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**Article**

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## The Socio-Economic Role and Status of Handicraftsmen among the Kambaata of Southern Ethiopia

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### Introduction

Throughout Ethiopia in general and southern Ethiopia in particular, specialised traditional handicraftsmen such as potters, tanners, smiths, weavers, woodworkers and the like live interspersed within the peasant population. These handicraftsmen undertake activities that require certain skills to add value to raw materials, mainly by manual labour, and for the most part by using simple hand tools. They have a very important role in satisfying the demands for products of consumption (e.g. clothing) and production (e.g. agricultural implements). Moreover, they have important ritual functions to play in important life events of the peasant population. However, their social status has been described as inferior and they are discriminated against and despised, being kept apart from the peasant population, who deny them access to key resources like land and livestock, mostly restricting them to their handicraft activities alone. As a result, they have an ambiguous dual position of an economically and ritually important role on the one hand, and a socially segregated and despised status on the other.

In this study an attempt is made to describe and explain the socio-economic role and status of marginalized handicraft minorities among the Kambaata of southern Ethiopia. Prior to presenting the main Kambaata case material, a brief review of literature and concepts concerning the handicraftsmen in southern Ethiopia is given in section one. Then, a description and explanation of the submerged Kambaata handicraftsmen is presented in section two, utilising particular cases of the *Fuga* (potters/tanners) and *Tumaano* (smiths).

Kambaata is one of the more densely populated areas of Ethiopia. Mixed cultivation with *enset* (*ensete ventricosum*) as a staple food is the main

source of livelihood of the inhabitants. The present study was conducted in *Jaba and Doddoobba* Peasant Association (PA), located around 255 kms to the Southwest of Addis Ababa along the *Alem-Gena-Wolayta-Sodo* main road. This PA is located in *Angaacha Wereda*, a district within *Kambaata, Alaaba* and *T'ambaaro* Zone of the Southern Ethiopia Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SENNPRS). In addition, comparative investigation of the Kambaata craftsmen in *Metekel* resettlement site is also conducted while assessing social change in a new setting. *Metekel* resettlement site is located in Northwest Ethiopia about 560 kms of Addis Ababa. The Kambaata resettlers in *Metekel* are those who joined the *Derg* government's emergency resettlement scheme of the 1980s (see WOLDE-SELASSIE, 1998, 2000), mainly due to over-population.

## 1. Handicraftsmen in Southern Ethiopia: An Overview

### 1.1 The Role and Status of Handicraftsmen

#### 1.1.1 The Role of Handicraftsmen

Handicraftsmen produce a wide range of goods and implements for production, household consumption and defence. Their products are indispensable for the rural agrarian economy. Different artisans provide the varying but equally important production goods and implements of their craft activities necessary for day-to-day use by the farming population. For instance, blacksmiths produce household implements (e.g. knives of different sizes and types), field farm tools (e.g. ploughshares and hooks, hoe blades, tips for digging sticks, sickles, weed-clearing knives, etc.), and defence weapons (e.g. spear-heads, swords, fighting knives, spear-tips and hoes, daggers, etc.). Potters produce earthenware which is very important in the daily service of the households (e.g. pots of different sizes and types, plates, bowls, cups, mugs, cooking stands, cooking pans, roof-caps, tips of smoking-pipes, etc.). Tanners produce a variety of important household products from skins and hides (e.g. sleeping skins for bedding, leather garments, saddles, sandals, leather straps, leather strapping for beds and chairs, skin or hide sacks, belts, whips, skin wrapped containers [*agelgil*], etc.). Wood workers produce indispensable household furniture and woodcarvings. Traditional weavers provide clothing for the local peoples.

Handicraftsmen have an important socio-cultural role as ritual performers and assistants and as entertainers during several important social occasions. They have special functions at funerals and mourning rites as profes-

sional mourners, drummers and ritual performers. They play key roles during important life cycle events in society as midwives at births, performers of circumcisions, initiators of girls into womanhood, and ritual performers for the dead and the living. They carry out cleansing rituals for warding off curses and evil spirits. They have crucial magico-religious roles as mediators with the supernatural. They are highly feared for their ritual power linked to the multiple spirits, often related to the earth and the sky. Besides, they act as traditional medical specialists, treating wounds, setting bones, performing 'surgical' operations, dispensing ritually prepared medicines and carrying out other related medical practices, both for human beings and for livestock. Accordingly, they used to perform special duties at the local chiefs' courts as guards and even executioners. They also serve as announcers of special local events, blowing big trumpets, as well as functioning as entertainers and musicians.

### 1.1.2 The Status of Handicraftsmen

Despite their important socio-economic role, handicraftsmen and their crafts are despised and regarded with prejudice by the peasant population. The degree of prejudice and segregation displayed by the cultivators against the artisans and their handicrafts varies within and across the different ethnic groups of the country. An artisan group strongly despised in one or several of the ethnic groups is less despised in others, or the other way round. It is also very difficult to differentiate clearly whether the prejudice is directed specifically against the people or their activities, or both.

As already indicated, the handicraftsmen are kept away and segregated from the rest of the society and restricted to endogamous marriage (among different clans but within the artisan groups). They are prevented from entering the houses and eating together with the cultivators and they are feared for their linkages with evil forces that empower them with the skills to master and control the craft activities. They are ostracised and considered to be unclean, contaminating and polluting the farmers who have contacts with them; crop fields they have crossed, granaries they have touched, houses they have entered and the like need complicated purification rituals. Even if they are allowed to come to the houses of farmers during special occasions or feasts, scavenging for left-over food, they stay either far outside or enter the house, bringing leaves with them to sit on in a far corner near the gate. Then, they are mostly served left-over meals on broken dishes and drink from broken vessels, leaves or even from bare palms of their

hands. They usually collect the left-over food and take it home together with the items they were served and the leaves on which they sat, and destroy them, throwing them away, or hide them in far-away places at a safe distance from the villages of the cultivators. Due to this sub-human position, they have internalised and accepted their inferior status as despised 'pariah' groups and express their best wishes wherever they meet the farmers, kneeling and bowing their heads down while usually looking the other way.

