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Some Aspects of the Cultural History of the Awi People

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Abstract

The people of Awi have succeeded in preserving their age-old traditions that are handed down from generation to generation. Amongst Awi, Marriage, like so many of their other practices, is subject to considerable regional variation. Funeral, Burial and Mourning Ceremonies are other forms of age-old tradition. Furthermore, the Awi have old traditional religious and secular songs. Singing accompanies agricultural activities, religious festivals and other ceremonies surrounding life's milestones like birth, marriage and death. The major purpose of this paper is, therefore, to bring out the traditional social organizations and marriage types that have been practiced by the Awi. It also attempts to assess and analyze the funeral, burial and mourning ceremonies. In the course of the study, I have depended mainly on primary sources such as artifacts, photos, administrative files and secondary sources like books, theses, dissertations, as well as oral informants, and archival materials. I used them in the result and discussion part. I also gathered archival data from the Awi Zone Culture and Tourism Office. Indeed, gathering oral information from knowledgeable individuals through interviews was another important source data for the research. The interview was effectively addressed by qualitative approach through snowball sampling method. The data which I collected from oral sources were crosschecked with archival and secondary sources before interpretation.

Key Words: Awi marriage, Awi mourning, Awi secular and religious songs.

1. Introduction

From ancient civilizations like Aksum to resisting colonialism and transitioning to a modern republic, Ethiopia's history is rich and complex. Ethiopia, often referred to as the "Land of Origins," is a land of ancient civilizations and vibrant cultures stand as one of the oldest nations in the world. From its majestic highlands to its bustling cities, Ethiopia's cultural heritage is as diverse as it is captivating. With a history that spans

thousands of years, Ethiopian culture reflects the country's rich history and diverse ethnic makeup.¹ Ethiopia is often said to have been as the cradle of civilization. It is home of ancient cultural heritage and diverse landscapes. As the only African country never to be colonized, it possesses a rich history that spans thousands of years, from

¹Lipsky, George A., *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*. New Haven, CT: Hraf Press, 1962, pp.35-37.

the ancient Kingdom of Aksum to its current Federal Republic status. Known for its archaeological wonders, Ethiopia is a mosaic of ethnicities and languages, each contributing to the country's unique cultural identity.²

Anyway, Ethiopia is a melting pot of ethnicities, languages, and religions, with over 80 distinct ethnic groups calling the country home. From the Amhara and Oromo in the highlands to the Somali and Afar in the lowlands, each group contributes unique customs, traditions, and languages to Ethiopia's rich culture. Despite this diversity, there is a strong sense of national unity among Ethiopians, forged through a shared history and a common appreciation for their country's heritage. The concept of "*ethiopiawinet*" (Ethiopian-ness) is deeply ingrained in Ethiopian society, emphasizing the importance of unity, solidarity, and patriotism among the country's diverse ethnic groups.³

When we see the religious observances, Ethiopia's religious customs, particularly those of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, play a central role in daily life. These include fasting, attending church services, and celebrating religious holidays with communal feasts. Ethiopian music, characterized by its unique scales and rhythms, is an integral part of the cultural fabric. Traditional dances such as the *Eskista* are renowned for their energy and distinctive movements.

²*Ibid.*

³Charles W. McClellan, "Annual Festivals in Ethiopian Orthodox Christians", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1984, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1984), pp. 657-675.

Regarding Ethnic Groups of Ethiopia, Ethiopia's diversity is reflected in its over 80 ethnic groups, each contributing to the nation's cultural richness.⁴

In addition, Ethiopia celebrates a variety of cultural festivals and ceremonies throughout the year, each offering a glimpse into the country's rich heritage and traditions. One such festival is "*Timket*" (Epiphany), celebrated by the Orthodox Christian communities to commemorate the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River. The festival is marked by colorful processions, religious rituals, and reenactments of biblical scenes that attract thousands of pilgrims and visitors. It is celebrated on January 19th (or 20th in a leap year) in accordance with the Ethiopian calendar. During *Timkat*, thousands of Ethiopians gather to participate in vibrant and joyous ceremonies. The festival features processions, where replicas of the Ark of the Covenant, called *Tabots*, are carried in elaborate processions from churches to a body of water, such as a river or lake. The water is then blessed in a ritual that symbolizes the baptism of Jesus. This is followed by a period of immersion and sprinkling, reflecting the baptismal rites.⁵

Another significant event is "*Meskel*" (Finding of the True Cross), celebrated to commemorate the discovery of the True Cross by St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD. The festival is marked by bonfires, religious processions, and cultural performances that bring communities

⁴Mammo Muchie, "Ethiopiawinet", *Journal of African Study*; vol.34, No. 19 (1999), pp.4-6.

