The Gumuz: Are They Shifting Cultivators?

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Shifting cultivation is one of the less explored subjects in anthropology. The existing literature has serious limitations in providing a broader picture of the dynamics of the system. Shifting cultivation is variably addressed as part or form of hunting/ gathering, pastoralism or as combinations of these systems. Such (mis)representation has contributed for continued confusion and misunderstanding. Some of the theoretical tools that attempted to establish shared common features among shifting cultivators exclude people like the Gumuz due to paucity of data on the diversity and dynamics of the system. This paper compares and tests these general criteria with empirical ethnographic data from the Gumuz.

Introduction

Shifting cultivation as an economic system is known with different names and terms. Among others hoe cultivation, horticulture, swidden agriculture/cultivation (an old European term), slash-and burn, crop rotation and crop fallow are used in one way or another to refer to the practice of shifting cultivation. The term horticulture is used to denote the transition between forager societies and those of agrarian societies. Shifting cultivation, on the other hand, is described as a form of agriculture in which farm plots are shifted regularly to allow soil fertility to recover. The practice mainly depends on the periodic shifting of farm plots in favour of new and fertile ones (Berihun 2004; Boserup 1970).

Many shifting cultivators practice slash-and-burn the trees and bushes in the new fields as part of their farming cycle. But some clear the land without burning, and some still migrate to new areas without employing cyclical method on a given plot. Thus the concept of slash-and- burn only explains one aspect of the practice. The same is true for the “crop rotation” and “crop fallow” terms, which shows the differences in perspectives and emphasis among researchers. This multiplicity of terms, to a certain extent, is a source of confusion and indicates some sort of lack of clarity when it comes to our understanding of shifting cultivation as a system. In fact in attempting to define horticulture Johnson noted that “‘horticulturalist’ is one of those categories, common enough in our field, whose meaning seams clear until we attempt to define its boundaries exactly – that is, provide rules for deciding who is a horticulturalist and who is not” (Johnson 1989:50). Johnson further states that horticulture covers a large and diverse array of economic and social systems.

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2 The practice of shifting cultivation is known by different terminologies. Some of these designations refer to one or other dimensions (aspects) of the activity, such as the tools used (as in hoe cultivation), the periodic shifting of plots (as shifting cultivation) and slash and burn to indicate the cutting and burning of trees in preparing new plots. These terms are used interchangeably. Shifting cultivation seems more widely used although the other terms are also fairly common. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will use mainly the term shifting cultivation and hoe cultivation.
This paper is, therefore, aimed at outlining some of the effects of the confusion in categorizing a certain socio-cultural group as shifting cultivators in some of the literature and non-shifting cultivators in others. It also challenges the commonly shared features of shifting cultivators which are used to compare and contrast with other form of economic practices. I will attempt to show the limitations of such generalization in a context of ethnographic data drawn from the Gumuz of northwest Ethiopia. I argue that groups such as the Gumuz have been labelled by some authors as pastoralists and hunters/gatherers due to this limited understanding and lack of clarity on shifting cultivation. Despite the claims of establishing shared common features of shifting cultivators, there is a visible paucity of information on shifting cultivation even compared to the literature on hunter/gatherers (foragers) and pastoralists. I return to this general point shortly. First I will briefly discuss the ethnographic account of the Gumuz.

The Gumuz
The Gumuz are one of the peoples of northwest Ethiopia inhabiting the extended north-western lowlands stretched from Gondär in the north to Wälläga in the south. Currently, the Gumuz are mainly incorporated in the Benišangul-Gumuz Regional State of which the Gumuz predominantly live in two of the three zonal administrative divisions namely, Mätäkäl and Kämaši (the third being Assosa), and two special wärädas (i.e. Pawe and Mao-Komo). The Gumuz language (ingäša-boga) belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language family. Most of the data used in this discussion is collected among the Gumuz of Mätäkäl at various times, mainly during my dissertation fieldwork conducted at various times in 1999, 2000 and 2002. About 55-60% (66,532) of the Gumuz live in the five wärädas of Mätäkäl.