Many of these artisans lead a hand-to-mouth existence in temporary shelters in a flimsy compound, without proper clothing, and producing no surplus for further improvement. They are set aside at the edge of villages in shelters built either on common-property lands or on the lands of wealthy landowners but at a safe distance from the homestead. They are often considered to be resistant to a number of diseases and hardships, this being attributed to their habit of spending almost all their income on food items. Some artisans confirmed this habit of uneconomical expenditure on food due to the heavy and intensive labour of the handicraft activities they perform. Farmers further accuse them of the habit of eating everything without any selection and of food-avoidance restrictions. Worst of all, their habit of eating the meat of animals which are not ritually slaughtered is a frequently cited case by the farmers as a proof to justify the handicraftsmen's inferior, sub-human and polluting status.

Besides, the socially inferior status of handicraftsmen is explained by the members of the dominant groups as being divinely ordained and often cursed as a sub-human occupational position by the supernatural taking account of supporting justifications in the legends, myths, folktales, sayings, proverbs and other oral traditions of the different ethnic groups. Therefore, their status is taken as birth-ascribed, entailing a rigid segregation that the handicraftsmen cannot alter, and legitimate status change is absolutely impossible. However, on the other hand, the farmers' status will not be reduced to an inferior level equating with that of the handicraftsmen as a result of poverty or by engaging partly or fully in the handicraft activities performed by the artisans.

## **1.2 The Ambivalent Status of Handicraftsmen: Review and Conceptual Considerations**

Several Ethiopianist scholars, mostly social anthropologists, have tried to describe and explain the ambivalent dual status of Ethiopian handicraftsmen

which varies from one artisan group to the other within and across ethnic groups. Many of the researchers focused on their case studies of individual ethnic groups of craftsmen. These case studies include the *Tayib/Tabib* among the *Ambara* (HOBEN 1970); the *Fuga* among the *Gurage* (SHACK 1964); the *Fuga* among the *Kambaata* (BRAUKÄMPER 1983); the *Bauda* among the *Konso* (HALLPIKE 1968); the *Geymi* among the *Dizi* (HABERLAND 1984); and the smiths and tanners among the *Dime* (TODD 1977, 1978). On the other hand, some other researchers tried to describe and explain the artisans' socio-economic role and status in broader perspectives, crossing the ethnic boundaries in the realm of national, regional and local perspectives. These include handicraftsmen in 'greater Ethiopia' (LEVINE 1974); handicraftsmen in southern Ethiopia (KARSTEN 1972); handicraftsmen in the *Konso-Burji* cluster (AMBORN 1990); and handicraftsmen in southwestern Ethiopia (PANKHURST 1999). Besides, some of these scholars tried to compare the social status of the Ethiopian traditional handicraftsmen with the Indian 'caste' system, asserting a strong similarity (TODD 1977, 1978; LEVINE 1974; SHACK 1964). However, some others used the term 'caste' in designating the handicraftsmen's status but did not consider this as 'caste' in the sense of this term in the real 'caste' system (HABERLAND 1984). Some argued against the very idea of using the term 'caste' to refer to Ethiopian handicraftsmen (AMBORN 1990). However, almost all of them have equally considered the submerged minority status of handicraftsmen on the one hand and their ritually important role on the other, with differing magnitude in space and time, while attempting to explain the issue on the basis of the different conceptual considerations stated below.

Several scholars in their studies of the role and status and of the origins of the traditional handicraftsmen have considered and developed different conceptual approaches. Some of them tried to view the origins of artisans as being the result of the transformation of skill specialisation in different ecological niches and then its incorporation into the host communities through immigration for the demands of their products (LEVINE 1974, TODD 1978). Others consider the origins of artisans to be the outcome of internal social differentiation from within, based on division of work due to increasing agricultural intensification (AMBORN 1990). Apart from the two views, another category of scholars considers the origin of submerged artisans as deriving from remnants of former autochthonous peoples who have been submerged by dominant immigrants who moved into the areas they formerly occupied (HABERLAND 1984, SHACK 1964). Therefore, the per-

ceptions of different scholars on the origins, roles and status of marginalized handicraftsmen can be broadly categorised into three conceptual approaches: 'Internal Social Differentiation', 'Remnants', and 'Holistic-Mutualistic Specialisation'.

### 1.2.1 The Internal Social Differentiation Approach

The 'internal social differentiation' approach holds the view that as surplus resources grew with the increasing intensification of agriculture, a need for skilled specialist artisans' products created the conditions for the internal social differentiation of a mutually inter-dependent group of cultivators and artisans. Internal differentiation of cultivators and artisans based on 'division of work' allowed the cultivators to concentrate fully on their agricultural tasks. On the other hand, by producing the necessary implements, the specialised handicraftsmen removed the pressure and burden from the cultivators. Thus, where there were sufficient skills and resources found together with surplus food to support them, some members of the community preferred to live mainly through the exchange of their specialist skilled handicraft products alone.

The 'internal social differentiation' approach was earlier held by TODD (1978) in his analysis of the *Dime* artisans-cultivators relationship, although he tried firmly to justify the existence of a caste system among the *Dime* which he assumes is comparable with that of the Indian caste system.

