



Socio-cultural conditions and Economic activities and its Dynamics among the Gumuz Communities, in State of Benishangul-Gumuz region.

Abebe Ano Alula (M.A.)

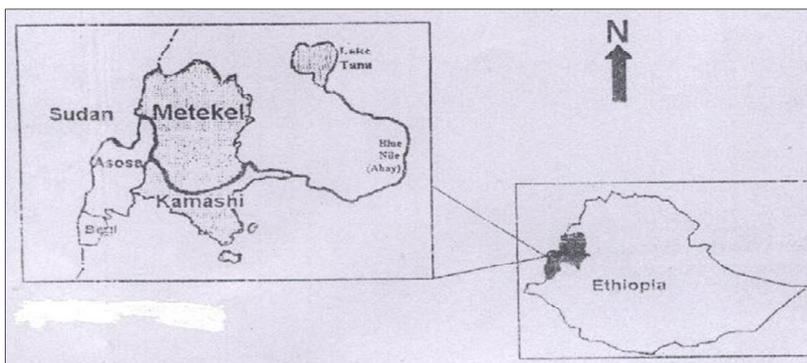
Lecturer at department of Civic and Ethical studies, Ethiopia, Assosa University

Abstract : The Gumuz is one of the groups of the people, who are living in Metekkel administrative Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional state. They have different cultural, economic and social practices that distinct them from others. This study aimed to assess and outline Socio-cultural institutions and Economic conditions of the Gumuz people and its dynamics in the region/Metekkel/, Northwestern Ethiopia, in state of Benishangul-Gumuz region. It attempted to analysis the Social organization of the Gumuz society as well as traditional beliefs system. Furthermore, the study try to outline Marriage and kinship and modes of livelihoods of Gumuz people. Finally, study also high-light on the geographic and background of ethnic settings of the people in the region. The paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the Socio-cultural institution and Economic conditions of the Gumuz society

Keywords: Gumuz, cultural Practice, Socio-cultural institutions, Economic Activities, Traditional belief, Marriage and Kinship, Social organization, Metekkel, Benishangul-Gumuz

The Background and the Rational of the Study. The study of Socio-cultural institutions and Economic Activities among the Gumuz Communities, Northwestern Ethiopia is the main focus of this paper. In order to understand the Socio-cultural institutions and Modes of Livelihoods of the people and its

dynamics in the region, it is important to high-light on the geographic and background of ethnic settings of the people. Metekkel is the research area located in northwestern Ethiopia on the Ethio-Sudanese border (see map below) and in which majority of the Gumuz settled there for Millennia.



A sketch Map of Study area (Metekkel)

Source: Adopted from Wolde-selassie Abbute, Gumuz and Highland Settlers: Different Strategies of Livelihood and Ethnic Relations in Metekkel, Northwestern Ethiopia (2002:56)



Metekkel is may be also described as a special platform for social relations and cultural integration. It has brought together a Mosaic of divers' ethnic groups who have continually been intermingling among themselves, the most important of which are Gumuz, Shinasha Agaw, Oromo and Amhara. Since the emergence of Resettlement programme of the 1984/5, the region was further enriched by addition of other groups including the Hadiya and Kambata. It can be stated that the Members of the four Ethiopian language families (Semitics, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan) are represented in this region and forming "Ethiopia in Miniature" (Tsega Endalew: 2006: 15)

Geographically, Metekkel is bordered with Gonder in the North, Wollega in the south, Gojjam in the east, and the Sudan in the west. During the Imperial and Därg regimes, Metekkel was one of the districts of Gojjam province. Moreover, Metekkel is consisted of sub-districts which are known as Gwangwa, Mandura, Dangur, Guba, Dibati and Wombera. Due to political changes in 1991, Metekkel was placed under Region Six. Later, the Benishangul-Gumuz Region. But sub-districts like Gwangwa and some parts of Dibati (Mentawuha) were placed within the State of Amhara Region (Tsega Endalew: 2002a:2.)

Metekkel is very rich in natural resources like gold, coffee, animal skins, civet, ivory and minerals. Marable and gold are largely obtained in the region. However, because of the physical features of the area, these minerals are not effectively exploited and used. Metekkel is a place where we can find a variety of animal species like elephants, giraffes, monkeys, lions, buffaloes, apes, ostriches and others (Abdussamad H. Ahmad: 1988: 2).

