

***Indigenous Knowledge among Shiro Meda Dorze Community:
The case of weaving***

By

Eskedar Girum,

***National Archives and Library Agency, Addis Ababa University,
eskedaratnafu@yahoo.com, P.O. Box: 717, Addis Ababa.***

Abstract

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is generally understood as knowledge which is unique to a given culture, society or community and which is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, values and belief systems. Indigenous knowledge includes the whole range of tangible and non-tangible entities of human experiences. As it is an important part of a national knowledge system, it should be protected and developed. It provides effective alternatives to Western knowledge. Some scholars from social anthropology, sociology, history and other related fields have studied the indigenous knowledge systems. However, studies on the indigenous knowledge of the diverse ethnic groups and its contribution for development are limited. A lot of people don't know why this knowledge is the base for our development. It is an endangered species because no body cares. Therefore, a study of indigenous knowledge of the diverse ethnic groups is an important area to be explored. This study is about Indigenous Knowledge of Shiro Meda Dorze Community and its Contribution for Development. The objective of the study was to identify the basic characteristics of indigenous knowledge, to examine its contribution for development, and its possibilities and constraints in the context of diverse ethnic groups of Ethiopia. Hence, relevant data were collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources include observation, key informant interview, in-depth personal interview, focus group discussions and case method. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted; based on the analysis, summary and conclusion were presented.

Introduction

The definition indigenous knowledge is used synonymously with traditional and local knowledge and is starting to become more valued in the world for different purposes. Indigenous knowledge is a system of knowledge and practices developed over generation by a particular community within a particular geographic area .It is also a dynamic concept, as new knowledge is continuously added during use, and external knowledge adapted to suit the local situation. Usually, it is non-formal, stored in people's memories and activities and shared and communicated orally. Some of the indigenous knowledge is held by numerous people, while some only by few in a given community. The quantity and quality of the indigenous knowledge that individuals possess vary according to age, gender, education, social and economic status, daily experience, observation skills, etc. (Grenier, 1998, p. 4).

The concept of indigenous knowledge covers a great variety of aspects: management of the natural environment, food production and preservation, institutions, communications, techniques, belief systems, tools, traditional healing and many other subjects (Atteh, 1992, p. 3). Handcraft is one of the indigenous knowledge and an activity in which weaving is included. Specifically, indigenous knowledge of weaving refers to the techniques, practices, skills and methods of producing traditional clothes developed by traditional weavers.

The purpose of this paper is to study the indigenous knowledge of weaving among Dorze weavers' community around Shiro Meda area in Addis Ababa. It also provides some recommendations on the sustainable use of the knowledge.

Shiro Meda and the Weavers

In the 19th century, Ethiopia was under the control of Emperor Menilik II, and he was aware of special skills of the peoples he controlled and ordered large number of them to join the newly created city, Addis Ababa. These craftsmen played a major role in producing the cloths, domestic utensils, furniture, tools and weapons for Addis Ababa dwellers. The Gamo highlands were also occupied by Menilik II in 1898 and a large number of Gamo weavers were forced to come to Addis Ababa to produce *shema* (traditional cloth) for the population (Silverman, 1999:11).

The term "Dorze" is used to refer to both the weaving community and all the people who originally came from the Gamo highlands and they are belonging to a large cultural cluster known as Gamo. Therefore, the name Dorze is given to all people coming from Gamo.

The Dorze were not the only weavers in the country, however they were able to dominate the tradition of weaving in Addis Ababa in a very short period of time and Dorze migrants are still coming to Addis Ababa to perform weaving.

Shiro Meda is the name of an area in the city of Addis Ababa that is found in Gullele sub city of Addis Ababa in which many weavers reside, produce different types of clothes and sell their products to consumers. It is a well-known district where there is the largest and the earliest settlement of the Dorze community since 1898.