AMBORN (1990) also holds the same view of the origins of the cultivators-artisans relationship based on the social division of work, but in a much more elaborated way. However, he is rigorously opposed to the idea of considering artisans as 'castes' and explains the common methodological weaknesses and the arbitrary use of the term by scholars in order to define handicraftsmen as 'castes'. AMBORN therefore explains the theoretical importance of 'internal social differentiation' based on the social division of work, considering it as the specialisation of agriculturists and craftsmen in societies characterised by agricultural intensification. He further explains the mutual interdependence of the two groups as being a ritually secured coherence of the societies where the indispensable 'socio-religious' role of the handicraftsmen proved to be an integrative factor.

### 1.2.2 The 'Remnants' Approach

The 'remnants' approach held the view that traditional artisans were the remnants of former aboriginal autochthonous peoples who had been sub-

merged and depressed by dominant immigrants who moved into the areas they formerly occupied but whom the peoples who subjected them have not absorbed. In order to justify their conception of artisans as remnants, different scholars described them as characterised by physical differences, resembling in colour and physique the Bantu-Negro, who use or had used their separate language or 'argot' (SHACK, 1964], make use of stone-age tools such as obsidian stone flakes (tanners), are frequently mentioned in the origin myth of the ethnic groups, and the like. In addition to SHACK (1964), HABERLAND (1984) also holds the 'remnants' approach and describes the subjugated 'autochthonous' group of the *Dizi* as follows:

I presume that immigrants from the north or north-east, who perhaps originated from the Ometo or Gonga area and who retained a vivid consciousness of their ancestors' descent from Christian Northern Ethiopia, came to Dizi. They brought along their concepts of state rule and caste-structure ... Culturally as well as racially there was an extraordinary contrast between the immigrant ruling class and the subjugated autochthonous ... The immigrants applied the principle of caste structuring to mark ethnically different groups, which were now living together in one domain (1984:449).

### 1.2.3 The 'Holistic-Mutualistic Specialisation' Approach

The 'Holistic-Mutualistic Specialisation' approach is particularly represented by LEVINE (1974) when he discusses the origins of the despised 'caste' groups of artisans in 'Greater Ethiopia'. He treats the 'Holistic Specialisation' and the 'Mutualistic Specialisation' separately, where the former precedes the latter in the process of specialisation and the subsequent incorporation. 'Holistic Specialisation', according to LEVINE (1974), is the first evolutionary transformation in which numerous specialised modes of subsistence in various ecological niches afforded by highland plateaus, lowlands and waterways enabled an increased elaboration of heterogeneous cultures based on hunting, fishing, pastoral nomadism, shifting cultivation, horticulture, plough cultivation and specialised crafts. He explains the origin of castes to be on the basis of 'Mutualistic Specialisation'. In a mutualistic specialisation, distinct groups of people settled in a certain 'ecological niche' who had developed certain specialised handicraft skills, had migrated and dispersed into areas of 'host' groups where their services were required, in order to market their products, and remained mutually interdependent.



Moreover, he strongly emphasises his conception that “whatever the manner of recruitment, the caste groups in Ethiopia are in their host societies but not of them” (1974:169). However, he argues against considering the Ethiopian ‘caste’ groups as either representing specialisation on the basis of internal social differentiation or remnants of the former inhabitants.

## 2. The Role and Status of Handicraftsmen in Kambaata: A Case of the *Fuga* (Potter-Tanners) and *Tumaano* (Smiths)

In Kambaata there are two groups of marginalised craftsmen: the *Fuga* (tanner-potters) and the *Tumaano* (smiths). The *Fuga* are despised and marginalised to a far greater degree than the *Tumaano*. Other crafts, such as woodwork, are practised by any Kambaata and are not despised. Hunting and gathering are no longer practised due to dwindling forests, as a result of population pressure.

### 2.1 The *Fuga* (Potter-Tanners)

The *Fuga* [sg. *Fugicho*] occupy the lowest social stratum. They are isolated from the rest of the population, without rights or protection. They are despised and marginalised by the farmers, and are considered impure due to their consumption habits, namely, eating the meat of animals that have not been ritually slaughtered. There is very little mixing between the *Fuga* and farmers, and none at all in marriage. Their settlements are separate from farmer villages. The farmers have developed prejudices and stereotypes about the *Fuga*, whom they consider to be lacking self-esteem, to consume extravagantly and to reside in small temporary and flimsy shelters. Farmers rarely enter their houses and do not share food with them. They fear the *Fuga* because of their ritual power, which they believe is linked with the earth and related spirits.

#### 2.1.1 Handicraft Production: Pottery

Women produce pottery, whereas men take responsibility for fetching straw and grass and chopping fuel for firing the products. Men take charge of arranging the clay-digging places and at times assist women with the digging. However, digging, transporting and processing clay up to the finishing stage are mainly done by women. Men and women share the task of taking items to market.

Tools Used by Potters<sup>1</sup>

- Billawwa* - knife used for scratching and smoothening the finished pottery items after drying them and before baking.  
*Dooniya* - sack used for transporting clay.  
*Enqeesaancho* - piece of skin moistened with water used for smoothening and polishing pottery items.  
*Kalta* - axe used for digging clay.  
*Laastiikaa* - plastic sheet used for mixing and processing the clay.  
*Maaraqaancho* - piece of bamboo or wood used for shaping and moulding the pottery items.

The main raw materials used for pottery production are clay (red and black), water, wood and straw for firing, and gum called *aqoomaada*, collected mostly from acacia trees, which is used for decorating smaller pottery items to make them shiny.

