

Christian Influences On Shinasha Oral Traditions

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Abstract

The Shinasha are an Omotic speaking group with ca. 32,000 population living in northwest Ethiopia near the Sudanese border. They seem to have been a part of the historical Gonga population who once lived on both sides of the Blue Nile (Abbay) River. Due to the sixteenth century population movements a majority of the Shinasha lost their ethnic identity in northern Wallaga and southern Gojjam. They were subsumed into the Amharic, Agaw and Oromo speaking groups. However a significant group of the Shinasha today live in Metekkel region, northwest Ethiopia, with their ethnic identity still intact. 'Inhabiting the embattled crossroads of the African and Oriental worlds for centuries the Gonga have absorbed the cultural impacts of Islam and Christianity in their development of a unique amalgamation of cultural traits.' Christianity, in particular, has influenced their traditions of origin, their religious beliefs and various other aspects. The present study is an attempt to look into these traditions. The methodology employed includes the systematic interviewing of resourceful informants to supplement the available literature. Their testimonies were carefully cross-checked and systematically analysed through qualitative research methods.

1 Introduction

The Gonga peoples having survived the ravages of the past constitute the living representatives of one of Africa's most intriguing populations. Inhabiting the embattled crossroads of the African and Oriental worlds for centuries, the Gonga have absorbed the cultural impacts of Islam and Christianity in their development of a unique amalgamation of cultural traits. Sustained and intense interactions with the cultures of neighboring Semitic - speaking peoples long before their forced dispersion beginning in the 16th century, has left an equally heterogeneous precipitate in Gonga languages and folklore. Their states have been ruled by dynasties frequently claiming descent from Tigre and occasionally tracing origins to Ancient Israel or Yemen and their national epics contain striking parallels to those of northern Ethiopian peoples. Thus the Gonga present both the ethnologist and historian with a profound challenge. The challenge is compounded by the fact that several Gonga peoples and every independent Gonga state have disappeared well before any extensive scientific study of their culture and history materialised. Gonga oral tradition, however, remain ... and suffice to partially meet the scientific challenge.¹

The Shinasha/Northern Gonga, are believed to be the only survivors of the historical Gonga population north of the Abbay River. Their history and settlement patterns are shrouded in legend and continued to baffle students as well as scholars of Gonga history. Just to start with their names, they were/are called, by various names such as Boro, Dangabo, Gonga, Sinicho, Seenetyo, Simitchos, Sinetjo, Shinasha, Scinascia and Xinax. They are most commonly referred to as Shinasha and various writers, mainly travellers, used different spellings according to their own respective languages. The term Shinasha (see below) seems to be a non-derogative Amharic designation, emerged from *shi ina shi* which means *thousands and thousands*, depicting the multitudes of Shinasha who fled to and settled in the north of the Abbay. Although this is a wide spread tradition there is also a Shinasha clan with a related name called Shinasnao which is one of the sub clans of Anfo Shinasha living in Bulan warada. Similarly there is a locality in Agawmeder with the related name Shashina, where one of the Shinasha clans were said to have settled, led by their chief Ashinao. Although it is difficult to ascertain, these names are very similar to Shinasha and the origin of the word may be traced more to the local traditions.²

¹ Werner J. Lange. 1982. History of the Southern Gonga (Southwestern Ethiopia). Wiesbaden, p. 1.

Sinicho is an Oromo appellation for the same group of people. Whether it is a corrupt form of Shinasha, is unclear, but they might have put up stiff resistance to the Oromo during their expansions in the sixteenth century who gave them the appellation ‘Sinichoo’ which means small hot pepper in Oromiffa. The Shinasha resistance seems to be too bitter and burning like Sinicho (pepper) and the Oromo called/and still call them Sinicho. Dangabo is also an Oromo word for the Shinasha living in Dangeb locality of Metekkel. It might have been derived from the name of the locality itself without pejorative meaning.³ Boro is the group’s self name widely in use after 1991. According to oral traditions Boro is believed to be their original ancestral father and they would like to be called after him.⁴