⁵*Ibid.*

together to celebrate their faith and heritage.⁶ An additional celebration is *Genna*, (Ethiopian Christmas). It is observed on January 7th, is a time of religious reflection and communal gathering. Unique games, traditional foods, and church services are integral parts of the celebration.⁷

Furthermore, one of the most iconic festivals in Ethiopia is “*Enkutatash*,” the Ethiopian New Year, which is celebrated on September 11th. On this day, Ethiopians gather for feasts, music, and dancing to welcome the New Year and bid farewell to the old.⁸ Anyway, Ethiopia is a country with a diverse population, and the various tribes and clans play an important role in shaping the cultural landscape of the country. Each tribe and clan has its own unique customs, traditions, and cultural practices that contribute to the rich tapestry of Ethiopian culture.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Ethiopian culture is the variety of tribes and clans that can be found within the country. In this research paper, I have explored one of the most notable tribes and clans of Ethiopia, their unique customs and traditions, and their role in shaping the cultural landscape of the country. Thus, one of the most significant notable tribes and clans of Ethiopia is the Awi people, also called the Agaws of Gojjam, who constitute around 2.5% of the population of Ethiopia. They are primarily found in the northern and northwestern region of the country and are known for their strong connection to their Christian faith. They are known for their traditional music,

which is characterized by its use of the “*krar*” (a six-stringed lyre) and the “*washint*” (a flute) as well as the “*masinko*” (a one-stringed fiddle). Thus, in this paper I have attempted to investigate some of the ancestral cultural elements and traditions which are still venerated and practiced in Agaw Meder by the Awi.

2. Study Area

Presently, Awi zone (formerly Agaw Meder *Awaraja*) is the homeland of the Agaws of Gojjam who are called Awi. It is located in north western Ethiopia, in the Amhara National Regional State. Awi zone has remarkable physical features, characterized mainly by extensive plateau, massive mountains, broken land and River gorges. The plateau is dotted with grandiose peaks which extended from one end to the other. In between the mountainous ranges, *Ambas* (flat topped hills) and vast plains are also found. The high peaks rise from 1500 to 3300 meters above sea level. There are also several big, medium and seasonal small rivers that drain to the Abay River.⁹

The climate of the zone combines the three traditionally acknowledged climatic zones of Ethiopia: *Qolla* (hot, 500 to 1500m. above sea level), *Woina Dega* (medium, 1500 to 2,200m. above sea level), and *Dega* (cold, 2,200 to 3, and 300m. above sea level).¹⁰ According to the Awi zone Agricultural and Rural Development office, in the zone there are three major types of soil: *burburi* (brown), *dimi* (red) and *sarki* (black). The climatic condition of the zone is conducive to grow cereal crops, oil seeds,

⁶Gale, Robert Woolbert, “The Peoples of Ethiopia.” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 2. 1936, pp.13-14.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Informants: FätlëBäläy, Gälaytu Ayana.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

pulses, vegetables and fruits. It is also conducive to grow different species of trees and plants as well as to raise beasts of burden and drought animals, and to rear cattle. Generally speaking, the physical setting of the study area is characterized by the prevalence of fauna and flora, natural to all ecological zones.¹¹

3. Literature Review

Until recently Ethiopian history was mostly the history of the state. Almost it was mainly state centered and institutional in character. It tended to extol the centralizing and unitary role of Ethiopian monarchs (C.Clapham, 2000:38). Furthermore, the historical studies of Ethiopia mostly tend to focus on events at or near the center of the political power (A.Triulzi, 2002:277). Thus, the study of several ethnic groups and communities, who have economically, socially and politically contributed a lot to the development of the country, has been neglected. This in turn has constituted one of the major gaps in our knowledge of Ethiopian History.

Among the many peoples of Ethiopia that played a great role in the socio-economic and political development of the country but who has not comprehensive and satisfactory scholarly written materials are the Awi. In fact, few scholars have attempted to provide some historical and linguistic studies about them.

George A. Lipscky(1967) in his book entitled: *Ethiopia: Its people, Its Society and Its Culture* wrote about the Agaws of Gojjam as they are one of the

representatives of the ancient Caucasoid race. His description deals with the origin of the Agaws. In relation to the contribution of the Agaws (Awi) in domesticating and developing variety of plants, both Frederick Simoons (1960 :) and Richard Greenfield have made significant contributions. F. Simoons, a cultural -Geographer is one of the ex-patriot scholars who described Agaws (Awi) as one of the most important people who established Ethiopia as an important center of plant domestication. R. Greenfield (1965) noted how the Agaws [Awi] discovered and developed new strains of plants and how they ennobled many wild plants in the plateau. He further discussed how they developed variety of plants that came from South Arabia by diffusion Ethiopic agricultural civilization. Concerning the role of the Agaws (Awi) in the socio-economic and political development of the Aksumite state, Ludendorff (1965) in his book entitled: *The Ethiopians: Introduction to the Country and People*, pointed out that the Agaws were the very basis on which the whole edifice of Aksumite civilization was constructed. Similarly, Tadesse Tamrat (1972) described the Agaws as they had played important role by being soldiers and officials in the royal court of the Aksumite state.

Already in the six century how the Agaws (Awi) extended towards the region of Lake Tana and the sources of the Blue Nile is written by Mc Crindle (1897). In connection with the existence of the Agaws (Awi) in Gojjam and in the districts of Gondar during the medieval period of Ethiopia Trimmingham (1952) has contributed a lot. He pointed out that in the medieval period the Agaws (Awi) are said to have lived not only in Agaw

¹¹*Ibid.*

Meder and Metekel but also in other districts of Gojjam and Gondar.

