Book Review

Dena Freeman. 2002. **Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This theoretically challenging and ethnographically detailed anthropological study describes the Doko community in the Gamo Highlands of southern Ethiopia and focuses on changes in ritual systems. Author Dena Freeman was the winner of the 2000 Curl Essay Prize and is co-editor (with Alula Pankhurst) of *Peripheral People: The Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia.*

During 21 months of fieldwork in Doko Masho between 1995 and 1997, Freeman observed two types of rituals: sacrificial system rituals, which have not changed significantly in the past 200 years, and initiatory system rituals, which have undergone substantial transformations. In this study, the author seeks to explain how these different outcomes could occur.

In the first chapter of this eight-chapter book, Freeman critically reviews major studies concerning cultural change and positions her work within an "integrated theory of cultural change." This synthesis modifies Anthony Giddens's practice theory with the aim of integrating both systematic and individualistic analyses.

Change has a temporal dimension, and the second chapter sketches the historical context of the Gamo Highlands culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century was characterized by increasing slave exports to Arabia and continuous inter-community warfare, both of which ceased abruptly when the Abyssinian Empire expanded southward into the area at the end of the century. The twentieth century saw new developments stemming from national integration. An indigenous religious reform movement appeared, and missionary Christianity spread. Many men took up weaving and migrated to towns such as Addis Ababa.

The next chapter discusses communities (*deres*); house and other spatial structures; agricultural production, including the gender division of labor and labor organizations; and kinship and marriage systems. Although not entirely relevant to the theme of the book, the ethnographic descriptions of this chapter are noteworthy.

The fourth chapter explains the sacrificial system. In traditional Gamo thought, spirits must be fed through offerings, because they have power over agricultural production and human well-being. Only elders can make such offerings. This is the ideological basis for a hierarchy based on primogeniture. In the twentieth century, the process of "devolution" weakened this system, as its economic basis eroded while the symbolic aspect remained.

In contrast, the initiatory system, which is the topic of the fifth chapter, is grounded in community-level local bonds, instead of the primogeniture rule. In the twentieth century, this system gained popularity in Doko Masho, but not in the neighboring community of Doko Gembela. Initiation into a titled status requires sponsoring huge feasts and participating in a series of rituals. Today, of the three types of initiates in Doko, the lowest status, known as *halak'a*, has become common.

The sixth chapter considers how people have experienced the historical changes and adapted the ritual systems to new conditions. Since the incorporation of the Gamo Highlands into the Ethiopian state, local production patterns have changed markedly. Wealthy landowners who had gained slaves through inter-community wars lost a major source of agricultural labor and could no longer produce surpluses. The number of landowners who could afford large- or even mid-sized feasts to gain status declined. On the other hand, young men began to acquire wealth through trading and weaving. Two small communities in Doko have responded differently. While initiatory systems in Doko Gembela have changed little, those in Doko Masho have made innovations. For example, they are now open to young men and are less expensive. While a Doko Gembela *halak'a* plays a symbolic "warrior" role, the role of a Doko Masho *halak'a* has gradually been transformed into that of a "wife."

The seventh chapter explores the process of communal decision-making by examining how changes in individual strategies have led to changes in cultural practices through assembly discussions. The resolution of small local issues in the assemblies brings about incremental cultural change, which results in a chain of intended and unintended consequences.

The last chapter seeks to trace and recon-

struct the process of transformation in Doko Masho initiations and the changes, or "devolution," that has taken place in Doko Gembela initiations. Finally, it contrasts the sacrificial and initiatory systems. Freeman concludes that cultural systems with a pyramidal organization (such as sacrificial systems) will evolve or devolve, while cultural systems with a network organization (such as initiatory systems) will transform. However, this generalization seems too functionalistic and ahistorical, and therefore lacks persuasiveness.