The term Gongga, although inconsistent, has a long tradition of use. It has been identified as the tongue of the Kingdom of Innarya.⁵ Antoine D’Abbaddie and Charles Beke described Gongga as a language spoken on both sides of the Abbay as far as Kafa to the south.⁶ The Gongga languages include Anfillo, Dawaro, Garo, Kafa, Mao, Shinasha, Sheka, Yam and Walayta which form a homogeneous language cluster⁷ and may be divided into three main branches: 1) Southern Gongga including among others Kafa, Sheka and Bosha spoken in south-western regions in the vicinity of the Gojeb river, 2) Central Gongga representing Anfillo /Affillo spoken in western Wallaga and, 3) Northern Gongga comprising Shinasha.⁸

² Tsega Endalew.1997. The Oromo of Wänbära: A Historical Survey to 1941. MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, School of Graduate Studies, Addis Ababa, p. 29; Interview: Qenaw Gobana and Alboro Dibaba.

³ Interview: 2003. Guddina Waltaji, Imana Jote, Dukkan Aga and Mange Wirtu.

⁴ Eike Haberland and Helmut Straube. 1979. Nordost Afrika. *Die Völker Afrikas und Ihre Traditionellen Kulturen* Hermann Baumann, (ed.). *Ost-, West- und Nordafrika, Teil. II* Wiesbaden, p.115

⁵ Hiob Ludolphus.1982. *A New History of Ethiopia*. London, pp.79-80; see also Lange, p.3n.

⁶ Lange, p. 3n; Charles T., Beke. 1844. Abyssinia-Being a Continuation of Routes in that Country. *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*. XIII, London, p.39.

⁷ Leo Reinisch. 1888. *Die Kafa Sprache in Nordost-Afrika I*, Wien, pp. 64-65; see also C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford.1954. *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646*. London: The Hakluyt Society, p. 17n; Marcello Lamberti. 1994. Some Phonetic Laws of the Gongga Language. *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*. XXXVI, Roma, pp. 57-58

⁸ Harold Fleming. 1976. Kefa (Gongga) Languages. Marvin Lionel Bender (ed.) *The Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*. Michigan, p. 364

Gonga primarily seems to be a generic term representing Kafa, Sheka, Bosha, and Hinnaro dialects of the south-western region as well as the Anfilloo and Shinasha languages. It might have been for this reason that early Portuguese travellers such as Manuel de Almeida used Gonga, referring to Shinasha as one of the native inhabitants of Gojjam. He also mentions Sinasse as a Gonga town but it seems to be a Shinasha settlement area. Gonga is also mentioned as one of the provinces of the Christian Kingdom.⁹ Although its early history is difficult to trace thoroughly these Gonga groups seem to have formed a kingdom that might have stretched up to Kafa in the south and the Shinasha seem to live in the most northern part of this kingdom.

There is also a Shinasha clan and place name, Gongo which is much similar to Gonga. According to oral tradition the Shinasha are originally descended from two main families: Gongo and Do'oo. Gongo begot Innoro and Indi'oo and these clans are still today considered to be the Shinasha ancestors and widely respected in society. They are responsible for performing traditional blessings and leading various rituals. Gongo is also the name of a locality to the south of Bulan, and even one of the district names of Metekkel, Gwangwa, seems to have been derived from Gongo.¹⁰

South of the Abbay there are traditions that there were in the past groups who called themselves the Ganqa in western Wallaga ruled by various local chiefs. One of them, Abba Bisqano, was still remembered as Ganqa chief defeated by the Oromo around Najjo region.¹¹ Ganqa is also very related to Gonga providing a pertinent clue to the once emergence of Gonga states until dispersed in the wake of the sixteenth century demographic and political changes in the Horn. In various sources Gonga is referred to as the name of the people and also applied to the area where they live starting from Guman up to Metekkel. Guman is in fact mentioned as the land of the Shinasha.¹² This indicates that Gonga is in use at least since the sixteenth century referring to a group of people living in separate localities on both sides of the Abbay around Guman, Wambarima, Durra River and Wanbara as far as Guba on the Sudanese border; and Wasti, Nafro and Dinigas immediately to the south of the Abbay (See

⁹ C.F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford. *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646*. p. 17, 56 & 145; James Bruce.1972. *Travels to discover the Sources of the Nile in the years 1768-1773*, London pp.309-11.

