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SPECIAL ISSUE

## Techniques of happiness

### Moving toward and away from the good life in a rural Ethiopian community

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This article seeks to tease apart some of the different factors and cultural practices that lead toward and away from happiness in particular social and cultural contexts. It considers happiness as experienced in the community of Masho in the Gamo Highlands of southwest Ethiopia at two different points in time. It starts by exploring the traditional Gamo concept of happiness and the way that happiness was experienced in the mid-1990s mainly as peaceful sociality and nonreflexive present-time consciousness. It then charts the move toward a more market-based socio-economic reality that has taken place over the last twenty years and shows how the concomitant decrease in peaceful sociality and increase in inequality has led to a decrease in happiness of most people. However, it then considers the way that conversion to Pentecostal Christianity has created new avenues of happiness by bringing about a radical transformation of the self and by deeply reconfiguring emotional lives. In charting the way that happiness shifts from being imbued in the social fabric to being more about deep interior spaces, this article argues that happiness is configured differently in different social and cultural contexts and that different experiences of happiness are fundamentally linked to different experiences of the self.

Keywords: Happiness, self, Pentecostalism, market transformation, Ethiopia, Gamo

Scholars from many different disciplines have written about happiness and well-being in recent years. Psychologists and economists have dominated the field (see, for example, Frey and Stutzer 2002; Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz 1999; Lane 2000; Seligman 2003), but contributions have also been made by sociologists, neuroscientists, philosophers, historians, and evolutionary scientists (see Davidson 2004; Inglehart et al. 2008; Nesse 2004; Veenhoven 1991; White 2006). Anthropologists, however, have been fairly resistant to the notion of studying happiness (for notable



exceptions see Adelson 2000; Jiminez 2008; Mathews 1996; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008; Thin 2005). Part of the reason that anthropologists have been slow to engage with happiness research head-on has been the terms in which this research has been framed by the other disciplines. By far the majority of existing happiness research is based on assumptions about the self, emotions, and experience that anthropologists find questionable, and methodologies that anthropologists find shallow and uncontextualized. People are assumed to be like *homo economicus*, rational, transparent, and universal, and insights into their well-being are garnered by asking them how happy they are on a scale of 1 to 10, and then finding correlations between these scores and various other factors. Research in this vein has generated a huge amount of data about happiness levels in different countries, how happiness correlates—or doesn't—with wealth, or with marriage, or with living in a city, and so on, and has led to much interest in developing happiness indicators and designing policy in order to improve people's happiness. This is all rather alien to the way that anthropologists approach questions of experience and has led to a situation in which anthropology is perhaps the only social or behavioral science discipline that has virtually nothing to say about happiness or the foundations of the "good life."

So, then, how might anthropologists contribute to the study of happiness and well-being? What might we add to the debate? This collection shows many ways that anthropologists can add depth and richness to the study of happiness. In this article I will focus on two key ways that anthropologists can contribute to the debate. Most obviously, anthropologists can provide detailed ethnographic accounts of how people in different places and in different cultural contexts conceptualize happiness, how they talk about it, how they strive for it, and how they experience it. Rich ethnographic descriptions of happy lives in different cultural contexts are as yet few and far between and such accounts of socially and culturally contextualized happiness could do much to broaden the very narrow accounts and assumptions that dominate much contemporary happiness research.

A second contribution that anthropologists can make, and the main focus of this article, is to begin to tease apart the different factors that lead to either happiness or unhappiness in a particular social and cultural context. We can look at specific social and cultural practices that appear to enhance happiness—what I will call *cultural techniques of happiness*—and analyze how they function and how they are intertwined with certain forms of social organization and cultural ideation. In this way we can begin to bring into focus ways that happiness is socially and culturally constituted in different settings and how the nature of happiness, as both concept and lived experience, can change over time.

Tolstoy claimed that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Is the same true of communities? Is there an ideal form of happiness that all communities can aspire to or do forms of happiness vary in different places and different times? How do we take into account the simultaneous presence of happiness-increasing and happiness-decreasing factors? When happiness researchers tell us that the people of X and the people of Y both score 7 on a happiness scale of 1 to 10, is there a difference in the nature of this 7, to put it rather glibly, for those that arrived at it by combining, say, a happiness of 8 with an unhappiness of -1, and those that combined a happiness of 9 with an unhappiness of -2?



Ethnographies of happiness as experienced in different historical and cultural settings can offer some insights into these questions and begin to deepen our understanding of happiness as it is experienced by real people, embedded in particular communities, at specific points in time. In the rest of this article I will consider happiness in a community in rural Ethiopia at two different points in time. By comparing the factors and practices leading toward and away from happiness in these two contexts I will try to open up and complexify the notion of happiness and to show how both the concept and the lived experience of happiness can and do change quite radically over time.