Much of the land in Metekkel is abundant which makes it attractive to different settler community in addition to early inhabitants (Shinasha and Gumuz) until recently. These include the Agaw, Oromo, Amhara and others like Wolayta, Hadiya, Kambata and Gurage who were brought to the region as a result of the resettlement program of the Military Government in 1984/5(Tsega, 2002a.: 2).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sources: The study is based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources have been obtained from informants and personal observations which were collected during a brief study tour of Metekkel from the end of January to April 2017.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The data for this study were collected at Bulen, Dibati, Dangur and Wombera Districts in Metekkel. The data to this study were collected by qualitative data collecting methods. The primary data were collected through interviews with elders of study areas. Although it difficult to confidently to accept oral information as perfect, I carefully checked and counter-checked with secondary sources available different offices in State of Benishangul-Gumuz Region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Background to study people

The Gumuz is one of the groups of the people, who are living in various districts of Metekkel and Kamashi administrative Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional state. They have different cultural, economic and social practices and settlement patterns that distinct them from others.



According to Taddase Tamarat, the Gumuz people are among the earliest inhabitants of the Metekkel and originally occupied extensive territory that extended to the shores of Lake Tana and the Abbay basin from where they were forced by the neighboring people. At present most of the Gumuz people are living in the hot lowlands of Metekkel (Taddase Tamarat,

In the same way, Tsega Endale states that the Gumuz occupied an extensive territory along the Sudanese border extending from Metemma in the north to the Dhedheessa valley and Anger River in Wollega. They have the tradition that their areas extended to the shores of Lake Tana and Agawumedir since time immemorial until they were apparently pushed westwards by the neighboring people confining them to the hot lowlands of Metekkel. Based on the available data, it can be hypothesized that the Gumuz might have originally lived on large area in Gojjam and Agawumedir including Dangla and Kosober areas (Tsega Endale 2006; 15). This is evidenced according to Wendy James, considers the documentary accounts of early scholars such as Henery Salt and Charles T. Beke who had witnessed the fact that the Gumuz lived in the highlands of the present central and southern parts of Gojjam in the 18th and 19th centuries. These accounts try to point out that due to population pressure they gradually pushed to lowlands in the far western periphery of the country looking for greater safety (Wendy James 1986:121).

The Gumuz also live in the Sudan in the territories adjacent to Ethiopia particularly on the hills around Famaka and Roseires (ibid: 16). Thus, the Gumuz mostly inhabit the lowland climate

(Qolla) areas. According to James, the Blue Nile valley inhabited by the Gumuz to be a narrow corridor of low, undulating country penetrating the heart of Ethiopia and sandwiched between the high plateaus of Wollega and Gojjam (Wendy James 1976:28).

Linguistically, the Gumuz belong to the Koman group of central-Sudanic branch in the Nilo-Saharan language family (Ibid: 40). According to Unseth, is a Nilo-Saharan language of western Ethiopia and eastern Sudan, found along Blue Nile and further north (Unseth; 1985:929).

The Gumuz have their own distinctive socio-cultural institutions and modes of Livelihoods. According to available data in study areas some social conditions, economic activities and the emerging changes started since 1960s as a landmark. This time was marked by the expansion of central government political power to the Gumuz periphery with the establishment of its various institutions it paved the way for the arrival of spontaneous settlers in the region. It also contributed to further encroachment of peoples from different regions to the land resources of the Gumuz area. The episode facilitated greater interaction among the peoples that played significant role in the emerging socio-cultural and economic dynamics among the Gumuz people.

Social Organization of the people

Families, Neighborhood/commune and clan/

There is consensus among scholars that Kinship is a complex system of culturally defined social relationships based on Marriage and Birth. They agreed that Kinship is the basis of group formation, relationships between individuals are governed mainly by kinship norms, and



the extension of kinship ties is the main way of allying groups to one another and incorporating strangers into a group. This is the case among the Gumuz society.

A Family is the most important basic social institution among the Gumuz. The husband, wife/wives and children form part of the extended families. The head of the family is the husband. Infants and children are taken care closely by the mother. Polygyny is quite common among the people. At an early stage, after the marriage of a junior wife, co-wives usually share the same house. The husband usually builds a separate house for the junior wife/wives after the latter have a number of children. In the absence of the husbands, the senior wife will be in charge, supervising the junior wife/wives. Customarily, Gumuz senior wife, taking charge and push their husbands to marry junior wife/wives, taking charge of organizing and facilitating the wedding (Wolde-selassie Abbute 2002; 66-7).

