informants Gebre had to propagate *fwenfwe* for the coming years. He showed me all the stages of *fwenfwe* planting.

The *fwanfwa* stage is the first stage for the Esset plantation. First, Gebre took one *Teqet* (the plant which is in the second stage of growth) and cut it at the part between the root and the stem. Then picked the middle part of it with a spade and formed a hole. Then he put soil and ash in the hole he made earlier. He did this to increase the number of seedlings (*shoots*, as Leslaw, 1969:283 calls them) that will be produced.



**Fig 5** Gebre reproducing the Esset

If he did plant it with out doing this, only one seedling would have grown out of it, meanwhile, when he put soil and ash in the middle there grows a lot of new Esset seedlings (shoots). Then he



buried it in the ground. On the next day he put animal dung on top of it as fertilizer. He told me that it takes two years for the fwanfwa to turn to *teqet*.



**Fig 6** *Teqet* in the field

Here the farmer will uproot each of the off springs and plant them in separate places in rows. Then they become *Teqet*. *Teqet* is the very important stage of esset growth. It is the reproductive age of the plant (Shack, 1966: 60, Wergasa, 2006). The farmer waits for two years before he takes it to a different field and replants it. When it finishes this stage it will be a four year old strong plant: *Metkeya*.



**Fig 7** *Metkeya* in the field



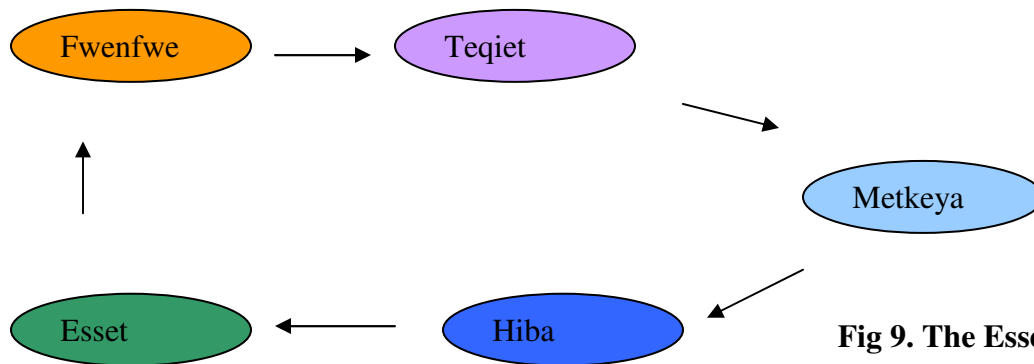
It transfers to the next stage and will pass through another re-planting. Within two years the *metkeya* becomes a grown *Hiba*. At this stage the farmer plant the *hibas* he has for the coming two years' harvest in the main part of his farm land.



**Fig 8** Hiba in the field

The farming activity after this stage will be to make it productive by providing fertilizer, and ploughing the land to clear weeds from the plot. Within the next two to three years the *hiba* turns in to a mature *Esset* which will serve for the family as a subsistence food and support for their livelihood.

To sum it up, *esset* passes through four important growth stages from *esset* to *esset* as the water cycles. (Shack 1966:62, Wergasa, 2006:59)



**Fig 9.** The Esset Cycle

## Uses of Esset

Esset provides a lot to the *Sebat bet Gurages*. At birth, they tie the umbilical cord of the newborn baby with *Kacha* which is made of *esset*. When they die they cover their body when they prepare them for burial (Wergasa, 2006: 110). My field notes also tell me that, in their life time, they use parts of the living *esset* for many things. After uprooting, they chop the parts to make food for the family. Thus *esset* provides a lot to the people who are dependant on it.

Firstly, the living plant facilitates life in the Gurage village. For example, if we take the leaves of the plant as illustration we can see how far the plant is important in the daily life of the community. They chop the leaves into pieces and give it to their animals as fodder. They put the fresh leaves on fire and when it become flexible they cut it into shapes and use it as a dish to serve sauces like *Ketfo*, *Braperat Zemamujat*. When they go to the open markets to buy meat, the butcher wraps the meat they buy with the leaves of *esset*. The Muslim members of the community use clean *esset* leaves to stand on when they pray. When they die, their bodies they will be kept by wrapping them with clean *esset* leaves before burial. They also use it to sit on it in groups and chew *chat*. If fire breaks, every one runs in to the backyard to cut leaves of *esset* to use it for extinguishing the fire. They also carry it like an umbrella in the rain. When women prepare storage to keep *wesa*, they cover the *Werera* with clean leaves.



**Fig 10.** Blacksmith sitting on *Chefat* made of leaves and use *chembina* to protect the handle of the knife from the hot fire

When the leaves start to dry, they turn into *Wedere* and *Enwa*. These two partially dried leaves are useful for many things. When they build a house they tie the walls and parts of the roof with *wedere*. They sleep with *Kapwat* which is made out of *wedere* and *Enwa*. They use *Enwa* to

cover pots when they churn milk to make butter in a traditional way. They also use *Enwa* to keep pepper and other spices for a relatively long time.

The *kacha* serves a number of purposes in the daily activities. They use it to tie/fasten all things. They use it in the building of houses and fences to strengthen them. They also use it to tie their cattle at home and outside.

The stem and the root are the main source of food. The stem, after it is scratched and decorticated, turns into a delicious food called *wesa*. The root can be boiled as potatoes and served as food in the family and at important occasions. In the middle of the harvest they squeeze the liquid part of the raw *wesa* to produce *atmit*. It is used for the making of *braprat* and porridge.

The *wehta* of some of the *esset* types are taken for their potential to cure disease. When I was in the village I have tried to go around and see these special types of *esset*, and also learned about their use in the community. Above all I was able to taste few of them.

Hailemariam recorded the medical use of some of the *esset* types in his book *The Gurage and their culture, (1991)*. He has listed eleven of the important species used as medicine in the community. I have compared it with my field notes and taken the followings as illustration.

Gwarye: The *wehta* of this *esset* is well known in healing wounds, back pains and reduces problem of eye sight at old age and gives strengths when eaten with yogurt. My informants told me that it also helps to fight impotence.