### Traditional Gamo ideas about happiness

The people of the Gamo Highlands in Southern Ethiopia don't talk much about happiness, or about any kinds of feelings or emotions for that matter. But, at least on a cursory surface level, my impression when I first arrived in the mid-1990s and walked through the lush green fields and saw people working together, talking, laughing, and smiling, was that generally they seemed to be very happy. As I stayed longer in the village of Masho, I began to get a clearer picture of what ideals Gamo people held about the good life and how the lived experience of their daily lives engendered a certain feeling of contentment.

Gamo ideals of the good life, what they strive for and what they wish for their community, can most clearly be seen in the blessings made at the beginning of any local or communal assembly. Local and community discussions are a regular feature of Gamo life, often taking place several times a week, and they are always preceded by a series of blessings made by the senior men. These blessings always take the same general form and call for two essential elements: peace and fertility. Peace encompasses the values of togetherness, mutuality, and smooth social relations, while fertility includes crops that grow well, women that give birth, and children and animals that grow strong and healthy. In the mid-1990s, and for a long time before, these could be considered to be the Gamo recipe for a good and happy life. And indeed, in their patterns of thought these two ingredients for the good life were interconnected, such that peaceful social relations were actually thought to be part of the cause of biological fertility (Freeman 2002a, 2002b). So, quickly solving conflicts and restoring peace was seen as a sacred as well as a political act, and something that would keep the community and its members healthy and fertile. Thus, when, in 1996, I asked people why they were going to an assembly, they did not reply that they were going to discuss a case about some stolen sheep, or that they were going to decide what to do about a certain community problem, but instead they would say something like, "We are going to the assembly to bring reconciliation to the community. For the grain, for the milk, to make the community well" (Freeman 2002b: 134).

The importance of smooth social relations was emphasized again and again in daily life. Conflicts happened but they were relatively rare. And when they did occur, it was generally on a quiet level—more a case of cold silences or fake smiles than shouting or screaming. And kin and neighbors always made sure to involve themselves in others' conflicts and to help resolve them as soon as possible. Anyone

who had an argument with someone else during the day could expect to find the neighbors gathering in his house in the evening, where in a gentle and friendly way, they would ask to hear both sides of the story and steer the two parties to a resolution. It was always stressed that one had to get right to the bottom of things so that there would be no grudge to hold and genuine good relations could be restored. This process of reconciliation is an important technique of happiness in Gamo. I was party to many of these reconciliations during my two years in the village of Masho, and I was always impressed at how people came to a resolution and then left their hurt and anger behind. Anthropologist Judith Olmstead, whose work on the Gamo Highlands was cut short in 1974 by the Ethiopian Revolution, was so impressed by the Gamo techniques of conflict resolution and reconciliation that she later went on to become a professional mediator.

The people of the Gamo Highlands do not value suffering. While there are numerous accounts in the anthropological literature of suffering being considered as important for character formation or for moral purity, the people of Gamo simply see suffering as a miserable state that should be remedied as soon as possible. It is seen as a sign that something is wrong, that things are not in balance, or that a taboo has been broken. If someone is suffering from an ongoing misfortune the response is to look for the cause of this misfortune so that the situation can be rectified and the suffering relieved. If someone is suffering from a known misfortune, such as the death of a relative, people will come to cheer them up, to laugh and joke with them and try to ease them back into the smooth flow of happy social relations.

So while there is no one word for “happiness” and it is not overtly theorized or discussed, it is clear that happiness is seen as the default state that everyone should seek to attain in their social lives. Gamo people do not strive for it, in the sense that they might strive for wealth or political power, but rather it is a way of being that is valued and appreciated. Gamo concepts such as “joy” (*uffaisi*), “smiling” (*michidi*), “peace” (*salame*), and “reconciliation” (*makaino*) are the integral elements of happiness as sought for and experienced in the Gamo Highlands. It is a fundamentally social conceptualization of happiness and it is inherently bound up with the lived experience of peaceful sociality.

## Happiness as lived experience

In general day-to-day life it was indeed smooth social relations that did seem to bring about feelings of happiness and contentment. Life in Masho in the mid-1990s was intensely social. People were always with people—farming the land together with family or in work groups, cooking food together with other household women, walking together to market, sitting in community assemblies. There were very few occasions that someone would do something alone. Even if a man might occasionally farm his land alone, other people passing by on footpaths or working in adjacent fields would call out greetings, wish him strength, and perhaps stop to chat about some communal affair or to tease or joke with him. Walking anywhere always took twice as long as it could have, because it was always necessary to stop and greet everyone you passed on the way, to wish them a good day, and again to joke around with them.

Psychologists have suggested that both dyadic social connections and the feeling of being part of a community are important for well-being (see, for example, Baumeister and Leary 1995; Haidt, Seder, and Kesebir 2008) and both of these experiences were available in abundance in Masho in the 1990s. As an outsider-anthropologist I was perhaps aware of these dynamics more acutely than those who had always lived this way. I was overwhelmed with the number of people that I had to relate to and the constant stream of friendly social interaction. At times I would try and hide away for an hour or so in my room, to find some time to be quiet and think, and I would always be sought out after about five minutes with calls to come and talk/eat/play. If I resisted for more than about ten minutes people would become genuinely concerned and start asking if I was feeling ill. When I tried to reply that I was fine and that I just wanted some time to think, I found that such a concept could not be expressed in the Gamo language. The verb that best translates as “to think” also means “to worry” and so I found myself saying “I’m just worrying.” People were quick to respond that I shouldn’t “think/worry” and to pull me out of my aloneness and back into sociality. Eventually I stopped resisting and surrendered. I remember noticing some months later how different I felt living like that and how much calmer and happier I was—how I felt safe, connected, embedded.

