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## **Slavery Beyond History: Contemporary Concepts of Slavery and Slave Redemption in Ganta (Gamo) of Southern Ethiopia**

**by Bosha Bombe**

B.A. in History; M.A. in Social Anthropology

# **Slavery Beyond History: Contemporary Concepts of Slavery and Slave Redemption in Ganta (Gamo) of Southern Ethiopia**

**By Boshha Bombe<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Slavery was officially abolished in Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1942. Despite the abolitionary law slaves and their descendants have continually been marginalized in the country (especially in the peripheral parts of southwestern Ethiopia) from the time the law passed until today. In the Gamo community of southern Ethiopia, descendants of former slaves carry the identity of their ancestors and as the result they are often harshly excluded. Today, not only are they considered impure, but their perceived impurity is believed to be contagious; communicable to non-slave descendants during rites of passage. In order to escape the severe discrimination, slave descendants change their identity by redeeming themselves through indigenous ritual mechanism called wozzo ritual. However, the wozzo ritual builds the economy of former slave masters and ritual experts while leaving redeemed slave descendants economically damaged. This study is both diachronic and synchronic; it looks at the history of slavery, contemporary perspectives and practices of slavery and slave redemption in Ganta (Gamo) society of southern Ethiopia.

## **Background to the problem**

Despite the twentieth century abolitionary law, various international conventions<sup>2</sup> and state sanctioned laws, slavery to this day has not been eradicated (Miers 2011, Welch 2009, Craig and et al 2007). At present “slavery and slavery-like practices » affect the lives of millions of people throughout the world (Welch 2009: 9). Kevin Bales’ cross cultural slavery index indicates that in the year 1999 there are about 27 million slaves throughout the world (Bales 2004, 2005).

Officially/legally speaking slavery is “non-existent” but it is a lived condition of many people across different cultures of the world.

In Ethiopia, apart from those studying classical slavery (e.g. Pankhurst 1964, 1968, Dirk 2010, Smidt 2010) little attention is paid on impacts of historical

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<sup>1</sup> . B.A in history and M.A in social anthropology and currently working as social science researcher in Arba Minch University in the department of social science & humanities, Ethiopia. Email, [bombebosha@gmail.com](mailto:bombebosha@gmail.com), phone 0923106264.

<sup>2</sup> . The 1926 League of Nation sanction on slaver, International Labour Organization(ILO), forced Labour Convention, UDHR 1948, Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery 1956

slavery on contemporary social equality. The problem of historical slavery is a neglected topic despite the fact that it is a concern for many people, especially those in the south and southwestern parts of the country. Smidt in his article explains that although the abolitionary proclamation was issued in 1942 by Emperor Haile Sellassie, slaves and their descendants have continually been marginalized in the country, especially in the peripheral parts of the southwest, until the 1990s (Smidt 2010). Smidt's finding is quite authentic but the practice did not stop there (1990s), it continued until today.

In the Gamo society of southern Ethiopia slavery is a lived condition. In Ganta (Gamo) society, in the absence of legal slave-master relationships, descendants of former slave masters control the social and economic life of slave descendants. They restrict non-slave descendants' (free born descendants) involvement in the lives of slave descendants under several specific situations.

Descendants of former slave masters turn the free born into the status of slave when they closely participate with slave descendants by crossing culturally sanctioned social boundaries. Because of the cultural ban on the relationship between free born and slave descendants in these specific situations, the slave descendants are seriously excluded. The slave descendants (ayle) are detested and perceived as subhuman because of their social origin. The ayle are considered as impure and their impurity is believed as contagion; if a non-slave participates by eating (during a mourning event, for example) in a slave home, this will turn him/her also into a slave. It's as if being "slave" can be transmitted from one person to another just the same as a contagious disease. Close interaction with slaves during such events can result in automatic exclusion of the free born; they therefore avoid close interaction with them during rites of passage—a period of time when it's believed that transmission of the impurity of slaves to other people can occur.

To escape the suffering, the slave descendants have been "redeeming" themselves through ritual purification called *wozzo*. Through *wozzo* ritual the slave descendants completely change their slave identity and assume all privileges of the free born, however, it is an exploitative method that creates opportunity for slave redeemers, descendants of former slave masters (*lathi*), and politico-religious ritual experts (*maga* and *kati*) to profit while leaving the redeemed slave descendants economically broken. The study is both diachronic and synchronic; it looks at the history of slavery, contemporary perspectives and practices of slavery and slave redemption in Ganta (Gamo) society of southern Ethiopia.

## Contemporary Slavery: Conceptual Approach

There is no agreed upon definition for contemporary slavery; different scholars and international organizations define modern slavery in different ways. According to Miers, contemporary slavery is “an all catch name” for various human exploitations such as debt bondage, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, child slavery, forced labor, forced or servile marriage, cult/ritual slavery and others across the world (Miers 2000). For Bales, contemporary slavery is a “hidden crime” because slavery is illegal in all countries and banned by international organizations (Bales 2005). Bales further explains that fundamentally slavery is the same throughout history but the “package” i.e. the defining apparatus such as cultural, social, religious, political, psychological, ethnic and commercial context is different. Slavery at the fundamental level is violent control of the slaves by the slave holder (Bales 2004, 2005).

Welch explains that contemporary slavery is characterized by subtle practice:

*The current manifestations of slavery are far more subtle than those of captured, racially-differentiated slaves imported into a society to fill specific labor needs, the form most familiar to Westerners. Slavery in the twenty-first century is deeply rooted in many societies, promulgated by existing norms, in which selected groups in the general populace are particularly liable to slave-like practices (Welch 2009: 73).*

For Craig et al contemporary slavery denotes “severe economic exploitation, absence of any framework of human right and maintenance of control of one person over another by the panorama or reality of violence” (Craig et al 2007). It also implies as an umbrella expression for numerous forms of slavery such as descent-based slavery, bonded labour, serfdom, debt bondage, sexual slavery, child labour and enforced participation in armed conflict (Craig et al 2007, Jordan 2011, OHCHR 2002).