Demyet: The *wehta* of this *esset* is eaten by women immediately after birth. My informants also told me that when a person suffers from *Anemia* (which is the reduction of iron in the blood) the bush doctor advises the patient to eat the *wehta* of this species.

Astara : If one is suffering from boils or anything of that nature that continues to exist for some time with out producing pus, he is given to eat the cooked *wehta* of *Astara*. Immediately, the boil produces pus and the person is cured

Carqema: is white *esset* and eaten by women when the placenta after birth is delayed. This is also used for cattle in the same way. The surprising story I heard from my informants is that if a pregnant women eat this *wehta*, she will suffer an abortion.

Qemnar: When some type of wound continues feaster, the *wehta* of a *qemnar* is cooked and eaten, and the last poisoned pus comes forth, and after that the wound gets dry.

Agade: The *wehta* of this *esset* is used by people who suffer from chronic wounds on the leg.

Atshaqt: If one gets sick around the spinal cord as a result of lifting heavy objects, the *wehta* of such esset is eaten to heal the sickness.

Denqinet: When one gets jaundice and suffering as a result, the *wehta* will be eaten with yogurt and immediately it gives relief.

Oret : The *wehta* of this species helps people with heart ailment. When it is eaten with milk the person gets relief and become normal.

Yesohe lemat : They eat it when parts of a thorn, wood, or other object remain in the foot or other part of the body. The chemical inside helps the body system to eject it from the flesh

Yetefye: If one gets suddenly sick. They bring the whole esset to the sick person and the stem will be cut in to two. When the trunk is cut it turns to red so that his body will be rubbed with it and also eats the *wehta*. Surprisingly the person gets cured.

## Chapter Four

### Esset as Gurage Identification

In this chapter I discuss the role of esset for the *Sebat Bet Gurage* as an ethnic group in its own right. As Fenton mentioned about ethnicity and ethnic groups, he argues that, ethnic groups are people socially organized based on descent and culture together with the meaning and implications of classification systems built around them (Fenton, 2003:2).

My field experience tells me that, the discussion of descent in the *Sebat Bet Gurage* is directly associated with the origin of the *Sebat bet Gurage* and the strong kinship system built up for generations. Firstly, as it is recorded by Shack, (1966), Ullendorff, (1950), Teferra, (2008), the *Sebat bet Gurage* history goes back to the fourteenth century. In the era of king Amdetsion, 1312-1342, seven war leaders under the leadership of Azmach Sebhat started their way to the western part of the country from a place now called *Gura* in the *Akale guzay* province of Eretria, as part of the invasion plan of the late king Amdetsion. They got the name Gurage from *Gurea* which is the area they came from. And *Sebat bet* from the number of the leaders: seven. Thus, *Sebat bet Gurage* means (The seven houses of Gurage)

Secondly, Kinship plays a great role in the description of the *Sebat bet* Population. William Shack, after making a detailed study of them, said that, *Kinship prevails in everyday life, ramifying through the other aspects of social, economic, and even political organization, and most of the important Gurage institutions are built around consanguine and affinal relations in homestead and village* (Shack,1966:83).

According to Evans-Pritchard, defining kinship; *a man's kin are those persons with whom he is genealogically connected through his father and mother. The kinship system exists in its own right, and a child who is born into the family is born at the same time in to a kinship system* (Evans-Pritchard, 1990, 152). According to Evans-Pritchard, a kinship system is a sort of family tree or family package that starts from an individual family and goes up to the extended level of the family ties.. All relationships at home and in the neighborhoods are based on consanguinity, which is a relation built related through birth, and affinality, related through marriage.

Accordingly, in the *Sebat bet Gurage*, the pattern of the kinship system starts from the Gurage house called *Aberus*. This consists of the father *Aba*, and the mother *Adot*. Then ascends to generation and any fathers or mothers brothers are distinguished as *mwena* . The father's sister is

*anachwet* and the mother's sister is *amakwet* (Shack, 1966:84-86, Needham, 1969:154-155). I have learned from my field work that the social organization extends from these family ties. What a young Gurage does before marriage is to study his forefathers at least up to eight generations. This is because marriage is not allowed between families. Shack used a family of a person called Woldemichael and shows us back the generations to estimated 125 years (Shack, 1966:100). Since I am myself Gurage, I want to use my family as an illustration for this description by taking my reader back to an estimated time of 500 years of my family history (rough calculation of 60 years by 8).

My grandfather taught me about my forefathers up to eight generations back. Therefore, my generation goes back to => Woldeyohannes – Haile – Worega – Ejaks – Fuka – Mendamuwa – Wenjera – Hembat. All the sons and daughters of Hembat identify themselves as Hembat, which is one of the larger kinship structures in the Cheha section of the Sebat bet Gurage. This structure extends further one step. *Hembat* together with other 13 of his brothers form the higher hierarchy called *muogemene teb*. I do agree on what Shack has recorded. Amato, Hembat, Yergusden, Jeger, Manto, Yabsar, Yetenaka, Yabukre, Siqora, Yeget, Chambuye, Wombye, Mwyana form the higher hierarchy of their kinship system which is *the Muogemene* in the cheha district. (Shack, 1966 :99)