¹⁰ Interview: Qenaw Gobana and Alboro Dibaba

¹¹ Interview: Gudina Waltaji and Imana Jote

¹² Bairu Tafla. 1987. *Asma Giyorgis and his work. History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa*. Stuttgart, p.925; See also Weld Blundell.1906. Exploration in the Abbay Basin. *The Geographical Journal*. XXVII, pp. 537-538.

map). Most probably the same group of people are referred to as Shinasha and for our historical concern here, we would like to use Shinasha and Gongga interchangeably.

The physical complexion of the Shinasha /Gonga seems to have also challenged scholars. They were called people of yellow-skin,¹³ white race¹⁴ and to the contrary sometimes *Shanqilla* groups.¹⁵ According to Schuver,

*The Seenetyo are a white race numbering only a few hundreds of individuals and inhabiting 2 villages on the crests of the Gooba mountains, east of Fazoli. Their language, customs, dress and physiogamy differ completely from those of both Gallas & Abyssinians and traditions assign to them the master-ship over the land between Fazogli and the Godsham during a period anterior to the Negro and Galla invasions, which came both from the south. It is probable that 3 other villages, situated on the crests of the Obi mountains, halfway between Dongoor and Keeneen and which are inhabited by whites, belong to the same race.*¹⁶

Plazikowsky-Brauner also describes their physical complexion with the words, *Bei den Boro-Völkern wird von allen Reisenden ihre helle Hautfarbe hervorgehoben, im Gegensatz zu der der weit dunkleren Galla.*¹⁷ Inadequate evidence and, perhaps their location amidst the Nilotic Gumuz, might have misled many writers as to their physical complexion. As we have tried to highlight above they are one of the historical Gongga populations similar in colour as well as language to the Omotic speaking groups. In areas south of the Abbay and in Wanbara they were almost completely assimilated and one hardly identifies the Shinasha from the Oromo. Physically the Shinasha are indistinguishable from the Oromo or from the Agaw and one has to go many generations back to come across Shinasha names. In Wanbara they practice Gada rituals, Waqa religion and speak Oromo. Only some Shinasha in the lowlands use the Shinasha language. Those of Bulan, however, are mostly bilingual and present a

¹³ Wendy James, Gerd Baumann and Douglas Johnson (eds.). 1996. *Juan Maria Schuvers's Travels in North East Africa 1880-1883*. London: The Hakluyt Society, pp.180 - 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 332; see also Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner. 1950. Die Schinascha im West-Äthiopien. *Zeitschrift für Ethnology*, Band 95, p.33.

¹⁵ Bairu Tafla, p. 969; Wallis Budge.1966. *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia*. I, p. 419.

¹⁶ James, Baumann and Johnson, (eds.), p. 133

¹⁷ Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner, p. 30

strong Shinasha identity. They also practice Oromo traditional customs but retained their language and other cultural traits.

This clearly shows us that linguistic as well as historical surveys of the Northern Gonga are far from being complete. *The great lack in North Omotic is the group of two or three shinasha languages in southern Gojjam and Wallega which are barely known.*¹⁸ Their language, history and socio- cultural similarities with the southern Gonga, and their settlement patterns are hardly studied, posing a profound scientific challenge to scholars as well as students. Scientific surveys of the southern and central Gonga are also yet to be thoroughly studied, although relatively speaking they are better known than the isolated groups of their northern kin. Even the exact habitat of the Shinasha is not correctly indicated on various maps, and according to Fleming and later Lange, the Shinasha groups are identified as Amuru, Boro, Guba and Naga. However, neither of these names are today identified as Shinasha except Boro which is the name of their ancestral father and their general self name. Amuru is an Oromo clan name¹⁹ while Guba²⁰ and Naga are Gumuz clan names²¹, living to the north and immediately to the south of the Abbay River respectively.