Major Products of Fuga Potters

- Angaalancho* - medium-sized clay dish to warm water for washing near fire.  
*Baareete* - oval-shaped clay container used for urinating at night.  
*Booso* - medium-sized jar for carrying water and churning milk.  
*Diste* - cooking pan.  
*Gaayya-Kino* - small clay dish with a hole in its centre and holding pieces of baked tobacco and fire to be inserted in the local smoking pipe.  
*Gambo* - medium-sized clay pot smaller than *Booso* used as a container for local beer, milk and water.  
*Gullilaata* - clay dome placed on outer tip of central pole on rooftop.  
*Jabana* - coffee pot.  
*Kooraano* - small clay container used for melting butter.  
*Mada* - large shallow clay basin used for mixing flour and serving as a container for solid and liquid items.  
*Mejejja* - circular ridge of a stove constructed in the centre of the house.  
*Meteqenna* - clay tripod support for hearth to place pots on.  
*Mitado* - round flat baking pan.

<sup>1</sup> Being a Kambaata native speaker, I questioned and collected the following Kambaata wordlists myself.

<i>Qure</i>	- cooking pot.
<i>Shaate</i>	- small clay dish used for serving food.
<i>Tenqo</i>	- small clay dish for serving drinks.
<i>Weesaame</i>	- medium-sized clay container used for milking.
<i>Wonshirancho</i>	- relatively large jar smaller than the <i>zaale</i> .
<i>Zaale</i>	- very large jar (container) used for brewing local drinks, as a granary and for storage of other items.

The different items produced are exchanged either for cash or in kind, both at the production site and in the local markets. Some customers bring *qocho* (meat, usually from animals which died without being ritually slaughtered), vegetables, or grain in exchange for pottery items. At times, *Fuga* exchange pots for cooked food brought by farmers' wives to the place of pottery firing, because it is a time when the women feel hungry after the heavy labour. In-kind exchange occurs mainly at the production site, whereas exchange in the local market is mainly for cash.

*Qure*, *mitado*, *jebana* and *booso* are the most frequently produced pottery items with the highest demand. Some items, like *zaale* and *gullilaata*, are pottery items produced mostly when customers order them and provide advance payments in cash and/or in kind. Usually women bring their items to the market places, carrying them on their backs. However, husbands also assist with transporting products to local markets. The price of products rises during the dry season and falls in the rainy season because they will not be strong and of the right quality due to the lack of proper drying.

### 2.1.2 Handicraft Production: Tanning

Tanners are male *Fuga*. Wives prepare water, *moocha*, and pound castor seeds mixed with water, while their husbands are processing the skins. The items used by them include:

#### Tools Used by Potters

<i>Billawwa</i>	- knife for cutting and making peripheral holes for stretching moistened skin.
<i>Cheennaa</i>	- castor bean used to soften the skin during the finishing phase.
<i>Enaancho</i>	- sharpener for the obsidian blade.
<i>Gogaa</i>	- skin used to make <i>iitille</i> (bed-cover), coating ( <i>agelgil</i> ), sacks, belts, strips, whips, etc.

- Gundaanna* - tool with a wooden handle and an obsidian splint on both sides of its head, used for tanning.
- Moocha* - pressed juice of *gotcho* used for soaking the skin (with a strong softening effect).
- Reeq'ee* - a sharp obsidian rock piece set at the tip of a wooden handle, used as a blade for scratching the skin.
- T'iribba* - pegs used to stretch skins.
- Wo'aa* - water used to moisten or soak the skin.

The tanners' basic livelihood is dependent more upon pottery than tanning, which is generally performed occasionally because skins are scarce. The only occasion when skins are available in abundance is the period of the *Mesq'el* celebration (see BRAUKÄMPER 1983), when customers either bring the skins themselves or call tanners to collect them together with the left-over pieces of meat, including hooves, heads, intestines, etc. These left-overs are calculated as the labour cost of the tanners. The collected left-over meat also enables the *Fuga* to celebrate the occasion. Besides, the *Fuga* are known for their consumption of animal parts such as heads and hooves, which are not eaten by farmers.

Skins are mostly processed for use as bed-sheets, *itille*. When they are ready, *Fuga* tanners and their wives take the *itille* to the customers' houses, where they will be served with enough food to be eaten on the spot. Then they will be given butter, which they smear in the centre of the *itille*, and bless the family with good wishes, mostly related to fertility. Their blessing in this context is highly valued, and the *Fuga* are served with abundant food and drinks to please them. Moreover, they are also given enough food to take home. When enough food is given to their full satisfaction, cash payment for labour is not more than ten to fifteen *birr* (at the time of the field data collection of this study in 1997). Most of the time, they take advance payment from customers in order to buy castor beans used for softening the skins. However, when the *Fuga* manage to process *itille* which they have acquired, they sell them in local markets for 50 to 80 *birr*.

### 2.1.3 Agricultural Production

Prior to the 1974 revolution, the *Fuga* were landless and used to settle on the lands of the dominant groups. The land reform entitled them to rights over their back-yard plots as well as a share from the field plots. However, their field plots are mostly either share-cropped or rented out to other farmers by themselves. They manage their own back-yard plots, though the

plots tend to be poorly handled and have few *enset* plants and vegetables compared with other farmers. Even today they rarely own livestock. Most *Fuga* rely on artisanal production for their livelihood. However, grain received from share-cropped land is also used to support their subsistence.

The *Fuga* express the view that they do not bother too much about saving because they rely on the availability of clay soil, which is given to them by their Creator. Rather, they are particularly concerned about their physical strength, that enables them to perform their tasks properly.

#### 2.1.4 Social Interaction

Except for their marginalised subordinate social status, they have friendly relations with the village farming community in their daily life. They charge villagers lower than open local market prices when exchanging products. They visit the sick and provide labour services for farmers when the need arises. Male *Fuga* participate in farmers' festive labour. They exchange products in the same local markets and fetch water from the same spring. They participate in many of the village's social occasions.