The Gumuz of Mätäkäl are socially organized on the basis of two main factors; clan and territory. In terms of kinship the Gumuz are organized in different clans and sub-clans that consist of people who claim patrilineal descent relations. They practice exogamous and polygamous exchange marriage and residence for newly married couples is mostly patrilocal. Generally intra-clan relations involve a limited area of claims and co-operation. The practical restrictions and obligations that a clan member has to his fellow men are mainly related to marriage. A person is not allowed to marry an individual who has a claim to the same clan ancestor as one’s own (Berihun 2004).

The most important economic endeavour in Gumuz is shifting cultivation, locally known as mälaya. The word mälaya is also used to mean “work” which implies that work and agriculture are synonymous. Agricultural activities are mainly based on human labour and the use of the hoe. In the process of the hoe cultivation they periodically rotate agricultural plots. Plots that are cultivated for some, usually three to four years, will be left fallow for six to ten years. Every year they clear and use new plots and leave fallow old ones for a certain period of time (Berihun 2004).

Each year a Gumuz family clears new forest land, kanča land, to produce millet, while some of the previous plots are still in use. The Gumuz family has different types of plots that are in use for harvesting a variety of crops in a single agricultural calendar. The Gumuz identify two main plot types, i.e. kanča and hokuma land. Kanča plots are, as mentioned above, the freshly cleared lands used to grow finger millet as the main crop type in the intercropping farming practice. In the second year kanča plots are called jitank’a and are sown with sorghum as the main crop. The varieties of seeds that will be intercropped in jitank’a plots are fewer than in kanča plots. The third year a

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3 See Berihun (2004).
A kanča plot is turned to bokuna but it is at the same time a sorghum field and sometimes called jikuanča. This second sorghum harvest, however, is not a result of new hoeing and sowing. It rather is a ratoon cropping that arises from the regenerating sorghum roots from the harvest of the previous year. After the third year a plot is left fallow for a period of six to ten years, which presently tends to be reduced to four to six years due to an increasing land shortage. There are several factors for a growing land shortage among the Gumuz, of which settlement of non-Gumuz highlanders to the region is one major reason (Berihun 2004). I discuss more on the ethnographic accounts further below as part of my argument whether the Gumuz have been understood as shifting cultivators or otherwise.

The Gumuz: Shifting Cultivators or Hunter-gatherers/ Pastoralists?

The Gumuz can be taken as good ethnographic evidence for how we misunderstood shifting cultivation and how little information is available on such socio-cultural groups in general. Some authors label the Gumuz as pastoralists; others refer to them as “nomadic hunter/cultivators”. Olson (1996) is one among those who define the Gumuz as pastoralists. Under the entry of the term “Gumuz”, Olson states that the Gumuz are an ethnic group living in the Sudan and far western Ethiopia. They speak a Nilotic language and make their living as semi-nomadic pastoralists, raising cattle, and as plough agriculturalists. As a dictionary definition, we may not expect detailed information but there is no hint about the Gumuz being shifting cultivators. In fact they are described by economic activities they practice least. The Gumuz, or for that matter most of the shifting cultivators, are not known for their stock raising. Animal husbandry and poultry are important activities that complement the hoe cultivation but are not the main economic activities.

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Berihun 2004), in Gumuz the purpose and use of the small cattle and goat stocks are different from what is common among the pastoralists and neighbouring highlanders. First, since the Gumuz are hoe cultivators and not plough farmers, cattle (particularly oxen) are not relevant for farming as it is for the neighbouring ethnic groups. Second, the Gumuz are not accustomed to the use of milk and milk products as part of their diet, while it is part of the staple diet among pastoralists. The Gumuz raise cattle and goats as a source of meat and for the main purpose of ritual offering such as sacrificing animals at death rituals (keməša) and other similar human and spiritual-godly relations (Berihun 2004:117).

Hoe cultivation is the main occupation and source of subsistence in Gumuz. Other economic activities, including hunting and gathering, limited animal husbandry, beekeeping, keeping poultry and small scale fishing are supplementary. Contrary to this, a UNDP/RRC report identified the Gumuz as “hunter/cultivators”. It is hard to explain what “hunter/cultivator” represents as a combined concept as such. The terminology