This is because the new wives are considered to be instrumental in strengthening the family labor and sharing the care of the husbands. Additionally, children begotten from polygynous marriage increase the number of Members of the family, which is considered as an important status symbol and security. Budge notes the experience of polygyny among the group generally referred to Gumuz as "The Polygamy of the Gumuz is not the result of lust on the part of the Man, but of the Women, who wish their husbands to have large families for the sake of the protection which many children give" (Budge 1928: 629).

Inside a family, girls learn the responsibilities of their mothers; whereas boys learn the activities of their fathers. A family, usually including co-wives, shares food from the same dish and dines together. In the case of a polygynous family, the co-wives either cook together or pull their food in one of the homes and eat together. However, the husband prepares separate crop fields for each. The Harvest will also be stored in the respective wife's separate granary. The husband fairly shares his working time in each wife's field in order to prevent any conflict that might arise among them. In most cases, all the extended members of a family share the same nearby compound forming a hamlet. Mostly, a grandfather, father, co-wives, sons and daughter in-laws live in a hamlet. Very close kin members of living parents form the closest neighborhood. The neighborhood distance increases with the growing distance of blood relations. Several hamlets form neighborhood or village commune (Wolde-selassie Abbute 2002: 66-7).

A commune/group home/ is a very important social unit among the Gumuz. Members of the same neighborhood seem to be ideally egalitarian in nature. They perform all field cultivation activities together, facilitated by elders. They share closely in all aspects of the village life. They also drink together Keya (local brew), prepared on rotating basis. Most of the time, they pool their labor. The neighborhood wives gather and fish together. When the distance of the village increases far from the shifting cultivation fields, the whole neighborhood moves to a new site. Through time, a neighborhood grows and splits into more neighborhoods (ibid).



A Gumuz clan is mostly composed of its different neighborhood members related by descent along patrilineal lines. The clan is a symbol of identity for its members. The clan territory is strongly defended by the members against outsiders. Inter-clan relations are held with mutual recognition according to customs. Violation of such recognition results in inter-clan feuds. Members of closer kin groups live in villages inside the clan territory. According to the local criteria, appropriate village locations are selected by elders on the basis of the suitability of the site both in vegetation and soil types. They accordingly shift their village sites on the basis of the distance and locations of their cultivation fields as well as other causes related to their traditional belief system. In addition, a number of a clans of the respective territories form larger broader territorial groups separated one from the other by geographic settings such as the Gumuz of the Mandura, Dangure, Gublak, Guba, Dibati, Wombera, etc. In turn, the different Gumuz groups form a much larger territorial category such as the Gumuz of Metekkel. At higher level, wider categories such as Gumuz of Metekkel, Gumuz of Kamashi, and Gumuz of Metemma from the entire Gumuz ethnic groups as a whole (ibid).

There are some differences among researchers on the social organization of the Gumuz. Some emphasized territorial division as basis for social organization and identification while others not. As discussed by Desalegn, the social organization of the Gumuz people was a segmentary one. Gumuz individual belonged to a territorial group. Territorial groups were separated from each other either by geographical features (Desalegn Ramatho 1986:124-

126). Accordingly, the people were known and called after the name of the territory they inhabited as: The Gumuz of Manbuk, of Mandura, Gumuz Dibati, Gumuz Guba and so on. Each territorial group was divided into several distinct clans that had their own definite lands and area of authority. Wolde-selassie also supports this idea of clan territory as an important unit in the Gumuz's perception of territoriality. He states that "Members belonging to the same clan are common owners of the territory and its resources which is strongly defended and preserved by its members" (Wolde Selassie Abbute2002:67). Geographical features like rivers and streams, hill and mountain, large old trees (sometimes marked by cuts on the branches) and big stones; roads and footpaths marked the boundary of a clan territory (Ibid).

In other hand, as Gebre Yntiso argues that Clans basically lacked clearly defined territories. Their locations were not confined to a single territorial grouping. It was not uncommon to find the same clan or sub-clan that occupied two or more discontinuous territorial areas. At the same time, one could find members of the same clan or sub-clan that lived in discontinuous localities within a single territorial grouping. In fact, the social organization became more evident at a village level where members who traced their descent to a common lineage lived. The pattern of residence could be considered as patrilocal /a woman must live in her husband's home after marriage/ since an agnatic lineage members lived together during both pre and post-marital period. They performed rituals and ceremonies. Power and property also inherited through this line (Geber Yntiso 2001). Due to this; villages became centers of identification, not a



clan territory. "Gumuz village is usually though not exclusively, composed of people of the same clan and/or sub-clan who claim a common patrilineal descent and married women...". The village was identified with and belonged to those who claim the patrilineal descent/A person belongs to the descent group of his or her father/ (ibid).

