Why the Tumtuu are Not Marginalized: New Perspectives on the Positions of the Smiths in Western Ethiopia, Wollega

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Abstract

The archaeology of iron production in Ethiopia is in its infancy; very few have attempted to reconstruct the technology of iron production and the socio-cultural aspects that surround it in this country. The studies that have examined iron working have concluded that the lowest social status is left to craft people including metallurgists. The model that led to this conclusion in Ethiopia is based in a few sporadic ethnographic field trips in different communities. This paper attempts to show that such conclusions are superficial, particularly for the Oromo of western Ethiopia in Wollega. Wollega is a kind of bridge between different populations and linguistic groups that are located north of the Blue Nile, south of the Gibe River and the western lowlands bordering the Sudan. Data presented in this discussion is important for a wider regional dimension. The new perspective presented here is based on repeated observations of social processes and interviews with both smith and non-smith informants in various parts of northeast and southwest Wollega. The information from these people indicates that the stigma of marginalization attached to smiths and other craft people in the region, does not have any serious antiquity in the region, and such marginalization probably originated with late 19th century transformation that came with the occupation of the land by the Amhara-led kingdoms of Gojjam and Shoa. The data shows that the smiths (tumtuu) were not only important because of the technical skills that they possessed, but also the spiritual leadership that they had in order to maintain the socio-political systems amongst their people.

Background Study

The archaeology of iron production in Ethiopia is one of the least addressed (Burka 2006, 2008), and its history is not yet complete (HaaIand et al 2004 a, b; Phillipson 1993; Todd 1985). However, we can find passing comment of its presence as far back as the mid-first millennium BC (de Contenson 1981), and in recent times ethnographic discussions are available (Burka 2006, 2008; Cline 1937; Haaland et al. 2004a,b; Haberland 1959; Huntingford 1955; Lewis 1961; Todd 1985; Todd and Charles 1978). Only a few have provided serious observation, and in some cases reconstructions, of the technology and its related social aspects (see Burka 2006, 2008; Haaland et al. 2004a, b; Todd 1985).

Studies of iron production were conducted in two different ecological regions and among different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The teams of Haaland and Todd conducted their research within Omotic-speaking families along the Omo River in southern Ethiopian, and my research is among the Oromo of western Ethiopia in Wollega between the former region and the people immediately south of the Nile and east of the Sudan.

The technological and socio-cultural findings for the Omotic-speaking people of the Oska Dencha and Dime (see Hualand et al. 2004a,b; Todd 1985) are in many ways distinct from the evidence from Wollega (Burka 2006, 2008). Although my current focus is on the position of the tumtuu iron producers, I will highlight differences between the two areas in terms of technology.

Iron production (smelting) in the Omo Valley was conducted by the same person who smiths it (see Haaland et al. 2004a, b). In both Dime and Oska Dencha, the furnace is not much taller than 80 cm and it has various clay tuyères radiating around the furnace bottom that are fitted to other clay tubes connected to pot bellows buried around the furnace. Once the bloom cools, it is retrieved from the top by a slight person who enters the furnace (Haaland et al. 2004a,b).

Wollega smelting is more complicated than that of the Dime and Oska Dencha. On the one hand, in the northeastern area of Wollega south of the Nile (Burka 2006), smelting takes place in an underground furnace built in a sloping position dug for over one meter (data is drawn from the 2005 smelting recon-
struction), and two clay tuyères made to fit to that length. Two other tuyères (made from horn and iron sheet) are used in succession to connect the four bag bellows and the clay tuyères (Figure 1) that are permanently installed in the furnace (Burka 2006, 2008). For southwest Wollega (Burka 2008) the technology is quite different. Smelting takes place in an enormous furnace superstructure that has a diameter of over 50 cm and is built in the center of a conical house that can accommodate the approximately two meter tall furnace (Figures 2a, 2b). The two equally tall clay tuyères are inserted not from the bottom or middle of the furnace but from the top back at approximately shoulder level, and they are in turn connected to the four bellows by two kinds of tuyères similar to their counterpart in northeast Wollega. Bellows-men pump the air comfortably sitting on a bed constructed high above the shoulder of the furnace superstructure (see Burka 2008).

There are two things that demand explanation about Wollega iron smelting: there is a division of labor (occupational differentiation) between iron smelters and iron smiths. Although they are both called ‘tumtuu’ by outsiders to the occupation, they differentiate themselves into buuftuu (smelters, bellows-men) and tumtuu (smiths, forgers). It was the observation of this division of labour that tempted me to separate them in my discussion of smelters and smiths in northeast Wollega (Burka 2006). One additional reason for my classification was the fact that the smelters were the ones with rights to the land from which iron ore was mined. However, members of the tumtuu also participated in smelting iron (for instance, the father of the master smith volunteered to head the smelting reconstruction of 2005). The second intriguing thing about Wollega’s iron producers is that they are from the same lineages in both northeast and southwest Wollega even though these areas are separated by over 200 km. Smelters in south-

Figure 1: The combination of the three tuyeres used by northeastern and southwestern Wollegan smelters.
west Wollega were descendants of the northeastern smelters who migrated and settled away from their core family in an Oromo traditional land holding mechanism (Burka 2006). These people, unlike the Omotic iron smelters of Oska Dencha and Dime, (according to Haaland the smelter in Oska Dencha was originally from Dime) who because of affinity adopted a similar iron smelting technology, the Wollega smiths followed a distinctly different type. However, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the technology which will be the subject of my future research.

