

[Dena Freeman](#)

## Who are the D'ache? And who are the Gamo? Confusions of ethnicity in Ethiopia's southern Highlands

**Book section Article  
(Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:** Originally published in: Uhlig, Siegbert, (ed.) *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006

© 2006 [Otto Harrassowitz](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67835/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: September 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Who are the Gamo? And who are the D'ache?:  
Confusions of Ethnicity in Ethiopia's Southern Highlands**

In Uhling, Siebert (Ed). 2006. *Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag

*Dena Freeman*

The Gamo Highlands of southwest Ethiopia are home to a large number of related communities. Most well known are those in the northern parts of the highlands, such as Dorze, Doko and Ochollo, who are often taken as exemplars of a more general 'Gamo' culture and language. However, towards the south of the highlands both the culture and the language are very different. In communities such as Balta, Sorba and Zargulla, the majority of people speak a language that is not intelligible by northern 'Gamo' speakers and follow a cultural tradition that is significantly different from the northern *halak'a* initiations. Confusingly though, they refer to themselves and their language as Gamo. And they maintain that the northerners are not Gamo, but D'ache. This paper sets out new information about these southern communities based on fieldwork in Balta and the surrounding area. It presents new ethnography regarding the southern 'Gamo' culture and compares it to cultural forms in the northern areas. The paper then also attempts to explain the evolution of Gamo and D'ache cultures and identities from a historical perspective. In doing so it questions just who is 'Gamo' and considers quite what this term means.

**Overview**

There are well over 40 communities, or *deres*, in the Gamo Highlands. Some of these are shown in figure 1. Roughly speaking, all those *deres* south of Bonke are 'Gamo' *deres*, while all those further north are 'D'ache' *deres*.

In the Gamo *deres* there are people who belong to Gamo clans and people who belong to D'ache clans. In most cases there are far more people from Gamo clans than D'ache clans, although in a few cases the numbers are approximately equal. The Gamo and D'ache clans speak different languages. The language spoken by Gamo clans is referred to as 'Gamo-tso' in both languages. The language spoken by D'ache clans is referred to as 'D'ache-tso' in the language spoken by the D'ache clans, and 'Zegets-tso' in the language spoken by the Gamo clans. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to it simply as 'D'ache-tso' throughout this paper. Most people in Gamo *deres* speak both languages, although there are some people from D'ache clans who only speak a rudimentary Gamo-tso. As well as these linguistic differences there are quite significant cultural differences between the two groupings of clans. D'ache clans are considered to rank higher than Gamo clans, and people say that they came to the area from the north..

In the D'ache *deres* there is no separation of D'ache or Gamo clans. People speak only one language and are generally unaware that any other language is spoken in the highlands. Within any one D'ache *dere* everyone will follow more or less the same cultural and ritual forms. They do not, however, refer to themselves or their language as D'ache. They consider their language to be Gamo, and would refer to themselves as either Gamo or according to their *dere*, as Dorze or Doko etc. All this confusion leads us to question just who are 'The Gamo'?

The northern culture in the so-called D'ache *deres* is reasonably well documented. The initiation of *halak'as* and the sacrifices of *ek'k'as* have been described by various anthropologists including Marc Abeles, Jacques Bureau, Dan Sperber, Judith Olmstead and myself. However the southern culture in the so-called Gamo *deres* has yet to be written about. This then is the focus of

this paper. Brief references to the northern culture will be made for comparative purposes, but for a more detailed account see Freeman 2002.

### ***Cultural life in the Southern Gamo Deres***

At first sight many of the cultural forms in the southern Gamo *deres* appear to be broadly similar to those in the northern *deres*. There is a sacrificial system whereby certain people offer sacrifices on behalf of other people, and there is an initiatory system in which people can get initiated by throwing large feasts and making monetary payments to the community. However, the form and functioning of both these systems is considerably different to those in the northern *deres*.