Marriage and kinship

There are different forms of marriage practices among the Gumuz communities. These are Sister-Exchange, Elopement, Abduction, Marriage through bride-wealth payment and Inheritance Marriage. In Gumuz communities, the Marriage conducted among the inhabitants of the various adjacent villages. Of course, this does not mean that marriage relationship among the inhabitants of discontinuous villages did not exist. Gumuz practiced marriage on the bases of clan exogamy, from outside one's own clan. Hard work and pleasant behavior are qualities expected from a bride.

Sister-exchange

Polygamy was/is common in the society. This means the Marriage of one man to several women. The most common and normative form of marriage among the Gumuz communities is Sister Exchange. This is the most dominate and standard form of marriage. It is also believed to be the original form of Marriage practiced by their ancestors and it is fundamental way of life. It is one of the highly valued traditions. A groom gives his sister or daughter of his close relatives in change. In the process, the parents selects the would-be bride as well as the bride to be given in exchange in consultation with their sons and send elders to girl's family(Jira Mekuria 2008 :48).

In other term this form of marriage required the bride groom to offer his sister or daughter in place of the one he is going to marry. If he has no sister or daughter for exchange, he may borrow a girl from among his closest relatives and give back his first daughter to the creditor. A boy must be circumcised to get married. When a girl marries between an average ages of fourteen to sixteen, she moves to the village of her husband's clan (ibid).

Sister-exchange marriage constituted a long term initiation between the two sides. It was long standing contractual relationship characterized by making adjustments that would sustain the relation. Among such adjustments, for instance, claim for the replacement for died wife and inheritance of a wife on the death of her husband can be mentioned. On the death of a wife, the husband can claim for a replacement so long as he has nothing to do with the cause of the death. The other partner side has to offer the replacement. Otherwise, the claimant has the right to take back his sister/daughter. Conversely, if a husband dies, his widow would be passed on to a younger brother's son or even to the son of the deceased by a different woman. When both parties agree, they fix a date of wedding in the families at the same times, except for the wedding feast; no form of price is paid or exchanged. On the wedding day, the parties that go to the respective brides fix a central place where they can meet on their return. On their way back, they meet at this central place and exchange greetings making the two brides kiss each other with a facilitation of elders and then take them to the respective families (ibid).

In the case of divorce, either the wife given in exchange is returned up on



demand or replacement is requested and given. Exchange marriage among the Gumuz, James explains, "Is a long-standing contractual relationships which should last a full generation and is fulfilled by the plentiful birth and survival of children on either side" (Wendy James 1986:133).

James analyses the effect of this exchange marriage in terms of Gumuz's relation with the neighboring highlanders. This marriage according to her operates only among the Gumuz and did not involve peoples like Oromo, Amhara, Agaw and Shinasha. It had the following effects. Firstly, since it did not extend to the highlanders; it defines and partly contributes to their ethnic distinctiveness. Secondly, it protected the society from possible penetration by the highland economy which could result from the acceptance of a bride wealth in the marriage arrangements even among the Gumuz themselves. This argument seems to be less substantiated. For instance, Bruce tells us that 'there existed trade relationship between the Gumuz and the Agaw during his time' (ibid). Bartering was active in this trade relation. He also tells us there existed marriage relationship between the two groups intended to facilitate this trade. The way this trade, though very much limited, is established, and is by two nations sending their children mutually to each other. There is then peace between these two families which have such hostage; these children often intermarry. There was also instance where Gumuz individuals who failed to provide sister of daughter paid bride wealth in kind such as, rifle, cattle, goats and the like to get married (Jira Mekuria 2008:50). These were items that the Gumuz obtained through trade relation

with neighboring highlanders (Agaw). Hence, taking exchange marriage as if it played a defensive role against the economic penetration of the highlanders tends to miss the presence of age old trade relationship between the two groups.