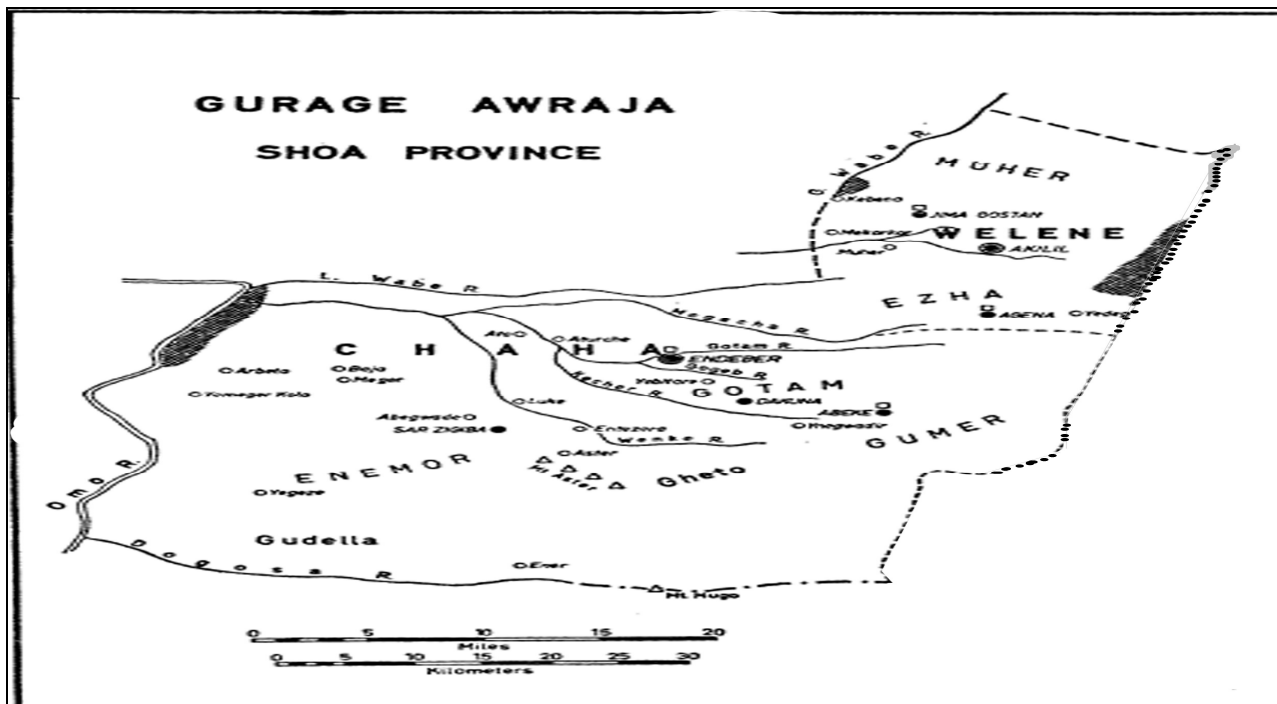
The social structure and the settlement spring out of this kinship system. For example, most part of the *Cheha* area such as *Yedebe, Amya, Gura, Yefwerehena, yeferezye, Tereshe*, is populated by the *muogemene* (this is the area where I conducted my field work). In this case, marriage is not common from the neighborhood, i.e. they are predominantly exogamous. Therefore, when they want to form a new family they look for girls from outside of this area. When the elders go to the girl's family to ask the bride in a traditional way, the first question the families ask is *mer tebenhu?* (to which group do you belong?)

Whenever they meet a new person in a certain occasion, after giving salutation what comes next is '*mer tebenhe*' (from which kin you are)?. Or when something good or bad is done by somebody in the community, in the middle of the discussion again the question arises, *mer tebu?* This tells that the kinship system is serving as identification of self-consciousness. Here it pointed not simply to selfsameness but to the sameness of the self with others, that is, to a consciousness of sharing certain characteristics within a group. This consciousness makes up a group's identity. These understandings were complementary rather than contradictory and fitted



well together, as the group to which a person belonged constituted an important part of the social environment in which and through which personal identity was formed (Cohen,1994).

To conclude, The Sebat Bet Gurage society is basically made up of seven groups and commonly known as the *sebat bet* which comprises of *Cheha, Ennemor, Geyto, Eza, Muher&Aklil, Meqorqure* and *Endegagne* (Teferra, 2008:42, Tekle, 2004:24, Hailemariam 1991:1). The seven families live in different geographic locations across the Gurage land. The *Cheha* live in the central portion of the region. *Enemor* and *Geto* live in the southern part of the land. *Muher &Aklil* live in the northern portion of the Gurage land. Despite the dialect difference they have, they all speak the *Guragegna* language and uses *Esset* as their main food source.



**Fig.11. the Sebat bet Gurage settlement**

For these people, *Esset* serves as a means of ethnic identification among the Ethiopian population. Ethiopia is a country where there live more than seventy ethnic groups. Even though they are led by one federal government and are using one official language; there are certain things make each group different from the rest of the other. Most of them have their own language, social organization; eat different kind of food, etc. For example, the *welayta* and *Dorze* people are well known weavers. The *Oromo*, among other things, are well known in sport. Recently, the world record holders in the women and men category of long distance run are from this group of the Ethiopian population.

Accordingly, Gurage identity is associated with hard work, saving money and *wesa*, which is a product of Esset. As a study made in the capital city Addis Abeba by Daniel Teferra in 2008, 80% of the restaurants, 40 % of the motels and Hotels, 40% of import and export trade, 60 % of leather production businesses, 50% of metal production firms, 70% of flour mills and 60% of the retail business are owned by the Gurages. (Daniel, 2008:46). These figures clearly exhibit that Gurage who live outside the Gurage area, are playing an important role in the economy of the country. As Gerdes, 1975, and Tekle, 2004 mention, and as I witness it as native Gurage, the source of this expanded control of the business sector is because of the Gurage cooperative culture and the *Equb* System. When someone wants to start business or is doing various kinds of work, if he or she needs money, friends and relatives collect money and make savings called *Ekub*. *Ekub* is a savings or pooling arrangement whereby each member periodically contributes a stipulated amount of money, with the entire sum being awarded on the basis of a lottery to the winner. So they give it to the one in need.