### **Sacrifices**

The main differences between the southern version of the sacrificial system and the northern version are:

- In the southern version there is a neat stacking of the different levels of hierarchy manifested by different sacrificers, while in the northern version the different levels of hierarchy do not stack up.
- In the southern *deres* mid-level sacrificers are referred to as *sagga* (in the highlands) or *demutsa* (in the lowlands). The equivalent sacrificers in the northern *deres* are referred to simply as *ek'k'as* (literally: sacrificers). The term *sagga* is unknown, while the term *demutsa* refers to another kind of sacrificer who is outside of the main hierarchical organisation.
- In the southern *deres* there is a common myth about the first *kawo* being born when the sun impregnated a girl at a lake in the *dere* of Kole. Variants of this myth are found in the Gofa area, but no such myth is told in the northern *deres*.
- In the southern *deres* there are special relations between groups of *deres* based on the notion of the relatedness of their senior sacrificers, or *kawos*. Such ideas are not found in the northern *deres*.

In the northern *deres* people sacrifice for other people on the basis of seniority. The *kawo* sacrifices for the whole *dere*, *ek'k'as* sacrifice for their district or sub-district, clan heads sacrifice for their clan, household heads sacrifice for their households, and so on. In most *deres* however, these different hierarchical units do not stack up into a neat pyramid as might be expected. For example, in Doko there are some sacrifices made just before the agricultural season, but they do not follow an orderly pattern down the hierarchy of sacrificers. The *kawo* does not make any sacrifices at this time, but the *ek'k'as* of two particular districts make a special sacrifice (called *wok'o*) in which they kill a sheep and then bury the stomach fat in the land and sow the first seeds. Straight after that everyone in their district can begin sowing. No other sacrifices or ritual ordering is necessary.

In the southern *deres* the sacrificial system is *ordered* much more neatly, so that each level of hierarchy stacks above the next. So before the main agricultural season in Balta, for example, the *kawo* must first perform a special sacrifice (called *domo*) in which he kills an ox and then makes extra offerings of powdered barley. After this, the *sagga* of each district must carry out a similar ritual (generally substituting a sheep for an ox) and after this each household head must again carry out a similar ritual. Only then can people begin to sow the land. At harvest time a similar pattern is followed with first the *kawo* making offerings of barley porridge in a ritual known as *daitso*, and then the *saggas*, and then each household head. And only after that can everybody harvest their grain.

So the organisation of the sacrificial system is quite significantly different in the northern and southern *deres*. In many respects the southern system, in which the units of hierarchy are neatly stacked, is more similar to the sacrificial system found in Maale and other communities in the Gofa area (eg see Donham 1985, 1990) than it is to the unstacked system found in the northern *deres* of the Gamo Highlands.

The names of the sacrificers are quite interestingly different too. In the northern *deres*, most other sacrificers in the mainstream organisational hierarchy are simply referred to as *ek'k'as*, which quite literally means sacrificers. Then there are other sacrificers who have special roles who are outside the mainstream hierarchy. These include special 'mountain *ek'k'as*' who make sacrifices on local mountaintops, '*maakas*' who have a variety of roles generally to do with purification, and '*demutsas*' who are rather like judges and have important roles in land disputes. They can make a special plaited bamboo pole called *gik'a*. If they put a *gik'a* on a piece of land, people will not farm that land in fear of incurring serious misfortune from the supernatural powers of the *demutsa*.

In the southern *deres*, *sagga* and *demutsa* are interchangeable terms for the district sacrificers in the main organisational hierarchy (in the highland *deres* and lowland *deres* respectively). They carry out a similar role to the *ek'k'as* in the northern *deres*. But they also have the power to solve disputes and make plaited bamboos to protect land. In this area the plaited bamboos are called *pash*, not *gik'a*.

