

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

A STUDY ON SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC  
MARGINALIZATION OF ARTISANS IN URBAN  
ADDIS ABABA, WEST GOJJAM ZONE OF NORTH WEST ETHIOPIA

By  
Birhanie Alemu

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**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY**

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**A STUDY ON SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC  
MARGINALIZATION OF ARTISANS IN DEMBECHA WOREDA,  
WEST GOJJAM ZONE OF AMHARA REGION**

**By**

**Birhanie Alemu**

**A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of  
Addis Ababa University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

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**By**

**BIRHANIE ALEMU**

**Approved by the Board of Examiners:**

*Denselechu Megeressa*

*G. Megeressa*

**Advisor**

*Gebre Yntiso*

*AMSD*

**Internal Examiner**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**External Examiner**

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## **Usage of Dating and Naming**

Unless otherwise it is stated as E.C. (Ethiopian Calendar) all the dates indicated throughout this thesis are in Gregorian calendar. And all the names of the informants are pseudonyms.

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## Glossary

<i>Abba</i>	a honorific title that precedes a male elder
<i>Ato</i>	a title which precedes a man's name
<i>Abat</i>	father
<i>agär</i>	home country
<i>Aliga</i>	bed
<i>Aräk'i</i>	local distilled liquor
<i>at'antam</i>	a person from prestigious descent
<i>awdamma</i>	circular ground used for thrashing grains
<i>Bahil</i>	literally corresponds to 'culture'
<i>Balabbat</i>	one who comes from the prestigious category
<i>Bayid</i>	non-kinfolk
<i>Bäga</i>	a season without rain
<i>Bet</i>	house
<i>Buda</i>	a person believed to be possessed by evil spirit
<i>Chewa</i>	free born, not descend from low status groups
<i>Däga</i>	highland
<i>Fak'i</i>	a derogatory term applied for tanners
<i>Idir</i>	burial arranging association
<i>Egziabihir</i>	God
<i>Eje seri</i>	a term applied to refer to handicraftworkers
<i>Ema</i>	honorific title for elder females
<i>Got</i>	territory less than a kebele
<i>Injera</i>	a kind of pancake prepared from grains
<i>Iquib</i>	rotating credit association
<i>Kebele</i>	the smallest political administrative unit
<i>Kiremet</i>	rainy season
<i>Liqaqit</i>	spun cotton thread enrolled in a presimic shape
<i>Majet</i>	quarter of a house served for custody
<i>Mahiber</i>	religious feast association

<i>Medeb</i>	mud bench used for sitting and sleeping
<i>Mender</i>	village
<i>Merigta</i>	a honorific title given for church schoolteacher
<i>Meseso</i>	pillar of a house
<i>Kirb zamad</i>	close kinfolk
<i>Kolla</i>	lowlands
<i>Kumo ker</i>	a person who do not marry at the appropriate age
<i>Rist</i>	inherited land-use right
<i>Sew</i>	human being
<i>Shemanie</i>	a term applied to refer weavers
<i>Tabot</i>	Holy ark
<i>T'ella</i>	local beer
<i>Tibeb</i>	literally corresponds the English word 'art'
<i>Tir</i>	January
<i>Wet</i>	sauce
<i>Woreda</i>	administrative unit larger than kebele
<i>Woret</i>	capital
<i>Woyna dega</i>	mid-highland
<i>Zamad</i>	kinfolk
<i>Zer</i>	descent

## Abstract

Craft workers in the Dembecha woreda were/are marginalized occupational groups. Despite their ago-old existence and importance of crafts, they were sidelined from the mainstream society in which they live. In addition, factors for the low status and marginalization of craft workers in the northern part of Ethiopia are less studied. Therefore, we have very little information about this group of people, especially from the change and continuity perspective. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute ethnographic information about the socio-economic condition and aspects of marginalization in light of change and continuity.

The main objective of the thesis is to investigate and describe factors for the low status of artisans and dimensions of marginalization who are settled in Dembecha woreda, West Gojjam Zone of Amhara Regional State. The thesis also tries to describe organizing principles of artisans in light of the dominant society's social setting. In addition, changes and continuities in the production and exchange system of handicrafts are discussed.

In order to treat the stated problem and accomplish the objective, both primary and secondary methods of data collection were used. Participant observation and informant interview were important mechanisms to gather primary data. Available written materials were also reviewed.