Marriage through Bride-wealth payment

Marriage through Bride-wealth is another form of marriage. But it is rarely practiced in the society. It required payment of bride-wealth in the form of animals, rifles and money. This was common among the Gumuz around Guba. Family of the bridegroom would pay the required amount usually, "ten cattle, ten goats, ten bars of salt, two guns, a spear, a hoe, and a shield to the family of the bride." But this amount of bride wealth sharply reduced to five hundred Ethiopian Birr or property that worth equivalent to the stated amount (W/Gabriel Tesfaye & Tefera Eshet 1989: 44).

Elopement

Elopement marriage is another form of marriage practiced in Gumuz community. Here, a boy and a girl love and agree to each other. However, the boy may not have a sister or a daughter of close relative readily available to be given in exchange. In such a case, boy persuades the girl and elopes with her. Then, he totally disappears and hides himself to avoid the dangerous consequences that result from the furious girl's family and close relatives (Wolde-selassie Abbute 2002: 68).

Respected and neutral elders will be sent as soon as possible for intervention. Through the facilitation of elders, according to the custom, the issue will be settled either by immediately giving a girl



from the boy's group or with an understanding of the boy's family being indebted to give a girl's sometime later. In a few cases, the couple will give their first-born daughter in ex-exchange for her mother. Unless handled carefully, such acts are highly valued, enabling their clan boys to get wives in exchange. The boy and close kin group members pay fines in form of livestock for taking the girl with the consent of her clan, which violates and hurts their dignity (ibid).

Love affairs between young couples, absence of a female relative to be exchanged and refusal of the parents of a bride to the proposed exchange marriage were among the reasons. These reasons usually resulted in Elopement (ibid).

Abduction

According to local traditions various factors that could force an individual to decide for Abduction. Abduction is a form of marriage in which the girl is taken by force. According to local traditions various factors that could force an individual to decide for Abduction. Among them Love affairs between young couples, lack of other alternatives, young man with no sister to exchange or in some cases, property as a dowry may be forced to kidnap a girl. This is the most dangerous form of marriage, and it is frequently a cause of inter-clan feuds that costs lives from both parties and lasts long period due to a severe conflicts, the method of handling its effect by neutral elders is similar to elopement a part from the higher intensity exerted in handling the matter (ibid). However, recently this type of marriage is rarely happen among the Gumuz society. Love affairs between young couples, absence of a female relative to be exchanged and refusal of

the parents of a bride to the proposed exchange marriage were among the reasons. These reasons usually resulted in Abduction.

Inheritance Marriage

Marriage through Inheritance was also common in the society. Death of a husband usually, gave way to the inheritance if a widow by relatives of the deceased. The closeness of oneself to the deceased determined the potential inheritor and in these cases the younger brother was preferred. He also inherited the property as well as the responsibility to look after the widow and children, if any. Property inheritance was extended to him when the children of the deceased (boy/s) could not do that because of age factor. Absence of a husband from his village for a relatively long period for such reasons as imprisonment and for military service also resulted in temporary inheritance of his wife by a close kin person. This shows the existence of temporary transfer of rights of sexual access to a wife in the society. The husband could reclaim his wife on his return. Such practices were performed with the intention of protecting Adultery by others.

On the other hand, a husband usually claimed the return of his sister, repayment of bride wealth or replacement of a new woman, on the death of his wife. What actually caused the death greatly affected the response either positively or negatively. Factors like sterility also caused similar claims. Genuine claims were settled by repaying of bride-wealth, replacement of a new woman or by returning the claimant's sister. On the contrary, claims were rejected when they tend to be not genuine. For instance, when the husband



or members of his lineage were associated in the death. This resulted in disagreement between the two parties and became a source of conflicts. Hence, getting a substitute for one's deceased wife was not an easy and automatic (Jira Mekuria 2008:51-53).

Failure to respond to such claims sometimes resulted in the divorce of the other side. Apart from this, laziness of a woman on agricultural works, sexual weakness of the husband could also cause divorce. ...". Divorce in Gumuz by definition implies the reversing of the process of exchange marriage. This means taking the exchanged brides back to their respective families'. However, this seemingly obvious reciprocating relationship was not always the rule and there were other and different ways of dealing with divorce. In fact, the divorces of one couple disrupt the life of the other half of the exchange; but the other couple's marriage could maintain and sustain with new arrangements and substitutes (Ibid).

Traditional Beliefs System

According to available data in study area, the mythical creator in Gumuz religion is "Mussa". "Mussa" sees, hears and knows all. He is believed to be the creature of all the living things, the earth, moon, stars and sun.