On the traditional belief of the Agaws (Awi) J. Bruce (1790) and Torrey Fuller (1970) have contributed much. Generally speaking, although few Ethiopian scholars and foreign travelers provided some works, most of them are fragmented and others are dealing with the Agaws relations with the Aksumite kingdom and with the efforts of the Gondarine kings to incorporate into the overall administrative structure of the Ethiopian Christian Kingdom and the development that followed.

More than others, however, it is Tadesse Tamrat who has made a great effort to interpret and reconstruct the history of Awi from the 6th to the 17th centuries. In his classic work, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Tadesse convincingly argues that the Agaws (Awi) were one of the principal founders and major pillars of Ethiopian civilization from antiquity to medieval times. Then, in his later studies, he focused more exclusively on the Agaws (Awi) of Gojjam in which he showed the repeated efforts of the Gondarine kings to incorporate as well as evangelize them.

Therefore, despite their history attached with the rapid growth of their involvement in the political life of the country, no scholarly significant and comprehensive historical study has been made on, above all, the traditional social organizations and ancestral cultural elements, which could be said very well trends and practices.

4. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to appraise the ancestral cultural elements and

traditions which are still venerated and practiced in Agaw Meder by the people of Awi since the earliest times. The study has also the following specific objectives.

It is intended to:

- a) Describe some of the traditional patterns of marriage that have been practiced by the Awi people.
- b) Investigate the funeral, burial and mourning ceremonies by the Awi.
- c) Mention the influence of the ancestors of Awi on their descendants.
- d) Point out the traditional secular and religious songs of the Awi people.

5. Methodology

This paper is history research and used historical research methods. The data for this research is gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are archival documents and oral information. The process of rigorous cross-checking has enabled me to arrive at an objective picture, i.e., to appraise the ancestral cultural elements and traditions which are still venerated and practiced in Agaw Meder by the Awi people. Parallel to the archival research, I went on field work to collect oral data and memories. As I supposed that I found a large number of people of both sexes in rural and urban areas whose age bracket ranges from the middle aged to the octogenarians. The elders who are in their 70s and 80s have lived through the entire period I am investigating. Whereas, those who are younger, particularly the middle aged, were valuable witnesses for the recent years. I deployed two different methods to tap information from informants. Firstly, I extensively applied the method of individual

interview from which I hope to collect personal, family and village information. I gave special attention to life stories because informants generally are good at recalling the process through which they passed in their lives. Life stories gave me the pieces that would enable me to patch up the ancestral cultural elements and traditions which are still venerated and practiced in Agaw Meder. Following this, I set up group interview, the second method I deployed. Indeed, discussions were held with different groups of elders selected from villages located in Banja, Ankasha, Fagita- Lekoma, Dangla, and Zigem *woredas*. The secondary sources are Theses, dissertations, booklets, articles and books. Anyway, these primary and secondary data are critically verified and analyzed for the originality and reliability in the course of reconstructing the history of the age-old convention and adoration of the ancestral cultural elements and traditions which are still venerated and practiced in Agaw Meder (presently Awi Zone).

6. Result and Discussion

a. An Overview of the History of Awi People

The Awi people are part of the Agaw language speaking peoples of northern Ethiopia. The Agaw, on the other hand, are first mentioned in the third-century *Monumental Adulitanum*, an Aksumite inscription recorded by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century AD. The inscription refers to a people called "Athagaous" (or Athagaous), perhaps from 'Ad Agaw, meaning "sons of Agaw." The Athagaous first turn up as one of the peoples conquered by the unknown king who inscribed the *Monumentum Adulitanum*. The Agaw are

later mentioned in an inscription of the fourth century Ezana of Aksum, known as the Ezana stone. Here, they are referred to as "Atagaw," a name closely resembling the earlier mention.¹²

Cosmas Indicopleustes also noted in his book entitled: *Christian Topography* that a major gold trade route passed through the region "Agau". The area referred to seems to be an area west of the Tekeze River and just south of the Semien Mountains, perhaps around Lake Tana. He also makes a reference to a "governor of Agau", who was entrusted by Kaleb with the protection of the long-distance caravan routes from Agau. According to Tadesse Tamrat, Kaleb's governor of Agau probably has his seat of government in the area of Lasta, which would later serve as the center of the Zagwe Dynasty.¹³

Agaw is a generic term denoting different Agaw groups in central and northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. The four historically and linguistically identified dialectal groups are the Bilen of Kärän in Eritrea, the Qemant of Kärkär and Çilga in Gondär and its environs, the Xamtañña or Khama of Wag in Wällo and the adjacent areas of Endärta; and the Awi of Agaw Meder and Mätäkäl in Gojjam. Therefore, the term Agaw is reserved for all Agaw groups who lived in pockets in several parts of the country.

¹²Gamst, Frederick C. (1969), *The Qemant - A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. p. 29; Lipsky, George A. *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society Its Culture*. New Haven: Harf Press, 1967pp.35-37.

¹³ *Ibid*.