Gamo sociality is emphasized and intensified by two more cultural techniques of happiness. The first of these is the act of “playing” or *kaò*. The same verb is used to describe children’s play, or playing football, but when applied to adult “playing” it refers to the joking, teasing, and banter that characterize much of Gamo social interaction. It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that most day-to-day social interaction in 1990s Masho was “playing.” Seventy-year-old Shato,<sup>1</sup> in whose house I lived, was a master at playing. Here are some examples:

Murunesh, a neighbor, comes into our courtyard. Shato, with a sparkle in his eye and a mischievous smile, shouts, “What are you doing in my house? Did I call you?” Murunesh, laughing, says, “I came because I missed you. I wanted to see your handsome face.” Shato: “Nonsense! You’ve come to eat my food, I know it! And who is this child you have brought with you? Give her to me and get out!” Murunesh, pushing her three-year-old granddaughter in Shato’s direction: “Here, take her, she will make you a second wife. . .”

Shato is hoeing one of his fields near the house of Abera, a second cousin. Abera walks past and calls out: “Good morning! Strength to you!” Shato replies, “It’s not a good morning, come and help me with this work!” Abera has to quickly find an answer: “Bring me a second hoe and I will hoe with you.” Shato: “No, no, take this one. Here, you scoundrel, why are you running in the other direction?” Abera: “Strength to you, strength to you! I must go to the town.” Shato, laughing: “Go, go, return in peace.”

These types of exchange took place literally all the time, several per hour, and generally left both parties smiling and laughing.

I was forever being told to marry people, to take children back to England, to come and cook dinner, or hoe the fields, or cause the rain to start or stop. These

1. All names have been changed.



invitations to play did more than make me laugh. They kept me on my toes—they forced me to keep sharp and focused, to quickly find witty replies or rebuffs, and to warmly engage with my interlocutors. Rather like a mindfulness meditation, these exchanges kept me constantly “present” and “in the moment.” With the constant calls to play there was no time for daydreaming, thinking about something else, or otherwise sinking into one’s own world—activities I was rather prone to in my previous life in London. Recent research by psychologists suggests that people—European and American students, that is—who daydream more and have more so-called “stimulus-independent and task-unrelated thoughts,” or SITUTs, and are therefore not fully aware and attentive to the present moment, report increased negative affect and lower psychological well-being (Stawarczyk et al. 2012).

The Gamo focus on adult playing encouraged a state of nonreflexivity. It pulled people out of their own thoughts and their own concerns and served to train their attention on the immediate experience of the present moment and the other people in that moment (cf. Kavedžija, this issue). Michael Jackson has suggested that the dance between “being part of and being apart from the world” is a universal feature of human consciousness (Jackson 2012: 2). We all constantly oscillate between states of engagement and detachment, relationship and aloneness. In the Gamo Highlands, the cultural practice of playing serves to continually push people toward the pole of engagement and relationship and to encourage them to be “part of” rather than “apart from” the world. Much more than just a mere backdrop to social life, the Gamo cultural activity of playing is thus an important technique to increase happiness—by making people laugh, by fostering warm social relations, and by training peoples’ attention to the present moment.

The second technique of happiness that intensifies sociality in the 1990s was the drinking of coffee. As in many parts of Ethiopia, it was common in Masho for women to prepare coffee and invite friends and neighbors round to drink. Starting with raw coffee beans, the actual preparation of the coffee would take about an hour and a half, and guests would be invited soon after the process started. Guests would straggle in over the next hour or so, and sit in the house and play while the coffee was being prepared. Then the actual coffee drinking would generally take between 30 and 50 minutes, as the pot was boiled three times and guests drank three cups. Coffee drinking was an occasion to down tools, have a rest, and most of all, to play. Groups of neighbors would invite each other on the basis of a loose reciprocity, while passers-by and others would get added to the mix when they were around. During my fieldwork in the 1990s it was typical to partake in coffee like this at least once or twice a day, sometimes more. These occasions were pleasant, relaxed, and sociable. And they were so central to life that even on the occasion when Abebech, the wife of Shato’s son, Wendu, happened to give birth one morning—round behind the back of the house—when the house itself was full of guests for coffee, no one thought to leave or stop the coffee drinking. They simply put some straw on the floor for Abebech to lie on, wrapped the baby up and gave it to one of the guests, and carried on with the second cup of coffee.