Quirk and Vigneswaran argue that the term “human bondage” is an overarching concept that helps us analyze contemporary forms of human exploitation because this concept covers all definitions and manifestations of contemporary forms of slavery such as forced labour (the 1930 Forced Labour Convention), human trafficking (the 2000 Trafficking Protocol), child labour (the 1999 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention) and debt bondage (the 1956 Supplementary Slavery Convention) as well as all other human exploitations. In the perspective of Quirk and Vigneswaran, and in the framework of human bondage, slavery is part; it includes various combinations and manifestations,

violent coercion, social subordination, psychological compulsion, severe exploitation and strict social hierarchy<sup>3</sup>.

Quirk and Vigneswaran further state that to understand contemporary slavery we must look to the links between historical legacies and today's practices. From the perspective of historical legacies, the current trends and practices should be built up on the cumulative effects of the past institutional and sociological precedents. They justify this assumption by offering an illustration that in the countries of West Africa (such as Mali and Mauritania) continuing legacies of slavery are due to long standing arrangements from the past.<sup>4</sup>

Orlando Patterson in his book *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) argues that slavery should be examined in terms of socio-political relationships and the power dynamics in human societies. He asserts that, "all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons." Patterson claims that slavery at the fundamental level is a "relation of domination." Patterson further states that slavery is defined by three kinds of relationships of oppression that collectively constitute "social death."

The first relationship is characterized by subjugation of slaves by owners that express violence and physical coercion. The second is that slaves are totally isolated from kin groups, family and communities. Finally, slaves are viewed as inferior creatures, whereas their masters are considered elites and nobles (Patterson 1982: 1).

Anti-Slavery International explains contemporary slavery in terms of caste-based exclusion and strict social hierarchy. The organization argues that slavery exists today despite the fact that it is illegal in all the countries where it is practiced. The slavery practiced takes various forms and affects people of all ages, gender and races. Among other forms, descent-based slavery is common especially in West African and sub-Saharan countries. In descent-based slavery, slavery is a condition ascribed at birth, passing through generations. In societies where descent-based slavery is prevalent there exists a strict hierarchy based along ethnic and sometimes racial lines. Free men are at the top of the hierarchy followed by caste-based occupational groups. The slaves and their descendants are at the very bottom of the caste system and experience severe exclusion<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> . Quirk, Joel and Darshan Vigneswaran. Chapter One: Human Bondage in Africa: Historical Legacies and Recent Innovations PP. 1-35.

<sup>4</sup> .Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Anti-slavery International. What is Modern Slavery? // [www.antislavery.org/](http://www.antislavery.org/) accessed on 4/11/2013.

## **The Setting: Study Area description and methodology**

This study was conducted in Ganta (Gamo) of southern Ethiopia. The Gamo lies in the Gamo Gofa zone, which is one of the administrative zones of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State/SNNPRS/. The Gamo receives an average of 500-1800 ml annual rainfall and the temperature of the area ranges between 24<sup>0</sup>c and 10<sup>0</sup>c yearly. The area of the Ganta people (the research site), who belong to the wider group of the Gamo people, belongs administratively to the Arbaminch zuria *woreda* and is located at hilltop some 20 km North West of Arbaminch town. The total population of Ganta was 13,392 in the year 2007, out of these 6,498 were males and 6,894 were female (CSA of 2007). The total households registered were 2,934. During my field stay I identified nearly seventy-one households of *ayle* both in Ganta and upper town of Arba Minch, capital of Gamo Gofa zone, with a total population of 300 individuals. The people of Ganta have a mixed economy which is related to the agro-ecological zone of the area. Barley, wheat, *teff*, sorghum, beans, horse beans, sweet potatoes and *enset* (false banana) are the main crops produced in the highlands. In the lowlands the main crops produced are maize, cotton and bananas.

The people of Ganta are hierarchically divided into three strata. The *mala* (free born) who constitute the dominant portion of the population are at the top, the occupational castes (*mana*) at the middle and the slaves/slave-descendants (*ayle*) at the very bottom. Crossing the caste-based social hierarchy is common for *ayle* and *mala*. The slave descendants, *ayle*, disclaim their slave identity, redeem themselves and achieve the strata of *mala* thereby assuming all the privileges of the free born. The *mala* on the other hand fall from their honored social position when turned into a slave if they closely participate with slave descendants during rites of passage.

This study is based on field work (conducted from February 2012 - May 2013) and focused on qualitative method because the qualitative method was important to uncover data regarding people's feelings, opinions, experiences, and personal accounts and also observations of everyday behavior—an important variable which can help us understand people's motivation to uphold their views and practices. This kind of data cannot be obtained through quantitative design. Data was collected by using different data collecting tools: in-depth interviews, informal conversation, case studies, collection of genealogies and observation of everyday life.

## Origin of Slavery in Gamo Society

The historical origin of slavery in Gamo society is associated with many factors. According to several informants, including the politico-religious leaders and ritual experts (*kati & maga*), descendants of former slave masters, *lathi*, slave descendants, *ayle*, and others there had been frequent famines (*gaffe*) in the middle of the nineteenth century. During that time people were forced to subjugate themselves to those few who still had ample resources. The many impoverished had to beg for food from the few rich. This later turned the many into slaves as they were unable to give back what they had been given to sustain their lives. Informants even revealed that *gaffe* stricken people had “bartered” their children for survival needs, i.e. they gave a child in exchange for food<sup>6</sup>. Descendants of slave holders asserted that their fathers and grandfathers bought slaves with only small amounts of grain and flour. Some slave descendants also confirmed that their ancestors had turned into slaves during the time of famine.