The major finding of the thesis indicates that craft workers were exposed to social, cultural, economic, spatial and political aspects of marginalization. In addition, the field data revealed that many of the factors upheld among the dominant society for the low status of artisans are cultural constructions under vein of social norms.

However, the lives of craft workers have changed overtime. Approbation of land ownership right and expansion of modern education have positively affected the different dimensions of marginalization. Craft workers have thus achieved improved social and economic position. However, craft workers in the study area are not considered as full social persons. They are still despised through contemptuous feelings and ideological explanations. This is to say, though there is no official marginalization, artisans are still reminded as not equal with others.

## Preface

The data presented in this thesis were derived from direct observation of community life and participation in some social events, feasts and work places. Informal and semi-structured interviews with the dominant society and artisans, supported by brief case studies and secondary data were also the most useful techniques to gather and present the data.

In this thesis, the information collected is structured to show socio-cultural and economic marginalization of artisan groups in two main villages of Dembecha woreda. The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter presents the statement of the problem, the objectives, rationale and significance of the study and describes procedures and methods of data collection. It also includes the endeavor to review the available literature regarding the attentions of early scholars to study artisans in Ethiopia, perspectives about origin and identity of artisans, sources of differentiation and the concept of caste

The second chapter attempts to describe location, ecology and demography of the Dembecha woreda. Basic features of social organization; marriage, kinship and family, are also discussed. The intention was to investigate alleged differences among artisans and the dominant society.

The third chapter deals with economics of handicraft working in Dembecha woreda. It describes methods and means of production, exchange system and living standard of craft workers through time.

The fourth chapter explains the forms and factors of marginalization. Various ideological explanations and assumptions, social, cultural and economic dimensions of marginalization are described and analyzed. Finally, in chapter five, the issues discussed throughout the thesis are summarized and concluding remarks are presented.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1. Introduction

Handicraft working has a long history of producing the most vital utilities associated with the daily lives of both the rural and urban communities in Ethiopia (Mulu, 2007:4). Agricultural utilities, cotton dresses, hide products like dresses, sleeping mats, slings and pot products such as baking plate, cooking pots and water containers with different size and shape were supplied by artisans.

Despite the long history and valuable role of crafts, the activity and the people who produce the crafts have been given minimal attention. Craft working in Dembecha woreda, for instance, is identified as dishonored hereditary occupation. Thus, the skill of producing all sorts of crafts is passed down to posterity through genealogical line. As a result, handicraft working is believed to be the sole possession of certain groups who used to be accorded the lowest status. Predominantly, artisans in the study area were not allowed to own land, were forced to live in separate villages and were endogamous groups. In general, despite the inevitability of their products for the daily utility of the dominant society, craft workers in Ethiopia, for instance in Dembecha, are marginalized groups.

Therefore, this research attempts to discuss and analyze the sources of the marginalization and investigate manifestations of marginalization in Dembecha woreda. To accomplish this major objective, four specific objectives are outlined. The objectives are treated in five chapters.

In this chapter, topics as general background to the research are discussed. Accordingly, statement of the problem, motivation of the researcher to select the topic and the research site with significance of the study, methods employed in gathering data, scope and limitation of the study and finally literatures dealing with marginalization and marginalized groups are presented and discussed.

In chapter two, in an endeavor to present general background information to the study area and the people, location, geographical features, size of population with sex and religious composition and means of livelihood are described. In addition, marriage, kinship tie and family structure are discussed to highlight alleged differences of craft workers and the dominant society. Production and exchange systems of crafts are also presented and discussed in chapter three. In chapter four, myths about the origin of the artisans, negative characterizations and normative assumptions and the evil eye belief as factors for marginalization of artisans and exclusion from social associations, marriage restriction, religious discrimination and economic alienation as manifestations of marginalization are addressed. Finally, summary of the research with concluding remarks of the findings is presented in chapter five.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Marginalization has been an experience probably ever since human beings began differentiating themselves from their fellows based on different criteria like age, sex, wealth, birth, occupation, power, etc. The experience has often been a problem: affecting many people both at individual and group level throughout the world. It has no time and geographical limitation. It occurs in the north and south, in the towns and in the countryside, in the past and in the present (Pankhurst. A, 2001:1).