Thus through three main techniques of happiness—playing, drinking coffee with neighbors, and quickly resolving any interpersonal conflicts—the ideal of smooth and friendly social relations were to a very great extent maintained in Masho in the 1990s, and contributed greatly to people’s happiness and life enjoyment.



## Socio-economic change in Masho and its effects on happiness

I have returned to Masho on average once or twice a year since I completed my doctoral fieldwork in 1997 and have witnessed many changes over that time. One of the most important changes has been in the area of production and economic relations. In the 1990s most people in Masho were engaged in subsistence agriculture, growing barley, wheat, potatoes, beans, and *enset*, the false banana plant. Most men would spend much of their time working in the fields, often with household members or with local work-groups, with frequent breaks to stop and play with passers-by and with each other. The work was physically hard but relatively unpressured, and would generally generate enough food to feed the family, plus a small amount of surplus that could be used in various ritual exchanges at marriage, initiation, and the birth of a child, and to contribute to offerings made to the spirits by clan and lineage elders.

However, in 1998, an NGO started a development project in the area and selected Masho as one of its target villages. This was the first NGO project in Masho and it led to great changes in many aspects of life. As I have discussed elsewhere (Freeman 2009, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b), one of the main aspects of this project was to get people to grow a cash crop, in this case apples, and to become more involved in the national market economy. By 2010 over two-thirds of the households in Masho were successfully growing apples, a number of apple cooperatives had been established in conjunction with neighboring communities, and many apple farmers were making a lot of money from the sale of apple fruits and apple saplings.

While still agricultural, working with apples was very different from growing barley, wheat, and the other subsistence crops. Apples, and particularly apple saplings, could bring in big money. Thus, in the decade or so since apples were first introduced, there have been significant changes in working patterns and social relations, which I believe have seriously impacted on people's experience of happiness and well-being.

First, men who produce apple saplings have started to work much longer hours. Since there is a fairly direct link between the number of apple saplings you produce and the money you earn, people have begun to produce apple saplings in the spirit of maximization. Grafting apple saplings is quite labor intensive and thus apple farmers find themselves investing many hours in this work. They have generally been reluctant use family labor or to hire workers to do this for them, both because of the training and skill required and because of the fear of theft, as I will discuss below. So instead they have become more conscious about when they are working and when they are not working, and the previous relaxed experience where work was fairly embedded in the flow of social life has started to fracture (cf. papers by Walker, Lambek). Apple farmers are less keen to take breaks or to stop for coffee. In fact, when I visited Masho in 2008, 2009, and 2010, the number of coffee invitations was noticeably smaller. When I asked Wendu about this he said, "We are busy now. Before we were lazy. Now people are growing apples and they don't want to sit around drinking coffee."

Similarly, while people did still greet each other on the paths, it was becoming much more common for people to simply wish each other well and walk on. The occasions of long conversations and elaborate playing sessions in these chance



encounters seemed much fewer. While people in Masho do still play with each other and do still drink coffee, they do it much less than they used to. And thus the joy, connection, and “present moment consciousness” that these forms of sociality used to engender, now do so rather less.

Second, the apple boom brought with it a massive increase in theft. Never much of a problem before, from around 2003 onward theft—primarily of apple saplings—became a major social problem. People would creep into open fields at night, uproot apple saplings, and sell them for a quick profit to the traders that arrived in the local town. The extent of this theft was so great that most apple producers moved their saplings from the fields into their home compounds and started to stay up all night to guard them. As people quipped at the time, referring to the grafting of male and female in apple propagation, and finding the funny side to their unpleasant situation, “the apple sleeps with his wife, while we sleep outside.”

Wendu was one of the apple farmers who slept outside for a year or so to guard his apple saplings. During that period he often looked tired and stressed. He also bought a dog to keep in the compound to deter would-be thieves. Starting from this period, people started visiting each other's houses less. No one was sure who was a thief and who wasn't. People had been caught stealing from neighbors and close relatives, so everyone was under suspicion. In this situation, Wendu would keep an eye on visitors who came to the compound. He would get particularly uneasy if they spent too much time looking at his apple seedlings or the fence in that area. Perhaps they were plotting to come back at night and try and steal them? Likewise Wendu and Abebech stopped visiting other compounds so frequently—maybe people would think they were plotting to steal this person's apples? The fear and distrust that developed during this period had a dramatic effect on social relations and how people thought about others. Whereas previously people had related to others in a light and easy way, now the boundaries between one household and the next became psychologically firmer.

In 2005 the local government managed to solve much of the theft problem by closing the route to market for apple saplings and requiring all apple saplings to be sold via cooperatives to licensed traders with appropriate receipts and paperwork. This made it much harder to sell stolen saplings and the intense period of theft came to an end, and apple farmers returned to sleep with their wives (Freeman 2013). However, the changes to local social relations could not be so easily repaired. While visiting has become more frequent again, it is not as easy and frequent as it was before.