Marriage among Dorze community of Shiro Meda was monogamous in type and endogamous in nature. The existence of endogamous marriage was due to engagement in weaving and traditional prejudices against weavers (*shemane* is an Amharic word equivalent to weaver). They were also called

kutit betash (meaning one who cutting thread which used for making traditional cloth by one's and or teeth). The members of the Dorze community have that type of marriage system since they could not marry out of their occupational group at that time. They have been discriminated and were known as "*shemane*", according to the findings of the focus group discussion held with weavers in the compound of Shiro Meda Weavers' Association on January 1, 2007.

Monday is a special day for Shiro Meda Dorze community as they considered the day as "Segno Mariam" or "Dorze Mariam". On Monday, they perform different social activities such as *equb*, *idir*, *maheber*, etc. and these social organizations perform reconciliation activities between disputants. Regarding their settlement patterns, actually weaver's community is more integrated and live with non-weavers' society.

Knowledge of Weaving

Different individuals who possessed specialized knowledge can produce material objects that are useful to human beings. In the process of production, individuals express their artistic talent and creativity (Howard, 1996). Making different handicraft activities such as tanning, weaving, pottery, smith, woodworking, and others are considered as specialized knowledge. Similarly, weaving is a branch of handicraft activity, and a specialized knowledge and creativity of specific groups of people. Silverman (1999, p. 11) confirmed that "throughout Ethiopia, the creative process is limited to specific groups; few traditions are practiced by every one and gender and ethnicity are the major factors for specialization." Specialization along ethnic lines and gender are found throughout Ethiopia in various ethnic groups having their own specialized forms of indigenous

knowledge. For instance, Konso are known for their tracing system, while Dorze are known for their woven products.

The knowledge of weaving is one of the oldest crafts in Ethiopia and it is passed from generation to generation or handed down from father to son. During group discussion session, one of the informants stated:

I am 50 Years old and had been weaving for 35 years. I have two little sons and all my families are busy in weaving. My sons are assisting me by winding the threads on Diwira Mekina (a handmade bobbin winder) while my wife prepares cotton spins. Winding of the thread is the first step in learning weaving to become a good weaver. I first began weaving small netela (traditional cotton cloth). My sons also learn by weaving small netela, "yanget libse". I learned to weave from my father and my sons also learn the knowledge from me.

Another waver also confirmed the transmission of the knowledge from generation to generation as follows: “I have been weaving nearly more than half of my life time. I learned weaving when I was quite small by imitating my father and other adults. Before I reached at puberty, I had acquired all the skills of weaving.”

Previously, weaving at Shiro Meda has exclusively been carried out by men, while the women, usually the wives and daughters of the weavers produce the raw spin cotton into threads. Even if there is a clear distinction and specialization which has existed between the activities of women and men, weaving activity requires the involvement of both men and women. However, at present, women also begin weaving in Shiro Meda localities.

In this regard, one of the woman weavers in Shiro Meda stated the following:

We women did not perform weaving; it is specifically men's activity. Because it is very hard, backbreaking activity and specially the loom "yearb eqa" /የሽመና መሳሪያ/ is not comfortable for pregnant women. However, at present, few women have begun weaving in our locality. Men weavers appreciate our strength and endurance. I think it is a good progress and change in weaving.

Weavers believe that weaving products are artistic, the talent and the art of weaving is discovered by their elders and developed through time. They also argue that the knowledge of weaving has required a number of technical aspects - winding of warp and weft passing of weft threads through harness and combs, throwing the shuttle across the web and pressing the comb on the web, moving the two feet up and down, creating design and patterns, etc. In every step of weaving, personal creativity and talent is important. For instance, making different designs of "tibebe" on "Shema" and creating colour combinations for modern fashion clothes and using new raw materials, etc. require special skills. There is uniformity of the woven products throughout the weavers as hand made products. Therefore, we consider them as occupational groups having specialized knowledge and skills in changing local resources into different useful traditional clothes.

