

Ethiopian Socio-Cultural Rules Require Fundamental Change: A Case from my Bag of Childhood Memories

By Maru Gubena



Maru Gubena: "During those memorable days and long, tiring journeys, there were even more remarkable events to be observed – events that I used to find enormously fascinating."

It is in fact not difficult to provide multiple examples of Ethiopian socio-cultural rules that contain negative connotations, and which have been partly or fully responsible for molding the unaccommodating and unproductive attitudes of the members of Ethiopian society. These socio-cultural rules are also obviously responsible for our dysfunctional behaviours, which continue to be a permanent impediment to the process of democratization and to a free flow of ideas and views among individuals. It is therefore my sincere hope that we, concerned Ethiopians, will be willing to do everything that is in our capacity to selectively and collectively fight against the bad side of our socio-cultural values and norms, to realize the required structural transformation.

Here, for the purpose of clarity, I have chosen to address just a single aspect among the many cultural patterns of Ethiopian's socio-cultural norms: the negative use of the adjective "*woregna*." I consider this to be an enemy for a great part of Ethiopian society – an impediment to the development of free mindsets. With the intention of producing a readable text, this true story drawn from the bag of my childhood memories will be employed to illustrate the central, complex issues – issues that have lacked the required attention. As is known, there are also enormous differences in the meaning of the term of "*woregna*." The larger Ethiopian society tends to employ this word to describe individuals in a negative way: people who make trouble by stepping outside the social norms. The usage within a family household is quite different. When parents use the term "*woregna*," it is intended to protect children and other family members from the judgments of outsiders by discouraging acting too talkative or curious; the usage may feed into the social norms, but it is not at all negative. It can even be an expression of joy and the love of a mother for her laughing, happy child who constantly calls to her, asking so many exciting and even tiring questions. The subsequent pages reflect real and affectionate mother-child relations.

As can possibly be agreed the way a particular society interprets behaviours described by terms like "curiosity" and "fascination" – and whether these are seen as positive or negative attributes for individuals to possess – depends largely on the socio-cultural values, norms and attitudes that have been framed, molded, shaped and reshaped within the members of that particular society. Being curious, or having a fervent desire to enthusiastically and creatively engage in observation and discussion, in an attempt to uncover and understand the world – and in this case the socio-cultural, and economic relations among people – is seen as an extraordinary talent in modern societies, especially those that are technologically developed; such societies may give people with this talent a special socio-economic status. The same applies to the enormous curiosity and enthusiasm shown by

individuals who make vigorous efforts to clearly perceive and understand the processes and course of events in a given society, the socio-cultural influences on behaviors and interactions, the presence or absence of talents and capacities among individuals, and the huge gaps due to inequalities among the members of society.

Regrettably, Ethiopia is an example of a culture in which the most dynamic individuals – those who make every possible effort, as energetically and tirelessly as possible, and who employ every available tool in an effort to uncover are not seen in a positive light, even today. Individuals who are open minded and able to uncover, observe and understand the socio-economic relations, relative positions and interactions among individuals in our society are not only perceived negatively, but are actively discouraged from asking sensible, far-reaching questions: they are characterized as, even *accused* of, being “*woregna*,” as presented in the subsequent pages, “The True Story of the Rich Lady and the Mules of Fogera: Sharing my Childhood Memories.”

The True Story of the Rich Lady and the Mules of Fogera: Sharing my Childhood Memories