Other changes in social relations have also come about due to involvement in the apple business. Instead of working together, farmers now increasingly compete with each other. Neighbors have become competitors, competing to producing the best apples, to sell the most saplings, to get the highest price. Staff at the NGO that implemented the apple project were aware, and rather dismayed, at this situation. The Agriculture and Food Security Program Facilitator told me:

Our strategy was to build a caring, interdependent society, not a competitive society. But a competitive society has come about. Farmers compete with each other over apple production and access to market, they say that their variety of apple is good while that of others is bad, they



argue about everything. There has been a lot of fighting since the apples came. . . . While the project is good because people are getting more money and can send their children to school and wear clean clothes, it is true that it is also making people more separate. People here used to help each other, but now they compete. It's not good what is happening.

As well as being potential thieves and potential competitors, “other people” have also become potential customers. Now that more people have more cash, a number of households have set up little tea shops, particularly those situated on the road into the local town. These houses will typically be new style rectangular mud houses with several rooms. A large room at the front will act as the tea shop, while household members will live in the other rooms at the back. Small benches typically line the walls and a kettle of tea sits on a charcoal stove, ready to serve those wanting a rest on their way into town. Very often customers include kin and neighbors, and thus the line between social visiting and market transaction has become uncomfortably blurred. I recall one time in 2008 when Wendu and I went to visit Adanech, a young neighbor who we saw often, who was at the time ill in bed with flu. We walked in through Adanech's tea shop, where one or two people were sitting drinking, being served by Adanech's husband's younger sister, and into her bedroom. Adanech lay there in bed, wrapped in blankets and sneezing. We sat on small stools opposite her and she propped herself up to talk to us. Wendu immediately started to play, telling her to get out of bed at once and go to work, and soon we were all laughing together. She then offered us some tea and three small cups of tea were bought into her bedroom and we all drank together. We carried on laughing and joking some more, and then when we saw she looked tired we got up to leave. As we wished her a speedy recovery and she thanked us for coming, Wendu put a few coins on the table to pay for the tea. It was an awkward moment, but Adanech didn't refuse. . .

A third change caused by the shift to market-based apple production has been a massive increase in inequality. While there have always been differences in wealth and land-holdings in Masho, these have become much more significant since the arrival of apples. Those farmers with lots of apple saplings have made lots of money very fast—in some cases thousands of US dollars per year, while those with few or no saplings have remained at the same subsistence level as they were before. The differences have become huge. And furthermore, while previous wealth differences used to translate into status differences, as wealthier farmers used their surplus to throw big initiation feasts and in the process redistribute their surplus food around the community (Freeman 2002a, 2002b), today's wealth differences translate directly into differences of consumption. Wealthy apple farmers have built new, modern-style houses, wear nice clothes, own smart bags and cassette players, and in some cases even have televisions and DVD players. Their poorer neighbors continue to live in traditional bamboo houses, wear old clothes, and struggle even to send their children to school.

An interesting finding from the existing happiness research is that happiness and well-being are inversely correlated with inequality. High levels of inequality have been shown to lead to poor health, social conflict, and violence, particularly in those at the bottom of the hierarchy (Wilkinson 1996, 2005), all of which lead away

from happiness and well-being. It has also been demonstrated that *relative* wealth is much more important than absolute wealth (above a certain level of poverty) in leading toward happiness (Layard 2005: 43–48). It is a universal feature of human psychology for people to compare themselves to their reference group—if everyone is doing about the same, or they are doing better than others, people tend to feel happy. So an increase in inequality such as we have seen in Masho will have led to an increase in happiness for the few people that have made a lot of money and changed their consumption patterns, and a rather larger decrease in happiness for the many people that have been less successful in the apple business or have failed to enter it at all. This polarization of happiness between the successful and the less successful is a well-known facet of market societies (Lane 2000).

These changes in Masho have led to a further weakening of the social fabric and an increase in resentment and jealousy. In fact, I only learned the Gamo word for jealousy during a visit in 2010. In my two year's intensive fieldwork and all the subsequent trips that I had made I had never come across a situation when the word was used. But in 2010 it came up in a conversation with Wendu and his twenty-year-old daughter, Muna. We were discussing some problems Wendu was having with the Pentecostal Church in Masho. Wendu was in fact one of the longest standing members of the church and had been one of the earliest converts. He had done much to bring in other believers and had been a preacher and a member of the church committee for several years. So I was surprised to learn that the current church committee was accusing him of being involved in inappropriate, un-Christian activities. I asked Wendu what this was all about and he struggled to explain. None of the accusations made any sense. Then Muna, who was also active in the church, leaned forward and said:

It's because they're jealous. Wendu has done well with apples and they don't like it. They cause him all these problems and make all these accusations, but really they are just jealous that we are doing well. We have done well through working hard, not by doing anything bad, so we know we are in the right. So we will continue to work hard and pray to God and just ignore all these accusations.