Therefore, in Ethiopia as in many parts of the world, there are many people who are excluded from the mainstream society and 'normal' way of life. From the existing literatures on marginalization, it seems that the commonly marginalized groups are hunters, gatherers and handicraft workers (weavers, tanners, potters, smiths and wood workers). Thus, marginalized artisans of Dembecha woreda who have engaged in weaving, tanning, pot-making and blacksmithing are the focus of this research.

Almost all available related literatures maintain that the craft workers in Ethiopia usually occupy lower status of the social hierarchy. For instance, in Dembecha woreda, the artisans (tanners, potters, weavers and blacksmiths) are despised groups. They have not been treated in the same way as other ordinary people. They have been deprived of

socio-cultural, political and economic advantages that the majority could enjoy. According to some craft worker informants, restriction to own land, sharing of food and drink, sitting together in communal gatherings and marriage with non-craft workers were/are critical variables that underplay the maintaining of marginalization. However, as it has been mentioned in recent related literatures, there have been considerable changes since the Derge regime: at least owning land has become possible since the 1975 land reform policy. However, socio-culturally, craft workers are still positioned at the lower position in society. For instance, intermarriage with craft workers is commonly viewed disgraceful by the non -craft workers.

There are so many stereotypes and discriminatory principles attached with craft workers to be considered as aberrant. They are described as possessing of a number of attributes. The weavers, blacksmiths and potters, for instance, are associated with the evil eye (*buda*)<sup>1</sup> and *teyib* (lit.wise), connoting danger and mystery. That means, the workers are perceived by the rest of the society as wielding special supernatural power and esoteric knowledge which are considered to cause illness and death (Silverman, 1999:14). The tanners are thought to smell different and consume unwanted portion of the skin that they are working with. But the claims are malicious gossips to artisans.

In addition, within Dembecha woreda, the artisans are identified and called by derogatory names and honor degrading titles. For instance, the weavers are called *Kutit betash* (lit. thread breaker), the tanners as *faqi* (lit scratcher), the blacksmiths as *ketkachi* (lit. someone who bit something continuously) and the potters as *deben ansa* ( lit. taker of the fertile soil). These terms are generally applied to mention the lower status while implicitly reinforcing the dominant sense of superior rectitude.

With all these and other attributes the craft workers are considered different and looked down up on by other people which force them to live confined in their own group

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<sup>1</sup> *However, all weavers, blacksmiths and potters are not considered buda as all buda people are not artisans.*

(Lewis.H, 1970, Haberland, 1979, Ambaye 1997, Pankhurst, 2001). Thus, in many instances, socio- economic organizations were/are arranged among themselves.

In fact, there has been remarkable change in societies' attitude and feeling towards artisans. As a result, some of the negative attributes, nowadays, tend to become outdated or at least the chauvinistic attitudes against the nature and identity of artisans are apparently in the process of collapsing. Nevertheless, artisans do not become part of the dominant society. They are still placed at the margins of some socio-economic benefits.

Notwithstanding, the aforementioned features of marginalization, products of artisans have been very important in the socio-cultural and economic life of the society. Particularly, the utilitarian products are too vital to the livelihood and economic activity of Dembecha woreda. Even it can be said that no activity would be accomplished without the involvement of artisan products. This unprecedented role is also evidenced socio-culturally. Social events, practices, relations, etc, are often accompanied with and even expressed by handicraft products.

The socio- cultural and economic status of the artisans, however, is a disparity and reverse; being pillars for the general life setting of the society, they have been usually economically disadvantaged and socio- culturally excluded. This is similar with what Cassier said: “society would call them to provide certain implements and practical objects, but kept them in a marginal position” (1975:57).

If they have played a significant role in the maintenance and welfare of the society, why is it that these craft workers are marginalized? This is the basic question that the thesis attempts to address.

Furthermore, the continuity of handicraft working leads one to ask how the skills have been transmitted from generation to generation despite the discouraging practices and attitudes.

In Dembecha woreda the non- craft workers claim handicraft working to be beneath the economic dignity of the majority of the farmers. But it is inaccurate to say social status or acceptance is certainly related with the occupation because “families who abandoned handicraft working long ago might still be considered socially inferior while ordinary people can take up the occupation without affecting their social status” (Karsten,1972:134). Therefore, it is appropriate to question why craft workers have been treated differentially.

