



## Ideological Praxis at Awra Amba : implications for the development of the region

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### Abstract

Awra Amba is a small community living in the Southern Gonder, at a distance of 73 kilometers from the city of Bahir Dar. The aim of this study is therefore to look into the ideological praxis among the Awra Amba community. Specifically, it attempts to describe and profile the ideological praxis of the community and its unique features. To achieve this objective, direct observation, focus group discussion and interview with key informants is used along with consultation of secondary sources. Findings of the study show that Awra Amba is a community with strong faith in the existence of the Omnipotent without providing any name such as God or Allah. It is a community of faith without religion. Members of the community face challenges to sustain communal life and adhere to their ideology among others. The author, therefore, recommends flexibility of the community on various ideals, use of Awra Amba as a model to influence the working traditions of neighbouring communities, and further research on socio-cultural sustainability and dwellers health and safety.

**Keywords :** Awra Amba, ideology, praxis, religion, Amhara.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Awra Amba is a rural Ethiopian community in South Gonder, Fogera district. The community is founded by Zumra Nuru, a 60 years old Ethiopian farmer, based on the ideals of equality with the goal of solving socio-economic problems of the society through cooperation. In Awra Amba, there are no distinctively assigned gender roles. Thus, men cook and women plough as a result of which the community appears to be in a significant contrast to all other cultures across the regions in Ethiopia where women's place is believed to be at home.

#### 1.2 Objectives

Goodman and Refsing (1992 : 9) states ".....there are at least two different aspects to ideology : function and content — what ideologies do and what they say". Thus, this suggests that the study of ideology revolves around its praxis which

consists of these two elements. With this in mind, the general objective of this study is to profile the ideological praxis among the Awra Amba community. Specifically, the study attempts to describe the ideological praxis of Awra Amba community, identify the unique features of the community from the perspective of ideology and ideological culture, and find out whether there is any (in) congruence between ideology and its praxis.

#### 1.3 Scope and significance of the Study

This study does not exhaust all aspects of the cultural practices among the Awra Amba community. Therefore, the scope of this study will only be about ideological praxis of the community which deals with their ideological culture. The socio-cultural situation of Awra Amba is much less recognized than the familiarity of the name across the media in Ethiopia. The current study can be used to document the ideological praxis of the community in view of theories about ideology.

## 1.4 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to identifying the ideological praxis at Awra Amba.

### 2.1.1 On ideology and its meaning

Scholars opine that the term ideology has assortments of meanings. Madge (1964 : 68) states that this term refers to any form of mental activity such as politics, and religion on the one hand and the dominant outlook of some elites of a given society, on the other. From this, it may make sense to argue that the notion of ideology brings with it the interrelationship with other ideologies and thus, we have to perceive the term ideology to consist of other ideologies ingrained in it. Manheim (1979: 39) states “.....in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it”. This makes the implicit meaning of the term ideology. It shows that ideology clouds people’s perception of reality and let them accept their situations as normal, favourable and appropriate when it could have been otherwise.

In contrast, Therborn (1980) contends that ‘the more accurate and fruitful’ perception of ideologies is to perceive them not as ideas but as social processes. Thus, the term ideology should take into consideration the day-to-day life activities, experiences, and the dynamism we come across in the world. In ascribing meaning to this term, William adds another perspective by stating it as “a system of illusory beliefs-false ideas or false consciousness— which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge” (as cited in Nagara, 1985 : 21).

Thompson (1990) adds a different perspective to the notion of ideology describing it as a complicated concept with diverse meanings as well as uses. It is a way of dealing with the belief systems, attitudes and outlooks of a society- the way a particular group of people perceive the world (ibid). According to Tyson (1999), Ideology is a belief system, a product of cultural conditioning. Thus, Tyson states that religion; ethicalism, capitalism, Marxism, patriotism, patriarchy, and even all critical concepts in literature are referred to as Ideologies (Tyson 1999: 52-53; ibid : 83-85).

In addition, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003 : 35) explain it to be “.....the set of beliefs that

govern people’s participation in the gender order”. Thus, beliefs and outlooks such as patriarchy, womanhood, motherhood, and cultural belief systems are all ideologies as far as they govern peoples participation in different social affairs. Thus, the way we perceive a society is our representation of the society. In the reverse, the way a society understands the world is the representation of the world by the society, both ways being ideologies.

