

## Gender power relations in Southern Ethiopia - an anthropological insight

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I am an anthropologist from Ethiopia who is writing his doctoral thesis on gender power relations and their change and continuity in the Kambaata community in southern Ethiopia. In our field of anthropology and its methodological engagement on gender studies there is still a notion and stereotype that says a male fieldworker, ethnographer and anthropologist cannot engage with women's issues or conduct valuable research on them. I would like to challenge this widely held view and try to understand the world of women through strategic ethnographic tools that can help male feminist anthropologists to explore the perceptions, attitude, beliefs, norms and values of women in power dynamics of the Kambaata community to which I belong.

### Background of the Kambaata community

Kambaata is located in the southern region of Ethiopia and consists of eight main *woreda* (districts) with a population of above half a million. A sizable portion of the population lives outside the Kambaata territory, including in resettlement areas. The Kambaata have a long history and comprise more than 130 tribes. Supposedly, almost all tribes migrated to the region at different times; a process which lasted until the end of the twentieth century. The settlement has been accompanied by an intermingling of tribes ([Arsano 2002](#)). The Kambaata, who are perceived today as a cultural and linguistic group only, or an ethnic group, are better understood if we consider them as a society marked by a highly elaborate combination of different subgroups within a complex socio-political setting with its own political history. The Kambaata as an ethnic group are to be understood as a socio-political entity with its own elements of self-administration and rules to organize power relations and gender. In the past, they were the inhabitants of the multi-ethnic group Kambaata kingdom, which was one of the numerous traditional inner-African independent states entertaining economic and political relations (including marriage relations) with neighbouring kingdoms and states.

Since fertility plays an integral role in the cultural life of the Kambaata, the cultural structure exerts an immense psychological pressure on a young woman. That is because, by being infertile she is regarded not only to lack the decisive value measure of a woman, but also to endanger the family, lineage and even the clan. That means, a woman perpetuates the life of the family and enlarges the number of the members of the lineage and clan. By being sterile, she is almost putting an end to the life and continuity of the family and kinship.

### Why is research on power relations of gender in Ethiopia important?

In many societies, the socio-cultural, political, and economic power of women is ignored due to traditional practices that discriminate against and abuse women. [Belachew Gebrewold-Tochalo \(2001\)](#) notes that in agricultural societies, women work 16 hours a day. Such work has something to do with family and home economics. In Ethiopia, the power relation of gender, potential and influence of women in society is not well documented and advocated (Women Strategic Center 2019). In addition to this, the traditional way of exercising the power of women is not well recognized in most writings. In the Kambaata community, in some instances of cultural performance, women have a greater role in reconciliation and conflict resolution through the practices of blessing and cursing, peacemaking, and negotiation, influence and respect of the role of motherhood is evident power. Women have different roles of power and influence on social integration, peace, and social stability. The power of women is hidden by the entrenched patriarchal system of society, and it must be emphasized in the quest for further empowerment of all women. Thus, women's status in terms of female political participation, economic control, personal autonomy, interpersonal influence, and equal power must be well explored in the Kambaata community. Because of unequal gendered power relations, men have better access to structural and institutional power, which resides in the forms of access to educational, health, political, and economic resources and opportunities.

## **Power relations from an African community perspective**

Earlier empirical studies show theoretical perspectives and research areas to be dealt with in an Ethiopian context, particularly of the Kambaata community. Most of the research works revolve around showing and explaining how the status and role of women is affected by socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. These works elaborate how women's subordination is evident through gender inequality practice. Some of these important research works clearly explore the positive role of women, their potential influence and power in society, in economic spheres and decision-making capacity. [Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome \(1999\)](#) elaborates the multiple ways in which African women exercise and deploy power. Another important theoretical perspective of African gender power relations is [Ifi Amadiume's \*Male daughters, female husbands\* \(1987\)](#). This ethnographic work of Nnobi, an Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria, magnifies the decline of pre-colonial women's power through the colonial and postcolonial periods. Ifi Amadiume in her book describes that power relations were well balanced in pre-colonial era of Igbo society and challenges the colonial period assumption of African women as powerless. [Ambaye Ogato Anata \(2016\)](#) describes how Sidama women negotiate their power and influence through the Yekka institution to demand respect, recognition and protection of women's right. The Yekka cultural institution is owned and managed by elder women to protect their rights from harassment and violence. This gives women power to struggle for their right within patriarchal structures.

## **Examining power relations and gender in the Kambaata community**

Often, the dominant discourse among Kambaata men suggests that being a woman is to be powerless (quiet, obedient, accommodating). To challenge the dominant discourse and narrative, my research aims to explore how women in Kambaata can access power and have socio-economic influence. The way women resist and take advantage of, and change inequalities and imbalances is different to men. Women have different ways of displaying and practicing agency because of the available space they must practice in, is different. Women have different spaces of power than men and different ways of bargaining, resisting, manipulating and deceiving. My conceptual understanding is supported by Amy

Allen's theoretical perspective of feminine empowerment. As [Amy Allen \(1998\)](#) describes, empowerment theorists begin by noticing that women have special skills and traits that misogynist cultures have devalued. In particular, they claim that women place greater emphasis on care and on the maintenance of relationships with others. They go on to argue that this "care perspective" provides the basis for a unique and beneficial understanding of power (see i.e., [Ruddick 1989](#); [Held 1993](#)). [Darlington and Mulvaney \(2003\)](#) name a concept, reciprocal empowerment, that this research also would like to see in Kambaata women. Reciprocal empowerment as an optimal understanding of power differs even from prior feminist notions of empowerment in that it explicitly embraces active mutuality.

I am trying to emphasize an empowerment theory of feminist approach to explain my data and evidence from an ethnographical point of view. The empowerment theoretical view is advanced and important for current social transformation and new policy design. So, my emphasis is on the empowerment side of women and collective power as cultural cooperation of women.

## **What is expected from studying gender power relations?**

Looking at gender relations from a power perspective and combination of structural, collective and individual elements of power that relate to choice, values and action will tell us how gender inequality is manifested through access for resources, social status and opportunities. Still, the aspect of power relations of gender in relation to women's entrepreneurial roles, leadership, decision-making and cultural roles in ritual is not assessed well. There are few academic papers that show us that the power relation between the sexes and the potential, influence and energy of women have not been properly explored. So, there is some male bias and focus on domination theory that is magnified in past research endeavours and research. Gender relation approaches of anthropological research must explore the access, opportunity and power structure among women and men in Ethiopia, and in particular in the Kambaata community where there is limited research works on gender issues. Looking at the gender power relations aspect in-depth through ethnographic inquiry will help to see over all domains of social structure and institutions.

My research will provide important insight for African nations and in particular to Ethiopia. The results of the study will add on scholarly knowledge for the limited literature on Kambaata women and gender relations. I am also convinced that feminist response to poverty and development in rural community of Ethiopia can help to transform the society.

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