Secondly, Gurage are well known for *wesa* and *kitfo*. *Kitfo*, which is a sauce for *wesa* made of fine chopped red raw meat, mixed with butter and chili pepper, is a typical traditional food of the Sebat lbet Gurage. It is not eaten in the everyday regular meal. Firstly, it needs time and money to prepare it. Secondly, a celebration spirit is associated with *kitfo*, so it is in most cases are prepared for holidays and special occasions. Especially, on the *Meskel feast*, which happens in the middle of September, families slaughter an ox according to the economic status of the family and prepare a very big *wesa* with *kitfo* eating ceremony. In order to participate in this memorable and highly respected ceremony, Gurage who live in other parts of the country and abroad come back to their families and relatives. In addition, Gurage, who are spread all over the country, took with them the tradition of *wesa* with *kitfo* to other places outside the Gurage region. Therefore, it became one of the food types hotels serve to their customers. A person who visits any of the restaurants and hotels in most of the towns and cities of Ethiopia can witness that it is common to read *Yegurage ketfo* on menus.

I do believe that *wesa* or *eset* is drawn in the minds of the people who know about it in relation to the Gurage people. A case in point, when we get invitation for lunch or dinner in the house of our friends, our expectation differs based on the ethnic group the family belongs. For example, if the invitation is made by a family from the *Amhara* ethnic group we expect to be served *Injera* with *Doro wet*. (Special bread baked on clay pan with a sauce made of a spiced chicken meat). If the invitation is made by a Gurage family, we expect to be served *wesa* with *kitfo* or specially

made cheese. What makes everybody expect *kitfo* with *wesa* is because there is a shared knowledge which associates *wesa* with the Gurage.

Thirdly, even though other neighboring people grow *eset*, what makes *eset* different for the Sebat bet Gurage and /or serves as a symbol of identification is its value in the community. It is everything to them. For example, *eset* is grown in the Sidamo and Gedeo areas. Though *wesa* is eaten there, the primary purpose of growing *eset* or making *wesa* is for sale. In Addis Abeba, Merkato, this is the biggest open market in Africa<sup>2</sup>, there is a place called *Kocho tera* where women sell *wesa*. There one can find two types of *wesa*, one is called *Sidamo* and the other is *Chebo*. *Sidamo* and *Chebo* are names of regions in the southern part of Ethiopia where *eset* is grown. These people sell *wesa* because they depend for their basic necessities from growing and selling cash crops like coffee, and the geographic location is favorable for the production of fruits and other crops.

The Sebat bet Gurage do not sell or use *wesa* for other purposes rather than eating. This happened because of few interrelated reasons. The first is the land ownership system. A Gurage family owns a very small area of land. On that small area of land, families build their house and the remaining portion of their property is left for growing *eset* and for some seasonal crops like maize and potatoes. Even those seasonal crops, in most cases, are planted on free spaces among *eset* plants. Because of the limited number of *eset* a family can have, the yield is also limited. They cannot produce a surplus product for market. My experience tells me that, in the rainy season most families run out of *wesa*. As a result, they tend to eat *tequrye* (*wesa* which Women set aside in the dry season from using for food because of its poor quality) and few cabbage types (are family of grass) that grow when they get rain, and potatoes. This is not normal in the Gurage eating habit. Thus, Gurage do not take *wesa* to market for sell. It makes them different from other neighboring *eset* growers.

This also again takes me to the discussion of the emotional and psychological attachment of *eset* with the people. Evans-Pritchard studied the Nuer people that are living in the Sudan. After living with them for several years, he describes them as, *a people whose material culture is as simple as that of the Nuer are highly dependent on their environment. They are pre-eminently pastorals. The only labor in which they delight is care of cattle.* (Evans-Pritchard, 1969:16) this description of the Nuer fits with the life style of the population I am dealing with, except in their case it is not cattle but *eset*.

2: [http://www.addisababacity.gov.et/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=41](http://www.addisababacity.gov.et/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=41)

If they sell *wesa* or the esset itself, how would the community be able to survive. In my film, my main character Mekdes was asked about the relationship between esset and the Gurage. She said that “If we had not esset, we couldn’t have survived.” Besides she added that, “It would have been very difficult to raise our children.” What interested me more in Evan-Pritchard’s expression of the relationship between the cattle and the personality of the people is that, *they are not only dependent on cattle for many of life’s necessities, but they have the herdsman outlook on the world.* (ibid).As I understood it, cattle are not just only an animal to the Nuer. They are part of the personality and the knowledge system of them. Similarly, esset holds a deep rooted section of the Gurage life.

When I read Evans-Pritchard’s book about the Nuer, it reminded me of some events back at my grandfather’s house. My grandfather used to go around and inspect his field before having breakfast. Sometimes wild animals come to the village at night, dig a hole at the root of one or more esset and eat part of it. If that happens, the esset will die out. Unfortunately, if it happens outside the harvest season, we will lose a mature plant. On that unfortunate day, he did not want to talk or eat breakfast; he sits at the door and grieves. I understand the feeling. It is like losing a member of the family. One esset takes four to seven years to get ready for harvest. If a fully grown esset is eaten or destroyed by wild pig, I think it is not difficult for my reader to understand the sadness of my family. Thus, this feeling exhibits the interwoven relationship between esset and the Gurage family.

## Chapter Five

### Esset and associated Gender Roles among the Gurage

#### Gender: theoretical perspectives

In biology, the sex of human being is defined by the gametes it produces: males produce male gametes (sperm) while females produce female gametes (egg cells); and by the different body structure they own. There is also one concept attached to these organisms: gender. It is not only about the physical differences both men and women have. Its definition and explanation has been an issue in different disciplines and in the process of knowledge formation.

Gender, as Strathern defines it covers *categorizations of persons, artifacts events, sequences and so on which draw up on sexual imagery-up on the ways in which the distinctiveness of male and female characteristics make concrete people's ideas about the nature of social relationships* (Strathern, 1988:ix). Based on her study of a Melanesian culture, she describes the concept as the categorization of persons. It is the categorization of persons as male and female, weak and strong, powerful and powerless, etc. Besides, it is about the things and the events associated with persons to distinct male and female group of a society.