Second, the nineteenth century slave trade in the country had a paramount role in developing slavery in Gamo highlands. Oral traditions elucidated from informants proved that the Gamo highlands in general and Ganta in particular had been connected to the long distance caravan trade routes of 19<sup>th</sup> century in southwestern Ethiopia, mentioning that the Shoshane market had been a historic slave market then. Numerous informal conversations with different categories of people at Shoshane market, polling center and sacrificial places of the Ganta people revealed that slaves were formally traded at the market in the past. Informants from Ochole, where the market is situated, asserted that there was an *ayle do'o* (slave-selling part) in the market. They said that slaves had been traded like animals; bargaining over the price after the age, sex and healthiness of slaves was revealed was actually a common practice. The price of young and healthy slaves was higher than that for old ones. In the southwest, the Shoshane had been connected to Wortsiso (now Amaro-kelle), a leading slave trading market. Slave raiders had traded in these two markets. The genealogical data of origin of slave descendants' ancestors indicates that some came to Ganta (Gamo) from Wortsiso.

Informants also elucidated that the historic Shoshane market had been linked to Wolayta, Dawro, Keffa and Jimma. Alito Kayt (about 80-years-old and a descendant of slave holders) explained that the Gamo highlands had been connected to the nineteenth century along with the Omotic states, Kaffa and Konta. Referring to his father, Alito recalled that there had been a frequent exchange of

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<sup>6</sup> Some redeemed slave descendants whose ancestors' case related to this issue indicated that the intention of parents when bartering their children with some food was not to let them become slaves but rather to allow them to simply be adopted children by “new parents.” However, with passage of time the children were claimed as slaves.

goods and services between these states during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main trading items were slaves, ivory, civet and incense (see also Freeman 2004:29).

The third factor that contributed to the development of slavery in the Gamo highlands was the frequent conflict among the Gamo themselves. Numerous discussions with various people pointed out that in the past the different Gamo communities had been involved in frequent war. The creation of nearly forty Gamo communities was related to these conflicts. Mostly the fight was between the hereditary *kawos* (kings).

The fundamental causes of these skirmishes arose from economic issues. According to Olmstead, war could occur among various communities because of conflict over stolen livestock, a runaway wife, or ownership of a pasture lying between the communities (1973:226). Freeman also indicates that the desire to capture slaves was a fundamental reason because by then slaves already played a significant role in the Gamo economy (2004: 29-30).

During the conquest and skirmishes the war captives (*de'oo*) were taken as slaves by the victorious group. Besides turning individual captives into slaves, the victorious community brought the vanquished under their subjection. They became the vassal of the triumphant<sup>7</sup>. Traditionally, this period of war in Gamo history were known as: Gamo Tora *woode* "Gamo spear time" and it occurred at the dawn of nineteenth century. Generally one can say that famine takes first place in inventing slavery in Gamo highlands. The situation became more aggravated with frequent war between various Gamo *dere* and at the same time the connection of the highlands with the 19<sup>th</sup> century international slave trade.

### Contemporary Perspectives of Slavery

Today in the context of Ganta (Gamo) society slavery is broadly defined as *gale*- "debt bondage." This definition, however, differs from what "debt bondage" means in the literature of contemporary slavery<sup>8</sup>, and it also partially contradicts that of the historical origin of slavery in the Gamo society. The literal meaning of *gale* is "debt" but in connection to slavery the term has loaded connotations. It implies an innate debt (money or goods) that ancestors of slave descendants

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<sup>7</sup> Olmstead explains that vassal *dere* were of two kinds. Those called children (*yelo* in Ganta, also called *shato*) owed the dominant *dere* support in future wares. Those called wives (*macho*) owed agricultural labor; living at home during much of the year, their citizen had to work for specific individuals in the dominant *dere* as well (1973:227). Some of my informants indicated to me that vassals were also called *dere ayle*.

<sup>8</sup> The 1956 Supplementary Convention of Slavery defines debt bondage "status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined"(see OHCHR .2002. Abolishing slavery and its Contemporary Forms, Miers 2000, Welch 2005)



borrowed during famine or in time of social insecurity (sickness, mourning, and funeral). The *gale* also denotes an inherent debt, i.e. the money or good that was given in exchange for slave ancestors, the amount for which they were bought (during slave trade). The term is also unfairly linked to ancestors of slave descendants who were caught as captives during Gamo war periods. It seems that the definition of slavery, seen broadly in the context of *gale*, is connected to the role of slave redemption during which all slaves (slaves whose ancestors were bought or turned into a slave due to famine or caught as captive or was enslaved via other mechanism such as marriage contracts with people of slave descent) are required to pay huge amounts of money to descendants of former slave masters and ritual experts in order to retrieve their lost identity.

*Gale*, slavery, is considered impurity and consequently slave descendants are perceived as pollutants who transmit impurity to non-slaves. They are also considered as a kind of inferior creature when compared to non-slave descendants. This inferiority serves as a culturally frowned-upon link that travels back to their ancestors' dehumanization in the moment they became slaves. In the past, slaves had been treated no better than any other commodity or animal traded in the market and slave descendants, it is believed, share their ancestors' sub-humanity. Only through redemption, when slave descendants repay *gale* for their ancestors, can they retrieve their lost identity.

In the perspective of the Ganta community, slavery, *gale*, is both heritable and social contagion. With the heritability of slavery (and although the Ganta are patrilineal), slavery is believed to be heritable through both parents line. Many believe that a child shall be a slave by descent whether both or either of his parents were a slave. Slavery is also believed to be transferable through social participation with slave descendants. According to this assumption slavery is truly considered a "communicable disease," transferring from slaves to non-slaves through social participation during times of death, funerals, and even child delivery. Slave descendants are severely excluded during these events because close proximity partaking with them in those episodes turns him/her into slave.