The Status of the Tumtuu

In my previous discussion (Burka 2006), I highlighted a number of interpretations used to explain why craft people, particularly the tumtuu, were not sharing commensality equally with agricultural families. As well, I pointed out that the position of the tumtuu among the Oromo of Wollega is not as notorious as is reported for craftworkers in other Ethiopian societies. I have for example used an Oromo saying ‘tumtuu gaasha Boorana’, literally meaning ‘the tumtuu are like the Boorana’ which puts them much closer to the upper class of the Oromo (Burka 2006). As a point of information, the Booran are believed to be ritually clean, and they claim to be the first born and to occupy the upper class in their society (Burka 2006; Hultin 1984). When I was classifying the tumtuu below farmers and rulers, I could not determine a clear position for the smelters (the buuftuu) in this hierarchy. This was because I separated smelters from the same class as the smiths who are occupationally distinct, and not simply distinguished by a simple division of labor because of skill.

Based on two field visits and interviews with people in May and July (2009), a better understanding of the tumtuu’s status was determined. The inquiry
began as part of an investigation of the destination areas of metal tools after they left the smith’s forge. One of these destination areas is the Oromo traditional belief system in the form of the Qallu institution (Figure 3). In Oromo socio-political systems there are two powerful positions: the Gadaa (Abba Gadaa) and the Qallu (Abba Qalluu), which are the secular and ritual leaders respectively. The Qallu’s role is to legitimate the secular leaders and bless the community members. Today, with infiltration of Christianity and Islam, its role is highly limited. The Qallu man/woman is a spiritually possessed person who is feared and respected. These individuals are important religious fathers/mothers who are still playing significant social roles in the Oromo community. The purpose of our study was to identify the ritual role iron plays in people’s lives. I was surprised to find that common metal tools play an extraordinary role of reconciling problems amongst the people (Burka and Giardino, forthcoming). This finding led me to raise a number of questions. Who are these people who play with metal tools? How, in this modern time of court systems, do they maintain a judiciary role? Where did they come from?

The New Finding

I could find no clue as to the origin of these religious fathers except that for many Oromo the belief holds that the first Qallu is said to have dropped from Waqa (an Oromo God, and the name for the sky) decorated in female and male objects (Megerssa and Kassam 1989; Tola 1983) according to my informants. From body decorations (shells and metals) associated with that Qallu, and the Oromo term for the color of their Waqa and iron is black, I developed interpretations and a question (Burka 2006). One interpretation is that the ritual nature that the metal
holds for the people might have connections with the source the material: the sky (or Waqa). Particularly the belief that the Oromo ark-like ritual object, called Kallach, is made from iron from Waqa (and that the first Kallach dropped from Waqa). One question I raised, but was not able to determine, was whether or not the first Qallu was a smith himself (Burka 2006, 2007). In this new perspective that I am trying to develop, I believe that there are some indirect explanations that connect the Qallu and the smith. The centrality of the Qallu in maintaining law and order and legitimating rule among the Oromo is long established. Thus, if we are able to establish the relationship between the Qallu and the smith, then it would be used as evidence to argue in favor of their special role and special position in Oromo society.

In my recent July field work, I directed my attention to a more remote corner of Wollega District where many traditional ritual sites survived the 1970s socialist government intrusion. I visited three ritual sites in this district over a 15 day visit, and I was surprised to find a smithing forge in the compound of a man known as Bicoo Qaalicha (Figure 4). I finally discovered that the same person of the Qallu is the smith. We found that he was proud of his skills (forging and weaving). I found no embarrassment for his craft as is the case for tumtuu elsewhere.

After we were given a seat (with my research assistant, the Zonal Culture Bureau Head for East Wollega), we were asked whether we were clean or not. This was in regard to the type of food we ate for breakfast (for instance, chicken, eggs, goat meat are unclean and should be avoided before visiting the site). We travelled with two other assistants for over 21/2 hours by mule from the district town where we were based. We told them what we had eaten, and then we were allowed to pass to the second compartment where several huts were situated. We were provided with cultural food and drink which we enjoyed: a traditional Oromo dish called Chumboo (a thick
bread with boiled butter and cheese), and a honey brewed drink called Booka which symbolizing sweetness, being clean, and it is used during blessings (e.g. for marriage or for reconciliations). Such food has not been served in my home in northeastern Wollega since before I was born. I was eager to ask questions, but only after his salgee (the nine-members of the jury) assembled. After some of the salgee arrived we were led to some ritual sites under the sacrificial tree, where we were told many things (Figure 5). Because my interests are in metals, metal workers and the ritual position of the Qallu in connection with metals, I left these other matters alone.