Mascia-Lees and Black also see this concept from different angles. They argue that it can be understood as the *meaning* that a particular society gives to the physical or biological traits that differentiate males and females. These meanings are like guidance for the society in the social organization. They further explain this concept as, *these meanings provide members of a society with ideas about how to act, what to believe, and how to make sense of their experiences.* (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2000:1)

I have understood what they mean by in the above explanation. In the Sebat bet Gurage society the *meanings* that are associated with how men and women act the belief system and the value of their contribution is relatively clearly visible. There is a shared behavior in the community (as Spradley mentions it giving example of the crowd mistakes the rescue attempt by the police as attack (Spradley, 1980:6-7) on what male part of the community are acting and about the female part of the community as well.. For example, as *universal act* (Rosaldo 1974) women are dedicated in the domestic activities such as raring of children and feeding the family. As opposed to many societies, harvesting is the duty of women in the Sebat bet Gurage. Meanwhile, women never plough the land or slaughter an animal. It is already assigned to the men.

Besides, in this society the value of contribution in the livelihood of the society is clearly visible. In my observation, what I have learned is that the women's work is most tiresome and dirty, but its value is not well recognized. But, though it is not an easy job, what men are doing is taken as important, even by the women themselves. Therefore, I do agree on what Mascia-Lees and Black put in their words about the definition of the concept gender. It is about the meanings associated with the activities, the belief system and the values of the contributions of both male and female in a Sebat bet Gurage.

In my understanding from the literature about gender, what makes the issue a point of argument and keeps on as a topic of discussion is because of the differences in understanding the contribution of women in different societies all over the globe. Rosaldo argues that, *what is perhaps most striking and surprising is the fact that male as opposed to female activities are always recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men* (Rosaldo: 1974:19). In the Sebat bet Gurage society, what I learned in my field research is that the livelihood of the people is totally dependant on the time-consuming and tiresome work of women. Men never cook food. They do not clean houses, especially, not the place where animals are sleeping. Mothers and young girls fetch water carrying pots from a long distanc etc. However, their role is not that far recognized and valued.

The value system according to Mascia-Lees and Black starts from birth. They give their study in USA and Canada as illustration. When a child is born, among other questions what is asked first is, *is it a boy or a girl* (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2000:2). I think this is also common in most societies. In the Sebat bet Gurage the same thing happens. When it is heard that a woman gave birth the first thing they say is "*Yembwe Yesetene*". It is cursing oneself and is equivalent to *I wish* your suffering happened to me. It is a traditional way of expressing proximity and belongingness. But the next question is *mer chenecheme?* Is it a boy or a girl?

But why does everybody want to know the sex of the new born baby? A new child came to this world everybody has to enjoy. For this question my understanding is that there is a subtle psychological feeling which through time became a learned behavior in our thinking system about being male and female and its place in our environment.

Then the new born baby grows up and gets cultivated with this way of thinking. Gets orientation about appropriate behavior to follow as a member of the sex group it belongs to; as a man or as a woman. In the Sebat bet Gurage, children start to exercise their role as part of the sex group they belong to at an early age. Boys reaching a certain age do not enter the room where their mother

chops and bakes *wesa* bread. This is because if he touches part of it his friends will insult him “*Yetaterye*”. It is an insult like he became a *woman*. Surprisingly, the father himself says to him “*Meshtot*” if he found the boy doing woman’s work. It means you became a woman (in other words you lost your pride).

Gender roles are clearly set in this society based on the activities they perform. Both parties have duties attached to their sex group, which are some times not crossed by the opposite sex. I will try to show the main activities of both men and women in the villages.

### **Women’s duties**

**Child rearing:** In this society, as it is done in many societies, rearing of children is the duty of women. In most cases, they give birth at home with the help of old women and folk midwives. For example, in my study area, the health center is so far away that women are forced to give birth in a traditional way. Other wise neighbors and friends of the husband carry her on *Qareza* (home made stretcher) to the nearby clinic. Dorothy Shack made a study on her work *Nutritional Processes and Personality Development among the Gurage of Ethiopia*, on nutrition and child rearing. In this study; she has recorded what women do to their children from birth (Shack 1969: 292-300). The birth of a child is celebrated with some kind of ritual. A sheep or an ox is slaughtered, and a feast is prepared. As part of the ritual, *the “godmother” places a small amount of soft rancid butter in the infant's mouth, where it slowly melts and is swallowed. Several hours later he is given the breast* (Shack 1969: 293). Shack’s study is from the 1960s, but what I have understood in my field work is that, nowadays, due to the economic situation, it is not common to slaughter an animal when a woman gives birth.

What makes the things worse is, if the mother does not have a grown up girl or an old mother of herself, she will get forced to perform other domestic activities while carrying her child on her back. She also frequently goes to the river to clean the clothes of the child. In any social activity where women get involved, it is common to see lots of children around. Because mothers come there carrying their children. I have captured this situation with my camera.

**Harvesting:** the Sebat Bet Gurage population is dependent on the Esset plant. As I mentioned in chapter three, the process of making food out of the plant needs long years of waiting and hard labor. Harvesting of the food is part of this hard labor. In this process activities are clearly divided among men and women .I will discuss the role of men later on, but will keep on describing the women’s activity.



They put the leaves of the plant on the ground and prepare a place for the harvest. As I have observed it, it is a time-consuming and tiresome process. Then they share roles. They divide themselves into three groups.

The first group will cut the stem into shapes that will be scraped by the second group. They also remove unnecessary parts, avoid dirt and make all the necessary preparation.

The second group scrapes the readymade pieces of the stem with a knife-looking tool (*sebisa*), which is made out of a bamboo plant. The scraping is done in a very special way. On the previously made harvest area, they put wood 'watar' on the nearby standing *eset* and sit in rows. They scratch the body of the stem down to the bottom until the last part 'kacha' is left (kacha is a product of the plant they use for making of rope and other household materials.)

The third group takes care of the root, taking it into pieces in a special way. With the help of a specially made wooden tool (*zabanegeba*) they mash the root little by little until it turns into pieces.