Wendu concurred that this was the case. "It's been a headache since the apples came," he told me, "there has been so much fighting and arguing." As well as the arguments with the church, he is always being asked for help by poorer neighbors, and he feels uncomfortable in these situations. He told me about Lembo, just one of the many people that keeps coming to his house to ask for food, money, or work. According to Wendu, Lembo sold all his land some years ago and quickly "ate" the money. He now goes around begging for help and often turns up at Wendu's door. Faced with a direct request, Wendu finds it hard to say no, but he also believes that their different fortunes are due to their own personal decisions and that it is not his responsibility to look after Lembo. Even though Wendu has been one of the "winners" of the apple revolution and now sits toward the higher echelons of Masho society, he has also found that the changes have both decreased as well as increased his happiness.

So, to sum up so far, there seems to be quite a case for thinking that most people's happiness has decreased since the apple boom and increasing involvement in



market-based economic activity. The culturally valued state of smooth and peaceful social relations has diminished and the techniques of happiness that previously facilitated warm sociality and “present moment consciousness” have receded into the background. If these are the things that make Gamo people happy, then it would seem safe to say that they are less happy now than they were ten years ago. But . . .

But there is a caveat. Alongside these changes that I do believe have led to a decrease in happiness, there has been another change that I believe has led to an increase in happiness. This is not the increased consumption of goods, which I don’t believe has led to any sustained increase in happiness, but a change of religion and, in particular, the engagement in a new form of religious ritual. Alongside the change in production and market activity, there has also been a major religious shift in the same ten years, during which time by far the majority of the people of Masho have converted to Pentecostal Christianity (Freeman 2012a, 2013b). I have suggested elsewhere that there are some quite Weberian links between the move toward market capitalism and the move toward Pentecostalism (Freeman 2012b), but that is not my concern here. Instead, I want to focus on the change in religious and ritual life that people are experiencing and to consider, perhaps, how it affects their happiness.

### Religion, ritual, and happiness

For most people in Masho, direct personal engagement with Pentecostal Christianity is very new, something that has only started in the past 2–7 years. Before that the vast majority of the community participated in traditional rituals centered on animal sacrifices and an elaborate series of initiations (see Freeman 2002). These rituals and associated practices structured social and political life and appeased the spirits so that they did not cause illness or misfortune. I have not discussed these traditional beliefs and practices in the foregoing sections because I do not think that they function as cultural techniques of happiness. Like many traditional rituals, they focus on formalized speech patterns and conventions and function to insert persons in the public order and to legitimize the redistribution of surplus wealth. As many classic anthropological analyses of ritual have argued, this formalism renders the intentions or experiences of the participants largely irrelevant (see Bloch 1974; Tambiah 1979; Rappaport 1999). The purpose of these rituals is not to do something to the inner emotional states of individuals; it is to do something to the social order. Their focus is not on the happiness of people but on the happiness of the spirits.

Pentecostalism, however, is a completely different thing. One of its very main objectives is the reconfiguration of the self of the believer. While it is probably true that all of the major world religions seek to effect structured transitions in the inner world of the subject (Shulman and Stroumsa 2002), Pentecostalism puts a particular emphasis on this and is extraordinarily effective in its methods and outcomes. Scholars of Pentecostalism have talked about its ability to bring about a “revision of consciousness” (Martin 1990: 287), a “remaking of the individual” (Maxwell 1998: 352), a “reorientation of persons” (Barbalet 2008: 75). In the context of Gamo, and

indeed more generally, the key subjective transformation is to turn the person into a “believer.” What this means, though, deserves a little unpacking.

Joel Robbins has pointed out that the verb “to believe” can have two different meanings—“to believe in” and “to believe that” (Robbins 2007). “To believe in God,” for example, means to trust God and to commit yourself to Him. It is an act, more than a statement, and it signifies a relationship between the believer and God. “To believe that God exists,” however, is something very different. It is a propositional statement and it implies a state of uncertainty about the proposition. “To believe,” in this second sense, is in contrast to “to know.” “Believing” in Gamo is very much *believing in*. It is not about believing that something (e.g., the Bible) is true, or believing that something (e.g., God) exists. It is more about trusting and believing in a God that can and will help you, and is only waiting for you to enter into relationship with Him in order to start bestowing His magnificent power and goodwill on to you.

For people in Gamo this is a radically new concept. When I asked if they believed in the spirits, people laughed at the absurdity of the question. For them it is clear both that (a) the spirits exist—there is no question about that—and (b) you can’t “believe in” them because they do not have anything good to give you, they do not relate to people in that way, they do not care about people and are not able to protect them. *Believing in* God or Jesus, for Gamo Pentecostals, is about opening yourself to a new kind of relationship with a new kind of benevolent power. As such, it is a radically transformative process and leads a person to begin to experience him or herself in a profoundly new way, as someone that is both loved and empowered.

The process by which this transformation of the self takes place is long and complex, and can only be briefly touched upon in this paper. The main techniques used are Christian study and experiential ritual. The church’s head office in Addis Abeba produces study materials that are distributed to all the local churches. The book currently used has ten chapters on topics ranging from “revelation” to “man and sin” to “salvation” and “Holy Spirit.” All those visiting the church are soon invited to participate in a series of small group classes with the preacher or some of the other church elders that slowly works through the book. The initial series of classes can last over a year and people then often continue in other classes or group learning activities. Slowly, gradually, people learn a new way to view themselves and the world, a new narrative, and a new set of values.