The Musa is inevitable but sees, hears and knows everything. Musa is invisible, the Gumuz sometimes associate Musa to sun. The society celebrates uk'a-musa i.e. Day of god once a year by preparing beer (Keya-Musa). Uk'a-musa could be celebrated at any of the seasons. But usually, it is the availability of crops for the feast that decided the season. The day is fixed by religious leader, Etmoawa, and clan elders after the consultation of Gafia

(a witch-doctor). In the celebration ceremony members of village gathered under a big tree, juncture of a road, on hilly areas or near water courses. Scarifying of animals like sheep, or cow to Musa perfumed. The Scarified animal was divided half being burned in honor and devotion to Musa and the remaining half would be enjoyed by the participants. A religious leader, Etmoawa stood in front of the gathered people and dictated the prayer by giving thanks to Musa. Prayers for good harvest and in aspiration for exhortations for peace, good partnership and health, pleas for enough rain and to keep Satan (devil) away from the community were performed there. Special prayer for protection and guidance were offered in stressful conditions like the outbreak of epidemic disease, clan fight, famine or movement from one area to another for settlement. Individuals also prayed to Musa in aspiration of good hunting, happiness and family welfare (Jira Mekuria 2008: 53-54).

Gumuz also recognized the power of Gafia (witch-doctor). Such individuals are owned to possess spiritual knowledge and power. They are said to have the power to mysterious things such as the causes of death or sickness, the fate of the community and reasons for weather change. On top of this, they are believed to have to reverse adversities through prayer, magical and ritual performance, herbal medicine, animal scarifies and by ordering the society to change residence. Because of diverse role, it was said that "Gafia" in (Gumuz) society means everything. He was a medicine man in the absence of health centers, clinics. He was also considered as "messenger of god and advisor of society" (Ibid).



Even though, the majority of the Gumuz adhered to their own indigenous religion, those who came into contact with neighboring people or the followers of other religion because of the proximity of their settlement areas adopted other religion such as Islam and Christian religion. This was prevailed in Gumuz inhabited areas in a post-1960s. But this does not mean that adherents of either Islam or Christianity were strictly governed by the rules and regulations of the religions. One can notice elements of indigenous religions practices among Christian or Muslim Gumuz. The conversion of most of the Gumuz of Guba into Muslim or the others in nearby District centers into Christianity revealed the influence of the neighboring states and people (ibid).

Economic Activities and its dynamics among the Gumuz people

Shifting cultivation and land tenure system

Agriculture (shifting cultivation) was the main means of subsistence and this made land an indispensable resource of the Gumuz. The land tenure system of the Gumuz has been a subject of controversy among scholars. According to the accounts of Desalegn, land was collectively owned by the clan and members have the right to use the land either for cultivation or for settlement. Agricultural land was a land under cultivation or a land which temporarily left fallow. In addition, the clan usually owned forest or woodland that provided supplementary resources to the collectivity. As a result, the property of a clan was at least three or four times greater than what its members actually cultivating at any given moment (Desalegn Ramatho 1988).

Wolde-selassie also supports this communal land ownership. He states that in the customary communal tenure, rights to natural resources including land derived from the community. He also further states that "The community as a group rather than individuals decides the overall use and management of natural resources. Since the community (ideally the clan in its defined territory) is the true owner of natural resources, individual members are accorded only usufruct rights" (Wolde-selassie 2002).

On the other hand, Gebre Yntiso, discusses the land holding system as a 'controlled Access' system, combining individual possession with communal ownership. Communal ownership is of two types; society ownership and lineage group ownership (Gebre Yntiso 2001). All members of the society have rights over cultivable virgin lands, forested areas, grazing and/or browsing land, and river banks. These resources were owned by the society as a whole. The second one, lineage group or the sub-clan tenure was important level to pass decision as well as to exercise rights and duties. He asserts that "all lands under cultivation and all plots temporarily left fallow are controlled by the lineage that cleared the land for the first time" (ibid). Individuals have possessory right over the land that they cleared. They could pass on their descendants so long as they lived within the domain of the lineage group. The possessory right of individuals ceased when they left the residence of the lineage group (ibid). In the same way, Sisay states that "all land belongs to the domestic group as a whole ... The Gumuz individual must live inside the domestic group to be recognized" (Sisay Muche 1988).