Although not in the same sense as in today’s modern politics, even as child in Fogera, where I was born, and since, I think, age six, I have always been fascinated by politics, human interactions, human behaviours and socio-economic inequalities among the people within Ethiopian society. In my recollection, even at an early age I was sometimes invited by elderly people to tell them “*wores*” – stories that are exciting, deep and meaningful. Other times, however, I was described as being a good “*woregna*,” a storyteller. Although my mother, Mazash Bykedagn – the mother of four girls and three boys, who was always happy and looking young and beautiful, with an elegant, sexy appearance and body structure despite being the mother of seven children – never liked it when I was called *woregna* by others, she herself used to say or even to shout at me “I have told you time and again not to be so *woregna*, and certainly not to talk everywhere and to everyone, even with people we don’t know, who are not related to us.” My father was hardly at home. He was always busy with his court cases and court sessions, mostly in Addis Zemen. It was probably due to the beauty of my mother that my paternal grandmother was never happy and comfortable whenever my mother spoke of or got ready to go alone to Woreta, or even to the nearest markets. In the early years of the 1960s, Woreta was a very small town where my mother and other people in our region did their business, especially on Saturday. My mother was not only beautiful, but she was also wise and most conciliatory with both family members and friends. She therefore made every possible effort to avoid anything that would hurt my grandmother, whose house was almost attached to ours. So as a compromise with my grandmother, and also because I was the last and favorite child of my parents, my mother almost always took me with her wherever she went, which was mostly to Woreta.

During these many and most memorable journeys, much to the irritation of my mother, I was always staring at the various people who were walking or riding on mules along with us on the road to Woreta. I mostly watched their behaviour and listened to their talk. In my recollection, the great majority of Fogeries – about 90 to 95 percent – made their journeys to Woreta on foot. Others traveled on mules or donkeys – a good number of them carrying guns. My mother and I used to go to Woreta on foot, with no sticks or guns. It was not unusual for me in the middle of our journey to ask my mother as lovingly as possible to stop walking and listen to me – to my questions. “My Tati, I want you to stop for me. I want to ask you something!” As my relationship with my mother had always been very close and affectionate, her responses to my sometimes sensible but often nonsensical, childish and bothersome questions, was always carefully, wisely and lovingly crafted. While looking closely at me and smiling affectionately, as always, she would ask: “what is it Hode? What do you want to tell me, Hodeye? Okay, tell me. I am listening to you, Yeni Fiker – my love.” “Why do some people travel on mules or donkeys, and others on foot? And why are some men carrying guns?” My mother looked at me with surprise and irritation as well, and, holding my hand firmly, said: “is this the reason you asked me to stop my walk and listen to you, my *woregna*? Is this what you want to ask me, Hode? What is interesting about this, and why is it your concern? I really don’t want to hear any more of your nonsense questions” my mother would say, harshly, decisively

and in the most uncompromising terms, holding my left hand in her right and dragging me forcefully to continue our journey.

During those memorable days and long, tiring journeys, there were even more remarkable events to be observed – events that I used to find enormously fascinating. Consequently, I quite often stood still, remaining far behind my mother, while looking at those men and women who rode on mules – to the point that my mother would get so mad at me that she would give me a smack, quite often on my buttocks and sometimes even my face. It was not just the men and women on the mules who were so fascinating to me, but rather, the two, three or sometime four poor guys – I am not sure whether they were a kind of **slave**, or servants or permanently employed bodyguards – of the individuals riding on mules. Each of them carried a gun and ran on foot to the left or right of the mules and at the same speed. Since I had no one to ask – asking my mother would certainly bring me another, even harsher smack – I was most often left alone to wonder, asking myself “how on earth can those poor guys go on foot, running for hours at the same speed as the mules, carrying guns all the while, until they reach their final destination?” In particular there was one lady, said to be a descendant of a warrior family in our region. She was extremely rich, with extensive lands in many parts of Fogera. This rich lady was also said to own an enormous number of cattle, five or more modern houses in Woreta, and to have many servants and bodyguards. Everyone was able to see this lady riding on her mule along our way to Woreta, guarded by her five servants or bodyguards, all of them carrying guns; but I was, I think, the only one who stared at her with particular interest and fascination. Since the entire body of the rich lady, except her face and feet, was usually entirely covered by her Ethiopian traditional clothes, no one could recognize her. Those who felt compelled by the traditional social code of laws, norms and values of Fogera to salute the rich lady could only have identified her by recognizing her mule and her five servants or bodyguards.