The second technique, and the one on which I will focus a bit more here, is experiential ritual in the Pentecostal church service. In contrast to traditional rituals that focus on the social order, Pentecostal ritual focuses almost exclusively on the inner emotional world of the participant. For this reason it has proved difficult to study with classical anthropological theories of ritual and most scholars have tended to lean to a more phenomenological approach, focusing on bodily experience and meaning-making (see, for example, Coleman and Collins 2000; Lindhardt 2011; Luhrmann 2004, 2012; Steven 2002). As Martin Lindhardt has commented, this approach sees Pentecostal ritual as “an arena of practice through which new dispositions and new senses of self, agency, community and mission are cultivated” (Lindhardt 2011: 8).

Going to a Pentecostal church service in Ethiopia is like going on an emotional rollercoaster. There is no way to sit at the back, remain a neutral observer, and not get



swept up in the collective emotional journey. At least I couldn't find a way. Church services generally last around three hours and have a fairly standard emotional shape. After some warm-up with quiet reflection and singing, participants are led to feel first guilt and suffering. The preacher will harangue them, bemoaning the sinfulness of the community, the things that they have done wrong, how they haven't helped others enough, haven't been doing God's word, how there are problems in the community, and so on. During this time it is common to see people with tears in their eyes, looking down at the floor. I would find myself with a heavy heart and somehow absorbing the feelings of sadness and remorse that emanated all around me.

Then the tone would shift, and through stories of God's forgiveness and awe-inspiring good deeds, arousing singing and the use of call-and-response that pulled you into praising God, the mood shifted to awe and gratitude.

"Who put us here in this world?"

"God did."

"Who?"

"God!"

"Why did he do it? Because he loves us! Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!"

"And he cares for us! Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!"

"Turn to your neighbor, look into their eyes, and tell them that God cares for them!"

In this way, at high volume, and interdispersed with vibrant singing, people's emotions are manipulated from state to state. By the end many people are standing up, arms spread upward, with huge smiles on their faces. The energy causes others to run around the church and occasionally someone will speak in tongues. Most times that I have attended these services, I have found myself swept up in this emotional frenzy and by the time I come out I am feeling somewhat exhausted, and full of gratitude and love and warm feelings toward everyone. Facial expressions and movements suggest that many other people are feeling the same way.

Anthropologists have long noticed that rituals very often make people feel good—they are a prime example of a cultural technique of happiness. From Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence" through Victor Turner's "communitas" to many more recent studies, we have many ethnographic descriptions of rituals generating feelings of joy, ecstasy, and exuberance during the ritual itself and then leaving people with a sense of peace and calm afterward (see Csordas 2002, 1994; Eliade 1964; Goodman 1988; Katz 1982). There is even a small body of literature seeking to find the causal physiological mechanisms for this generation of positive emotion. Earlier studies looked at the release of endorphins during various ritual activities (e.g., Prince 1982), while more recent work has suggested that various bodily techniques, such as singing together or moving together in synchrony can lead to the experience of positive emotions (Csordas 1997, 1990; McNeill 1995; Williams 1981; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). Radcliffe-Brown talked about the experience of the dancer losing himself in the dance—a notion very similar to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" (1991)—and recent work by psychologist Jonathan Haidt has suggested that experiences of transcending the



self, feeling part of something that is greater than the self, can generate very positive emotions of awe and elevation (Haidt 2000, 2003, 2008).

The point that I want to make here is that Pentecostal church services in Masho are phenomenally effective techniques of happiness, in more than one way. First, they regularly generate bursts of positive emotions in their participants, a weekly “fix” of love and gratitude, if you like. In fact, many people attend church services 4–5 times per week, so for these devout followers the emotional fix is even more frequent. The regular experience of these heart-overwhelming bursts of positive emotion considerably changes people’s lived experience of themselves and the world. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, working in a very different context, has suggested that experiences of positive emotion such as gratitude can lead to a broadening of people’s attention, more creative thinking, and the cultivation of more social connections, thus leading people to shape their lives so that they experience more well-being (Fredrickson 2001). I have not yet been able to investigate this in Masho, but it is an interesting avenue to explore.

Second, Pentecostals change their subjectivity by deepening their interiority as they develop the process of looking inside. This “opening of inner space” seems crucial to the process of self-transformation (Handelman 2002). All prayer meetings start with a few minutes of silent, personal prayer where people articulate their hopes and desires and also scrutinize themselves and their activities for sins and wrong-doing. This process of introspection is developed through other programs, confessions, and prayer meetings, and is very different to traditional notions that what is inside is best kept there, hidden and out of sight. Through the emotional journey that they then traverse during the church service—through shame, guilt, and sadness to joy, love, and gratitude—Pentecostals are able to understand and experience their emotional lives in new ways that has lasting effects beyond the ritual itself.