### **Different Categories of Slaves**

Slave descendants in Ganta are broadly categorized into two: *bacha ayle* and *chancha ayle*. In the phrase '*bacha ayle*' the suffix *bacha* means sickle, a cutting tool used for cutting grass and weed. The term *bacha ayle* implies that the ancestors of that *ayle* had been bought from a market and had served their master by cutting grass for his mules and cattle. Such *ayle* also had to do farming, keeping cattle, washing the feet of their master, collecting firewood, and leading them when their master had to go somewhere. Informants indicated that *bacha ayle* had the

lowest position because their duties of serving someone by cutting grass for cattle are considered the lowest, defiled task. Associating slaves with this task was also used as a means to hint to their dehumanized position, as they were bought like cattle from the market. Descendants of these slaves today are called *bacha ayle* because they inherited their ancestors' status.

Another category of slaves contain those who became slaves through other mechanisms, such as during times of famine, during times of a Gamo war (as war captive) and through marriage. Descendants of such slaves are called slaves by descent (*lataa ayle*: inherited slavery). However, some informants argued that slaves by descent can also be called *bacha ayle* if they are fourth and fifth generations of their ancestors. The logic behind this explanation is that one of the essential features of *bacha ayle* is that it is hereditary, and *lataa ayle* share this attribute. During the redemption process it becomes obvious that there is quite a difference between the two; the *lataa ayle* do not give up their land and property to descendants of their master in order to acquire a new status like *bacha ayle*. If *bacha ayle* want to be redeemed, they should give up whatever property they have produced and whatever they have attained in their lifetime, including their houses and farms. All should be given to their *lathi* (master), or, more specifically, the descendants of their master. They reason out that the ancestors of these categories of *ayle* had been devoid of any property when they were bought. They had put off their clothes, shaved their hair, cut their nails and were naked when they came to their master's home. After that whatever property they produced and resources they attained were produced on the lands given to them by their masters. Thus, if they want to be "redeemed," it is said that they should give up their lands, houses and any property produced from the descendants of their master and leave themselves the way they had come: naked and without property. Then they should start a new life in another area.

The third slave category is called *chancha ayle*. The *chancha ayle* are *mala*, i.e. non-slaves, who were turned into slaves by participating in funerals of slave descendants or during a child's delivery. The term *chancha* stands for the food and drink offered to the grieving slave descendants' home when a relative has died, to comfort them. The same custom exists at *mala* homes. Here the equivalent food and drink is called *bochocha* (clean food)<sup>9</sup>. *Chancha* also stands for food and drink at slave descendants' home in the first week when a woman gives birth.

When non-slaves ignorantly or knowingly participate in eating *chancha*, the food offered during a funeral at a slave descendant's house, or in the first week when a woman gives birth, they automatically turn into slaves. These new kind of

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<sup>9</sup> I was told that when people do not eat *mala* at home during the time of the death, the grieving family accuses them by saying: this is not *chancha*! Why don't you eat? In other words, *chancha* means polluted food.

slaves have appeared only recently it seems, in connection with the intensification of slave redemption.

### **Everyday Interaction of Slaves with the Rest of the Community**

Daily life in Ganta at first glance can be characterized as a peaceful coexistence of slave descendants, *ayle*, members of *mala* (free born) and craft workers, *mana*. In church they worship and serve together. There are slave, *ayle*, church leaders, deacons, evangelists, singers, Sunday school teachers and worship-leaders. In community-based organizations such as *idir* (burial association) and *iqub* (saving association) the slave descendants have equal rights with the other members. Some of them serve in those organizations in leadership positions and equally benefit as the other members. In the neighborhood they entertain friendly relations, help each other out, work together and visit each other. The slave descendants also equally benefit from the infrastructure of the community. Their children go to school with the other children; they equally use the piped water set-up in each *qabale*. At local level government functions they equally participate with the rest of the community.



Ganta Idir association including: mala, lathi and ayle, constructing a house for mala widow.  
Photo by Boshia B. April 2013



The Idir Association having Lunch. Photo by Boshia B. April 2013.

All this shows that the slave descendants have a position very different to that of the original slaves. Today the *ayle* work for themselves and do not serve their masters, *lathi*, anymore. They are independent economically and socially, and many of them are now richer than the *mala*. Officially/legally there are no slave-master relations between slave descendants and their masters; however, in practice, the past relationship between the two is not forgotten especially during rites of passage (marriage, mourning, and funeral and child birth).

While the daily life of slave descendants with the rest of the community is relatively peaceful, the situation of *mala* is quite different. They are discriminated against, insulted and ridiculed continuously. The reason is, as my *mala* informants explained, that turning into slave by closely associating with slave descendants is considered more shameful than being a slave by descent.

While being a slave by descent is considered a part of a person's identity, i.e. an inborn inferior attribute, turning into a slave is considered the same as falling from grace, i.e. losing one's honored identity. Thus, usually *mala* are seriously excluded, and even more by their own relatives than by the rest community, because the relatives consider that the change from *mala* into *ayle* is not only shame for the person himself but also for them. During my research I met some *mala* who had turned into a slave by marrying slave descendants. They were severely discriminated by their own kin, evicted from their own land and banished from their residence, with ties to their kin completely cut off. Such *ayle* were therefore forced to migrate to another area.