The Cushitic speaking Agaw formed and ruled during the Zagwe Dynasty of Ethiopia from about 1150 to 1270. The Zagwe rulers were deposed, and the throne was seized by a Semitic-speaking Amhara dynasty, which would claim to be a resumption of the Solomonic lineage of the pre-Zagwe Aksumite Kingdom. Despite this, the new monarchs granted the Zagwe rulers and their descendants the title of *Wagshum*, allowing them to govern their native regions of Wag and Lasta.¹⁴

In fact, in this article my intention is to discuss about the Awi of Gojjam. Different writers have given varied names to the Awi of Gojjam. For instance, R. Hetzron refers to them as “DamotAgaws.” But Damot denotes a segment of the history of the people, because it was once inhabited by Awngi speaking people.

Even today, the *Awngi*-speaking pocket areas are found in Damot, Sekela, Tillili and Wāmbārema*Wārādas*. Other writers use the term ‘*Awiya*’ to refer to the people, but in *AwngiAwiya* means simply the son of Awi. Thus, it cannot represent the people. Apart from the writers, some people call them ‘*Awawa*’, which, however, refers to a group name or to those who belong to the Agaw ethnic group by birth.¹⁵

The people call themselves Awi, which should be used by others and they call their language *Awngi*. Basing themselves on traditions transmitted to them from past generations, Agaw elders narrate that it was

around the 12th century that the ancestors of the GojjamAgaws, the Seven House Agaw (literally *La Nāta Awi*) had migrated from Lasta-Sāqota to Gojjam. Their initial move to the region was primarily directed towards hunting buffaloes and elephants in the jungles of north eastern and northwestern Gojjam.¹⁶

After they made a seven month survey, the ancestors are said to have decided to live in this newly founded area. Then, they went back to Lasta and brought their respective families to Gojjam by crossing the Abay River from Çäqäta (in present day Wällo) to Biçäna. Before they left for Agaw Meder, however, these ancestors are said to have lived in the area of what is today East Gojjam and Damot.¹⁷

Informants mention as evidence for this settlement few place names in Eastern Gojjam which are Agaw terms. Some examples are *Dekul Kan* (the mountain of antelope) and *YāAgawKab* (an Agaw fortress). In relation to this point in his unpublished work, Alemu Abebe writes that, “following their settlement in eastern Gojjam the Agaws on the basis of the experience that they gained from the people of Wag and Lasta built houses by piling up stones and mud. The remains of stone ruins are still found in Biçäna, particularly in districts like Quyyi.”¹⁸

¹⁴Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 27.

¹⁵TäfäriGätahun, “AwngienaŞehufu (Awngi and its literature) presented in the Awi Symposium at Injabara, 1988 E.C., p. 28.

¹⁶Yä Amhara Kelel YäturistMäsehebHabtoç (Bahir Dar, Yä Amhara Behērāwi Kelel Bahel, Tourism enaMastawoqia Birro, 1991 E. C), p. 52.

¹⁷Melakneh Mengistu, “Themes and Motives...”, P. 39; Bekalu Molla, “Traditional Agricultural...”, pp. 26-27

¹⁸CyclostyledMonthly Magazine of the Awi (April, 1997 E.C), p. 3.

Anyway, until they were incorporated into the overall administrative structure and socio-economic and cultural milieu of the Ethiopian Christian Kingdom, the Agaws had maintained their own ethno-cultural identity. However, as the Christian Kingdom expanded, the Agaws lost this and their identity was subverted. In any case, before the seventeenth century the Agaws were one of the strong non-Christian peoples of Ethiopia that dominated most of the Gojjam region and the lands to the south of Lake Tana. Furthermore, they had their own culture, traditional governance and traditional rulers and these rulers were believed to have maintained peace and order in the region. Following their incorporation and integration into the socio-economic and political life of the state in Gondar, however, Amharization has eventually affected their culture, and since then their culture is characterized by the prevalence of bilingualism and cultural pluralism.¹⁹

b. Patterns of Marriage

Marriage, like so many other practices, is subject to considerable regional variation. In the Awi tradition, marriage takes place when a bride is very young, because unless a girl marries before 15 years of age at the latest, she would be humiliated by the community for being *QumoQär* (the girl who could not find a husband). Therefore, Awi who live in urban areas, girls are given away in marriage

between 9-12 and males between 16-20 years of age.²⁰

Marriages are arranged by the couple's parents, largely on the basis of the parents' interest with little or no attention to the future wife's or, in many cases, even the future husband's wishes. Accordingly, when a young person reaches the appropriate age, his parents would send elderly men (lit. *Šemagellés*) to the parents of the girl in order to give their daughter for their son in marriage. Unless there is some strong motive for rejecting them, the elders are accepted. Thus, everything would be arranged without consulting or asking the girl's consent.²¹

Dowry is given from the bride family in the form of cattle or cash or it could be in the form of a harnessed horse or a fire arm. In fact, it depends on the economic status of in-laws. The parents would put a dowry in the presence of the elders that represented both sides and this dowry is considered to be the property of the bridal couples. The parents of the bridegroom have also a responsibility in contributing and offering a bride wealth and other necessary materials for the bridal couples. Together with this, the elders would arrange the betrothed and this, according to the Awi culture, would be arranged three or four months before the wedding day.²²

When the wedding-day approaches, they would wash the bride, apply cosmetics (lit. *kool*) to her eye and dye her hands with

¹⁹Tadesse Tamrat, "Ethiopia in Miniature: The Peopling of Gojjam", in Harold Marcus (ed.), *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* Vol.1 (N.J: The Red Sea Press, 1994), p. 952.