One of the most interesting differences between the sacrificial system in the northern and southern *deres*, however, is regarding their senior sacrificers, who in both areas are known as *kawos*. Throughout the southern Gamo *deres* there is a very common myth regarding the origin of the *kawo*. Variants of this myth were found in every Gamo *dere* that I visited. At its core it tells how the first *kawo* was born after the sun impregnated a girl out collecting water at a lake in the *dere* of Kole. Exactly what happened next differs in different versions found in different *deres*, as I will discuss below, but the core part is common throughout this whole area. Versions of this same myth are also found in some communities in the Gofa area. For example the myth of the origin of the *kati* (similar to *kawo*) in Oyda goes as follows:

“A Gamo woman was impregnated by the sun and fled to Oyda, where she gave birth to twin sons. Because she had brought salt with her from Gamo, the Oyda people were very impressed with her cooking and they decided to make one of her son's *kati* in place of the currently ruling Shara clan” (Dereje 1997: 152).

In the southern Gamo *deres* variants of this myth are used to explain and justify relations between different *deres*. For example, people in the *deres* of Ch'oye and Hanik'a told the myth like this:

“One day the sun rose while a girl was collecting water at a lake in Kole. The sun's ray rode on the water and the girl became pregnant. Eventually she gave birth to one son. This son married a woman, and she gave birth to four sons who became the *kawos* of four *deres*. In order of seniority these were Dada Arshe who went to Bonke, Dawe Porsha who went to Balta, Boricha who went to Hanik'a, and Allemalle who went to Ch'oye.”

Until fairly recently these four *deres* had an alliance together were 'good in sacrifice and good in war'. They fought jointly in local wars and every few years they would go together to Kole, their place of creation, to make sacrifices.

Another version of the myth explains the grouping of *deres* at the very south of the highlands. In Zargulla the myth is told in this way:

“One day the sun rose while a girl was collecting water at a lake in Kole. She was peeing in the direction of the sun’s ray and she fell pregnant. She then gave birth to seven sons. These sons played a game known as *ange* that involved throwing a spear through a rolling bamboo hoop. When they succeeded in getting the spear through the hoop could claim whichever *dere* they wanted. The first one to succeed said ‘the earth and the sky are mine’ and he chose Zargulla. The next said ‘I’ll cross the lake’ and he went to Koyra. The third said ‘I am the lord of thunder and lightning’ and he went to Ganta. The fourth said ‘my father’s land is Kole’ and he went to Kole. The fifth said ‘I’m coming from the behind but I’ll go ahead’ and he went to Zayse. The sixth said ‘the right is mine’ and he went to Ch’oye. And the seventh said ‘the left *dere* is mine’ and he went to Balta

These seven *deres* are said to have formed some kind of grouping and used to go to Kole every year to perform sacrifices together. And even now when a new *kawo* is installed in Zargulla he must go to Kole to make sacrifices, parading through the seven ‘brother *deres*’ on the way. Such groupings of *deres* according to the relatedness of their *kawos* is not found in the northern part of the Gamo Highlands and this myth, in any form, is not known at all in the northern area.

### Initiations

The main differences between the southern versions of the initiatory system and the northern version are:

- In the southern *deres* there are initiates like those in the north who ‘herd’ the *dere* and cause it to be fertile and who are generally known as *maagas*, but there are also other ‘fundraising’ initiates who have no ritual role in the *dere*.
- The main role of the ritual *maaga* is to act as intermediary between the *dere* and the sacrificer.
- In some southern *deres* the role of ritual *maaga* is actually an inherited role, not an initiatory role.
- In the southern *deres* ‘fundraising initiates’ from Gamo clans are called *maaga* and they wear *ts’ats’a* grass on their heads during their initiation, while initiates from D’ache clans are called *hudhugha* and wear an ostrich feather. In northern *deres* initiates are called *halak’a* or *hudhugha*, whatever their clan, and they always wear an ostrich feather during initiation.
- In the southern *deres* initiates get an ‘honour name’ or *saaro*, by which they are then called most of the time. Getting initiated is often referred to as ‘buying a name’. This does not happen in the northern *deres*.

In the southern *deres* the initiations are very different to those in the northern *deres*. Most obviously, members of D’ache and Gamo clans are initiated differently, but also the purpose of the initiations and the role of the initiates are significantly different. I will describe the initiations in Balta and add some brief comparative notes from Zargulla and Ch’oye. For an account of initiations in northern *deres* see Freeman 2002 for Doko, Sperber 1973 and Halperin & Olmstead 1976 for Dorze, and Abeles 1983 for Ochollo.