Luckily, I have got the chance to observe what is happening in the harvest time. On that bright day, the women's group was made up of Yenenesh, the house wife, Ajyet kerwet (Ajiet is a name given to a very strong, hard working and rich woman by the society), Welewet, Mekdes, Zeineba, Simwet, and Ehete. All of them are neighbors to the household. Activities were shared among them. The two elderly women, Ajyet kerwet and Simwet, took the duty of cutting the stem into appropriate shapes. Mekdes, Yenenesh, and Zeineba were scraping the stem. The remaining two women, Welewet and Ehete, were mashing and chopping the root using *zabanegeba*. In the middle of the day; Yenenesh, the house owner, made lunch and coffee for the group.

It was a wonderful experience for me. Everybody knows what to do and how to do it. The sound came out of the scene together with the folk song they sang made the situation magnificent and made me taste the real countryside life.

In the middle of the work, they took the white part of the 'wesa'; call it 'mechi' and squeeze 'atmit. To prepare 'atmit', first Mekdes and Simwet dug a hole close to where they are working. They put leaves of the plant in the hole so that it does not leak the juice. To get this kind of leaf, they put the leaf on a fire for a while and put it into the hole. Then, after cleaning her legs, Mekdes pressed the 'wesa' in a basket to extract the juice. By the next day, the juice had dried and was ready for eating.

Eventually, they finalized the job by putting the ‘wesa’ together and covering it with leaves. It was left out in the garden for a week’s time to rot. When it got rotten it turned in to a smelly bad thing. After a month, it finished the chemical process and turned into a delicious food.

Therefore, harvesting is an important part of the women’s activity as part of their role in feeding their family.

**Making food:** the other activity which is totally done by women is food preparation. The staple food for the Gurage is *wesa bread*. The making of *wesa bread* is an arduous task. It has three phases. First they squeeze the *wesa* with *kacha*, then chop it, and, finally, mix it with water and bake it as bread. The first phase needs physical strength to squeeze the liquid, *tatera*, out of the raw *wesa*. The woman wraps a hand full of *wesa* with *kacha* and squeezes it using her two hands. As my informant told me, if the liquid is not taken out, it causes heart burn after eating the bread. Then she put the *wesa* on *zembwere*, a flat chopping material made of log of a big tree. Then she chops it using her big knife, *yezembwere senda*. When I filmed the chopping I had to use two Dv cassettes. It is a very long process. The *wesa* should be fine before it turns to bread. If it is not chopped properly, the bread will be not attractive to eat. Finally she mixes it with water and puts it on *yetefwepwe* to give it shape. Commonly the *wesa* bread has a circle shape. She then bakes it on *medad*, which is a material, made of metal. Some times she does this twice a day.



**Fig 12** Mekdes baking Wesa bread

**Yebara** (cleaning the stable) The Gurage ‘feed’ the plant (literal translation of what they call it) with the dung of their domestic animals. In this society, putting dung around the plant is a very important part of the farming activity. The women clean the den of their animals at least once in a week depending on the number of animals they own. In the rainy season, since the animals graze a lot of grass, it may be done twice in a week. Then they carry the dung to the farm land to put around the bottom of the Esset plant as fertilizer. I have observed the way they do it many times in my stay with the family of Mekdes. In this family, the cleaning was done by my informant, Mekdes, and her younger daughter, Zenebech. What did they do is first to take the animals out of the house. Then they collect the dung using their hands in one place to make it

easy for carrying. Then, they put the dung on a 'Matrashye', a stretcher made of two long sticks and dry Esset leaves in the middle. They then spread it at the bottom of the plant. This is a very tough and dirty job, and only done by women and the grown up children. They also use the dung to paint the floor of their house. As part of cleaning a house, women paint the floor with dung mixed with water. They told me that this stops the breeding of insects and fleas on the floor.

### **Men's Duties**

As Hailemariam recorded it, men's work is not continuous as that of the other sex. The major works they involve in are seasonal.

Farming: The major farming activity in the Sebat bet Gurage is the plantation of Esset. In few places, they grow cereals like barley wheat. In the rainy season they also grow potatoes and maize. In the areas where they grow cereals they use animals an especially oxen for the farming. Otherwise farming is done, as it has been for centuries, with human power. The major duty of a Gurage man is ploughing the land. It is entirely the men's duty. In the ploughing season men form groups, *Gez*. Each member of the group gets its turn to plough his plot of land. What makes special in the farming process here is, because of the dung they provide to the Esset plant, the land is full of very strong kind of weed. What they do is, working in groups, to turn the soil upside down to expose the root of the weed to the sun light. Then it dies. One person can not do this alone. In my stay at the place I saw the farming activity done by Gez. Gebtre, Kebede and Petos have formed the gez. For three days they took turns to plough their plot turn by turn.



**Fig 13** *Gez* ,men ploughing

The surprising situation is that Gurage men use simple iron tools for farming. No change has been made in the farming system for generations.

**Cleaning the plot;** the other task of the Gurage men is cleaning their farm land. The leaves of the *Esset* plant dies after some time and are replaced by new ones. Then the dried leaf compile around the plant. It makes movement difficult in the garden and it also makes the farm land full of dirt. So they cut the dry leaves using knives or a spade and put it around the plant as mulch. The working behavior of a Gurage man is determined by his actions in his plot. If the plot is full of dried leaves, as they told me, any one passing by understands that he is a lazy man.

**Harvesting;** in the harvesting of the *Esset* plant, the process has two sections. The first section is uprooting the plant and transporting it to the place where women decorticate it. The second phase is done by women .they decorticate the parts made ready by men. In this process, I observed that the work is gender based and labor is divided accordingly. There is a clear distinction between what men are doing and what is left for women.

In the early morning, groups of men go out in the field to prepare the plant for the making of '*wesa*'. They clear the plant, and then cut the long leaves of the plant. Then, they uproot the *esset* from the ground. Then they separate the root from the stem with a large knife '*tebeche*'. They clean the root with the same knife to take the soil away and to remove the part eaten by worms.

They also peel the stem one by one and carry them to where women are waiting to scratch (decorticate) them in to pieces.