The Process of Weaving

The Shiro Meda Dorze weavers get raw materials from market. Some of the most important raw materials in weaving are: *dir/warp*/, *maege/weft*/, spun cotton, and threads. The weavers identify or categorize threads using local language as *yemekina kir*, and *saba kir*. They also categorize and identify the mill yarns used for both warp and weft. In recent time, sisal and *sindedo*/types of grass/ are also used as raw materials by decorating them with different inks to make different designs on some woven products.

The first step in weaving is ginning, the removal of the cotton seeds and loosening the bolls by hand or in rural areas people may use bowing (*degan*). In order to prepare spun yarn and cotton yams, the weaver is spinning the cotton fibers using *enzert*, meaning the spindle. Nowadays, spinning among the members of the Shiro Meda Dorze is losing its importance because they easily get mill yarns or factory made yarns for both warp and the weft. If they need cotton spun, they can get it from market.

Winding the *dirr* (meaning warp threads) involves running the length of the loom by *wogumba* and then winding the thread and the weft of *meage*, meaning threads on the hollow *qesem*, meaning reed by a hand made bobbin winder or spinning wheels called *diwira mekina*. Once the weaver prepared *dirr*, the yam he passes the warp threads through each harness and tooth of *memcha*, the comb and then the weaver passes the warp. Finally, the extra warp should be tight and fastened to the right of the weaver, and then he starts weaving by passing weft threads across, under and above the warp threads. The thread passed out of *mewerweria*, the shuttle and the weaver used his/her two hands to throw the shuttle from side to side. He /she also used his/her two feet in weaving activity and moving feet alternatively raised and lowered the two reeds or *men*, harness. Sometimes, the weaver beat up the weft by the comb and windup *shema*, the woven on the roller wood.

Most of the weavers who are working individually use traditional loom made of wood and they setup their looms inside their home. The warp yam extends a little above ground level by digging a hole about two feet deep from which the weaver operates on the treadle by sitting on the ground. Some looms are constructed higher from the ground level so that the warp can cross over low ones. In this case, the hole is not needed and the weaver sits on the bench. Others who are members of Shiro Meda Area Traditional

Weavers Association were found to use traditional loom made up of metal pole and they set up their loom in the big hall of the Association. In the words of the key informants, “One *gabbi* [meaning traditional cloth] takes five to seven days to make it and the weaver sells it at a price which ranges from Eth. Birr 400 to Eth. Birr 500.”

The Traditional Loom

Indigenous people highly relate themselves to their immediate environment and they use local resources and materials. Weavers also use different kinds of tools or implements which are locally made and accessible from various kinds of wood trees and metal. For instance, some lighter tools such as the shuttle (*mattiyo*), and the instrument on which wool is wrapped (*gashemo*), can be made from wood or bamboo. Therefore, traditional weaving is carried out with the aid of simple and local materials.

In Shiro Meda, traditional loom is made by striking the four wooden or metal poles which is about 2 meters height into the ground in a rectangular shape and one meter a part. In order to give them strength, the weaver attaches another short pole fixed horizontally to the top of them. Some weavers use only two poles and the wall of the house instead of using the first two poles.

Between the first two stakes, there are two abort vertical stakes which are made of wood or metal which are about half meter height are fixed apparently. These are called *haifimtsa*, meaning the cloth beam carriers. The weaver rotates the roller (cloth beam) when he has produced more *shema*. The roller or the cloth beam is a smooth wooden rod with four holes; the holes are used as a locking device.

The end of the poll has a string made of wool and used to hung, held and keep the balance of the harness and *tirse*, combs. The harness and the comb

is about one meter length. The weaver calls the former *mihana*, the harness. There are two harnesses or combs. The first one is made up of a couple of long, thin, horizontal pieces of wood joined together by innumerable strings between which the weft passed. The other reeds which are made of wood are used to strike, or beat, the weft threads.