In Balta there are a number of different types of initiations. The most important are known as *halak'a maagas* or *baira maagas* (senior *maagas*). There are two *halak'a maagas* at any time and they have important ritual roles for the good of the *dere*. Their initiations are broadly similar to those in the northern *deres*, involving giving huge feasts and parading in the market place to mark the new status.

Alongside these initiates, however, are a large number of other initiates who do not have any particular ritual role for the good of the *dere*. These other initiates do not 'herd' the *dere*, but are often known as '*dere asha*' or '*dere saviours*' because of the funds they raise for the *dere* during their initiation. This, it seems, is their sole purpose. Most men will become initiated to one of these non-ritual positions during their lifetime. Men from Gamo clans become *maaga*, while men from D'ache clans become *hudhugha*. When the sacrificer chooses them to become initiated they are given a special 'name of honour' or *saaro*. Typical *saaro* include Kalsa (Satisfied), Yosha (Handsome) and Zuma (Mountain). Once a man has received such a name it is generally used instead of his real name in day-to-day life. The initiation process is often referred to as 'buying a name'. To complete his initiation the man must then pay the *dere*. In the past the price was 5 cows to become *hudhugha* and 4 to become *maaga*. In the late 1990s these had been set as cash equivalents of 180 or 120 birr respectively. After he has done this he parades around the market wearing a leopardskin and holding a ceremonial staff. The sacrificer then puts an ostrich feather on his head if he is to become a *hudhugha*, or some *ts'ats'a* grass if he is to become a *maaga*. Then the day is spent celebrating.

The funds raised from these initiations are then used for all sorts of *dere* matters, such as to buy food for meetings at the sacrificer's house, or to pay for offerings of grain or sheep that need to be taken to the Zargulla rain *kawo*. Recently they have also been used to pay off bribes to the local government administration. Similar 'fundraising initiates' are found in Ch'oye. In this *dere* everyone is from Gamo clans except the *kawo*, and the titles *maaga*, *hudhugha* and *dana* can be taken in a non-ritual fashion in order to buy a name and raise funds.

The role of *halak'a maagas* is interesting too. Their main job is to act as intermediary between the *dere* and the rain *kawo* in Zargulla, taking offerings of sheep and grain whenever requested. In Ch'oye there are also two ritual *maagas*, known as the 'left *maaga*' and the 'right *maaga*'. Ch'oye does not take offerings to the rain *kawo* in Zargulla, but the role of these *maagas* is similarly to act as intermediaries between the *dere* and the local sacrificer. And in Zargulla itself there are twelve *maagas*, each one representing a district of the *dere* and each one acting as intermediary between that district and the rain *kawo*.

However, to further confuse the picture, in both Ch'oye and Zargulla, *maagas* are not initiated but are hereditary positions, passed down from father to son. This is in sharp distinction to the situation in Balta, where they are initiated in a series of ceremonies quite similar to those found in the northern *deres*. It is perhaps relevant that about half the population of Balta belong to D'ache clans, whereas Zargulla and Ch'oye are almost entirely Gamo. This might suggest that *maagas* were originally an hereditary role in Gamo clans, that in some areas shifted to an initiatory role under the influence of the *hudhugha* initiations of D'ache clans.

The picture is thus rather complicated, with very significant linguistic and cultural difference between the northern and southern highlands and between Gamo and D'ache clans in the south. How, then, are we to explain this complexity?