**Feeding Cattle:** one important duty of a Gurage man is feeding the animals he own. This is totally a man's work. In summer, animals mostly stay outside and graze. When they return home it is the owner's duty to provide them with extra fodder. Especially, if the family owns a cow which gives milk, they must provide it with extra fodder and water at home. In most cases, they cut grass, carry it on their shoulders and take it home before the animals return home. In the late afternoon he spreads the grass in front of the animals and they spend the night chewing it. In the rainy season, they also feed them with the leaves of the *esset* plant. This is because of two reasons. Firstly, the leaves of *metkeya* and *hiba* type of *esset* should be cut in the rainy season in order to allow new leaves to grow. It makes the plant have a lot of layers. Secondly, there is not enough grass at that time to feed the animals. In addition, even though there is grass, the rain makes it difficult to cut and bring it home.

### **Building houses and fence**

Most of the men's farming work is seasonal. After the farming and the harvest season, they rarely work. As Hailemaraiam mentions it they carry long sticks or fly whisks and roam around. (Hailemaraiam, 1991:61). At this time of the year what men do is they repair or build houses. A Gurage house is a hut or cottage. The roof is covered with grass. Therefore, he has to check if the cover can survive the coming rainy season. If the damage is small, anyone with experience can repair it. Otherwise he has to look for one of the Fuga's from nearby residents. Though I have known these people in person for many years; I made no detailed study on them. Fugas are castes in the Gurage society. As they are in many societies, these people are blacksmiths, wood workers and crafts men. In the Gurage society only the fugas build houses. They are the only skilled people to do the job. At this time the house owner prepares the raw material to the skilled person. When Shack made the study there was no payment given for the work (Shack 1964:50), but now I have learned that they ask an expensive price for the service. Therefore the household should plan ahead to construct houses.

**Yerbat Eche:** though women prepare food, they need the firewood to do the job. Collecting fire wood (*yerbat eche*) is the duty of men and grown up boys. Alongside with the cultural obligations, I think they do this because the job needs physical strength. There are two sources for the firewood. One is they go to the nearby forest and picks dried leaves and branches of trees. In the rainy season movement is difficult in the forests, therefore what they do is they replace dry

woods from their fence and replace it with newly cut trees. Then they chop the dry one for the daily needs.

To sum it up, most of the seasonal and daily activities in the Gurage society are gender based and the tasks are set only for one of the sexes. In most cases, the women are doing most of the domestic activities. The surprising thing I observed is, those activities done by women at home are never done by men. If a man tries to do few of them, for example baking *wesa* bread, he will be insulted by others.

### **Gender based activities as a source of rank and social status in the Sebat Bet Gurage**

The daily activities performed by the male member of the community and by the female members of the community determine their position in the social lives of the people. Men and women get rank and names that show this rank in the society based on their working behavior. And almost all of the works they perform are related to the *esset* plant. Men become *Dames*, *Yeshyareb*, *Mecha* etc when they have lots of *esset* and if they are hard working. On the other hand women become *Ajyet* based on their working behavior at home and on their contribution in the community. For example, if a woman keeps enough *wesa* and *atmit* in her storage, to feed her family, to offer for guests and for important ceremonies like funeral, she gets the title *Ajyet*. In my film, *Esset the soul of the Gurage*, my informant Mekdes describes this situation well. She makes the distinction between the clever women and the lazy ones. The clever women work hard at home to keep enough food for the family. They also keep some *wesa* and *atmit* aside for important occasions that may happen in the community. On the contrary, the lazy ones only focus on the daily bread of their family and give no attention to what happens in the village. Based on their behavior and working condition the community calls the clever women *Ajyet* and gives them respect. The lazy ones get a name *Osha* to tell that they are lazy. The same is mentioned about men giving their daughters in marriage as an illustration. She said that, “when elders go for daughter’s family to ask for marriage, the girl’s family responds differently. If the bride and his family are good farmers, if they have enough *esset* on their farm and can feed their family the bride’s family agree to give their daughter for marriage. But, if the bride’s family do not have enough *esset* on their farm land and cannot keep the family, the bride’s family say “we cannot let our daughter to die of hunger” and refuse the marriage.”

When men and women get rank, they receive respect from the community. People call them with the title to show their acceptance and recognition. They are considered as important members of

the community. Besides, using their respect and acceptance they are called for advice; they sit to settle situations at the community.



## Chapter six

### Conclusion

#### **Esset as a Means of Existence, Social Organization, and Ethnical Identification for the Gurage People**

As I mentioned in the previous chapters, Esset is resembled with *Gordera* which is a very strong log of wood Gurage's use to build their house. As it prevents the houses for years from falling apart, the Sebat Bet Gurage livelihood is supported by the Esset plant. In the Gurage village houses are built surrounded by the esset plant. As I have learned, the Sebat Bet Gurage family considers the plant as part of the member of them. In other Ethiopian societies, farmlands are separate and in most cases are far away from residents; meanwhile, in the Sebat Bet Gurage village, esset is planted surrounding their houses. It shows the tie between the plant and the people.

Esset plays an important role for the social organization of the people. Acquisition of wealth, rank, and gender roles are associated with the plant. The wealth of a family is exhibited by number and the quality of Esset they own. A farmer who owns rows of mature and healthy esset plants exhibits his economic status in the village. Especially, when he plants those special esset types like *Astara*, *Guarye*, *qemnar* and the likes that I mentioned in the previous chapters, shows his possession and earns him respect.

There are different kinds of Esset serving different purposes. To mention but few, *Astara*, *Guarye*, *kemenare*, *Nechwe*, *Qesewe*...etc. *Astara*, *Guarye* and *Kemenar* are very important kinds of the plant used for food and medicine. For example, if one breaks a bone due to an accident, the local medical practitioner, after fixing the part of his body, gives him advice to go home and eat the root *wehta* of *Guarye* which has medicinal components inside.

In addition, in this community, the amount and type of Esset one owns determine his/her working behavior and the social status. When one member of the community passes by a farm land, looking at the scene around a house, he or she can tell what kind of farmer lives there. A case in point, if the cottage is surrounded by a greater number of Esset, and if the farm land is clean, this shows the owner is a very strong and hard working person. In contrary, if the cottage is surrounded by small number of Esset, and if the middle of the farm is filled with dried and dead leaves, one can immediately say that the people inside are lazy and careless. In this case the number of the plant around the Gurage cottage tells about the working behavior of them.