## Marriage Contract

Arranged marriage was in the past and present is the responsibility of the parents. In the past, parents selected the spouse for their children, sent elders, a go-between, *lazantha*, to the family of the potential spouse of their child, decided on the schedule, organized the ceremony, and provided all necessary resources needed. Today, children can select their spouses but their selection still has to be approved by the parents. Most important, even today they have to make sure that the background of the potential spouse is clean. The main criterion is *uma* (descent cleanness), i.e. the partner should be descendants of free born. To be sure that the prospective spouse of their child is not of slave descent, parents usually engage in intensive genealogical counting. Many discussions with informants take place and parents usually go as far as seven generations back to ensure the clean origin of the would-be partner of their child. In such investigations when they detect slave origin in either paternal or maternal ancestral roots, they avoid all contracts.

*Uma* matters greatly if one wants to continue to live in close relation with his/her kin. Because of the strict parental involvement in investigating the “clean origin” of the potential partner of their children, informants asserted that mixed marriage alliance, i.e. marriage between slave descendants and non-slaves, has been uncommon since the introduction of slavery in the study community. During my field work I cross-checked the marriage ban by collecting marriage genealogies of both redeemed and unredeemed slave descendants and it revealed that slave ancestors started marrying slaves and that they continued to practice this for more than four generations in the study community. Almost all slave descendants whom I identified engaged in contracted marriages with slave descendants.

Nevertheless, there are a few cases of mixed marriage (between slave descendants and free born). During my field stay I identified four cases of mixed marriage; two in Kanchama-Ochole and two in the upper town of Arbaminch. In Kanchama-Ochole a rich slave descendant and his son both married *mala* women. The women had volunteered to marry the *ayle* as they were wealthy. Such women, I was told, say “*Uma ala othai, santemewa!*” (What is important about the clan or social origin? What is important is money!); and “*Athi meyoda hedes ayleko gele!*” (If you want to have a luxurious life, marry a slave!). These women were completely cut off from their parents and kin groups after marrying *ayle*, as now they had turned into *ayle* themselves. The families of these women argued that, “*Tsegara durora alawa bu’asi!*” (Goat and sheep cannot mix), meaning that slave descendants cannot mix with freeborn.

Two freeborn men from Kanchama-Ochole who got married to *ayle* women were facing severe discrimination by their parents, kin groups and other *mala*. Their parents and kinsmen wept and mourned after the marriage, saying that they

had lost their children who had turned into slaves. The two men indicated to me that they felt as if they had lost their real humanity, as they were continuously mocked, insulted and scorned. Because of the serious exclusion from their kin groups and the community members they finally decided to migrate to Arbaminch to escape exclusion and maltreatment.

### Death and Funeral

Transmission of slavery during death and funeral rituals is dramatic and often results in the immediate exclusion. Death is the most serious of all the slave descendant transmission periods. Close interaction with descendants at such events can automatically turn people into slaves. It is also during an event of death, mourning and funeral, that people still recognize the previously existing slave-master relationships. The slave master initiates all activities: from giving postmortem care to the dead and giving funeral rituals at the death of the slaves who were owned by them in the past.

Numerous discussions conducted with informants (slave descendants, *mala* and *mana*) revealed that isolation of former slaves at events of death started right from the beginning of the origin of slavery in the study community. By then there were two areas of exclusion: by avoidance of food and drink and overnight stay before *la'a*<sup>10</sup>. The prevention was aimed to keep oneself away from being contaminated by slavery because of the strong traditional doctrine established that lack of deterrence on such areas during death automatically turned participants into the status of slave, and the pollution continues to contaminate the family line of the participant until he/she becomes redeemed. Therefore, when death occurs at a slave's home, the rest of the people weep and mourn with them but they do not share food and drink and stay overnight. They present food and drink to the deceased slave's family, but their own food is believed to turn into *chancha* (polluted and uneaten) as soon as it is handed over to the deceased slave's family<sup>11</sup>.

It is allowed, however, for *mala* to eat at their own slave descendant's funeral, i.e. slave masters are free to eat and drink at the death of the slaves who

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<sup>10</sup> *La'a* is complex concept having various connotations. In this study it denotes two issues. First, it implies emancipation/redemption of a slave descendant. In this case it denotes complete and permanent cleanness of the slave descendant. When a slave descendant is redeemed, it is called *la'atis* (meaning emancipated). Second, it indicates cleanness from temporary impurity. When a slave descendant dies or gives birth, the first six days are considered as the period of pollution. The seventh day is called *la'a* meaning the end of the period of impurity. There is no ritual required of the slave descendant to get cleaned. According to the customary law the seventh day is considered pure. Some of my informants, especially descendants of slave holders, associated *la'a* with Moses' laws from the Old Testament.

<sup>11</sup> I was repeatedly told that if one does not eat at a death event at a *mala* home, then the deceased's family complains by saying this is not *chancha*! Why don't you eat?

were owned by them in the past; it is only polluting to eat at an unrelated slaves' home.

On the death of the descendants of one's own slaves, the master and his kin group support the deceased slave's family in every aspect; they stay overnight, comfort them, eat and drink with them and even help bury the dead body. They freely do that because, people say, the slaves are considered to be their kinsmen since the time they became slaves of their masters. At that time the slaves were cut off from their kin group and established new fictive relation with their masters. I was told that the cooperation of slave master at the slaves' death is obligatory, and without him no one approaches the deceased slave's family. This is the case even though today there exist no real slave-master relationships anymore, but people still recognize the previously existing relations of their forefathers.

### **Recent Developments**

Apart from avoiding these principles other customs were introduced recently. The newly developed avoidance customs further complicated the situation of slave descendants. Almost all informants I interviewed agreed that the recent developments of avoidance customs are highly associated with "the commercialization" of slave redemption. Recently many slave descendants got redeemed, and the politico-religious leaders and ritual experts were concerned about the issue. They worried that all slave descendants could be redeemed and there would be no profit for them; they introduced new avoidance rules hoping that they would turn free borns into slaves.