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4 Boserup noted that there are many “tribal communities” in Africa who practice shifting cultivation as a main form of economic subsistence. Grigg noted that agriculture the main characteristics of shifting cultivation “is found in parts of America, Asia and Africa[…] and for the most part is confined to the tropical areas within these continents. In 1957 it was estimated that 200 000 000 people depend upon shifting cultivation and that they occupied- including cropland and fallow- 33 000 000 km², an area more than twice the world’s cropland” (Grigg 1974:60). Warner also stated that stimates of the actual number of shifting cultivators vary from 250 million to 300 million (1991:9). There are no much written resources on shifting cultivation compared to what we have on hunter/gatherers, pastoralists and peasants. One reason for such less emphasis could be the mixing of the definition of shifting cultivators with hunter/gatherers and pastoralists.
itself hints some confusion and uncertainty on the part of the authors. Hunting and gathering in the current context of the Gumuz of Mätäkäl are peripheral undertakings, a subsidiary to the hoe cultivation. Thus emphasizing these peripheral activities to the extent of labelling the Gumuz “hunter-cultivators” as the report by UNDP/RRC research team does is more of a hasty and unfounded conclusion. Hunting is in most cases an activity of individuals on their way to and from agricultural work. During the day people may hunt small games when they have short breaks from the farming job while at other times hunting remains an “off-work” undertaking. This is mainly related to the Gumuz’s perception and interpretation of hunting that goes beyond its economic relevance. It is rather a ritual endeavour. As a result many of the game animals are not consumed by all members of the household and are connected with many taboos and restrictions (Berihun 2004:115). The “hunter/cultivator” labelling, hence, is an additional evidence for the paucity of information on shifting cultivation.

How can one establish a shared common feature of shifting cultivators under such limited (if not confused) information? How far can such generalizations explain the reality? What will be its heuristic significance? I will discuss these and related issues taking Johnson’s “features most widely shared by contemporary horticultural peoples around the world” (1989:50). Johnson has listed the common features of horticulturalists and compared and contrasted them with foragers and peasants. My aim here is to see how far these features match with the ethnographic data from the Gumuz.

Johnson listed eight main common features of horticulturalists, two of which (production for subsistence and distribution throughout the humid tropics) are so common that they encompass many of the people engaged in other forms of economies as subsistence producers. I choose the most challenging ones that match the Gumuz ethnographic data. These include dependence on slash and burn or shifting cultivation of root crops for the vast bulk of food energy in the diet; provision of labour and technology by the nuclear or extended family of the producer; control of land by multifamily corporate kin groups; settlement in villages or in well-defined clan territories, with population of several hundred members; and political leaders of either headman or the Big Man varieties, with important roles in production, exchange, and resource allocation (Johnson 1989:50). When we measure the Gumuz practice of shifting cultivation against the listed features an unbridgeable gap appears.

Although slash and burn is a common practice, cultivation of root crops is not part of the main crop production in Gumuz. As discussed in Berihun (2004:114) finger millet and sorghum constitute the main agricultural products. Each of the crops has twelve and fourteen varieties respectively. The word tank’a (finger millet) is connotatively used to mean “grain” or “cereal”. Millet is sown in a newly cleared plot of land (kanča la). Such newly farmed millet plots are known in Gumuz as č̱əč̱əmat̤əsə. Sowing a single crop is uncommon. Intercropping, i.e. sowing different crops in a single plot is the usual way of farming. During my fieldwork in 2000, I observed a new farm, which was sown with different seeds of crops, including finger millet, sorghum, endọha, rapeseed, jampa (a variety of sorghum which has sweet sap similar to sugar cane) and sesame grain. A bean-like and creeping crop called oppa is also planted at the bottom of

