



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Freeman D.: 'Initiating change in Highland Ethiopia: causes and consequences of cultural transformation'

Abbink, G.J.

Citation

Abbink, G. J. (2004). Review of Freeman D.: 'Initiating change in Highland Ethiopia: causes and consequences of cultural transformation'. *Africa: Journal Of The International African Institute*, 74(4), 700-701. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9586>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9586>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

DENA FREEMAN, *Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: causes and consequences of cultural transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hard covers £40.00, US\$60.00, ISBN 0 521 81854 0). 2002, 180 pp.

This monograph on a small community in the Gamo highlands of southern Ethiopia is theoretically, as well as ethnographically, a highly interesting work. On both accounts the author offers new insights and sets us thinking about how 'cultural systems' change and about what fuels their dynamics. The book is set in the context of the perennial debate in social science about the relationship between 'structure' and 'agency'. It also builds on previous studies of Gamo societies by ethnologists such as J. Bureau and M. Abélès, augmenting their pioneering studies with historical depth and sociological analysis.

On the basis of a closely argued and well-presented case study of the initiatory and the sacrificial systems of the Doko people (who number about 20,000 and are one of the sub-groups or *deres* of the Gamo-speaking people), Dena Freeman wants to explain 'the ethnographic puzzle' (pp. 1, 168) of the systemic continuity of the Doko *sacrificial* system over time, and the remarkable transformations of their *initiatory* system. She hereby develops an historical approach, relating socio-economic developments and individual action to the processes of cultural change. She also describes and 'models' incremental changes in the cultural systems themselves, on the basis of their interaction with the historical and economic factors. A specific role is played by the political system of the Doko people, which allows, and partly determines, the process of cultural innovation and change. Freeman traces the intended and unintended consequences of political decisions on ritual, made in the characteristic Gamo (male) public assemblies that channel community life and are the arena of dispute resolution and collective decisions for the *dere*, itself again divided into sub-groups showing their own adaptations. She also shows the remarkable divergences in the trajectories of the two Doko *deres*, Doko Masho and Doko Gembela.

In the eight chapters of the book the argument is built up on the basis of historical developments in the Gamo highlands since the late nineteenth century, considering the changes in the productive systems and the emerging new opportunities for people (travel, trade, weaving and, later, formal education) as their society was incorporated into the Ethiopian imperial state. The author then goes on to describe in detail the (re)productive practices as well as the nature and change of the sacrificial and the initiatory systems among the Doko as they express power relations between the generations and responsibilities toward the community. In fact, a lot has to do with the (forced) *redistribution* of wealth within the community.

A brief review cannot go into the details of Freeman's fascinating account but her basic idea is to explain the puzzle of the decline, or devolution, of sacrifices and the innovative continuity of the initiations, relating this to the organisation of the cultural systems themselves. The former, sacrifice, is rooted in a *pyramidal* system of relations, relatively simple, with less complex connections, with power at the top, and susceptible to decline although retaining a symbolic stability. The initiatory system has what Freeman calls a *network* type organisation: more complex and interconnected, open to innovative adaptations by individuals, and with changes in one element, especially when persistent or iterative, quickly reverberating elsewhere in the system, thus allowing *transformation* in its functions and symbolism in response to changing (material) circumstances.

In her focused treatment of processes of socio-cultural transformation in a well-defined setting, Freeman has provided us with an admirable and convincing account, and it would be highly stimulating to try out or test

her model of incremental cultural change in other ethnographic contexts. At some points, of course, the reader might have wished for more details on certain aspects of Doko life and the reflections of Doko people themselves. They are cited and case studies are presented, but not very much. Also on certain aspects of gender relations one might have wished for more explanation. The focus is on men—perhaps necessarily so, because they have thought up and are running the two systems. On p. 70 for instance, when talking about the emergence of new houses (households) of sons when the father dies, she notes that the eldest son goes to live in the *gole*, the original big house of the father and mother. But where does the mother go when the eldest son moves in and redefines the *gole*?

The author also pays attention to the changes wrought in Doko society by new political developments, especially the effects of the period of the Ethiopian revolution since 1974 (pp. 41–43), which may be more far-reaching than she suggests. Nowhere is it mentioned that land is still the property of the state, not the people. The policies of the revolutionary Derg government may perhaps, more than internal developments, have given the decisive blow to the sacrificial system due to its attack on the position of senior sacrificer, the *karwo* (cf. p. 81). Also discussed is the social and religious impact of the enormous growth of Protestantism (or Pentecostalism), on pp. 35–36, 120–132 and 140–141. This new religion is changing—some would say disfiguring—southern Ethiopian societies, almost beyond recognition. While Freeman indicates that the traditional cultural systems partly resist or assimilate these two factors (modern politics and Protestantism), it would seem that their long-term effects will go beyond that. Formal education continues to spread, Ethiopian state policy increases its grip on local societies, and Protestants are strongly against traditional culture, including sacrifices and initiations.

I would also ask why the author has put such emphasis on the separateness of the initiatory and the sacrificial 'systems' of the Doko. Can they really be said to be 'two cultural systems', or are they part of the same socio-cultural system, as also found in other Gamo groups? (Perhaps the systemic nature of the practices is a bit overemphasised as well.) I know Freeman needs to keep them distinct for the purposes of her argument, but still, the two are much connected in Doko life, and perhaps refer mainly to differently organised but interlocked dimensions of community life, meaning and values. On p. 80 she also says: '... the most important role for the community sacrificers in the 1990s was their involvement in initiating *halak'as*' (i.e. the initiates).

But this note does not invalidate the quite convincing argument on cultural change made here. Freeman shows once again that in the debate on 'structure and agency' one should show the generative mechanisms and develop interactionist explanatory models that do justice to the nature of the cultural. The latter has an historical nature, a relatively autonomous dynamics, and a susceptibility to innovative change initiated by individual action—though depending on the political or community decision-making processes that steer it.

The book contains good illustrations, useful schemas outlining the various stages of the initiation processes described, and a brief index (though it is not of much use). The map on p. 21 has the wrong distance scale: it should not go up to 100 but rather to 250 or 300 km. A final quibble I would have is on the bibliography, which has quite a number of errors and typos—somewhat of a pity in an otherwise fine book.

JON ABBINK
African Studies Centre, Leiden