²⁰Informants: AlānāTārāfā, NesuhBayabil; Yā Amhara Kelel YāturistMāsehebHabtoč (Bahir Dar, Yā Amhara BehērāwiKelel Bahel, Tourism enaMastawoqia Birro, 1991 E. C), p. 52.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Informants: BlataEndalāwEngeda, AyānAlāmē.

Insosele (lit. a dark red dye). On the nuptial day the bridegroom accompanied by his best men, would receive a warm welcome in the bride's house and after a wedding banquet both brides would be taken before the elders and made to swear to live together forever and to be mutually faithful. After the elders blessed the brides, the bride would be taken to the bridegroom's house on a horse back.²³

Upon their arrival they would receive a warm welcome from the parents and relatives and guests who were invited for the occasion and traditional songs (accompanied with folk dances) would be sung throughout the night.²⁴

In connection with this ceremony, what is interesting is that traditional marriage arrangements and weddings are still practiced in the remote areas of the Awi Zone. However, currently in the urban areas where most of the Awi are partially or completely Amharized, a young person, who reaches the marriage age, has a right to select his future wife from wherever he gets.²⁵

c. Funeral, Burial and Mourning Ceremonies

In the tradition of the Awi, when one dies, the body is prepared for burial. After they washed the corpse, *abujädid* is brought to cover it and this, in turn, is covered with a palm made mat. But before the funeral ceremony is carried out messengers are sent out to relatives and surrounding villages to announce the sad news. Therefore, the funeral might be postponed until the arrival

of his far away sons or relatives.²⁶ The grave itself is painstakingly dug out to conform to the height and dimensions of the person to be buried.²⁷ Furthermore, the mourners who attend a funeral as a relative or friends of the dead person would join in their bewailing with the kindred they find there.²⁸

After the people assemble in the deceased house, the body of the deceased is carried to the place of interment by bearers walking mournfully at a slow pace. On the corpse arrival at church, the corpse would be put down and the priests would carry out further prayers for the forgiveness of the deceased. At the same time, the relatives of the deceased and assembled friends (numerous mourners) would carry out the mourning with heart breaking lamentations.²⁹ When an Awi, who distinguishes himself in fighting, dies mourning ceremonial is particularly impressive. His portrait, his horse, shield, sword and clothe would be displayed in the morning ceremony. Wailing would go on from morning to one o'clock in the afternoon. On the occasion, some verses are orally composed in praise of the deceased.³⁰

Funeral after the advent of numerous fire-arms was also marked by much firing of guns. If a deceased is very old, his corpse is taken out to the burial place after an ox or a sheep is slaughtered by the eldest son. His corpse is not taken away through the main door. If a door is present at the back of the house, it will be taken away through that;

²³Informants: AsfärawYemam, TägaññäNegussé.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Informant: BerhanuAssaye.

²⁶*Ibid.*; Cyclostyled Monthly Magazine of the Awi Cultural and Information Department (April, 1997 E.C) pp. 19-21.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Informants: AsfärawYimam, BerhanuAssayä.

³⁰Informants: *Blata*EndalewEngida, TamiruAmbaw.

otherwise, they deliberately open a hole through wall of the house in order to take away out the corpse of an old man.³¹

In the Awi tradition, if a woman loses her husband, she would stay for three years without a husband, and if a man loses his wife he would have another woman after a year.³² In fact, currently the funeral, burial and mourning ceremony of the Awi who live in the towns of Awi zone is similar to the neighboring Amhara people.

For youngsters and for notable men, wailing is carried out for seven consecutive days around the church where the dead is buried. The heavy mourning period comes to an end after a forty-day commemorative service is held. On this occasion relatives from far and near would gather to mourn their beloved and finally food and *ṭälla* (local beer) is served for all who attended the ceremony. At the end, all the present would stand and for one minute they would pray to God for the forgiveness of the deceased.³³

d. The Influence of the Ancestors on their Descendants

The influence of ancestors on their descendants could be either benevolent or malevolent. If the descendant carried out all his filial duties, he will get the blessing and protection of the dead. If, however, he is delinquent, he might earn their curse and ire. It is believed that such people meet misfortune and a bad end. On the whole, ancestors are regarded as a benevolent force.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Cyclostyled Monthly Magazine of the Awi Cultural and Information Department (April, 1997 E.C),pp.19-21.

³³Informants: Asrä'sNegusse,FätileBälay, GälaytuAyana

The graveyard is looked at with great fear and respect.

Not only the body of the dead and the burial grounds are kept with awe and reverence but, most importantly, also the values they left behind. Customary law, cultural values and norms are unchangeable, particularly in the districts of *Zigäm*, *Azänain* the remotest parts of Fageta-Läkoma and *Ankäšawärädas*. Thus, the veneration of the ancestors has a high place in the Awi society.³⁴

Traditional Secular and Religious Songs

The Awi have old traditional religious and secular songs. Singing accompanies agricultural activities, religious festivals and other ceremonies surrounding life's milestones like birth, marriage and death.