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3 endọha is a crop that has pepper-like fruits and is used as a sauce or a component to prepare a sauce. It has a jelly-like substance. One can use endọha fresh or dried and powdered to make the sauce. In Gumuz, it is also eaten raw. endọha is also called wayka and is used by some highlanders to reduce the hotness of pepper in a sauce.
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Most of the time independent family households prepare kemālaya turn by turn, while new couples may not have their own farm that needs a big work force for a year or two. Thus the Gumuz have kemālaya that refers to the group labour organization formed in a village, a group that has a relative permanency and reciprocates labour among its members. A usual kemālaya workgroup constitutes lineage members who live close to each other. On average a workgroup has about 10 to 12 members who participate in daily reciprocating labour force. The reciprocation of labour, however, may not be one to one since the return of labour depends largely on the host's ability and resources to prepare kaya for the kemālaya. Here it is important to note that kemālaya workgroups are not exclusively based on lineage membership. Persons who have affinal relations and live in villages of in-laws can also be part of kemālaya workgroups in a village (Berihun 2004:120). There are also other ad hoc forms of kemālaya workgroups which are called kemahəda and kemambəriya, both of which are organized for specific tasks and mobilized when required. Kemahəda is organized for a specific task and on occasional basis during the harvesting and weeding seasons. Apart from its ad hoc nature, a kemahəda workgroup is usually composed of people who are both paternal and maternal relatives. Reciprocation is not anticipated in kemahəda labour since the participants are basically helping a relative who is in a critical situation (Berihun 2004:122). Kemambəriya is a form of mobilizing a bigger workforce and brings together people from different villages and clans. This type of labour organization consists mainly of people of the same sex on the basis of friendship regardless of clan affiliation and residence. The number of kemambəriya members varies considerably, but in most cases kemambəriya groups consist of more people than the village kemālaya workgroup. According to my informants the smaller kemambəriya workgroup can have 16 to 20 members of same sex, while a larger group could be between 25 to 30 members. Such a group has the ability to finish an individual’s farm plot within a day. In fact it is considered as the strongest workforce that one can organize for the purpose of agricultural activities (Berihun 2004:123). Thus labour organization in Gumuz is not limited to the nuclear and extended family members and this makes it another challenge for the assumption of shared common features.

When it comes to control of land by multifamily corporate kin groups, this assertion is based on a common view that clans own land and control the distribution and use of land and related resources. This was an undisputed assumption among several authors on the Gumuz too. Actually this argument takes the assumption of clans as territorial

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6 The clearing of farmlands is made leaving some selected tall and straight trees all over the field. These trees will be burnt at the bottom so that they die but stand to be used as a support for the creeping crops. I used the term castration to express this practice of killing a tree.
groups as its point of departure, which is a common misconception. This clan based collective ownership argument is more an ideal model and conceals much of the complex nature of Gumuz socio-economic dynamics and the role of the individual in making important decisions. Thus in the context of the Gumuz, there are no clear territories of clan owned lands, forests, and woodland and hunting and gathering grounds as such. In fact clan relations are more visible and important at village levels than at wider territorial groupings. This is because clan locations and residences are not confined to single territories. It is not uncommon to find members of the same clan (or sub-clan) inhabiting different and territorially discontinuous locations (Berihun 2004: 80, 129-30). As a result taking this as a common feature leaves out the Gumuz from among the shifting cultivators.

Another common element assumed to exist among horticulturalists is political leaders of either the headman or the Big Man varieties, with important roles in production, exchange, and resource allocation. It is difficult to agree that there are individuals in Gumuz who assume either the headman or Big Man status. There are, however, individuals who assume leadership positions for different socio-cultural and religious practices such as religious rituals, group conflict arbitration and similar matters. In Gumuz the lineage dominates most of the relations. Many individual actions and deeds are implicated and interpreted in terms of lineage relations. This perception has much practical significance in relation to conflicts and feuds between various levels of lineage segmentations encompassing interethnic conflicts (Berihun 2004:178). Conflicts are arbitrated and resolved through elders (obtəsəbəga) (Berihun 2004:242). Thus in Gumuz lineage (group) decisions and arbitration through the elders play important roles as opposed to the headman type of leadership, which is an additional factor for the lack of inclusiveness in our shared common features.

Johnson himself is well aware of such possible limitations in establishing the shared common features and noted that when one attempts to categorize who shifting cultivator and who is not, it is “apparent that the boundaries are fuzzy and littered with variants” (Johnson 1989:50). Boserup also discussed shifting cultivation. She acknowledged in the preface of her book that “Many of the conclusions drawn in the book [concerning shifting cultivators] are necessarily tentative and provisional, and some aspects of the problem had to be omitted for lack of basic information” (Boserup 1970:5). Boserup also discussed the issue of gender among African shifting cultivators and stated that “Africa is the region of female farming par excellence. In many African tribes, nearly all the tasks connected with food production continue to be left to women. In most of these tribal communities, the agricultural system is that of shifting cultivation…” (Boserup 1970:16). Boserup’s discussion has ample room for disagreement and her positions are open for challenge when tested with empirical data from people such as the Gumuz. I will only make brief remarks on her views on gender relations among shifting cultivators due to the limited space available here.