The *Fuga* are excluded from membership of any farmers' associations. However, very recently they have begun to be given limited consideration in the village burial association. When death occurs in farmers' households, they contribute only money, grain and labour, but are not allowed to serve cooked food because non-*Fuga* would not eat it. Instead, they provide additional labour services. Male *Fuga* serve in the preparation of the coffin, serve fire for smoking the water pipes and look after the horses and mules of guests. Women *Fuga* fetch water for the family of the deceased. At the end of the day's service, their women collect the left-over food. On the other hand, when death occurs in the *Fuga* household, the other non-*Fuga* association members provide both contributions and cooked food. However, there is a saying, '*Faarechu fugi oonnata massano*', which translates as: 'Only an idle person can go to a *Fuga*'s funeral'.

The *Fuga* are well-known heralds. They announce messages by moving around the village blowing trumpets. They perform drum beatings during ritual commemorations and mournings for the dead.

They also play key roles at important social occasions as ritual performers or assistants. The following description illustrates the *Fuga*'s symbolic ritual performance role during the commemoration of a death.

### Ritual Role of the *Fuga*

Sometimes after the death of a household member, a commemoration feast will be organised in order to ease the spirit of the dead. After every invited guest is served with the feast, close relatives and village elders enter into the deceased man's house to process and participate in the ritual of driving away evil spirits and bringing in good or holy spirits. Once they get into the house, everyone sits on the upper or right side of the house and remains silent. Opposite the main gate at the far end in the lower or left side inside the house is placed a pottery container (*genbo*) full of local beer (*borde*) covered with a baked ensete bread (*gotcho*), having a rib meat piece put on top of it. While everybody is sitting quietly, a ritual performer, the Fugicho, (leaving his wife outside) enters into the house holding his trumpet with his right hand. He goes directly to the pottery container with *borde*, *gotcho* and meat. Then, he picks it up with his left-hand, blows his trumpet and utters: "Let evil, harmful, destructive and disastrous spirits go out of this home!" Repeatedly uttering the same and blowing his trumpet, he slowly walks out of the house and gives it to his wife, who is waiting for him outside. Then, she gives him fresh grass. Now he holds the fresh grass in his right hand and the trumpet in his left and returns to the house. As he slowly enters into the house, he blows his trumpet, uttering: "Let holy, innocent, peaceful and amiable spirits come into this home!" Repeatedly uttering the same and blowing his trumpet in between, he slowly walks towards the head mourner of the family and gives the fresh grass. Then, elders provide their blessings and the ritual process is completed.

In this ritual performed by the *Fuga*, fresh grass is considered as a symbol that brings in fortune, peace and contentment, making the deceased family feel free from any trouble and that there is nothing to worry about. Moreover, it is believed that the fresh grass consoles, lightens, cures and appeases the deceased family, who get relief from the sorrow by bringing in holy and peaceful spirits.

The *Fuga* used to kneel down and bow to non-*Fuga* passers-by, showing acceptance of their inferior status by expressing best wishes to the 'wise' group, saying "*Obodda!*", meaning "Have mercy on me!", to which the farmers respond, "*Ozita daqq*", "May you find your daily meal!"

However, recently they have objected to being called *Fuga*, which evokes all the associated derogatory associations. Instead, they prefer to be called by the term *serateñña* (worker) (used as a local term derived from Amharic after the 1974 revolution), that explicitly connotes hard work. In

fact, they even prefer to be addressed by their respective clan names. However, many farmers still address them as *Fuga* and only a few call them *serateñña*.

### 2.1.5 Identity: Alleged Difference as Reflected in Oral Traditions

The alleged differences and separate identity of the *Fuga* are reflected in the farmers' oral literature such as myth, folktales, and proverbs.

#### Alleged Differences as Reflected in the Origin Myth

##### Origin Myth One

A long time ago, a mother had given birth to a male child with some clay soil in his hand. As the child grew up and matured, all the leadership of the land together with all its resources was put under his control due to his being born with soil in his hands.

As he was governing the land, a weak, poor, sick, old man arrived at his village. The sick old man slowly walked to one of the villager's house and begged him in the name of God to accommodate him for one night in the house. The villager welcomed him, and gave him accommodation. Unfortunately, the sick old man died in the night. The next morning, the village community exchanged the news and gathered for the burial. In order to get permission for the burial place, they went to the governor of the land. Explaining all about the death of the old man, they requested permission for a burial place. However, the governor refused to give permission for a burial place for an outsider. Depressed by their leader's response, the villagers discussed the issue thoroughly, bribed him by contributing money and got the permission.

A few days after the burial, the dead old man left the tomb. Later on, he was found to be god Almighty. The same old man visited the village again and summoned the village community to a meeting. First of all, he called upon all the people who buried his corpse and blessed them: "May you prosper with all the wealth on the land!" Then, he called upon the governor of the land who gave permission for the burial place, taking the bribe money, and cursed him. "May you and all your descendants lead your livelihood by selling soil (clay), but never prosper and never have authority over the land!"

As a result of the curse, the governor lost all his power over the land. Then, people began looking down upon him. After losing all his power and

wealth, the governor began working on clay/soil products for sale to ensure his family's livelihood.

### Origin Myth Two

Once upon a time, a village community in Kambaata agreed to elect a chief for the village. In order to elect the chief, the elders decided to slaughter an ox and divide the meat according to its quality. Then, depending on the choice of the meat, they would elect the chief, who would be judged on the quality of the meat selected and chosen.