2 Christian Influences

2.1 Traditions of Origin

Every community has its own oral traditions of origin and settlements patterns. The Gonga peoples relate their traditions of origin mainly to the Middle East. Similarly, the Shinasha claim their original homeland to be Biblical Canaan. They are said to have left their country in search of pastureland and moved first to Egypt where they lived for a time and moved on to Ethiopia until they reached and settled in Shawa. From Canaan they were led by one of their ancestral fathers called Hamati who was believed to be one of the sons of Canaan.²² Hamati was instrumental in leading the Shinasha to cross a river known as Walel which they associate with the Red Sea. Similar to the Israelites who crossed the Red Sea after it was divided and laid open by God during the Exodus led by Moses, the Shinasha crossed the Walel (Red Sea) led by Hamati and entered Egypt. Walel, a mountain (tulluu) in western Wallaga, is believed

¹⁸ Harold Fleming.1973. Recent Research in Omotic – Speaking Areas. Harold G. Marcus (ed.) *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Michigan, p. 276

¹⁹ Täkläyesus Waqjira, Yäzämän Tarik Matäräqamiya, Ms. 527, National Library, p.152; Weld Blundell, p. 539.

²⁰ Interview: Algamar Banja & Täfarra Usman.

²¹ Blundell, p. 542.

²² The Holy Bible (KJV) Genesis, 10:18

to be one of the Oromo traditional centres (ritual places) and the Walel tradition seems to be an influence from the Oromo, as majority of the Shinasha moved to Metekkel from south of the Abbay in the seventeenth century.

Due to demographic factors they were forced to move again to the Horn. It was stated that their clan chiefs, notably Shao, led and directed all the Shinasha to settle in Shewa. Shao was said to have ruled the Shinasha in Shewa for about two decades before they were dispersed on both sides of the Abbay River and formed the Kingdom of Gongga that includes other Omotic speaking groups in the south-western territories. Population growth and search of pastureland are still the driving forces behind the move into Gojjam and adjacent territories on both sides of the Abbay. When they reached Gojjam in multitudes the Amharic speaking inhabitants of the region claimed: *shi na shi ye mihon tor wereren* i.e. thousands and thousands of troops invaded us! Since then the name Shinasha (after *shi na shi*) was said to have applied to them.²³

The Shinasha's reference to Canaan and Shawa indicates very early contacts with the Christian Kingdom. The long contact with the Christian kingdom influenced their traditions of origin. Although evangelisation of the region came much later, Christianity seems to have influenced Shinasha oral traditions at least as early as the sixteenth century. Emperor Sarsa Dengel and later Susenyos have conducted a series of expeditions against the Gongga north of the River. Such contacts might have gradually brought about Christian influences on the Shinasha oral traditions. Otherwise what is very clear about their identity is that they are one

²³ Interview: Alboro Dibaba; Mängäša Baqqe, 57, Bulän; Assäge Rado, 95; Atomsa Dibaba, 90, Wänbära, March 2000. In Šinaša language *Šiwa* means soil, depicting the multitudes of Šinaša who settled there. They state that they belonged to a strong kingdom that ruled vast territories including Kāfa in the south. Gradually they were dispersed, however, on every side of the Abbay basins due to invasions from the Christian kingdom and as a result of the population turmoils of the sixteenth century. Šinaša informants still recall that their kin are also found in Kāfa as evidenced by, *inter alia*, linguistic and cultural similarities. Linguistic similarities are particularly very clear which helped linguistics to classify Šinaša along with Omotic speakers. Also there are place names showing similarities. For instance, there is a place called Minjo in Wänbära which is the name of the old (Minjo) dynasty of Kāfa. Apparently Šinaša's Omotic roots and identification are beyond doubt.