Boserup argued, “...in very sparsely populated regions where shifting cultivation is used, men do little farm work, the women doing most. In somewhat more densely populated regions, where the agricultural system is that of extensive plough cultivation, women do little farm work and men do much more. ...” (Boserup 1970:35). Briefly put,

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7 The concept of “obtəsəbəga” is different from the concept of old, ganza, which is not used in the context of the former. However, the compound word “duganz”, literally son of an old person, has a connotation of respectfulness and is used to address persons. For instance, a person may call an individual whose name he does not know duganz.
agricultural activities in Gumuz are an occupation of both men and women. Although the division of labour seems to follow gender differences, as it applies to most other activities, there is no major gendered differentiation in terms of participation. One occasion in which gender differences become important is related to clearing of big trees in acquiring new plots (kančas), which is men’s work. On the other hand transporting the produce from the threshing field to grain stores is in most cases done by women. These can be considered as spheres of gendered participation in the process of the agricultural practices. The gender issue is much more relevant when it comes to labour organization. As discussed above, all major agricultural activities are undertaken in the form of reciprocating communal labour, i.e. kemälayas. The organization of kemälaya groups is entirely dependent on the availability of women and their organizing ability in the household. In fact looking at the current farming practice of the Gumuz, one can conclude that absence of women in a household is tantamount to non-existence of agricultural work at all (Berihun 2004: 135).

Boserup further stated that dominant female farming pattern is “found in regions of shifting agriculture where plough is not used” (Boserup 1970:24). This position has several drawbacks. First and foremost shifting cultivators in Africa are not isolated from other forms of agriculture, namely plough cultivation. The Gumuz, for instance, have lived for centuries with people who have been practicing plough cultivation. Boserup pictured the men in African shifting cultivators as “lazy”, “exploitive of female and child labour” and “highly rational”, calculating every step of the way of their advantages at the expense of their wives and children. In fact she argued that “the work burden carried by women, however, is large, since women also had to perform domestic duties. Since this double work burden is an obligation rooted in the traditional marriage system, which gives men command over female labour, it could perhaps be said that the large share of the added work input in agriculture was obtained by means of the stick, and not the carrot” (Boserup 1981:148; emphasis mine). This statement is close to comparing slave with female labour where men are forcing their women (wives) to serve them. With all the hardships and difficult tasks women are engaged in these societies, they deserve much better assumptions than reducing them to mere forced labourers.

Women are not passive participants and do not just simply follow orders. They are part and parcel and pillar of the family to the extent that their absence means non-existence or formation of the family itself. Such is the case in Gumuz labour organization. In Gumuz, individual labour (both male and female) is not well recognized as independent before marriage. Lineage members (both male and female) have no significant individual holdings of land. This does not mean that they have no right to have one. Rather they have not yet assumed independence from their natal family and remain dependent until they get married. Thus they work for the family and their labour will not be reciprocated since they are perceived as subordinate to their natal family. In addition, an unmarried individual (male or female) cannot have an independent kemälaya (beer for organizing communal labour), which is the basis of private property. For unmarried individuals this is simply impossible since they do not prepare the koya (beer) by themselves. Preparing the kemälaya is much easier for women, but since they are not married they do not have the resource, i.e. grains for the beer and a house of their own to keep the belongings and make the provision for the participants. Thus in the marriage process the individual becomes a recognized adult who can prepare the kemälaya and call for the labour of other members. As a result a
person does not only individualize his own labour but also gets the communal labour for his individual benefits. This works for both sexes.

Thus Boserup’s assertion lacks broader understanding of the context where such gendered relations function and in most of the cases she singled out one dimension and missed the full context. She also belittled women among shifting cultivators and reduced them to a level of passive forced labourers in order to show male domination. Boserup also went a great length to prove her assertion and made a comparison between African shifting cultivation and Asian plough cultivation. Boserup’s argument rather implicitly approves that Asia is more developed than Africa and plough cultivation is a sign of such difference (Boserup 1970: 26, 31).

In general shifting cultivators are misrepresented and misunderstood in many ways. It is difficult to reach a conclusion and draw shared common features based on the limited and less informed literature available. If we take such measures as a yardstick, the Gumuz would not be included in a category of shifting cultivators. Thus the empirical data I have discussed shows the limitations of the existing discourse of shifting cultivation and calls for a broader focus and rethinking that will help understand the seemingly simple socio-cultural dynamics.

References