In most cases traditional songs of the Awi are characterized by speedy and fast beats and they have a strong power of attracting the people who don't even speak or hear the *Awgnil* language. Thus, the *Awngisong* arouses interest and pleasure. In this subsection, an attempt has been made to show some of the traditional songs (secular and religious) of the Awi people in brief.

Secular Songs

The Awi people have several secular songs that have handed down from their ancestors. Among these traditional secular songs, the most important include *Monni-Monnäna*, *Ewawa*, *Lula*, *Kasimbo* and *Māraawi*.

³⁴*Ibid.*

Monni-Monnāna is a love song between a man and a woman directed towards mutual flirtation. *Ewawa* is also another love song in which a deep affection for the beloved is expressed. *Lula* is a group song involving a variety of themes.

Kassimbo is a jerky dance performed by a group of women holding a mirror, a comb and an umbrella high up towards their face. *Māraawe* is a praise song for a departed campaigner wishful of his victorious return. *Ensoseyayē* is a song that is carried out by a group of women and men on the eve of a wedding day. This song is connected with the bride's dying ceremony. On the eve of the wedding day, a bride dyes her hands with dark-red color dye.³⁵

Religious Festival Songs

Indeed, in the Awi tradition men and women singers and dancers are much in evidence at the principal religious festivals. Songs in praise of *Gänna* (Christmas) are composed by men singers. By wandering from one house to another, men singers accompanied by a drum would sing hymns in praise of the owner of each house throughout the night.

Their award includes money, food and traditional alcoholic drinks like *tälla* and *aräqē*. The gift, in fact, depends on the economic status of the owner of the house. *Enjimma*, *Eyāhonvava*, *Suredanava* and *Erkivdava* are the well-known traditional Awi songs that carried out in praise of *Gänna*.³⁶

Ensoseyay is a chorus song chanted by monks and other women singers in praise of

Ṭemqät (Epiphany). Girls are also singing hymns in praise of the principal religious festival. They grouped in a circle around the drummer and rhythmically sway their bodies and jerky their necks to the beat of the song.³⁷

Agol-Agolē and *AymoloWorqē* are the chorus songs chanted by a group of youngsters. On a Good Friday night, a group of youngsters by holding *Zänqorro* (a spotted stick), would roam from house to house. After they collect a piece of bread from each house, on Saturday these youngsters would meet together and eat the bread with great feast.³⁸

Mäsqäl (the feast of the Cross) which takes place in the mid-September, and more or less coincided with the end of the rainy season, is the greatest holiday amongst the Awi. It is a festival which was celebrated with a great pomp and show. The celebration starts from the eve of *Mäsqäl*, i.e., *Mäskäräm* sixteen (September 16 E.C.) and goes up to the next five days. On the eve, everybody has a lighted steam of fire in his house and a pair of long but thin peeled tree would stand in front of each house.

Then, early on *Mäsqäl* morning, while it is still dark, male kids, youngsters and adults as well as old men with long boundless of dried sticks, lit like torches would rush into one another's houses, and say '*derussa*', which meant "all bad things have gone out and good ones are coming in".

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Informants: Ṭiruye Seyoum, AyänAläme

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*

Everybody with his long boundless of dried and lit sticks would go to the place where the huge piles of wood are prepared. In fact, it could be at the center of the town or near the church. On the place where huge piles of wood is prepared, all people with their lit sticks would rotate three times around the fire that set on and in the end they would throw their lit sticks to the *dämära* (a huge pile of wood). *EmtatawGušaya* is the main traditional song that is carried out in praise of *Mäsqäl*. *Derussaya* is also another song sung by females.³⁹ Moreover, they have other colorful festivals in which the people celebrate with a great pomp and show. One of these is *Astäreyo*, which takes place on twenty-nine January annually. During the annual festival of *Astäreyo* numerous people would rush to the place where St. *Mary's tabot* (Ark) is present. The main celebration ceremony would begin about two hours after sun rise. Because it is the time when the *tabot*, covered with silks, is brought out of the Church by priests dressed in silks, and rags of all colors with silver and gold crowns and traditional clothes and ornaments. On that occasion, of some thousands who assembled in different groups gangs of young girls and boys would sing and dance to the beat of a drum.⁴⁰

On the other hand, when the priests gracefully dance and sing, the women shout and ululate joyfully. This colorful festival and ceremony would come to an end at six o'clock in the afternoon. In the end, those who live in the town where the annual church festival is held would invite all the

people and guests who come from near and far areas to participate in the banquet ceremony that they prepared it deliberately on behalf of the annual Church festival.⁴¹