Moreover, the socio-cultural and economic aspects of artisans’ marginalization in northern Ethiopia are not systematically studied. It is hardly possible to find any anthropological study of these groups in Gojjam let alone in Dembecha woreda. Therefore, a research that assesses the forms and factors of craft workers’ marginalization with basic features of social organization and handicraft working at such a woreda level can be expected to contribute, at least to fill the existing knowledge gap.

## **1.2. Objective of the Study**

### **1.2.1. General Objective**

The general objective and main aim of this research is to study the socio-cultural and economic marginalization of craft workers in Dembecha woreda, Amhara National Regional State.

### **1.2.2. Specific Objectives**

Specific objectives of the study are

To describe social organization of artisans in light of the dominant society

To describe the change and continuity in production and exchange systems of crafts and the survival strategy of artisans.

To describe and analyze dimensions of craft workers' marginalization from the change and continuity point of view.

To investigate factors accounted for artisans' marginalization.

### 1.3. Rationale and Significance of the Study

Making handicrafts is not a new phenomenon. It has a long history in Ethiopia. It is not also uncommon to observe handicraftsmanship either in the form of tannery, weaving, blacksmithing or pottery in Dembecha. However, on the one hand, handicraft workers are accorded lower status in the social hierarchy and are treated as inferior social groups. On the other hand, the socio- cultural and economic role of their products made handicraft working inevitable. Therefore, it is reasonable to study the paradoxes between the important roles their products play and the low social position given to workers. In addition, the low economic standard of many artisans when compared with the majority while their products are pillars for the economy of the majority was partly the basis for this study. Therefore, studying and documenting the socio- cultural and economic conditions of the marginalized handicraft workers will have the following significances:

Relatively speaking, there is no extensive study on artisan groups of Northern Ethiopia. Particularly, no special attention has been paid to study such groups who live amidst the dominant society without ethno-linguistic and religious difference. Thus, the research can be expected to have significance in initiating further studies and in serving as a ground to other researchers interested in the same field.

Since change is inevitable in this era of technology, a research from such a change and continuity perspective will provide valuable information about the overall social, cultural and economic life of occupational groups through time.

Though limited in scope and dimension, this research may help to compare the general life conditions of craft workers in different social contexts and geographical settings.

Moreover, it is the researcher's firm conviction that any interested body who engaged in the promotion of marginalized sections of any society including government and NGO practitioners would be beneficiaries of the research's outcome.

## **1.4. Research Methodology**

### **1.4.1. Procedures**

In this research, both primary and secondary sources were used. After identifying the subject area, the researcher tried to assess and collect related literatures. This has been done in two phases by classifying the written documents thematically: those that deal with the subject of this study and methodology. Accordingly, the researcher tried to get related literatures dealing with marginalization and artisans. Different articles, books, periodicals and proceedings have been consulted and photo copied as much as possible. This had great importance to write statement of the problem, to look at different anthropological perspectives about marginalized minorities and to review attentions of scholars studying the socio-cultural and economic conditions of artisans in Ethiopia and to some extent in Africa. Above all, the literatures that were read during this phase guided to develop themes and sub themes of the research.

Then, articles and books about research methodology were read. By which, the researcher came across with a great deal of information about the different anthropological research methods of data collection. This in turn helped to choose the methods that were employed during fieldwork. In addition, reading methodological parts of some thesis made the researcher aware of fieldwork pitfall.

The fieldwork was carried out from January 16, 2010 to March 20, 2010. Before the beginning of actual data collection, the researcher made observation of artisans' villages. While traveling through the villages, the researcher could observe the geographical setting, working units of some artisans, and settlement patterns. This assisted to identify where potters, blacksmiths, weavers and tanners live in group which later helped to choose the research villages. In addition, the researcher went to a market place to monitor the behavior of customers and producers as they go through their transaction. This visit also allowed to see the diversity and proportion of artisan products. Next, the researcher went to Wotebet, a village in Dembecha town where group of artisans found and began to discuss informally with some artisans. The researcher had no any recording material

during this time since the main aim was to know artisans attitude. The issues that had been raised were general, ranging from introducing myself, their occupation, family and economic condition. By the preliminary informal interviews and discussions, some key informants and the research sites were selected.

Though there are artisans who live dispersed in other kebel of Dembecha woreda, the major research villages are Wotebet, Aroge amba and Meged. The villages are selected based on different criteria. In the first place, it was due to the number and settlement pattern of artisans. The number of artisans is relatively large and live in group. Besides, the composition of different artisans, weavers, potters, blacksmiths and tanners were taken into consideration. This is to say, group settlement and number of artisans who engaged in different craftsmanship necessitated the selection of the villages. Furthermore, Meged which is found in Shelel kebele was selected for comparative purpose i.e. to compare rural and town settings.