In accordance with the elders' decision, an ox was slaughtered in an open area and the meat was divided into parts. While the process of selection was in progress, the person who chose a hump (small but high quality meat) became the leader of the village community. Others also took relatively better parts of the meat. However, *Fugicho* took and collected a large quantity of meat from the lowest quality parts, such as the head, intestine, lung, hooves and the like, which being accorded the worst status at the lowest end of the ladder.

As time went on, the potters' family lost all its importance in the community and began leading a marginal and subordinate life. They began building their houses far away from other villagers, started eating extravagantly, including animals not slaughtered ritually, and took less care of their personality and hygiene. All their groups would go to the houses where there were feasts, scrounging near the door to get some crumbs of food and some left-over drinks. Therefore, through time their social status went down and they became a marginalised minority occupational group.

According to the myths on the origins of the inferior status of the *Fuga*, through time, their importance in the community went down and they were reduced to leading a marginal and subordinate life. They began building their houses far away from the other villagers, started eating extravagantly, including animals not slaughtered ritually, and began neglecting their persons and hygiene. Therefore, through time their social status declined and they became a marginalised occupational group. They are the *Fuga*.

### Alleged Differences as Reflected in the Folktales

The following folktale, told about the *Fuga* by farmers, seeks to explain the alleged difference in the *Fuga*'s smaller houses.



#### A Tale of a *Fuga*'s Shelter

Once there was a group of *Fuga* men who cut down a big tree in order to build a large house. They borrowed an axe from their neighbours and cut down the tree. Then, they began splitting it by chopping. As they chopped and split, they placed their hands inside the splitting crack as a wedge so as not to break the axe. However, the moment they put their hands inside the crack of the split, unfortunately the axe came down and all their hands remained caught inside the crack. All of them cried loudly in agony. Hearing the cries, all the villagers arrived with their wedges and axes and freed their hands. After their hands were freed by the villagers, the *Fuga* agreed never to try to cut down big trees and build large houses throughout their lives. As a result, up to the present, the *Fuga* do not build large houses but rather live in smaller shelters.

#### Alleged Differences as Reflected in the Proverbs

The alleged differences between the *Fuga* and farmers are reflected in the sayings and proverbs of the farmers, some of which are cited below.

- i) '*Fugichu duuboda kuchaameen lokata worano!*' This can be translated as:

"A *Fuga* inserts his feet inside the butchered stomach when he becomes satiated with too much food."

This proverb suggests that the *Fuga* become unruly when they have eaten and drunk too much. On rare occasions they express their subordination openly. However, at times (when they are drunk, have eaten well or consciously react against the maltreatment) their inner-felt anger and grievances overflow and express it publicly. They do not care then about norms and prejudices and forget to obey and behave as equals, calling people by their names. They may even insult or accuse others when maltreated, which they never do in normal circumstances. However, such deviant behaviour of the *Fuga* is seriously monitored by the farmers, who try to keep them in the socially defined inferior status.

- ii) '*Biisha iltoo Fugichuta ikoot!*', which means:

"Do not behave like a *Fuga* who has given birth to a clean, handsome child!"

All the *Fuga* are alleged by the farmers to be dirty, filthy and unclean. However, once upon a time there was a *Fuga* mother who had given birth to a handsome baby and used to keep her child clean and neat, giving it too much care. This behaviour amused the farmers and they laughed at her scornfully. This proverb, at the moment, is applied not only to them but to all those who take excessive care and consideration for their property or family.

- iii) '*Fugichut manni haaroo wezzan gagihannse qortoon aggai!*'  
This means:

“A potter makes new pots for others, but fetches water in a broken one for herself.”

Since the *Fuga* are alleged to give too much attention to their daily food, they sell all they produce. But, for their domestic use, they mostly depend on those items that are broken or not well fired. This comment is also applied to other Kambaata who do not make proper use of the property in their possession.

- iv) '*Fugu ba'ano baqita!*' That is to say:

“Dawn is the time when the *Fuga* disappear from home.”

The *Fuga* are accused of extravagant consumption and behaviour, eating meat of animals which have died but were not ritually slaughtered, and promising to provide products in exchange. However, when the repayment becomes too burdensome due to their quest for daily subsistence, they plan to leave and look for another master. After pre-arranging everything, they disappear from their site at dawn. Thus, this saying is popularly used when members of the community make appointments to meet at early hours of the morning.

### 2.1.6 Social Change

- i) The *Fuga* in the Kambaata Home Area

Even though there has been no major improvement in the livelihood of the *Fuga*, there is a fairly friendly atmosphere between them and farmers these days, compared with former times. The land reform of 1975 has enabled them to own land and it has contributed towards slight attitudinal changes since the farmers no longer consider them to be sub-humans. Although implicit discrimination persists, they are no longer derided openly.

The land they gained access to enabled them to improve their livelihood. They became entitled to free access to clay from government-owned land, instead of paying annual fees as they did in the past. They now own backyard as well as field plots. They cultivate the former, but the latter are mostly given out in sharecropping or rental arrangements. Farmers showed a slight attitudinal change on the basis of their entitlement to land resources as equals. Farmers who require more land approach the *Fuga* (at times even bribing them) to get their land on a sharecropping basis. Land owned by the *Fuga* is in demand since the regular dispersal of ashes from the firing adds fertility to the soil. At times there is some competition, and a *Fuga* can choose to allocate his land to friendly farmers.

The expansion of the Catholic and Protestant religions in the area has also contributed towards attitudinal changes on the part of farmers, since followers are taught that the *Fuga* are also creatures of God. Besides, many *Fuga* suffered from forced conscription into the *Derg* army (during the recruitment of local *militiamen*) since others did not want to join. However, this enabled the *Fuga* to gain exposure to other contexts where they are not singled out and discriminated against. Even though the experience was bitter, it contributed to their personal awareness and to changes in the perception of their ascribed inferior status.

