

THE DROUGHT AND THE POWER



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In March 2017, the 71th Aba Gada was chosen among the Borana tribe in south Ethiopia. This ceremony celebrates the election of traditional leader, which is held every 8 years since 560 years ago.

Lately classified by UNESCO, this event occurs in a very special context : the Borana tribe, part of Oromo people who make up around a third of the Ethiopian population, is suffering from drought for months. Cows are dying, meanwhile many people are complaining the lack of support from the government, thus generating massive uprisings, repressions and killing hundreds of protesters.



Borana live in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia with a population of 500,000. They are semi pastoralists. Their life depends on their livestock, which are their only wealth. Their cattle are used in sacrifices and also as dowry or to pay legal fines. For one year, there has been no rain and more than 15,000 cows have died in Ethiopia.



This Borana shepherd says he lost 100 cows over the last weeks. He does not want to mention how many are still alive: in the Borana tradition, a man never talks about how many cows he owns, as it may give ideas to robbers... Later he confesses he only has 50 cows left.



The shepherds gather their cows in special areas provided by the government where they can be fed with grass. In Borana culture, a man's wealth is measured by the number of livestock he has. Many own over 1000 animals. Anyone with less than 20 head of cattle is considered impoverished.



In Borana culture, mutual aid is the key: those whose cattle are hit by drought will be supported and get free cows from those whose cattle are saved. But nowadays all the areas are under drought: no one can help anybody. « *There is no hope, I am not educated, there is no more grass, my cows are dying, I cannot sell them because they are too weak to reach the market. Now I am waiting for death ...*» Says an old man.



Every Sunday, Borana people go to church to make prayers for rain. Few men are joining, as they are all busy taking care of the remaining cow.



As the climate is changing, Borana have also been increasingly dependent from NGO's help, which is culturally repugnant to these proud people. They are forced to sell their animals before they die. This is not in accordance with their tradition. It is easier to find Coke than water in some areas.



Clans own their own wells that run for centuries. They are vital in these Borana arid areas.

The wells are called the singing wells: the young, strong men carry the water from the well to the top where people and animals wait for their turn. The songs are usually about the cattle. Singing is a way to keep a good tempo in the chain.

Conflicts over water are forbidden. If someone starts a fight, he will have to sacrifice one cow or risk being banned from the wells which is virtually a death penalty in the community.

But due to the drought, those wells are mostly dry, and people must find other solutions...



In the Borana tradition, there is a specific hierarchy for accessing the water: priority is given to the horses, then the calfs, then women, then cows, and finally the camels. Goats and sheep get access to the water anytime. But with the drought, everybody rushes to any point of water.



« My home is 5 km away from here. I come here three times a day. I come twice to take water for my cows, and then I come back for my family. The water is dirty, full of cow dungs and insects. This is disgusting, but I don't have any choice. I filter it with my clothes. » she says , she cries.



« For 6 years, I have been drinking the same water as my animals' ». On the hill stands the electric pillar coming from Gibbe dam. Many Borana complain: Ethiopia sells electricity to Kenya but never provides water to people and animals. It is part of the Oromo anger.



The Gada is an egalitarian socio-economic and political system of the Oromo people. Power rotates between five classes every 8 years, turning from leaders to leaders for more than 560 years. In March 2017, Kura Jarso, 30-year old, became the 71st Abba Gadaa. All the former Borana leaders are listed on this billboard.



Borana are Oromo people. Over the last months, lot of clashes raised between the government forces and Oromo people, killing hundreds and sending thousands in jail. Lots of Oromo journalists but also from Addis Ababa, belonging to medias controlled by the government, come to the ceremony to show that everything was peaceful.



High tensions raises before the beginning of the Gada ceremony due to the State of Emergency declared in October 2016. It gives a lot of power to the army and the police. It also imposes restrictions on freedom of speech and access to information: many newspapers have to be closed and Internet is regularly shut down for days in Oromia.



In November 2016, a few weeks after the State of Emergency was declared in Ethiopia, UNESCO inscribed the Gada system on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Oromo people regard it as a victory over the central government. Borana say seriously that USA copies their system as they allow presidential election every 8 years.



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The event gathers people from all over Oromia, even from Kenya where also live some Borana. The police widely controls the area, as many people fear clashes with the army.



The ceremony is a good opportunity for Borana to show their culture, even though no tourists dare to visit this area. Women wear their traditional clothes. Men are proud to show the virgin girls who are easily recognizable: they have a tonsure at the top of the head, from the age of 5 until they get married.





The Borana call these decorations "Kallo". Only the wives of prominent men wear those calabashes on celebration days. The leader's wives wear special ornaments made of leather and of bottle caps.



The Borana cook the coffee beans in butter. They pray before drinking it, asking the rain to come. These people depend on milk for survival.



Mr Doyo is wearing a kalacha, a phallus-shaped ornament. It protects all who touch it. The man who wears the kalacha must always stay calm and not speak loudly. He is a wise man who the new Aba Gada will get advise from.



Married men carry the "ororo" sticks. They never leave them! Those men are called "abba worra" (the head of the family). They are all waiting for the new leader who is in a secret place for a few days while taking the power.



The councilors of the future Aba Gada must remain in the same place without washing their bodies or their clothes. While waiting for the new leader, they spend their time meeting visitors and drinking hot Coke. During this time, the power is transferred to the new Aba Gada in a secret ceremony no-one can attend. « *It has the power to kill unauthorized observers* » according to the elders.



When the white horse of the new Aba Gada is in the compound, this means the power has been transferred, and the new leader comes back. He has disappeared for 3 days with his horse.



Here is Kura Jarso, the 71st Borana Oromo Abba gadaa and his councilors. He is educated and was studying statistics at Hawassa University. He is not supposed to be the chief: his brother should be the promised man, however he died in an accident and Kura has to play his brother's role in order to respect the tradition.



Kura Jarso is blessing the bull to be sacrificed as celebration of his new power. As everybody is suffering from the drought, killing a bull is a huge symbol. Even though many Borana are christians and muslims, many still believe in Wakefata, their traditional God, who can bring back the rain.



The bull is sacrificed in big chaos as everybody wants to see or take a picture with their mobile phones. Only the men can attend this ritual, women stay away.



Then Kura Jarso cut the genitals of the bull in a very solemn gesture.



His wife helps him to cut the skin of the genitals in straps that he will put around his wrists and keep them during the ceremony. This is a symbol of power.



Kura Jarso under the VIP tent. In his inaugural speech, he prays for the rain to come and asks the government to increase its help for the Borana who are dealing with the drought.



The last two Gadas have been celebrated during very severe drought. People start to wonder if a curse might have struck the tribe...



The Dabale is an age-based grade for the children. These kids do not go to school, instead, they receive traditional education. They only wear dreadlocks. They are the future Aba Gada. More and more young people are educated and are less and less interested in cattle. This will be the real challenge for the next generations...



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