Emerging changes in this communal land tenure system of the Gumuz have been seen since 1960s. The subsequent years saw ceaseless intrusion of the self-sponsored settlers into Gumuz land. Apart from paving the way for greater interaction between the Gumuz and the others, the development resulted in a relative shortage of farm land. The establishment of modern administrative structure naturally challenged the indigenous knowledge on the use of land. Consequently, Gumuz individuals began to exercise control over their plots of land at the expense of the power of elders/village councils/ who previously had a say on matter encroachment because of the proximity of their settlements near to the district centers bordering the highlander's began to lose their traditional power on land. In such areas, the first occupants began to exercise full control over cultivated or fallow fields. They were not willing to pass their plots to their fellow men. Rather, they preferred to rent to the outsiders without the knowledge of traditional leaders (ibid).

This was why Irwin asserts that "land is owned individually, but it is not bought or sold, nor are boundaries carefully delineated. A man claims land simply by clearing and using it" (Irwin Lee, 1968). Berihun also shares this idea and claims that land is owned by individuals. Clans or sub clans as a unit have no visible impact on matters of lands ownership and distribution (Berihun Mebratie 1996).

On the other hand, those areas located in remote parts of the region did not see this emerging change. Such areas were less encroached and less influenced by state expansion. Thus, the traditional system continued to function and the land was

owned collectively by the residents. As stated earlier each Gumuz village was formed by members that belong to the same lineage. So the land was owned by all members collectively. Individuals possessed the land so long as they performed agricultural activities on it. They could not claim the land they abandoned once to revive (fallow land). Again they also could clear forest land under the domain of the lineage and use it until they would leave it. They could clear forest land under the domain of the lineage and use it until they would leave it. Though the lineage group had its own domain, this did not mean that there are clearly marked delineations that separated the domain of one from the other. Such type of land holding system was practiced among the Gumuz of Guba, the remote parts of Mandura, Dangur, Bulen and others (ibid).

This indicates the ongoing change in the land tenure system among the Gumuz after 1960s, a transition from communal control of land to private control. It was evident particularly among those Gumuz bordering the highlanders (settlers). The economy of the Gumuz population was based almost exclusively on agriculture. And the most important economic activity was shifting cultivation. Hunting, Gathering and fishing were secondary pursuits. Shifting cultivation also called slash-and-burn agriculture, involved successive activities that include cutting/cleaning, burning, weeding and harvesting. The activity also involved fallowing the plot for a number of years to regenerate through re-growth and vegetation. The community performed these activities through labor exchange (ibid).

However, according to local traditions, there was no restriction on the amount of



land that Gumuz individual possessed to perform agriculture. He can farm as much land as he can within the domain of the lineage group to which he is a member. In fact, the archaic agricultural tools and the size of labor that he could receive during the working season limited the amount of farmland to not more than two hectares. As to the first case, agricultural tools were simple and rudimentary that did not permit farming at relatively large scale. These tools include: Gaud or Godda (chopper), Dugodda (sickle), Ligduma (axe), Gumba (digging stick with iron tip) and others. In the second case, the size of labor that an individual could receive largely depended on the quality and quantity of the refreshment that he could provide to those who come to work. This is directly related to the resource wealth and hence, individuals with limited or no resources attracted less communal labor and the vice versa. Social sanctions and moral approval and disapproval served as a way of regulating labor. These were ways through which the society assured that labor exchange was on the whole of the same intensity and quality. The sluggish or incompetent laborer became a topic of communal jokes and also attracted the least labor.

The society cultivates a variety of crops such as cereals, oil seeds, legumes, root crops and others. The most commonly grown cereals include finger millet, sorghum and maize. Finger millet and sorghum are staple crops. Sesame and oil seeds often produced as cash crops. Yam represented the main cultivated root crop. Hunting, gathering and fishing constituted important forms of supplementary economic activities. The society did not own large livestock herds: a few sheep, goats and cattle are what a

family owned. The absence of widespread cattle rearing habit of the Gumuz is attributed to the frequent outbreak of cattle disease caused by render pest. The Gumuz are also Known for their honey production (Patrick Wallmark 1981:88-89).

In addition, members of the society performed traditional gold panning practices along the river courses. The gold recovered was sold to local traders and hence, brought them income. Handicraft products were produced for sale and exchanged in the local market. Among these, pottery items of different sizes, Basketry, Keya Filter (Dingha), carrying short looped sickle (Gawud) for cutting and clearing bush and small vegetation) and others can be mentioned (Ibid).