The present generation has gained membership of the burial association (mostly after the 1974 revolution), in part because land ownership has enabled them to settle in a stable manner in one place. Production has not changed significantly, except for increased prices for pottery. However, until the present they have not been entitled to hold positions of leadership in the PA.

#### ii) The *Fuga* Resettled in the Metekel Resettlement Area

The former military government of Ethiopia, after the 1984/85 drought and famine, implemented a massive emergency resettlement operation. The Beles valley in the north-western part of the country was one of the target conventional resettlement sites that hosted resettlers originating from culturally, linguistically and climatically diverse parts of Ethiopia (WOLDE-SELASSIE 1998, 2000). Kambaata resettlers, including both farmers and handicraftsmen, were part of the whole relocation scheme. Despite similar difficulties encountered by all Kambaata resettlers in adapting to a new physico-biotic and socio-cultural environment, the resettlement scheme played an important role in the socio-economic and cultural changes of the *Fuga*.

My personal observation and discussion with a couple of potter families in the Beles valley, particularly in the rainy season of 1996, revealed an important improvement in their socio-economic status compared with the situation in their original homes. Economically, the livelihood of the families of the potters is by far better than that of the average farming families in the new context. All the husbands of the potters' families are wood workers, while the wives are potters. Because of the existence of natural forest, the wood workers have better and easy access to timber raw materials. Because of the ever-increasing number and category of population in the villages and the small emerging towns of the Beles valley, the demand both for pottery and woodwork products is very high. As a result, both family members generate a lucrative income for the household. Besides, they have been entitled both the field and back-yard plots of land on an equal footing with any neighbouring farming family. They also own traction animals and other livestock. All the families are quite satisfied with the attractive prices of their products in the local markets.

The pottery products of the women are in high demand, so that at times they hire the wives of poor farmers for fetching clay and carrying and transporting pottery products to the local market places. For instance, a farmer's wife who brought one pack of clay will be given one water-pot that costs 5.00 *birr*. Moreover, a farmer's wife who transports water-pots to a local market will be paid 50 cents for each pot. The potter women make use of the income for covering the household consumption. During the harvesting period of the dry season, they purchase cheap grain from the local markets with the income they generate but do not use from their granary. The dry season is the peak pottery production period. They begin to use their granary only in the middle of a rainy season where their pottery production decreases due to heavy rain. It is also a period when many farming families run short of food and the price for food crops rises. Besides, they explained that they save a minimum of 10.00 *birr* each week through the village informal traditional rotating money-saving association known as *iqub*. Apart from this, they also buy the clothing they require on top of what their husbands usually do. The money thus saved is mostly deposited in the hands of one trusted woman and used mainly as a security for the child-bearing period.

The husbands are busy in their craft. In the emerging small towns, their services are in high demand. They generate income both from the sale of their production and from their manual craft services. Besides, they equally cultivate their fields and produce crops. For instance, from my study of

potter groups, two examples can be cited here. One of the potter families resides in an iron-roofed house and owns an additional iron-roofed workshop and store for raw materials. In that particular season, the family has cultivated maize in the 1000m<sup>2</sup>-back-yard plot and one hectare of millet and another hectare of sesame in the field plots. The other potter family similarly resides in an iron-roofed house and has got a similar workshop, like the former. In the compound are a small, beautifully thatched guesthouse and a small sundry shop at the other roadside. In that season, the family had cultivated maize in the 1000m<sup>2</sup>-back-yard plot and three hectares of cash crop (sesame) in the field plot. The young husband of this family attended a night school and he was in grade seven. He was also in the political cadre of the village, playing an important role in its affairs and working closely with the district administration. Besides, the husbands of the two families told of the other sideline income they generated from lending money to farming families suffering from a shortage of food during the rainy season which will be paid back mostly in kind (in the form of grains) at the harvesting period.

The overall quality of the livelihoods of the potter families is far better than that of the average farming families. They proved to be quite rational in the management of their production, their consumption and savings contradicting the allegations of extravagance laid against them in the origin myths. Their family members are better nourished and have better clothing, while the women own better ornaments than the average farming families according to the village standards. Their children equally attend the village elementary school. They are better trusted in the village due to their secure source of income, and often consulted for borrowing money and grain by the weaker members of the farming families. The management of their income is quite rational as they mostly show progress. However, they complained that their highest expenditure is when they travel home to visit relatives in their original homelands.

All the potter family members are followers of the Protestant religion. All are members of the village religious association, where no noticeable discrimination is reported. In a multi-ethnic village where they live, there are two burial associations. The one is common for all members of the village, while the other is only for those who came from Kambaata and Hadiya. The potter families are members of both burial associations. In the case of the former, they face no form of discrimination and are treated as equals, as are any of their neighbours. However, in the case of the latter, they alleged elements of thinly disguised discrimination on the part of some of those fellow ethnic group members who came together from the same

region. At times, they are not even asked to serve food to the deceased families, but their husbands' services are not required in the preparation of coffins. Some of the fellow non-potter ethnic group members contemptuously inform other neighbours belonging to different ethnic groups of the inferior social status of potters in their original homelands. The potter families condemned with some hatred the acts of these fellow members and attributed the practice to an act of jealousy of their improved socio-economic status. They also told of the presence of many fellow members who were not mentally narrow-minded and do not discriminate against them. With the latter group, they have very good reciprocal relations. Accordingly, when needed, they lend money and grain, hire wives as labourers, and charge them less when these farmers' families buy their pottery or woodwork items. Their relations with other ethnic group members are very friendly, with no discrimination at all. One of the members of the potters has inter-married with a woman belonging to an Agaw ethnic group. She learned the craft and produces various items, although not with an magnitude and dexterity equal to that of the other 'proper' potters.