Ideology appears to be a form and a means of dominating and subjugating individuals and the society. Tyson (1999) and Therborn (1980) state that among such ideological subjections, sense of inevitability, and religion are worth considering. Sense of inevitability refers to subservience of individuals as if there were no other alternatives to their state of affairs. Though religion is an ideology in itself, it is also considered as a mechanism of ideological subjection to help those dominant individuals remain in power.

### 2.1.2 The relevance of ideology

The concept of ideology is often less expressed but much used in the world. But, people have never stopped to live and act according to some pattern of ideology. This ideology could probably be their religion, their political practice, their being pagan or something unique which might be challenging to categorize under the labels as religion, politics or culture.

One thing that may reconcile such diverse ideas is however the fact that all these things are themselves ideologies. Thus ideology has some form of significance for the social scientist to describe how people perceive the world, and how individuals understand a given society well. Different scholars have reflected on how relevant ideology is for us. For instance, Freedom (2003) states “.....ideologies map the political and social worlds for us. We simply cannot do without them .....”.

As can be seen above, it is hardly possible to act without ideologies. Because ideology relates to the world we inhabit, all our acts are governed and justified by our representation of the world which is our ideologies. It is used for an explanation of important experiences, for the firm guidance of conduct and for a fundamental rationalization of the value and self-respect of the groups who feel these desires. It may probably be essential to study the

ideological praxis of the society so as to identify what particular issue is reinforced in a given system of ideology or what particular social practice is undermined therein.

### 2.1.3 Forms of ideology

So far, an attempt is made to pronounce the term ideology and the relevance of the very concept of the term in view of different perspectives. Ideologies can be categorized as having different forms or typologies. Thus, religion, culture, traditional belief systems, politics, and gender can be taken as the different forms of ideologies.

#### 2.1.3.1 Gender ideologies

As to what gender ideology means, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003 : 35) explains it to be “.....the set of beliefs that govern people’s participation in the gender order and by which they explain and justify that participation”. Thus, ideologies related to gender such as patriarchy, womanhood, motherhood, and cultural belief systems are all gender ideologies as far as they rule such involvement of peoples. A number of scholars have theorized the concept of patriarchy and generated outstanding articles on gender-related issues across the world which provided us with theoretical and analytical inputs concerning the different bases of patriarchy which are ideological, biological, sociological, and anthropological, and the analysis and criticism of their effects on women’s lives (McCracken, 1997 : 563). In addition, Melakneh (2008 : 215) contends that ‘the marginalization from what is considered as socially and politically significant’ could be considered as an extension of the term patriarchy.

#### 2.1.3.2 Beliefs, values and ideals

In addition to the aforementioned forms of ideology, the concept of ideology can also be approached from three perspectives, namely beliefs, values, and ideals. Beliefs provide people with the understanding of how the world works. Likewise, values refer to peoples’ conceptions of the differences between right and wrong, and Ideals serve as models for what people hope want to attain as their life goal. To sum up, ideologies may fall into three major categories : beliefs, values and ideals. And all of these determine the living style of a people in general and individuals in particular.

#### 2.1.3.3 Religion as an ideology

Religion is an important aspect of our day to day life activity both in the secular and spiritual world. In light of the concept of ideology, religion appears to be a standalone ideology in some literatures and a component of universal ideologies in others. In spite of these controversies, a notion worth discussing is the fact that religion, like other ideologies, determines our perception of the world and the way we act in our day today life activities. Durkheim (1912/1995) defines religion as ‘ a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things’ in which two major components- beliefs and practices are given emphasis. Religion is also understood as a belief in the supernatural in its literal meaning.

### 2.2 Review of related studies

As to Awra Amba, there are studies that were conducted with specific focus on the community. Some of the studies were concerned with social welfare; others made small scale enterprises and self-help as their main objectives. For instance, a study by Fantahun (2003) found out that the Awra Amba community, a weaving community in Amhara region, is one of the ten success stories in Micro and Small Enterprises in the country. The study also indicates that the community started as a small cooperative twenty years ago with only nineteen people.