The first newly introduced custom is that the free born should not be present at a slave descendant's home when he/she dies. This newly introduced norm caused more fear to non-slaves regarding the situation of slave descendants than ever before. A redeemed non-slave wife explained that she fears slavery more than a wild beast. Informants pointed out that when a slave descendant gets seriously sick, the non-slaves do not go to visit him/her because they fear that he/she could die at his/her presence, and that potentially could turn them into a slave of the dying person's master. Thus, instead of visiting and comforting the seriously sick slave descendant, the non-slaves run away—especially if they are in the neighborhood of the sick person.

The second is avoiding postmortem care to the dead. Informants elucidated that this is the obligatory task of the slave master. They explained that no one can perform this task except for the deceased person's family.<sup>12</sup> If anyone gives postmortem care before the master he immediately declares that a person becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Informants elucidated to me that in this circumstance other slaves cannot help the deceased person's family because the local tradition forbids them doing so.

his slave. Therefore, during such time the slave descendants can be helped only by their master or they carry the burden by themselves. In other words, the situation is worse for the slave descendants; a father gives postmortem care for his dead son and vice versa; a husband gives such care for his lost wife... etc. If death occurs at a woman-headed household, the situation becomes worse; she could be helped by her relatives or she could be isolated until her master comes.

The third avoidance consists of various issues. I was told that when a slave descendant dies, the first six days are believed to be the period of “temporary impurity.” The non-slave informants explained to me that when a person dies, *suba* (liquid?) discharges in his/her mouth and/or nose. Therefore, when a slave dies it is believed that a drop of *suba* further pollutes the whole deceased person’s compound and his family, and they get cleaned at the seventh day, *la’a*. In this context in previous time what was avoided was food and drink but now newly added avoiding practices include: washing hands, brushing teeth, sitting on wet grass, initiating tent erecting for guests and smoking cigarettes. I was told that anyone who is found doing one of these lists automatically turns into a slave of the deceased slave master. In addition to avoiding these, informants indicated that before *la’a* exchange of any household equipment with deceased, slave descendant’s family is strictly prohibited; for example, the non-slaves can present food to deceased person’s family but they cannot return the tool by which they presented the food to the grieving home prior to *la’a*.

The last avoidance is participation in the process of corpse burying. The process of burying the dead body starts by preparing a new grave. Preparing the tomb can only be started when the master of the deceased slave first initiates the digging, *chare*. If the grave is started in his absence by anyone, the master asks: *Odewa bosasi chare?* “Who initiated the tomb?” which means he is claiming to make the initiator his slave. Informants indicated that carrying the corpse to the tomb did not contaminate and turn one into slave but initiating it from home to outdoor does have the potential to pollute. During corpse burying, participation in filling up the pit does not impure one but initiating it is danger.

### **Transmission of Slave Status During Child Birth**

Various discussions with informants (*ayle*, *mala* and *mana*) indicated that the mechanism of transmission of slave status during child birth is almost similar to what it is during death and funeral and consequently exclusion of slave descendants during time of child delivery is almost similar to the one described in time of death. Informants portrayed that non-slaves do not help when a slave woman gives birth. They do not give the office of midwife to her. After she gives birth, the non-slaves can visit about the well being of the woman but they do not



eat and drink at her home. They also do not wash their hand, brush their teeth and/or sit on wet grass. In addition, no household tool can be exchanged between that slave home and the rest of the people until the woman gets cleaned at the seventh day, *la'a*. In other words, any household tools borrowed by slaves before the delivery would not be returned to the non-slaves until the seventh day. Only slaves give office of “midwife” to a slave woman when one is giving birth. It is also they who cooperate and interact with them after one gives birth.

The logic behind excluding slaves at the time of child birth is controversial among informants. Many argued that during the child birth the woman sheds blood and that the blood contaminates the slaves and their home further. Especially *mala* informants claimed that standing where slaves bleed can potentially impure him/her. This is not at every time and every place, they argued, it is only during culturally sanctioned times, such as during child birth. This assumption is not clear but many accept the thought and they simply argued that it is a culturally established norm.

### **The *Wozzo* Ritual: Redemption of Slaves**

Given the dehumanization slave descendants face during rites of passage, redemption is the only hope through which slave descendants retrieve their lost identity. The *wozzo* is Gamo language and implies redeeming or ransoming, and refers to “the buying back” of lost identity of the free born, *mala*. The ritual consists of several complex steps and missing one of them leads to a complete failure of the process. In case all required ritual steps are completed, this guarantees the slave descendant to be fully integrated into the mainstream society and therefore assuming all rights and privileges of the *mala*. The intricate and exact procedure of the ritual performance depends on the category of the slave to be redeemed.

According to the interview I conducted with redeemed slave descendants, slave masters and ritual experts (*maga* and *kati*) there are four basic levels or steps in the *wozzo* ritual that all have to be completed during the redemption process.

At level one the slave descendants accomplish the redemption process with their master. At this level the slave descendants can take the initiative to redeem themselves, or a mediator (*oge maga*) will connect him to his master.

When the slave descendant decides to undergo the ritual process, he selects elders (*lazantha*). The *lazantha* should be aged, socially accepted and respected and influential. They should also be knowledgeable of all details of the *wozzo* ritual, and they should also know the master’s family and lineage very well.