One complaint is the book's treatment of its sources. For example, Straube (1957) introduced an alternate interpretation of a relevant topic. While staying in Dorze, the southeastern neighbor of the Doko, he identified a democratic form of social and political organization that he called the *halaka-Verfassung* (constitution). He assumed it to be an ancient, formerly widespread type of social and political organization in Ometo-speaking societies. The *halaka-Verfassung* remained a relict in most Ometo-speaking societies that had been taken over by monarchical rulers. Even if Freeman rejects Straube's idea of the ancient origin and wide diffusion of the *halak'a*, I wonder why she did not examine his ideas critically, instead of simply including his article and book in the bibliography.

I personally study the Malo, one of the Omotic-speaking societies, and several ideas, somewhat beside the theme of the book, crossed my mind. Specifically, the Gamo highlanders, including the Doko, seem to have two unusual features among Omotic-speaking, or more strictly Ometo-speaking, societies.

First, at the time of incorporation into the Ethiopian state at the end of nineteenth century, they were divided into many autonomous communities (*deres*) instead of being ruled by a single hereditary king (*kawo* or *kaate*), as were the Wolayta, Dawro, Gofa, Malo, Konta, Baskeeto, and others. Freeman suggests that the Gamo highlanders were in the process of dividing into even smaller communities in the nineteenth century. For example, the Doko community supposedly split into Doko Masho and Doko Gembela during that century.

Second, the sacrificial system and the initiatory system coexist in Gamo communities. This also seems unique, because the initiatory system is not found among Ometo-speaking societies, although the sacrificial system is held in common among them. The initiatory system is widespread in the Cushitic-speaking societies bordering the east and south of the Gamo Highlands (p. 23). Thus, the initiatory system was most likely introduced through cultural contacts with the Cushitic-speaking societies in the past. The question then arises as to whether these two unique characteristics of Gamo Highland culture are somehow related.

As to the first point, the author (p. 127) attributes the tendency toward community division to the search for slaves. However, slaves were not only in demand in the Gamo highlands but doubtlessly also among the Wolayta, Dawro, and others. These societies were also subject to incessant warfare but exhibited no divisive tendencies. Therefore, could the divisive tendency among the Gamo highlanders be related to the existence of an initiatory system? Quite possibly, I think. The author writes (p. 127):

> "As the large *dere* broke up, the smaller *deres* reconstituted themselves into new groupings. The *deres* of Masho, Shale, Woits'o, Gedeno, Dambo, Yoira, Ch'ento and Eleze made an agreement that from now on they would coordinate their *halak'a* initiations and their *halak'as* would all *sofe* (make a public parade that marks a change of status) together in the market place. The remaining *deres* made a similar agreement, and thus the groupings of Doko Masho and Doko Gembela came into being."

This description suggests that the break-up of communities into smaller ones occurred when different communities more or less coordinated their initiatory system. Far from persuasive, this interpretation suggests that the nineteenth-century break-up of the Gamo highlanders into smaller communities was facilitated by the initiatory system, which was exogenous to Ometo-speaking societies.

The author emphasizes the importance of discussion in assembly places (*dubushas*) to incremental cultural changes. In Malo, places where a big tree stands at the center are called *dubusho*. Each *dubusho* is known by the name of the tree planter, who died long ago and is said to have been an elder (*bayra*) in the primogeniture lineage. In Malo, the *dubushos* are not places where people discuss serious matters, but they are places where young or old men chat after work in the evening or lie around on holidays. It is said that in the past, elders hosted annual feasts there. Thus, in Ometo-speaking societies, a place called *dubusha* (*dubusho*) may originally be related to the sacrificial system. However, in the Gamo Highlands it is now inseparably tied to the initiatory system. This suggests that the cultural meanings of the place may have been transformed as rituals changed.

In all, Freeman's work is a worthwhile contribution to anthropological studies from both theoretical and regional perspectives.

Reference

Straube, Helmut. 1957. Das Dualsystem und die Halaka-Verfassung der Dorse als alte Gesellschaftsordnung der Ometo-Völker Süd-Äthiopiens. Paideuma 6(6): 342–353.

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TAKESHI FUJIMOTO
UHE, Okazaki, Japan