I had seen the face of the rich lady more than twice before; she was in fact beautiful, even though not as beautiful and elegant as my mother. Much to my embarrassment, once she saw me staring at her and said, with a lovely smile, something like “did you manage to discover what is interesting in me, my *Konjo woregna* – my lovely curious boy?” Of course, as anyone can imagine, I was embarrassed that she could see that I was constantly looking at her and that I was, in her eyes too, a good *woregna*.

One early afternoon, when my mother and I were in Woreta and my mother was busy shopping or buying some Lamba, coffee, salt and so on, I immediately saw the rich lady on her mule, just arriving in the market with her five servants or bodyguards. Among her five poor guys I saw two lifting the rich lady from the back of the mule down to the ground. I ran to her at high speed – to the rich lady. The rich lady of Fogera looked at me and asked, “are you here again today, my Konjo boy? “Yes, but why are those guys always carrying guns and running along with your mule on foot while you are sitting very comfortably on the mule? Why don’t they too have mules, like you?” I confronted the rich lady. And while the rich lady was still staring at me and at her bodyguards, I went on to ask her bodyguards as well. “Why do you guys run without stopping over such a long distance, carrying guns and with the same speed as the mule?” The servants or bodyguards, who did not know how to answer my questions, remained silent, just looking at their boss – the rich lady.

While I was spellbound, awaiting the response of the rich lady to my questions, but when the rich lady just began to open her mouth, saying something like “well...”, my mother who had been searching everywhere for me, saw me standing there, having a heated conversation with the rich lady and her bodyguards. As usual, and as could have been expected, my mother became furious with me. To make the situation worse, the rich lady told my mother that I was asking some “silly” questions; she felt that I was accusing her of doing something bad to her bodyguards. She also told my mother she had the feeling that I was too *woregna*. As one can imagine, due to my temporary disappearance from my mother’s side as well as for having hurt the feelings of the rich lady, I got two or three of the biggest smacks on my face that I had ever had from my Tati – my mother. While I cried, my mother held my hand firmly and pulled me closer and closer to her, as she apologized to the rich lady and asked for her forgiveness.

The above account is an obvious illustration of some patterns of Ethiopian socio-cultural values and norms that have, knowingly or unknowingly, been constructed to constantly discourage children from asking sensible, far-reaching questions. These repressive socio-cultural rules place excessive limits on our capacity for communication as adults – our ability to freely express ourselves. Yes, we are taught not to be open minded; instead we must be exceptionally quiet, calm and secretive, to the point that most of us are unable to make the effort needed to distinguish between what precisely should be regarded as a secret and what should not. For example, we have been brought up not to disclose household or family matters to outsiders or even to close and helpful friends and colleagues – even the fact that a family member or a partner is traveling to London or Atlanta to attend a social or political gathering is seen as a secret, although in most Western cultures and circumstances this would be seen as something that could be disclosed. Unfortunately, however, the majority of Ethiopians still believe such matters should not be disclosed except to immediate family members, probably due to fear of information getting to the wrong people or other unknown consequences, or to avoid being accused of “*woregna*.” It is clear that a disproportionate portion of Ethiopian society prefers shyness, closeness and secretiveness above openness and healthy, constructive communications. In addition, it is undeniably true that, in accord with our socio-cultural values and norms, talking or writing openly about vital issues related to our sexual behaviours and interactions are strictly forbidden. Not only are many of Ethiopia’s socio-cultural values and norms contrary to the modern socio-cultural and democratic values and norms that we badly wish to see implemented in our country, but also they harm us ourselves, the general population of Ethiopia, most of all. This unfortunate influence will continue to shape the attitudes of future generations, unless urgent actions and measures are undertaken by all concerned Ethiopians in an effort to modify or transform the current situation and arrive at more accommodative socio-cultural values and norms.

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