The *lazantha* and the slave descendant together go to the master’s home. After their arrival, the *lazantha*, on behalf of the *ayle*, falls down at the master’s

feet. While kissing the soil they plead, “*Tsela! Tsela! Tsela!*” (‘Look! Look! Look!’), asking the master to accept the request of his slave to be redeemed. At this level pleading and continuing negotiation and bargaining over redemption prices is tedious and complex. The master has absolute power; he can accept or reject the request of the slave descendant, he can handle the whole procedure fairly, but he can also make it difficult. Once the basic agreement has been made, the master initiates the redemption process by asking the price of the first ancestor of the slave descendant (*uma harafa*), which costs about 300-400 Ethiopian Birr. Paying *uma harafa* is the beginning step to redeem everyone in the descent line.<sup>13</sup>

When the master has collected *uma harafa*, he directs the next steps by ordering the elders of slave descendants: “*Gaydi eshayto!*” (‘Drive my oxen/cows’). Hereby he refers to the slave descendant who is considered his ‘ox/cow’, and then he tells the price of each of his ancestors up to the first in the descent line. The elders lead the *ayle* to the master, saying: “*Eshayto gaydi! Hiti! Hiti! Hiti!*” (‘Your ox/cow is this’), and then the *ayle* has to fall down on his knees and walk like an ox/cow before his master, roaring and mooing.

As indicated above, the cost of the redemption is not fixed. It depends on the category of the slave (*bacha/chancha*), sex and the economic power of the slave descendants. *Bacha ayle* must give up their residence and farm land, and material produced and attained in their lifetime to their master. They cut their nails, shave their heads and leave completely naked after being redeemed, so thereby start a new life in a new area. *Chancha ayle* have no impurity in their descent line and they, therefore, undergo only their own case. Their cost is much less than that of the *bacha ayle* or/and *lataa ayle*. The cost of female *ayle* is usually higher than that of male because female slaves are considered as “seed” to produce new slaves through formal marriage or sexual immorality.

The order of redemption is flexible. At the first level of redemption, a married *ayle* can first redeem his own descent line, or his wife’s descent line. However, redeemed slave descendants indicated to me that often husbands redeem their descent line first and afterwards they redeem their wives’. The slave descendant can also redeem his deceased ancestors first or he can redeem himself, his family and his living parents first and then his deceased ancestors.

When the *ayle* finishes paying the required amount for his father, himself and his children, the master starts the redemption. The *ayle* should be present, his children can be there in person or represented by ritual sticks, one for each child. The master relieves him from being an *ayle* and blesses him:

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<sup>13</sup> During slave redemption slave descendants not only redeem themselves but all deceased ancestors starting from the apical ancestor. Without redeeming deceased ancestors redemption cannot be complete. In addition to redeeming the deceased ancestors individually they redeem the works their ancestors delivered to their masters. According to informants this is the most fraudulent and deceptive part of the redemption process.

Hanzope gede nena anjakotede, nena dere maqada la'akotede, kati shato maqe, dana shato maqe ne shatora ta shatora eputi geluti  
(‘From now on I have blessed you, so that you can be a citizen, live like a king and noble man, May your children and mine marry each other!’)

Then he puts wet grass on the *ayle*, which means that now he is redeemed. Now, the redeemed *ayle* starts singing (*gayro*):

Ntsa kesisade wozitisade, lathi kare halsutesadee, hanzope gede galape kastakotede metope kesokotede  
(‘I am set free, I am redeemed, and I finished at master gate, from today on I am released from my debt. My problem is solved!’)

Then, the redeemed *ayle* runs away. He avoids looking behind the master because gazing back at the master during the ritual process is believed to disqualify the redemption.

The next step of the *wozzo* ritual is performed at the *maga's* gateway. The *maga* is politico-religious ritual expert positioned below the *kati* (king). At the *maga's* gate the *lathantha* once again fall down on behalf of the *ayle* and laying at the *maga's* feet they kiss the soil and plead “*Tsela! Tsela! Tsela!*” (‘Look! Look! Look!’). Again there is negotiation over the price for redemption but often it depends on the economic power of the *ayle*. Other than at the master’s house, many people attend the ritual at the *maga's* home, including the elders of the community, the family of the redeemed *ayle*, and the ritual elders of the redeemed slave descendant and the lineage (family) members of the *ayle* master.

Before ritually blessing the *ayle*, the main task of *maga* is to cross check whether the *ayle* has completely finished his redemption with various *lathies*<sup>14</sup>. He has to confirm that the redemption, i.e. the payment to the master’s family has been completed before one can proceed, as an unfinished redemption means that the *ayle* has not changed his status and therefore still is a danger to the *maga* and others as he can still pass on his status through marriage alliance or eating and drinking together at funerals, etc.

The *maga* and his wife are paid for redeeming the *ayle*. After completion of payment, the *maga* purifies and blesses *ayle* by saying:

Hanzope gede nena anjakotede, nena dere maqada la'akotede, kati shato maqe, dana shato maqe nu shatora ne shatora eputi geluti

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<sup>14</sup> Redemption starts with the first ancestor in the descent line and therefore there could be many masters when a man starts to redeem both his mother’s and father’s line.

(‘Now that I have blessed you, be a citizen, live like a king and noble man, may our children and your children marry each other’).

Then he puts wet grass on the *ayle*’s head suggesting he is cleaned and emancipated. Soon the *ayle* starts expressing his happiness by *gayro* (singing):

Ntsa kesisade wozitisade, maga kare halsutesadee, hanzope gede metope kesokotede

(‘I am set free, I am redeemed, my freedom is assured by the maga, and my problem is solved’)

Ritual purification of the slave descendant with the *kati* is the third and most important step. Again, the elders of the slave descendant accompany him and on behalf of him fall down at the *kati*’s feet and kiss the soil while saying: “*Tsela! Tsela! Tsela!*” (‘Look! Look! Look!’). The difference between the *maga* and the *kati* redemption is that the *maga* recognizes the redemption of the slave descendant to his constituency only, whereas the *kati* acknowledges his redemption to the entire Ganta community. The *kati* and his wife are paid for the ritual process. The *kati* ends the redemption by saying:

Hanzope gede la’a maqe apute, gelute

(‘From now on you are emancipated and integrated into the community, marry and be married with them’).