Melqemia, meaning shedding device or shed stick which is placed between alternate warp elements is used to separate them into two groups. It allows the weft to pass freely through the alternate warp tools. It is also important to make different designs. There are also very thin bamboo sticks called *chiraro* used by the weavers to divide warp yard into different sheets to make different *tibebe* designs. In so doing, the weaver placed this sticks through *dir*, the warp and the several sticks may be used according to the types of the *tibe* design or patterns needed. Weavers may use more than 50 sticks at a time when there is a big and complicate design.

Another supplementary tool is *mansha*; it is made up of flat and smooth wood, used to create the shed in order to thrown the shuttle. More than one shuttle with different colours may be used to make *tibeb*.

In weaving, the *mewerweria*, meaning the shuttle played important role, it is made of wood and shaped like a hollow canoe. It has a little hole or eye on one side which is used to pass out the thread from the bobbin when the shuttle is shot across the shed. Inside the shuttle, there is a thin reed used to rotate the thread and prevent the *qesem*, meaning the bamboo from falling out. *Wagumb*, meaning sinning wheels are used to winding the thread and *shalo*, the weft or *mage*, threads on the hollow reed by a hand made bobbin.

Importance of the Knowledge

Weaving plays paramount role as a means to adapt to indigenous technology in order to utilize abundance of raw materials, cheap labour force and traditional skills, creating effective utilization of local knowledge for the wellbeing of the Dorze community residing in Shiro Meda area. Weaving products have been the most important means to satisfy the immediate needs of the Ethiopian people with weaving products. In terms of their cultural value, these products have high demand and local people prefer to buy them.

The socio-economic growth and industrial expansion of Ethiopia failed to provide employment opportunities for rapidly increasing population. In order to minimize unemployment problem, weaving as an economic sector which can indeed provide employment opportunity. It is labour intensive and quite important in job creation at alternatively low capital. Maslennikov (1983, p. 134) argues that handicrafts activities have been using the local resources and raw materials to create jobs and thus reduced the excessive influx of people from rural areas to towns. Weaving provides a means of income and a source of employment opportunity not only for weavers and their families but also for traders, tailors, fashion designers, etc.

If the conditions of weavers, their skills and trade are be encouraged, weaving will contribute to the rural industrialization and for the development of improved industrial skills. In fact, Maslennikov (1983, p. 130) also states that the handicraft products have played paramount role for the development of society.

Weaving in Ethiopia plays a very significant role in the national economy, magnifying the cultural values of the country and satisfying the needs of the society by producing locally traditional clothes. It also promotes the

utilization of creativity and the contribution of cooperative sector in the national economy.

Socio-cultural Situation and Consequences

Traditionally, in Ethiopia, craftsmen were segregated because of the belief that they were *buda* (meaning evil-eyed). Whenever the non-craftsmen got sick they put the blame on the craftsmen by relating it to their evil-eyed (Pankhurst, 1992). Weavers, in this case, have been regarded as *qutit batash*. This attitude has contributed a lot to make them feel insecure, to decline in their self-confidence and to live with anxiety and led miserable life, experiencing a low economic and social status.

The deep rooted prejudice against weavers coupled with the total neglecting of the occupation and the possible role in rural industrialization and social transformation. It also brought great dependency on western products and knowledge. Thus, very cheap and easily accessible imported goods and the prejudice further pushed the indigenous weavers into the corner. Many more indigenous weavers abandoned their occupations and assumed new profession. The discrimination influenced the development of the knowledge and its contributions in the national economy.

Craftsmen were not respected, priority is given to other occupations, the condition of weavers and other craftsmen, their skills and trade are neglected. Mesfin Woldemariam (1972, p. 130) stated that handicrafts had not been occupations of choice, but obligations arising from the accident of birth. This shows that these craftsmen have remained stagnant and deteriorated. It is difficult to expect enthusiastic dedication, improvements and innovations from people who are ashamed of what they are as well as of what they are, just as it is what they are, that makes them do what they do.