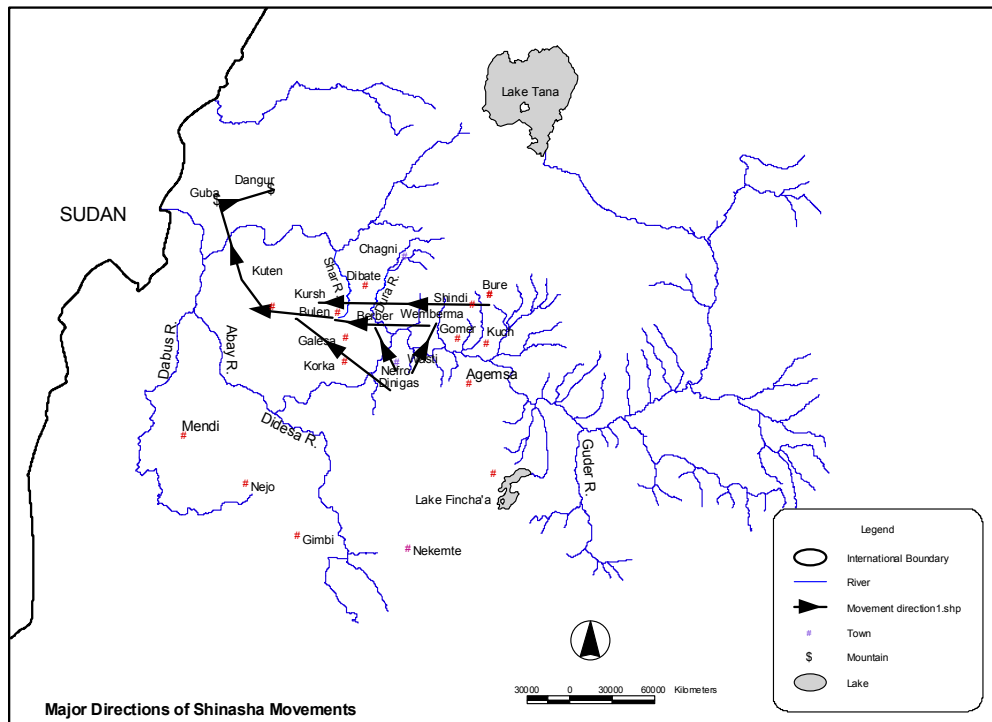
The different myths on the origin of the word Šinaša are still speculation and need to be proved. There are conflicting ideas on their origin, as stated above, tracing to Amharic speakers and others to local traditions. The use of the word, however, is as old as at least the sixteenth century. The various travellers have mentioned the name although spelt with slight differences. The Oromo word *Sinichoo* is also not very far from the word Šinaša and the various much related *Šinaša* clan names lead us to suggest local origin of the word. However, the word Šinaša doesn't have pejorative connotation although the people prefer to call themselves Boro. Boro is a relatively recent usage and unknown to majority of the rest of the people of Ethiopia who still call them Šinaša. Perhaps due to this reason there are efforts by the Regional State to use both words, particularly when the Šinaša formed their own political organisation after 1992. It was/ is called Boro-Šinaša People Democratic Movement.

of the several peoples of the Ethiopian interior speaking Omotic languages. Through travellers' accounts it is clear that they were living on both sides of the Abbay during the sixteenth century. When Father Antonio Fernandes crossed the Abbay by way of Wemberma to Inarya in 1613 he indicated their presence on both sides of the Abbay.²⁴

As a result of population pressures from south of the Abbay many Gongga groups seem to have moved to the north of the River and augmented the number of the Gonggas there. They continued their move into Metekkel forced by the military expeditions from the Christian kingdom. Emperor Susenyos (1607-1632) made at least four main invasions against the Gongga north of the river which were continued by the successive emperors. A majority of them was forced to move further into the unfavourable lowlands of Metekkel up to Guba on the Sudanese border and then to Dangur. It was these Shinasha groups which Schuver visited in 1882 and described them as people of yellow skin who live in isolation on inaccessible cliffs. They inhabited two crests of the Guba mountains and three other villages are reported in the region between Dangur and Kinien.²⁵

²⁴ Beckingham & Huntingford, pp. 145-146

²⁵ Haberland & Straube, p. 115; James, Baumann & Johnson, pp. 211 & 332



By escaping wars and military expeditions from various directions the Shinasha who moved into Metekkel have kept their language and other cultural traits, although most of them were subsumed into the Agaw, Amharic and Oromo speaking groups. The northern Gonga therefore constitute the Shinasha /Gonga of Wallaga, southern Gojjam and Metekkel, the latter being a typical Shinasha locality. The Gonga of the south-west of the Gojeb region have at least maintained their independence until the end of the 19th century. As Lange clearly put it: *Protected from the Northern Christian Empire and other colonial forces by vast forests, strongly fortified borders with trenches and a broad buffer zone of Oromo states, the southern Gonga almost uniformly maintained political independence until the close of the 19th century.*²⁶