Though Fantahun (2003) indicated that the community is ostracized for no participation in the Muslim as well as the Christian religious rituals, it doesn’t give deeper accounts of the ideological perspectives and the living style of the society. It rather provides only an account of how interventions from NGOs improved the performance of the weavers in this community. This being the only accessible studies related to Awra Amba, there are hardly any studies that investigated the Awra Amba community in the light of the ideological praxis of this community. Ideology is a social product that determines our living style (Simon, 2002 : 112). Thus, this study attempts to put major emphasis on the ideologies that are pertinent to the community. There are a number of other studies from Ethiopia that dealt with ideology in different contexts. Many of these studies dealt with ideology in art and literature. For instance, Melakneh(2008) discusses about patriarchal ideology in postcolonial Africa.

Such studies make use of literary works of art to reach at inferences as to what the ideologies in real situations of the people at the time of the narration looks like. Studies regarding ideology from elsewhere approach the issue from different perspectives. Berry, W., Ringquist, E., Fording, R. & Hanson, R. (2007) studied whether state political ideology change over time. In this study the researchers made use of analysis of the longitudinal measure of state citizen ideology from election results. Knight (2006) underlines changing trends in the meaning of the term and its frequent use in political science.

Similarly, Huaco (1971) states the different ways in which this notion is used by contemporary sociologists and implies that the term is used differently by contemporary sociologists. Similarly, Nolan, P. and Lenski, G. (1996) stated that both ideology and technology have had a powerful impact on the conditions of life in human societies. What is not clear, however, is their relative strength. Thus, they conducted a research to know which of these has the more powerful impact, They concluded that the effects of technology are generally more powerful, more widespread, and more robust. Also, Goodman and Refsing (1992) discuss both ideology and practice in modern Japan. They expound on the wider linguistic and symbolic manifestations of ideology and their effects in the living style of Japanese community leaving readers with a recommendation that Japan is a good point of study for anthropologists and researchers to explore about ideology, its content, formation, and praxis.

Such articles about ideology that deal with the ideology as well as real-life practice are rarely available. However, the study by Blessure and Allen (1995) documents the incongruence between the ideology and practice of marital equality can be considered as an example. Twenty married female and male feminists were interviewed and asked to describe the influence of feminism on their marriages. This study confirms a distinction between the ideology and practice of equality within heterosexual marriage.

The present study relates with the aforementioned studies in such a way that all of them are interested in ideology in one way or the other. But, most of the studies appear to be in a stark contrast to each other because of the differences in

purpose and methodology as well. In some of the studies, the writers attempt to write on the theoretical perspectives of ideology such as its semantic values and the changes over time. In others, the researchers dealt with specific ideologies such as gender ideologies or formation of political ideologies. Moreover, the investigators made use of quantitative data and statistical tools for analysis and inferences.

However, the current study attempts to deal with ideology like all the other studies and to deal with practices pertinent to it. What makes this study unique in itself is its attempt to follow the descriptive than prescriptive approach in dealing with the ideological praxis at Awra Amba. Moreover, it attempts to identify challenges in relation to the ideological praxis of the community, and to find out the extent to which there is incongruence between ideology and its praxis by members of the community.

### 3. Methods of the Study

The research design for this particular study is descriptive survey design. The study is designed to be qualitative because of the nature of data the researchers seek out from the site of performance. The result of the study would be inferred to the community of Awra Amba. In order to conduct focus group discussion with the dwellers, the researchers made use of a judgmental random selection of a group of eight individuals who would reflect on various items that are prepared in accordance with the objectives of the study. They are selected among shop keepers, weavers, care providers, tour guides, financial administrators, waitres, guards, and cooks. Key informants are also interviewed to come up with some data that will be triangulated during the data analysis and interpretation period of the study. Among such key informants are the leader of the community, namely Zumra Nuru, officials who have some direct relation with the community such as the licensing office of Cooperatives in the region and other relevant bodies who are believed to have and willing to provide information about the ideological orientation of the society.

Direct and non-participant observations of the living style of the society were used as the tools for data collection in this study. Last but not the least, data was to be sought from secondary sources and

other publications that are quite related to the living style and ideological orientation of the community.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Ideologies at Awra Amba

#### 4.1.1 Belief system

The Awra Amba is known for its uniqueness in its belief system. This is because of the absence of religious institutions at Awra Amba and their avoidance of any religious practices which is common in many parts of Ethiopia and in the surrounding communities of Awra Amba. However, both the interview and the focus group discussion (FGD) at the community showed that the community is not pagan as perceived by the communities afar. In contrast, Awra Ambans recognize and believe in the existence of the Supernatural without naming it as Allah or God. This appears to be in contrast to the definition by Durkheim(1912/1995) about religion as ‘ a unified system of beliefs and practices’ for the simple reason that the community proved to have faith without any practice. Moreover, there is no specific day related to and associated with religious rituals and they are working all days of the year except the last day of the last month of the year, Pagumen, to celebrate the New Year and to plan for the coming year as well.