All the potter families have unanimously confirmed the fact that they have experienced a tremendous change in the improvement of their socio-economic status in the new context, compared with their original homes.

## 2.2 *Tumaano* (Smiths)

### 2.2.1 Handicraft Production

The raw materials used by the *Tumaano* (sg. *Tumaancho*) are scraps of different types of metals and charcoal. They either buy or produce charcoal themselves. In addition to producing new tools, they provide maintenance services for farmers' hand tools, brought to them for sharpening, fixing or shaping.

#### Items Used by Smiths

- Anvil* - iron block used to hammer heated metal to make shapes.
- Madoosha* - instrument used to beat the hot metal while shaping it.
- Moorada* - a metal instrument used for sharpening.
- Q'phaa* - pincers used for picking in or out hot metal and holding it while hammering to make a shape.
- Woffanaancho* - a forge used to blow air into the fire to heat metals.

#### Main Products of Smiths

- Baachase* - sickle used for cutting grass and harvesting grain.

<i>Bagazo</i>	- spear used for defence.
<i>Billawwaa</i>	- knife used for cutting various things.
<i>Kalta</i>	- hatchet used for hoeing or cultivating soil as well as for cutting and scraping wood.
<i>Masha</i>	- large flat knife used for cutting <i>qotcho</i> .
<i>Misaane</i>	- axe used for chopping and splintering wood.

Many of these items are produced on a seasonal basis. For instance, *masha* and *billawwa* are mostly produced during the *Mesq'el* period (i.e around September); *kalta* is produced in the hoeing and cultivating seasons; and *baachase* in the harvesting period.

When farmers bring iron tools or scraps to be worked on and shaped into new forms of hand tools, smiths produce their wares on terms of sharing the products on a two-to-one basis (the smiths get double the share of farmers). Otherwise they are paid in cash for their services. They sell the items in the local weekly markets. They use pack animals or family labour for transporting tools to market. As well as their usual farmer customers, other traders come and buy their produce for sale elsewhere. Prices of tools have been increasing.

### 2.2.2 Livelihood

Smiths are all engaged in farming, be it on their own land or through certain local institutional arrangements on land owned by others. They practise their craftwork to gain additional income. They cannot be distinguished from other farmers by their farming methods. Because smiths combine metalwork with agriculture, they generate substantial income. However, their living standard is not much better than that of the other farming families. They use very traditional production tools, which demand excessive labour. As a result, they spend much of their income on food to get the necessary strength for production. They have serious problems in obtaining raw iron materials for production. They buy the iron scraps from local markets. Moreover, they spend much of their time in the production of iron tools. Consequently, time spent on iron production affects the family field agricultural labour. Besides, this activity does not receive encouragement from other farming families.

### 2.2.3 Social Interaction and Change

Although smithing is an activity that is somewhat despised and looked down upon by the farming community, it is a sideline craft performed in addition to farming to generate additional income. As a result, smiths are known and addressed as farmers and their smithing activity is considered supplementary to their farming. There are no obvious differences between farmers and smiths. Smiths are members of village *seera*<sup>2</sup> without discrimination and perform all tasks like any other farmer. However, farmers do not consider smithing to be a reputable activity and demean those involved in it. Their attitude towards smiths is contemptuous. Although inter-marriage between smiths and farmers is prevalent, smiths wish to marry farmers' daughters, whereas farmers have a disguised reservation about marrying smiths' daughters.

By the 1975 land reform, land was redistributed to all farmers, including the handicraftsmen households in Ethiopia. For landless smiths, this land reform has entitled them access to land, which has brought a significant change both in their daily life and production. However, with regard to their relations with farmers, no change in their social position or membership of associations has occurred. Concerning their craft production, iron scraps have become very scarce, but prices of the items they produce have increased. Thus, except for the changes indicated in the agricultural production upon which they depend for their livelihoods, smiths do not stress changes to their smithing activities.

### 3. Conclusion

To explain satisfactorily the intricately complex socio-economic role and status of handicraftsmen, it demands further thorough, temporally and spatially broader comparative socio-anthropological investigations. Although there is still need for further strengthening and advancement, the Kambaata case study contributes substantially towards revealing the indispensable facts concerning the socio-economic role and status of marginalized artisan minorities in southern Ethiopia. However, the erroneous application of the controversial term 'caste' by several scholars while investigating the marginalized handicraftsmen in the southern Ethiopian context seems not at all

<sup>2</sup> "Village *seera*" means both a legal framework (informal administrative norms, conventions, sanctions) and an insurance society (self-help during hardship, mostly at a time of death) of the local village community.



plausible. Out of the three stated broad conceptual categories, it seems to this author that 'internal social differentiation' best explains the role and status of Kambaata handicraftsmen as well. This approach considers a perspective of the mutual interdependence of farmers and handicraftsmen based on the social division of work and seems much more plausible than the other two approaches.

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#### Summary

Although traditional handicraftsmen play an indispensable economic and socio-cultural role within the society, they have been marginalized and segregated by the peasant population in southern Ethiopia. The handicraftsmen produce a wide range of production, household consumption and defence tools and implements. Besides, they have an important socio-cultural role as ritual performers, initiators, drummers, musicians, entertainers, operators, professional mourners, traditional medical experts, etc. during several social life events. However, despite their important role in multiple contexts, they are despised and prejudiced against by the peasant population. They are kept away and segregated from the rest of the society, being considered as unclean, and restricted in many ways, including limitation to endogamous marriage.

This study examines the ambiguous and ambivalent position of the handicraftsmen, as well as their mutual interdependence within the peasant population by investigating the particular case of potters and smiths among the Kambaata of southern Ethiopia.