7. Conclusion

Essentially, Ethiopia is a culturally multifarious and a 'poly' ethnic country. One of the several ethnic groups of the country, who formerly occupied a larger part of the Gojjam region but, presently confined themselves in the area what is today Awi Zone, are the Awi people. Of course, before they came to Gojjam and made Agaw Meder their permanent settlement area, the Awi are said to have lived in northern part of the country, specifically in the area of what is today Lasta-Säqota. Nevertheless, according to a widely recited tradition, for various reasons they were forced to migrate to Gojjam under the leadership of *Laññāta Awi* (lit. the seven brothers) probably during the Zagwe dynasty. After the first founding fathers established permanent settlement, the second wave of migrants, who studied the conditions and the comfort that the first migrants enjoyed, are said to have come to Gojjam under the leadership of five elders. Indeed, the Awi (Agaws of Agaw Meder) have a long-lived traditional associations and labor exchanging forms, and their foundation is associated with moral, economic and social co-operations. Therefore, in this paper an attempt is made to demonstrate how and why the people venerate their ancestors' culture and memories to this day. By and large, in this paper I have attempted to reconstruct the

³⁹Informants: AlānāTārāfā, NesuhBayabil; Zekre Awi; Bi-Annual, April 2005, p.17.

⁴⁰Informants: AsfārawYemam, TägaññāNegussé; ZekreAwi; Bi-Annual, April 2005, p.17.

⁴¹*Ibid*; Cyclostyled Monthly Magazine of the Awi Cultural and Information Department,(April, 1997 E.C) pp. 19-21.

cultural history of the Awi people. Anyway, this long-lived traditional ancestors' culture and memories of the Awi of Gojjam should be inherited from one generation to the coming generation.

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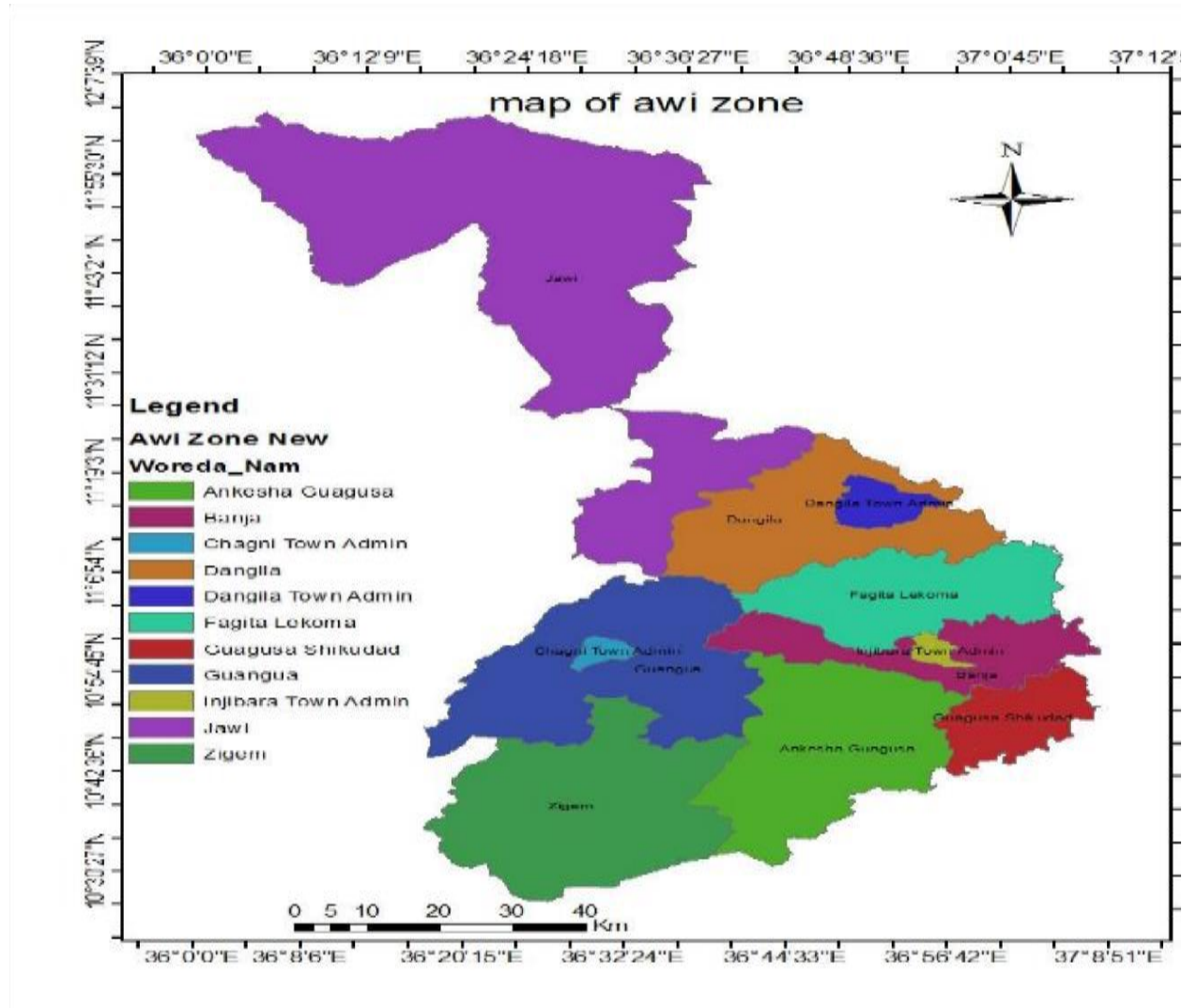
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Source: Administrative Office of Awi Zone: 2023

For further knowledge, I am dedicated to show the following information.