In contrast to the widespread practices in many parts of Ethiopia, the handicraftsmen were not marginalized at all and no form of stigma was attached to them. Nor did they belong to any specialized occupational groups. The society neither looked down up on and discriminated against them nor placed them in separate quarters. Instead, the handicraftsmen enjoyed increased respect from the Community for their additional skills of the crafts (ibid).

These economic activities of the Gumuz and their traditional way of life began to show considerable changes since 1960s. The developments that took place in the subsequent years increased the intensity and rate of the change. Economically, ceaseless encroachment and expansion of settlement resulted in relative scarcity of farmland and shortened fallow period. The former long fallow period of 10-15 years or more has been reduced to 3-5 years. The average size and plot number



of the natives was reduced. Thus, they were forced to utilize fallow fields without proper vegetative substitution (Wolde Selassie Abbute 2002: 130).

The episode resulted in the introduction of new institution unknown to the Gumuz; the land leasing institution. It was adapted by the Gumuz as a mechanism of coping with the new problematic condition. It was a contractual agreement by which the Gumuz entered into terms to temporarily rent their land to their neighbors in return for a fixed amount of grain, or sometimes cash. Share-cropping was the most commonly used type of land leasing arrangement. The Gumuz provided the land while their partners contributed plough animals, human labor and seed. Size of the land its fertility determined the amount of grain that Gumuz gained from the agreement. The grain would be used to boost the insufficient production of shifting cultivation (ibid).

In addition, the Gumuz started to adapt the plough-based agricultural system. The plough-based agricultural technology has been disseminating into the Gumuz and they have started farming using the animal traction method, which was not known in their tradition. As result they began to domestic oxen and acquire the knowledge of packaging of farming equipment's. They also started producing new crops such as Te'ef, which is not possible to do with their old farm technology.

The other economic features that saw considerable change were the activities of hunting, gathering and fishing. The expansion of human settlements and livestock population pressure minimized the forestland. The former hunting grounds were turned into farmlands.

This brought scarcity in the availability of wild foods to gather and disappearance of game animals to hunt. Harvest for fishing also declined due to the interference in the waters of the area and reduction into flow of stream and rivers. Consequently, members of the area had to travel so many kilometers away from their localities for the purpose of hunting, gathering and fishing, which is difficult and tiresome(Ibid:82-89).

However, a change has been also showed in the settlement pattern and nutritional habits of the Gumuz. Shifting of a settlement to a distant site began to cost their plots permanently. Since their neighbors were in short of farmland, they farmed the land without their consent and consequently, claimed as if it was their own. As a result, they began to live in a particular area for a longer period than before. This indicates the sedentization process. The Gumuz have also leant to use milk and milk products as part of their diet and rarely for marketing.

The other economic features that saw considerable change were the activities of hunting, gathering and fishing.

CONCLUSIONS

The Gumuz is one of the groups of the people, who are living in various districts of Metekkel and Kamashi administrative Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional state. They have different cultural, economic and social practices and settlement patterns that distinct them from others.

The Gumuz people are among the earliest inhabitants of the Metekkel and originally occupied extensive territory that extended to the shores of Lake Tana and the Abbay basin from where they



were forced by the neighboring people. At present most of the Gumuz people are living in the hot lowlands of Metekkel.

A Family is the most important basic social institution among the Gumuz. The husband, wife/wives and children form part of the extended families.

A commune/group home/ is a very important social unit among the Gumuz. Members of the same neighborhood seem to be ideally egalitarian in nature. They perform all field cultivation activities together, facilitated by elders. They share closely in all aspects of the village life. They also drink together Keya (local brew), prepared on rotating basis. Most of the time, they pool their labor. The neighborhood wives gather and fish together. When the distance of the village increases far from the shifting cultivation fields, the whole neighborhood moves to a new site. Through time, a neighborhood grows and splits into more neighborhoods.

A Gumuz clan is mostly composed of its different neighborhood members related by descent along patrilineal lines. The clan is a symbol of identity for its members. The clan territory is strongly defended by the members against outsiders. Inter-clan relations are held with mutual recognition according to customs. Violation of such recognition results in inter-clan feuds. Members of closer kin groups live in villages inside the clan territory. Agriculture (shifting cultivation) was the main means of subsistence and this made land an indispensable resource of the Gumuz.

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