#### 4.1.2 Gender ideology

The community believes in equal status of gender in every aspect of life. In rural areas of Gondar, it is usually common that females take care of cooking and house chores and men are responsible for business outside. Also, males dominate the stage in work life, education, and leadership. In contrast to this, it is observed that both men and women at Awra Amba are engaged equally in handling both in house and outside businesses. Men cook ‘wat’ and bake ‘injera’ which is considered only as women’s job in the mainstream Ethiopian tradition and women go to weaving and shopping as well which is only for men in other rural areas of Gondar but Awra Amba. Among Awra Amban families, decisions on every matter are shared between husband and wife; the couples are open and transparent. Asked about their situation during the FGD, the females in the community stated that they are glad about their equal rights and responsibilities and their being role models.

A senior mother in the community stated that when women and men from other regions came to visit them and asked whether males take part in house chores and take responsibilities in house equally with men, many of the people at Awra Amba were shocked because they did neither know nor understand the marginalization and discrimination of women in particular and gender in general. Thus, it is the culture of the community that they are all immersed in equalitarian practice.

### 4.2 Work practice

The community is recognized for its strong work practice and diligence. Both men and women work in shopping, weaving, taking care of the old, irrigation, selling products, cooking, taking care of children, social decisions, and profit sharing equally. There is no particular gender roles and gender assigned duties except natural matters such as pregnancy which is naturally given only to females. In some exceptional cases there are situations where only men take part in some activities. For example, if someone is passed away, only some selected men will go to the funeral and all members of the community including the family are not expected to attend to three days mourning / termed as selist in local practice of other Ethiopian community/ for condolences.

Asked about the situation, the leaders of the community stated that there is no use to spend time crying for the dead. It is good to help each other when someone is alive and by going back to work they have to help in taking part in the safety of the society in general and the family of the dead in particular. The same reply was given to the interviewers during FGDs as well.

### 4.3 Challenges in ideological praxis at Awra Amba

There is observable congruence of the ideology and its practice among the community. Though the results from interview and focus group discussion well describe the Awra Amba community and their practices, the community has prevalent shortfalls and challenges which may be attributed to the ideology and/or its praxis which they attend to all their life time. These include communal systems, rotation of the work force, at-risk occupational health, and the like.

### 4.3.1 Communal system

The community is basically communal and they have to share everything they got at the end of the year. Surprisingly, any income a person gets is to be shared among the community. The good thing about this is that whether one is strong or weak, young or old, as far as s/he contributes some share, s/he is entitled to equal divide of the final sum per year. This system secures the old and the weak. In fact, the community is not communal or purely communist as some people might perceive. This is because during the interview with the leaders of the community, it is indicated that potentially capable people are allowed to deal with any private business out of the community working hours. For instance, a person who is interested to accumulate more money, may engage in bee-hive, or poultry at home but still works primarily as part of the community member in normal working hours in the weaving center, cafeteria, shops and the like which are properties of the community. The challenge with the system is however, it is a push factor for others from neighbouring districts to join the community and it also discourages the opportunity to dig out individual capacities to the optimum and the work force is limited to weaving and in some cases irrigation only.

### 4.3.2 Rotation of the work force

Another potential are of problem the study identified was rotation of the work force. The Awra Amba is primarily a weaving cooperative and strong and healthy people are members of the weaving center working for the whole day, all the week round, for all the years. The challenge here is, in situations where people are unable to do the hard tasks in the center; they are taken to the relatively easier centers such as taking care of the old or shopping. The question that remains here is the fact that how sustainable the community will be by rotating the work force when they are hurt, sick, or old? The reason is because the community is said to have about 460 households and as it is typical of African population scenario, many of them are young and children. Thus, it seems that the community may face problem of sustainability and earning livelihoods which depends highly on the healthy adults at the weaving center who will retire to shopping or taking care of the old when they are

hurt due to lack of occupational safety which is discussed in the next paragraph.