The final stage of the *wozzo* ritual performance is the *soffe* celebration which involves the public announcement of the new status of the *ayle*. The *soffe* is performed at Shoshane market. The Shoshane market is the meeting point of the entire Ganta community and the surrounding areas including Arbaminch and other Gamo communities. The basic objective of celebrating the redemption at this market is to announce to the entire community, i.e. the people from nearby and from far, that the slave descendant is redeemed and integrated. Hereby, future confusion in marriage arrangements shall be avoided, and the full participation and interaction during funerals, marriage and childbirth will be granted for the redeemed and all his family.

Regardless of its complex and economically destructive aspects, the community trusts in *wozzo* ritual. Out of 71 households in three Ganta villages (Kanchama-Ochole, Meyche and Bonke) with a total population of 300 people I identified 51 households were integrated through the *wozzo* ritual, having completed the above mentioned noted levels and steps): Five households remained unfinished, i.e. they processed level one and were interrupted at that level due to

financial problems. Today they are perceived as potential sources of impurity. The remaining fifteen households are unredeemed.

## Conclusion

Years ago, Kevin Bales, a noted scholar in the field of contemporary slavery, argued that “in the academic and policy analysis of contemporary slavery, many of the fundamental areas of enslavement are yet to be explored and brought into systematic presentation” (Bales 2005:1). Taking Bales’ argument as point of departure, in the conclusion I will be concerned with two issues. First, the ethnographic material and the conceptual framework I used. Second, I’ll show what is new in this research.

I argue that despite peaceful, cooperative and coexistent relationships between slave descendants and the rest of the community members (*mala* and craft workers) slavery is still a lived condition of slave descendants in Ganta (Gamo) community of southern Ethiopia.

My first justification comes from the contemporary slavery definition from Anti-Slavery International. Since its foundation in 1839 Anti-Slavery International started working on chattel slavery and now shifted its attention to contemporary slavery (Welch 2009). According to Anti-Slavery International, descent slavery is a form of contemporary slavery. In societies where descent slavery exists, slavery is a condition ascribed at birth, passing through generations. Such societies living under caste-based social hierarchy are based on ethnic or racial lines. Free born (noble class) at the top, craft workers at the middle and slaves at the bottom level. The slaves face high exclusion due to being member in the slave caste group. This framework clearly shows how the Ganta (Gamo) society practices slavery today. In Gamo, slavery is not achieved status. It is ascribed to them because of their descent line. The strict social hierarchy is also a practical way of putting the slave descendants at the bottom level (below craft workers). Severe exclusion of slave descendants due to being members in the slave caste group is the real case in Gamo society.

Related to Anti-Slavery International’s definition of contemporary slavery is the theory of Orlando Patterson. In his book *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Patterson argues that slavery is a “relation of domination.” He says that power hierarchy and domination is essential to define slavery. In Ganta (Gamo) society, asymmetrical power relationships between slaves and their master, slaves and ritual experts, slaves and free born, slaves and the craft workers clearly reveals the relation of domination. In all aspects slave descendants are at the bottom. Nevertheless, masters have total power and slave descendants are not totally

powerless. The “social death” and “natal” isolation of slaves from the community (which Patterson argues) is incompatible in the context of Gamo.

My second justification is based on Caring and *et al's* (2007) approach on contemporary slavery. According to these authors slavery is “severe economic exploitation” and “control of one person over another by the panorama or reality of violence.” I argue that the severe economic exploitation of slave descendants in Ganta (Gamo) can be seen in the process of slave redemption. During slave redemption slave descendants lose all their assets acquired or produced during their lifetime, including their land and house (especially when they are *bacha/lataa ayle*); they give all to their master, descendants of former slave holders. They go naked as that was the way they joined their master. Is that not economic exploitation? The requirement of redeeming all deceased ancestors in the descent line is a deliberate mechanism to exploit the slave descendants. During redemption the slave master solely decides the redemption price and slaves have no right to argue and are forced to pay the determined amount. Borrowing Bales’ expression I argue this is a “hidden crime,” or, according to Welch it is a “subtle” form of slavery. Control of slave masters over slave descendants by panorama can be revealed on the way they restrict others’ involvement in the lives of slave descendants during rites of passage (marriage, death and child birth). When non-slaves closely participate with slave descendants during rites of passage the slave masters automatically turn them into the status of slaves. Then, unless they redeem themselves, their descent line continues in contamination. Thus non-slaves harshly exclude the slaves in such specific situations. Exclusion is a precondition for redemption and redemption is an exploitative strategy. It is control in my view.

When Bales says, “many of the fundamental areas of enslavement are yet to be explored and brought into systematic presentation” (Bales 2005:1), it was on the issue of debt bondage. I argue that this study partially fulfills that anticipation. The ideology of “debt bondage” in Ganta (Gamo) is to some extent different from what it is defined in “1956 Supplementary Convention” that Bales himself approach in *Southeast Asia: Collateral debt bondage slavery and coercive fraudulent debt bondage slavery* (Bales 2005: 1). In Ganta (Gamo) debt bondage is a loaded term and implies: innate debt (money or good) borrowed by slave ancestors, inherent debt (money or good) given in exchange for slave ancestors. Also it implies slave ancestors who were caught as captives during the war periods.

Finally, I argue that this study sheds light on the history as well as on contemporary perspectives of slavery. In my view the contagion aspect of slavery is new. Manumission and redemption of slaves is common in the history of slavery. What is new in Ganta (Gamo) is this structured and institutionalized form of ancestral redemption. As last point I confess that this study is limited to the community of Ganta (which belongs to the larger Gamo communities - there are

more than forty Gamo communities). Therefore, this study can be used as a point of departure for further study in broader Gamo communities or in Omotic regions within southern Ethiopia in general.

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