

# Ethnic Rituals Survive Passage of Time - 2019

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CULTURE: **Ethnic Rituals Survive Passage of Time**

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MARSABIT, May 6 1997 (IPS) - For many outsiders, the pastoral life of the Boran people of Northern Kenya seems simple and uncomplicated, but a relatively unknown system that dates from the 15th century governs the day-to-day living of the community. According to Borana elders, the system of Gada a social and political institution which determines the rules of birth, marriage, and numerous other rites of passage began with the creation of human beings.

God was the architect of the Gada system, says one elderly man. Its true origin however, has continued to baffle anthropologists and many of the Borana who religiously follow its rules.

One of the most significant events of the Gada system is the Gadamoji ceremony which marks the passage of governance from the elders to the young. The central figure in the ceremony is the Gadamoji, a highly revered elder who is believed to have special powers.

This celebration is the only major festival in a Gada period (which last eight years) and serves as the ceremonial mark of (the culmination of) a reign, says Kosi Dida, a Boran. The ceremony also paves the way for the next Gada government.

The Gadamoji ceremony is performed in an appropriate month and day determined by the lunar calendar. It is characterised by numerous activities and rites. Each event in the ceremony has a significant purpose and contributes to the social, economic and political prosperity of the society.

It also includes a ritual that marks a man's passage to a higher spiritual form, but also there are ceremonies which mark the life of younger men as warriors.

The contest between the Komicha (sons of the Gadamoji) and the Gadamoji himself depicts the Boran as a militaristic society. The dramatic tug of war over the milk vessel is a challenge to the youthful warriors to defend the society just like their fathers did, Kosi says.

Gadamoji ceremonies also define the gender roles among the Borana. In sexual intercourse the man is 'on top' which 'signifies the woman's position in the Borana society as subordinate and subservient, while they remain essential in their contribution to the numerical and social prosperity of the family,' Kosi explains.

Men's dominance in most ritual, social and military activities reflect the fact that the Borana society is patrilineal.

The future of the Gadamoji ceremonies however among the Kenyan Borana 'the ethnic group is also found in Southern Ethiopia' is at stake due to the influence of religion. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Islam and Christianity, found their way to the Borana areas. According to Kosi Didi Halake, these religions have 'to a great deal eroded most of the Borana cultural values'.

Land tenure policies in Kenya have also tended to jeopardise the continuity of ritual ceremonies like the Gadamoji.

Government policies seem to have little or no provision for preservation of holy grounds. And, competition from agriculture, coupled with the ever swelling human population, have at times resulted in social conflicts over land-use patterns. The lack of specific laws to cater for such land use systems, threaten the survival of traditional ritual practices.

The economic situation of the Borana also has worsened and people no longer have the cattle and other items needed to participate fully in the ceremony.

'I could not participate in the recent Gadamoji ceremony, because I was not wealthy enough to do so,' says an old man who declined to give his name. And as more and more of the Borana continue to abandon pastoralism and assume sedentary and urban lives, some aspects of the Gada rituals are fading away.

'Most of the Borana today would only wish to watch such dramatic rituals rather than participate in them. Such cultures are almost alien to the western cultural status that they have adopted,' Kosi says.

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