### 4.3.3 Occupational health and safety

A strong spot identified by this research is the absence of occupational health and safety. The individuals working in the weaving center repeatedly reported that they suffer from health problems such as kidney. Men work on sturdy and heavy traditional weaving equipments which affect their health. The informants stated that some weavers suffer to the extent of urinating blood and as a solution, they are taken to easier centers such as shopping as stated above. People in the weaving center know that their job is hurting them. But, they adhere to the ideology of the community as their belief and they feel this is the right belief and living style the world is missing. They say they are equally sharing the burden, and satisfied with the creeds and living styles at Awra Amba when in reality they are sacrificing their health to let other members of the community live. This could be taken as a point to demonstrate Manheim's (1979) implicit meaning of the term ideology which refers to the collective unconscious to becloud the real condition of society to itself and to others reality of situations.

### 4.4 Implications for the neighbouring region

With all its uniqueness and challenges, the community has strong implications for the neighbouring regions in particular and rural Ethiopian communities in general.

#### 4.4.1 Improved living standard

With a focus on works, and proper utilization of the available resources, the community is improving in terms of its living standard. As stated in the FGD, the members stated that the community was not potentially capable of winning daily bread at the beginning. But now, in addition to securing their daily bread, members of the community share an amount of about 3000 birr (Ethiopian currency) per person when they are dividing their share at the end of every year. This is a potential implication to demonstrate the change and improvement in the living standard of members of the community.

#### 4.4.2 Local innovations and improvisations

The Awra Amba community is proud of its local improvisation and adoption of technological

materials. For instance, they had a very clean kitchen which is not the case in other rural areas and well-designed cooking stove which is made of mud with a whole on the wall to send the smoke out. Another thing worth considering is their potential in making different design and mosaic of dresses, including suits and pyjamas.

#### 4.4.3 Local consumption of domestic products

Another point worth mentioning is the use of their own products in the community. During the interview, we observed that both the founder of the community Hon. Dr. Mr. Zumera and his wife W/ro Naney put on the clothes which are produced in the community's weaving centers. Also, the community has some bedrooms which are prepared for guests and in these bedrooms which are for rent in fair prices, all the beds are made of traditionally designed materials such as mud, wood, and straw, covered with bed sheets which are the products of the weaving center of the community itself.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The following conclusion are drawn from the study :

Communal life with all its limitations helped the Awra Amba to improve their living standard. The ideological praxis of the community is beneficial for the poor, the old and the weak in the community, but at the expense of the weavers who suffer from working for long on traditional and painful machines.

In spite of the definition of religion by Durkheim (1912/1995) to incorporate both beliefs and practices, the community has faith in the Supernatural without any practice related to this, or without any temple built for this purpose. The ideology of the community empowers feminine gender in the community by assuring equality in economic benefit, access to work, and the right to make decision in any family affairs which is not the case in many rural communities of Ethiopia.

It has no religious institutions such as church, mosque and related organizations but the Awra Amba community is not pagan as perceived by many individuals in the Ethiopia. The ideology favours the

tradition of working all the daylong, in all weeks of the month without spending any day for religious rituals and practices.

Working on traditional weaving machines for extended hours is extremely affecting the occupational health and safety of the people in the weaving center. Except the identified problems of occupational health and safety, no incongruence of ideology and its praxis is observed at Awra Amba. Members of the community live the life they believe in, and they enjoy their communal living style, accepted it, internalized it and they are going for it to the extent of losing their health.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The community should keep the good practices which have implications for the development of rural community. Further study should be done regarding the occupational health and safety of the people particularly by Medical professionals as to the intensity of the effect and the specific source of the problem by investigating the working environ and the situation of weavers. Kidney screening should be conducted periodically to identify the source and extent of the problem to improve the health of weavers who are struggling to sustain the community.

It is also beneficial to diversify the means of earning livelihoods than depend solely on weaving to save the adult working age groups of the community. Awra Amba should not be misperceived as a pagan society though it is free from any religious rituals. Likewise, the community should not suffer from any form of discrimination and ostracization for adopting their own creeds. The regional government and other stakeholder organizations should work on advocacy issues to promote the ideals of community and work towards change in attitude of neighbouring communities. The habits and attitude of Awra Amba towards work should be used as a living example to change neighbouring rural communities who celebrate religious holidays rather frequently. Further study of the community in such perspectives as occupational health and safety, ideological praxis, and development and the role of cooperatives should be done.

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