During the feudal regime, the weavers were regarded as a low status occupational group. Their products were valued, and they were exempted from corvine labour and instead paid tribute in clothes. Their privileges were denied before revolution and they were prohibited from owing land in most parts of the rural Ethiopia, (Sliver, 1983).

The knowledge of weaving was largely neglected and it is one of the areas underdeveloped. The position of weavers has changed after the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. Informants recalled that, prior to the Ethiopian Revolution in the past, they had been considered to have a low social position. They were excluded from mainstream society. Haberland (1976, p. 56) confirmed that the marginalization of craftsmen had not been a new or localized phenomenon, stating that “it is so wide spread that it has been described as a pan-Ethiopian cultural trait.” Pankhurst (1972, p. 254) states that weavers receive scarcely more attention than blacksmiths, however, they are also isolated and minority groups in the records of time.

The social status of weavers varies from culture to culture and they maintain a special status within the society in which they live. There is no stigma attached to weavers among Gamo, however, this is changed when they left their native land and live in other places like Addis Ababa. These discrimination and prejudice affect their social status and isolate them from the rest of the society. The knowledge they held and its contribution did not respected, they are also feared and despised. Regarding marriage restriction, Dumont (1980) also stated that marriage restriction on occupational groups is a common social phenomenon. The key informants in the study also confirmed the restriction of marriage as follows:

We were identified as low status group after we had left Gamo, or mother land. The tendency towards endogamy rises not because we

want to isolate ourselves from the rest of the community; however, the prejudices of non- Dorze community groups in Addis Ababa forced us to practice endogamy.

The negative attitude the weavers had developed for their profession paralyzed the development of the knowledge and skills in the country. Many young generation of the Dorze community in Shiro Meda area are not full-time weavers because they prefer modern education and other occupations like taxi driving, trading, marketing, etc. to weaving as their profession. This led them to lose the chance of acquiring the knowledge of weaving and affects the development of traditional weaving in the country.

Dynamics and Continuity in Weaving

In Ethiopia, weaving is often characterized as being very conservative, slow change due to social and cultural norms, negative attitudes of the society towards creativity. Until recent time weavers were confined in producing only specific and common kinds of materials such as *kamis*, *natala*, *gabi*, *kuta*, etc. (i.e. different types of the Ethiopian traditional clothes). The only differences are their border decoration and size.

The Ethiopian people have been dependent on weavers for traditional cotton clothing through time and this is good opportunity for the continuity of the knowledge. However, they complain that their woven products have suffered from competition from imported new and used factory products. In order to compete with imported foreign products, they changed their patterns of design, consumption of raw materials, kinds of woven products, level of education, etc. The imported cotton goods and clothes decreased the need for locally produced *shamma* and discouraged weavers. This foreign influx affected the demand and market of *shema*.

Today, this has changed and to compete with imported goods, they developed new designs and patterns of *shema* products. They argue that their items are getting bigger demands because the items are more attractive, quality and suitable for young generation than before. Weavers could produce variety of modern woven products with different patterns, designs, and new raw materials. For instance, they can produce the Ethiopian flag, carpets, hat, sofa covers, bedclothes, table clothes, napkin, woven clothes used for trousers, fashion dress, shorts, scarves, etc. They also produce various types of logo of governmental and non-governmental organizations on *shema* products. The young Shiro Meda weavers also started to work in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and they could obtain special training and experience on designing, which enabled them to produce different posters on *shema* products to transmit important messages concerning the impacts of HIV, early marriage and other social issues. Each weaver tries to find a new design using a combination of different colours to make his/her product(s) more attractive than before.

The equipments of weaving did not undergo any significant change in its long history. Weaving remained a home business at large. Even different weavers' associations could not grow into textile industries as opposed to the role they played in the national economy. There is only one change in weaving materials (the poles). It was totally wooden previously; today they are replaced by metal poles which are easy and portable to move them from place to place and no need to dig big holes to fix them in the ground.