Gender roles are clearly defined based on the activities related with the plant. There are activities only done by men and others left for women. Men do the ploughing, cleaning the garden and protection of the plant from wild animals. All the food making process, which is the tough part of the job, and taking care of the plant by feeding with dung, are done by women.

Men and women get rank in the society based on their working behavior. Men become *Dames*, *Yeshyareb*, *Mecha* etc when they have lots of *Esset* and if they are hard working. On the other hand women get ranks like *Ajyet* based on their working behavior at home, and on their contribution in the community. If a woman keeps enough *wesa* in her storage and enough *Atmit* in her store (*werera*) to offer for guests and contribute for important ceremonies like funeral, she gets the title *Ajyet*.

When men and women get this rank, they receive respect from the community. People call them with the title to show their acceptance and recognition. Besides, using their respect and acceptance they called for advice, they sit to settle situations at the community.

In a nutshell, after the observation I made and the interview conducted, I have tried to learn the following important issues.

- *Esset* is a means of subsistence and existence for the Gurage people.
- Gender roles are clearly set in the society.
- All the gender roles are associated with the activities related with the *esset* plant.
- *Esset* plays a great role in the identification of the Gurage identity.

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## Appendix I

### *Key Words and their meanings*

While reading this Paper you will come across with these local names and words in the Gurage language. Their meanings are presented below

**Atmit-** A raw material for making foods like porridge and *braprat*.

**Braprat-** A fried atmit on medad. It is a very delicious food.

**Chefat:** A round material which is made by rolling the leaf of Esset .People use it for sitting and put it in between their body and the load when they carry things.

**Chemkina:** The middle and hard part of the Esset leaf.

**Enwa. :** It is a dried trunk of the Esset

**Kacha-** A sisal kind of material which serves for making of rope, yetefwepo, building house etc..

**Kapwat:** A sleeping mat made of dried Esset leaves.

**Kitfo :** A fine chopped red meat mixed with butter and pepper. This is the best dish of the Gurage people

**Matrashye-** A stretcher women use to transport dung from home to the garden

**Medad-** A wide baking pan made by a blacksmith that people use to bake wesa, *braprat* and other foods

**Senda-** A big knife women use to chop *wesa* on Zembwene

**Sera-** A big bowl kind of material made of clay

**Sibisa –** A sharp, knife like material made of a bamboo palms that women use to scratch the steam of the Enset plant in the wesa making process.

**Teshar :** When a grown up person dies after thirty days they prepare feast to pray for the dead they call it Teshar

**Wedere:** It is a dried leaf of the Esset

**Wehta:** The root of the Esset plant

**Welanda:** chopped (not fine chopped) meat (red or not) mixed with butter and pepper

**Werera-** A big hole women use to store wesa

**Wesa –** A food made out of the Enset plant.

**Yebara-** Animal waste

**Yetefwepo-** A flat material made out of *kacha* women use it to give a shape to the bread before backing

**Zebangeba-** A tool that is made of wood and women use it to smash the root of the plant. On one end it is like a fork with many fingers and on the other end has a knife sort of shape.

**Zembwene-** A flat wood women use to chop wesa on it.

**Zemwamwejat:** A special mix of cheese, pepper and butter used as sauce for eating wesa bread.

**Appendix II**  
**Lists of Names of Types of Esset**

- |                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>1. Astara</b>          | <b>29. Ferezeye</b>     |
| <b>2. Guarye</b>          | <b>30. Gimbewe</b>      |
| <b>3. Qebnar</b>          | <b>31. Kekere</b>       |
| <b>4. Agade</b>           | <b>32. Gazegazeye</b>   |
| <b>5. Ydme Erte</b>       | <b>33. Shaweteye</b>    |
| <b>6. Qwashqwasheye</b>   | <b>34. Ygeteye</b>      |
| <b>7. Yfuga Gwarye</b>    | <b>35. Bazereye</b>     |
| <b>8. Soret</b>           | <b>36. Ewene</b>        |
| <b>9. Tereqate drehe</b>  | <b>37. Ywrete</b>       |
| <b>10. Treye Terereye</b> | <b>38. Zgueirte</b>     |
| <b>11. Sapara</b>         | <b>39. Emba atereqe</b> |
| <b>12. Bazereye</b>       | <b>40. Memate</b>       |
| <b>13. Amerat</b>         | <b>41. Ttrte</b>        |
| <b>14. Sebara</b>         | <b>42. Xrte</b>         |
| <b>15. Girende</b>        | <b>43. Ysenewte</b>     |
| <b>16. Badedyte</b>       | <b>44. Zegebat</b>      |
| <b>17. Ashaqete</b>       | <b>45. Jemiye</b>       |
| <b>18. Qanecewe</b>       | <b>46. Aqemch</b>       |
| <b>19. Gumbera</b>        | <b>47. Emereye</b>      |
| <b>20. Sebisasebere</b>   | <b>48. Sheberat</b>     |
| <b>21. Lemate</b>         | <b>49. Qchereye</b>     |
| <b>22. Aneqofeya</b>      | <b>50. Tgwaner</b>      |
| <b>23. Mesherat</b>       | <b>51. Eheret</b>       |
| <b>24. Bwahich</b>        | <b>52. Busherat</b>     |
| <b>25. Shreteye</b>       | <b>53. Debereye</b>     |
| <b>26. Nechewe</b>        | <b>54. Gnezeye</b>      |
| <b>27. Zobere</b>         | <b>55. Qsewe</b>        |
| <b>28. Besheyete</b>      | <b>56. Ysherafereye</b> |



- 57. Gazote**
- 58. Anechero**
- 59. Ygnedeye**
- 60. Agaze**
- 61. Tgaded**
- 62. Areqote**
- 63. Bosere**
- 64. Ykmebata**
- 65. Qesewe**
- 66. Qoine**