The first intriguing issue revolved around the genealogy of the clans that inhabit the region, including the clan to which our host, Obbo Waqtole, the Qallu head belongs. This was investigated by my assistant Obbo Chernet who is versed in such matters. He is an historian and has studied and written a number of unpublished papers about the Oromo settlement patterns in Wollega. They began to cross check each other and I was listening with many people who sat with us drinking araqi (a locally brewed strong alcohol). One pattern I could make out of the discussion is similar to one I have recorded for the Malkee clan to which the smelters belong (Burka 2006). This pattern came out of the 2005 fieldwork: the Oromo senior-junior (elder-younger) relationship could be a factor that allowed the elders to remain on their father’s land where the ore was discovered. The implication was that members of the elder groups controlled the sources of the ore and made poor members of their family work as smelters.

According to the new evidence, the smelters to whom I classified as having better status, and the smiths that we regarded as having lower status, belonged to the same family. The new data indicates that the tumtuu not only controlled the skill of metal working and the tools that are carried by the secular traditional head as symbols of power, they were members of the Qallu who blessed the people and legitimized the rule of the secular head.
Our informant (the Qallu head), who combined iron production with religious roles, and who, as smith and ritual fathers, continued to rule over matters in a judicial court. Previously (Burka 2006) I was intrigued as to why the traditional belief system recommends the sacrifice of healing medicines such as goats and hens bred by the tumtuu, and I wondered if there was any connection between the two. It became clear that it was not only that the tumtuu’s metal tools entered sacred places and were used to guide their believers, but also that they owned and controlled the sacred: Qallu belonged to the tumtuu. Who then are ritually clean and unclean? When did one group begin to look down on tumtuu? Why the warra Addaam, ‘the family of Adam’ as they are called by the non-tumtuu, given two contradictory positions: eldership and marginality?

Discussion

An oral law collected by priest Dafa Jamo (1983) is believed to have been promulgated by a certain leader called Bisil around 1700 AD. This law ascertains that craft people (particularly smiths, potters and tanners) deserve to have an equal position with others. The leader recommends that they should be called uncles and aunts, and that tanners should work their hides away from cattle to protect from the transmission of diseases. The period is said to have suffered epidemics (Tola 1983). Tradition also holds that the period coincided with the time when the Oromo suffered a setback north of the Blue Nile and many crossed into Wollega.

My point is that this could serve as a time when new social transformation in Oromo occurred that not only acknowledged the existence of different
skills, but also marginalized some groups. I believe that these practices must have been diffused from Oromo exposure to the Amhara culture north of the Nile. Apparently Bisil realized the dangers of such a trend and put the need for equality and respect into the law. Nevertheless, these concepts must have been put into practice after the fall of Wollega under Amhara rule.

One example shows how the position of the tumtuu in Wollega could change under the Amhara. When the Amhara rulers conquered the district of Abe-Dongoro, where huge iron production was carried out, the Amhara Christianized the people and gave a different title to the chiefs of these people. In Abe-Dongoro, the smelters, smiths and farmers received similar titles and were left alone except to pay taxes. In this case, the shift of hierarchy changed from Oromo eldership to Amhara mastership. It seems that such position was maintained until the 1930s. This new classification of titles created enmity even within the clan of Malkee. This was revealed when Fitwrari Abarra, who cooperated with the Italians during their five year occupation, waged war against the lowland Dongoro, an area inhabited by rich metal producers who refused to acknowledge his mastership. It seems that it was only after he received modern arms from his Italian friends that he could defeat them.

From this short paper, we find that the tumtuu were not marginalized in reality. If marginalization includes endogamous marriage, this is not the case for the tumtuu as they have marriage relations with different chiefly families (Burka 2006). In addition, a Qallu man that I interviewed in northeast Wollega in May has 68 children from 18 wives. When I asked for an explanation from the Qallu man, Obbo Waqtole, he smiled and said that they do not have problems getting wives. As a matter of fact he said that no woman would say no to marriage with a Qallu man. The source for wives is not specific he says, as they come from people of different occupational and social status. Then if the community, including the respected and the so-called Boorana class, allow their daughters to marry the Qallu man, who is also a smith, then the discourse of tumtuu marginalization is not so deeply rooted. In addition, there are many believers who kneel down in front him, kiss the ground before him, and are happy to mouth-feed from him. So where is their marginalization? After all they are called ‘people of Addam’, ‘the elders’, ‘the blessing people’. According to Obbo Waqtole, no one crossed a river, went hunting or to war before the Qallu blessed them and their spears.

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