Thus the various practices of Pentecostal Christianity, particularly its rituals, act as new cultural techniques of happiness. They provide believers with a new sense of self that is loved and empowered, a new set of values, new forms of community and togetherness, and a new emotional landscape. While I would not go so far as to suggest that all major religions are “ways to happiness,” as theologian Don Cupitt has recently claimed (Cupitt 2005), I am sympathetic to the arguments of Paul Heelas and his associates that the focus on “spirituality” and “inner experience” that has emerged in many contemporary religions and spiritual movements does indeed lead participants toward increased happiness and well-being in an increasingly complex world (Heelas 2008; Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

## Conclusion

It is clear that the changes in Masho over the last ten years have led to both decreases and increases in peoples’ happiness. For most people the day-to-day lived experience of happiness in peaceful sociality and nonreflexive present-time consciousness has decreased with the move toward a more market-based socio-economic reality. The increase in inequality and the broadening of the differences in peoples’ consumption habits has decreased the happiness of most people, rich and



poor alike. And yet, over the same period, as people have converted to Pentecostal Christianity, they have come to access a new form of happiness, one built on a transformation of their sense of self and a deepening and reconfiguring of their emotional lives.

Are the people of Masho happier now or before? It's hard to say. But what is quite clear is that they are happy in a different way. The integration of Masho into the market economy through apple production has transformed happiness from being imbued in the social fabric of the community to being more about cultivating deep interior spaces. While happiness was once grounded in the experience of peaceful sociality it is now to be found in the experience of a more empowered and liberated self in relationship with God/Jesus. As exchange has become increasingly commoditized, so happiness appears to have become increasingly privatized.

There are two key theoretical points that emerge from this ethnography, one more particularizing and one more universalizing. The first point is that the experience of happiness is fundamentally linked to the cultural sense of self. When the self is transformed, new avenues of happiness (and unhappiness) become manifest as more and different interior spaces are opened up. This point should be taken more seriously by happiness researchers from other disciplines who routinely assume a modern, rational, straightforward self. The ethnographic approach used in this essay makes it clear that such assumptions are not warranted when studying "non-Western" peoples. Cultural senses of self are varied and shifting and need to be taken into account particularly when doing comparative studies of happiness across different countries or populations. It is also extremely likely that the modern rational self is also somewhat of a fiction among "Western" subjects, among whom different interior spaces have developed in response to widely differing childhood experiences. A more nuanced, experience-based account of happiness among these subjects would also unveil richer shades of meaning and deeper understandings of the many and diverse ways that happiness is and can be experienced.

The second point is more universalizing. Despite the differences in the experiences of happiness in the two different cultural-historical contexts in Masho, there is nonetheless one major feature that is shared in both of the different routes to happiness—both of them involve the experience of transcending the self. In the earlier historical period the self is transcended by being subsumed in the social fabric. Cultural techniques of happiness encourage this by constantly directing (mental/psychological) attention away from the self and toward the other, whether by playing, by drinking coffee together, or by generally spending time constantly with other people. In the later historical period the transformed self is transcended in its new relation with the all-encompassing God/Jesus. New cultural techniques of happiness encourage this, particularly in the highly emotional Pentecostal church services and in new narratives of meaning. While in the first context transcending the self is part of everyday life and is very much a way of being, in the second context it is more punctuated, taking place in particular contexts such as church ritual, and is much more intense. Nonetheless the structural similarities are there. This suggests that the experience of transcending the self may possibly be a universal feature of the human experience of happiness.

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## Les techniques du bonheur: Trouver et perdre une vie bonne dans une communauté éthiopienne rurale

Résumé : Cet article tente de dissocier certains facteurs et certaines pratiques qui mènent au bonheur dans un contexte particulier. L'article s'intéresse au bonheur tel qu'il est ressenti dans la communauté de Masho, dans les plateaux Gamo du Sud-Ouest de l'Éthiopie, à deux périodes différentes. Nous considérons d'abord le concept traditionnel Gamo de bonheur et la façon dont il était éprouvé au milieu des années 1990, à savoir principalement comme une forme de socialité paisible et de conscience non-réflexive du moment présent. L'article retrace ensuite le mouvement entamé il y a une vingtaine d'années centré sur la réalité socio-économique associée à l'économie de marché. Ce mouvement fut concomitant avec un abandon relatif de la socialité paisible antérieure et une augmentation des inégalités, aboutissant au déclin du bonheur ressenti par les membres de la communauté. Cependant, l'article considère ensuite comment la conversation au christianisme pentecôtiste a créé de nouvelles voies vers le bonheur en générant des transformations radicales des sujets et en reconfigurant profondément les vies intérieures de ces derniers. En montrant comment l'expérience du bonheur s'est déplacée, d'une position inscrite dans le tissu social à un lieu profondément intérieure, cet article suggère que le



bonheur est configuré différemment selon les contextes culturels et sociaux et que les différentes expériences du bonheur sont fondamentalement liées à l'expérience de la subjectivité.

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