### ***The internal history of the Gamo Highlands***

The most likely explanation for this cultural diversity is to be found in the history of the area, and particularly in the movement and conquest of peoples. I propose that prior to the sixteenth century most people in the Gamo Highlands belonged to Gamo clans, followed a cultural form fairly similar to that found in Zargulla or Ch'oye today (with hereditary *kawos* and *maagas* and a neatly stacked sacrificial system) and probably spoke what is now the southern Gamo language. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, during and after the Oromo migrations,

it is likely that there was a great influx of people into the northern parts of highlands. Many Oromo and Wolaita people probably moved up into the mountains to find space away from the chaos that was taking place in the lowlands. Interestingly, Bahrey, writing from the northern Gamo Highlands in 1593, refers to a group of Oromo called 'Dach', possibly showing us the origin of the word D'ache.

It seems likely that most settled in the northern areas, outnumbering the local people and mixing with them to form the present population. I have argued elsewhere (Freeman 1999) that it was from this creative mixing of Oromo, Wolaita and Gamo cultures that what is now the northern Gamo cultural form of *halak'as* and *ek'k'as* evolved, drawing from the Gada initiations of the Oromo and mapping this onto the *maaga* office in the local area. In the north the influx of people seems to have been so great that the original cultural forms were entirely subsumed into the creative mix, with only a few elements carrying on relatively unchanged, such as the *demutsa* sacrificers, now outside the main ritual organisation.

A little later, as the population of the northern area grew, it seems likely that people moved further south into the highlands and conquered the local people living there and attempted to turn them into slaves. The D'ache clans in the southern *deres* would seem to be the descendents of these conquerors, while the Gamo clans are the descendents of the conquered. In the present day northern language, D'ache, while not a very common word, has the connotation of acting lordly. And to be Gamo means to be conquered.

Because the number of D'ache clans moving south was relatively small, the two groups did not mix as they did in the north, but remained as two separate entities. And whilst the cultural forms influenced each other, they appear to have remained generally separate, thus resulting in the Gamo and D'ache versions of the initiations (or non-initiations) found today in the south.

And likewise it seems that people from the Gamo Highlands went as far as the Gofa Highlands to the west looking for new territory. Not only does the Oyda myth quoted above suggest that their ruling clans came from the Gamo Highlands, but their division of clans into Gamitse and Arae seems to further support the idea (Dereje 1997:23). Several other communities in the Gofa area have traditions that their ruling clans came from the east, the direction of the Gamo Highlands (Donham 1985:22, Gebre 1995:14).

### **Conclusion**

The great diversity found in the Gamo Highlands, particularly between the northern and the southern highlands, and the Gamo and the D'ache clans within the southern highlands can only be understood with reference to the vast historical movements of people during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The pattern of these movements has led to the distinction between the people and culture of the northern and southern Gamo Highlands, and the rather odd situation that both groups speak different languages which they both call Gamo-tso. Who, then, are 'the Gamo' is a mute point. And considering that to 'be Gamo' means to 'be conquered' it is not that surprising that the term does not easily describe one neatly bounded ethnic group.

### **References**

Abeles, M. 1983. *Le Lieu du Politique*. Paris: Societe d'Ethnographie.

Bahrey, 1593. 'History of the Galla,' in Beckingham, C. and Huntingford, G. ed. 1954. *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646*. London.

Dereje, F. 1997. 'The Oyda of South Western Ethiopia: A Study of Socio-Economic Aspects of Village Inequality.' MA dissertation, University of Addis Abeba, Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

Donham, D. 1985. *Work and Power in Maale, Ethiopia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Donham, D. 1990. *History, Power, Ideology: Central Issues in Marxism and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freeman, D. 1999. 'Transforming Traditions: The Dynamics of Cultural Variation of the Gamo Highlands, Southwest Ethiopia.' PhD dissertation, London School of Economics, Department of Anthropology.

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

Gebre, Y. 1995. 'The Ari of Southwestern Ethiopia: An Exploratory Study of Production Practices.' Social Anthropology Dissertation Series no.2, Addis Abeba University.

Halperin, R. & Olmstead, J. 1976. 'To Catch a Feastgiver: Redistribution Among the Dorze of Ethiopia' in *Africa* 46:146-166.

Sperber, D. 1973. 'Paradoxes of Seniority Among the Dorze.' in Marcus, H. ed. *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies*. African Studies Center, Michigan State University.