Discrimination against weavers and their activities caused the decline of the development of weaving in the country. After the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution had occurred in the country, weaving and other craftsmen started to get encouragement and got the right to form association. Forming weaving

association enables the knowledge of weaving to continue. Today, traditional prejudices against weavers are in the process of collapsing. As the informants expressed, “Women and unemployed men from different ethnic groups are practicing weaving after they have got training from their Traditional Weaving Association. The training given by the Association could create favourable conditions and good opportunity for weaving to continue.”

Imported textile goods could not totally replace the demand of hand woven *shema*. Since, *yehabesha libes*, the traditional clothes have high cultural value, the matching white *natala* and *qemis* are common and valued in many religious and other occasions in Ethiopia.

Even if weavers have faced different problems and encountered challenges by foreign imported textile clothes and prejudices, there are some favourable conditions for the continuity of the knowledge. For instance, the import of cheap and mill yarns (warp and weft) helped the weavers to resist the influx of modern clothes. Informant further explained:

In the past, "shamne" obtained raw materials only from hand made spun cotton for both warp and weft. Nowadays, we largely depend on the factory produced warp. "Dirina mage," weft is threads that are bought from market. In addition to these, we began to use new raw materials such as sisal," sindedo", colourful wool threads, etc. to produce different shema products.

What should be done?

To some extent, the weavers improved their quality of production and their design to fulfilling the need of the society; they supply their products to the market. However, there are still deep rooted socio-economic and cultural barriers that have influenced the knowledge of weaving and the production.

Weavers suffer from lack of raw materials, training, and shortages of capital. Granting advances or credit facilities and technical training are necessary to promote the knowledge and to improve the quality and the quantity of the production.

Weavers utilize traditional instruments of production and largely depend on manual labour. A new improved loom technology should be applied to increase quality and quantity of production.

Cooperation life is a well known tradition among different ethnic groups of Ethiopia. From cooperation, immense benefits have been recognized. According to the 1993 Reports of Ministry of Industry, there are 437 weaving cooperatives in Ethiopia; among these, 157 are found in Addis Ababa. Therefore, for faster development of weaving knowledge to an industrial level, different research projects should be undertaken on these associations.

Economical development of weavers highly depends upon provision of proper marketing arrangements. The weavers residing in Shiro Meda area have the problem of getting market at both domestic and foreign levels. Lack of market discouraged them and forced to abandon weaving. Though their products should be promoted at various international trade fairs, there must be local exhibitions for the consumers and different sectors.

As weaving knowledge is underutilized and unexploited indigenous knowledge, it is possible to expect industrial development and socio-cultural transformation by organizing and coordinating weavers' activities.

In order to minimize traditional prejudice against weavers, according to the findings of the qualitative study, different sensitizations and awareness

programs should be organized by concerned bodies and offered to different sections of the community.

Regarding marketing promotion of their products, the key informants stated the following, as they argued, “Since traditional *shama* clothes have high cultural values in Ethiopia, different promotional activities should be done .in order to increase the demands of shema. In addition, the fashion designers, and the tailors should be promoted to implement their knowledge and skills of producing traditional shema products.

Conclusion

Weaving is one of the oldest craft developed over generation in Ethiopia. However, discrimination against their occupation affects the development of the knowledge on the part of the weavers. In the course of history, attitude towards weaving has undergone a considerable transformation, especially after 1974 Ethiopian Revolution.

Weaving is the dominant occupation among Shiro Meda Dorze community. A greater part of male population is engaged in weaving activity. Weavers joined this profession mainly due to traditional inheritance and they developed this knowledge through experience and productive activities.

Weaving support the national economy and it provides a means of income and employment for weavers, fashion designers, tailors, traders, etc. The weaving family also gets its income from weaving activity. As there is a changing trend, weavers have been trying to improve the quality and the design of products and then to increase their demand. However, the production process of their products should be improved to increase the quality and the quantity of the products and different development projects

should be put in place for the development of the knowledge and the skills of weaving.

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