- The center of the zone: Injibara
- Number of the woredas: nine. These are Ankesha-Guagusa with capital Agaw Gimjabet; Banja-Shikudad with its capital Injibara; Guagusa-Shikudad with its capital Tilili; Fagta-Lekoma with its capital Addis

Kidam; Dangla with its capital Dangla with its capital Dangla; Jawi with its capital Fendiqa; Guangua; Zegem with its capital Qilaj; Azena-Ayo with its capital Azena.

- Town Administration: Dangla; Injibara; Chagni; Addis Kida; Tilili
- Number of kebeles: 201

No	Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
1	Alänä Täräfä (Ato)	75	15-09-2007	Manja	He has a good knowledge on the role of the <i>gulte gahzis</i> of the Imperial regime
2	Ayän Alämē (Ato)	83	30-11-2005	Azana	He was an <i>Aṭbia dañña</i> of <i>Zagsa Abbo Meketel wäräda</i> and has a good knowledge about tribute collection during the imperial regime
3	Amuwamta Negussē (Emahoy)	97	21-03-2005	Gimjabet	She is a nun. She served the church at <i>Gimjabet Mariam</i> and has a good knowledge of history of the Awi. She is well informed on the various issues Particularly, regarding the Awi relation with the provincial administration and with the Gondarine rulers, she has a good memory and knowledge.
4	Asfäraw Yemam (Ato)	81	7-09-2000	Gimjabet	He has a good knowledge of the Awi under the Imperial regime.
5	Asräs Negussē (Emahoy)	107	13-11-2005 29-09-2007	Gimjabet	She is a nun. Although the length of time that she lived is too long, she has a good memory and knowledge in relation to the socio economic conditions of the Awi while <i>Ras Hailu</i> was the governor of Gojjam. She provided me good information on the condition of the administration and on the kinds of taxes levied on the Awi.
6	Assayä Antänäh (Ato)	59	23-11-2000 E.C	Dangela	He is native to the area. He served as an administrator of <i>Dangla Wäreda</i> and chairman of the <i>Awraja</i> Workers Party of Ethiopia during the <i>dergue</i> regime. Presently he is working in the <i>Dangela wäräda</i> Youngsters and Sport Bureau. He has a good quality of recording and keeping a diary
7	Berhanu Assayä (Ato)	37	14-05-2006	Injabara	Although young, he has a good knowledge on the traditional and cultural history of the Awi. He served as a head of the cultural and information office of the Awi zone.
8	Endalaw Engida (Blata)	91	29-05-2001	Šasena	He provided me authentic information about the establishment of the horse men and cattle owners association in the Awi. He also informed me how the Awi

					patriots exchanged information.
9	Fätlë Bälay (Woyzero)	61	19-09- 2007	Gimjabet	She provided me a useful information on the ancestral worship and tradition of the Awi
10	Gälaytu Ayana (Woyzero)	69	17-09- 2007	Gimjabet	She informed me about the culture and traditional history of Awi
11	Imrë Mäkonnän (Ato)	84	21-09- 2007	Dangela	He has authentic memories regarding the conditions that occurred in Dangela during the Italian occupation period. Furthermore, he provided me a good information about the Kuwkura, Méçça and Ačäfär peasants revolt of the peasants under the leadership of Abärä Yimam
12	Neşuh Bayabel (Ato)	67	30-09- 2007	Gimjabet	He has a good knowledge on the Awi traditional marriage, funeral and burial rites.
13	Täşalä Qoläç (Qés)	71	26-12- 2007	Gimjabet	He served St. Mary church as a priest and has a good knowledge of the establishment of the churches that are found in and around Gimjabet town
14	Tiruneh Chekol (Ato)	89	24-12- 2007	Dembecha	He has a good knowledge of Gojjam during the Italian occupation period and the imperial era.
15	Tameru Ambaw (Ato)	59	24-09- 2007	Dangela	He is well informed about the Italian occupation of the Agwa Meder region and the role of the patriots in fighting the invading force. Moreover, he has a good quality of recording and keeping a diary.
16	Tätafä Qälämu (Qés)	73	21-09- 2007	Gimjabet	A clergy man in <i>Gimjabet Mariam</i> and he provided me good information about the establishment of churches in Fasiledes and <i>Kiros Käbällés</i> and on the introduction of Christianity into the region.
17	Ṭeruyë Seyoum (Woyzero)	81	19-12- 2005	Ayisa Mikael	Her father was a well know leader of the horse men association and one of the patriots in the Awi. Thus, she is well informed about the issues that I aforesaid. Furthermore, she informed me the origins and development of the Awi traditional religious and secular songs.
18	Zänäbäworq Ayähu	63	30/8/2007	Dangela	She is a daughter of <i>Grazmaç Ayähu Jämbäré</i> , who from 1941-1969 served as secretary and administrator of Dangela woräda. On the basis of the information that she gained from her father, she has a good knowledge about the history of the Awi.