²⁶ Lange, p. 12

2.2 Izewero

Another Christian influence seems to be the use of the Amharic name Igziabher in a corrupt form, izewero. Izewero, God, is adopted before the introduction of Christianity by the end of the 19th century. The Shinasha word for God is Iqono or eqo. Izewero is the most common name than Iqono and the use of 'o' at the end shows one of the main features of Omotic languages; most Shinasha words and clan names have 'o' at the end.²⁷

2.3 Sheero

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church there is a fithat ceremony upon the death of someone which, as it is believed, allows the soul to enter paradise after wickedness is removed through the fithat. It is believed that the deceased will be cleansed and the relatives of the deceased will be in peace. The Shinasha have a similar practise known as sheero with the same purpose. As it is the case in the Orthodox Christian tradition, it is believed that if sheero is not conducted relatives and clan members of the deceased could be handicapped, or disabled or will be subjected to calamities, and the deceased will not be in a position to enter paradise.²⁸ The fact that the ceremony takes place on Sundays and is conducted by the Father Confessor of the deceased (tsas niha) shows a direct Orthodox Christian influence. Although our knowledge of the pre-Oromo peoples is very limited, the practice of Sheero may have developed as early as the sixteenth century and may be interpreted as Christian influences on the Shinasha in southern Gojjam and Wanbara.

4. The Use of traditional medicine

The Shinasha are well known as practitioners of traditional medicine. They are known to stop and allow rains, to make rivers dry up, etc, using plants as medicines. Traditions has it that they acquired the knowledge of practising traditional medicine while staying in Egypt from the Egyptians. On both sides of the Abbay they are still remembered as the best practitioners and the mystery of their skill is still difficult to describe thoroughly. From south of the Abbay, it was stated that the Oromo considered them as an evil-eyed community as they dried-up water-springs before they fled to Metekkel during the sixteenth century. Even today there are traditions that many traders from south of the Abbay have lost their lives in the

²⁷ Interview: Assage Rado, Qenaw Gobana and Alboro Dibaba and personal observations

²⁸ Interview: Alboro Dibaba, Mengasha Bake & Assege Rado; see also Addisu Adame, 2000, p. 48

Shinasha country after being attacked by their traditional killing medicine. A similar tradition is also attested in Guba where they dried up a river most useful to the Guba Muslim state before the Shinasha trekked further to Dangur.²⁹

There is also another tradition: God has originally provided a book of guidance for all human beings and while all the peoples of the world have kept the book, the father of the Shinasha left it on a tree and it was lost. When God asked the father of the Shinasha, he told him that he forgot it on a tree and the book is lost; and God instructed him: *let plants and other roots that grow on trees be your guidance and medicine.*³⁰ This corresponds to the tradition collected by Cardinal Massaja in Wallaga. According to him, God has provided a book of guidance to the Christians, Muslims and to the Oromo and while the others kept and effectively used the book, the Oromo failed to keep it carefully and it was eaten by a cow.³¹ This reveals a profound Christian influence and the similarity in the traditions on both sides of the Abbay. Actually the majority of the Shinasha came originally from Wallaga after being strongly influenced by the Oromo culture. Although it is difficult to trace it thoroughly, the Shinasha might have experienced the use of traditional medicine for a long period of time and the practice may be traced to local origin.

Thus the Shinasha traditions as well as the traditions and history of several pre-Oromo group's continue to challenge students as well as scholars due to lack of substantial scientific studies and documentary materials. Their living traditions are the most useful sources but they are much influenced by various external factors mainly Christianity. Therefore careful scrutiny as well as cross-checking are absolutely essential.

²⁹ Interview: Gudina Waltaji, Alboro Dibaba, Algamar Banja, and Demelew Bayene; see also Emiru Kenea, *The Kaza of Ebantu up to 1936*, Senior Essay, Addis Ababa University, 1984, p. 6.

³⁰ Addisu, p. 48

³¹ Alfred de Carouge, *Une Mission en Éthiopie*, Paris, 1902, p.109

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