Initially, thirty-two artisans and seven non-craft workers were selected to collect data about marriage arrangement rules, kinship relation, family composition and structure, economic level, etc. The thirty- nine informants were interviewed at a minimum of one time and maximum of three times. In advance, out of the thirty-nine informants, one non-artisan and eight artisan key informants were selected. The selection of eight artisan key informants was to give a great say to the subjects. The key informants were selected for their competence in providing the necessary data employed to accomplish objectives of this research.

#### **1.4.2 Data Collection Methods**

Much of the fieldwork time was dedicated to gather the most important data of the research. To this end, the following data collection methods were employed. The first two were methods that I relied on heavily.

**Participant Observation-** This was important to get in touch with the artisans and thus a good deal of rapport was established. Through this method, the researcher had the opportunity to observe methods, means and process of crafts production and the day to

day activities of artisans. The researcher had also the chance to take part in communal gatherings (eg at the church when people held public meeting after church pray), festivals (example, during annual celebration of *tir Mickeal*), markets and drinking houses. In this method, the researcher tried to understand the actual relation between artisans and non-artisans and also among artisans themselves, the difference and similarity in celebrating feasts and exchange systems.

**Informal Interview-** This was also the basic method employed. So much of my primary data were gathered through this method of data collection. Selected informants from both artisans and non-artisans were interviewed as much as fieldwork time and the interviewees permit. The researcher discussed with priests, farmers, merchants, government officials and with artisans of different sex, age, religion, etc. The non-artisans were asked about their life experience and family, about their relation with different occupational groups mainly with artisans. At the end through this method information about the history, the social organization, the economic condition of artisans in particular and the dominant society in general were gathered. Moreover, data about factors and forms of artisans' marginalization from the change and continuity perspective was gathered. In this method, the researcher used tape recording particularly when the interviewees allow me to record.

**Semi -Structured Interview** - The researcher used this method at the end of the fieldwork to cross check the data already collected. To this end, guiding questions were prepared which constitute issues that have been repeatedly mentioned and considered ambiguous like myths, beliefs, thoughts about artisans' origin and character.

**Case Studies-** In addition to the above data collecting mechanisms brief case studies, though not exclusively methods, were used to develop better understanding of different issues raised in the study. They were important to elucidate, discuss and analyze alleged differences of craft workers from non-craft workers, factors of marginalization, aspects of marginalization and life experience of both artisans and non-artisans.

## **1.5. Delimitation and Limitation of the Study**

Prolonged and exhaustive study is required to examine the multi-dimensional aspects of artisans' marginalization. However, this thesis emphasized on socio-cultural and economic aspects of marginalization at the woreda level. Again within the woreda, though there are artisans who live dispersed among the dominant society at different kebel, the scope of the study is delimited to potentially manageable size at a given time. Thus, the thesis focuses only on two selected research sites , one rural kebel, Shelel and one town, Dembecha. For the specific decision of which kebel or village to work upon, number and settlement pattern of artisans were taken as a guide.

Comprehensive anthropological study of artisans at any level demands the application of several data collection methods. Nevertheless, only four data collection methods (participant observation, informal interview, semi-structured interview and case studies) were employed due to limited time and finance.

In addition, unwillingness of some informants to be interviewed formally and official's resentment to provide demographic data have its own limiting effect on the thesis. Furthermore, the unwillingness of some ex-artisans in the rural research site has great limitation to unveil historical aspects of artisans and their life experience. However, to overcome these problems, greater attention was given to observation and informal interview to obtain reliable information from both sides, artisans and non-artisans.

## **1.6. Review of Related Literatures**

### **1.6.1 Attention of Early Scholars**

Handicraft working is not a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. According to Richard Pankhurst (1964) Ethiopia has a long history of handicrafts which stretches back to the very dawn of history. In this regard, while writing about historical background of artisans in Waliso, Ambaye(1997) said, " The history of artisans can be estimated as long as the history of the host society". During those times, objects of homestead utility and agricultural implements of the majority have been on the hands of artisans. However,

despite their long aged existence and important role they have been played for the well being of their “host” society, scholarly attention is negligible. The insignificance attention and absence of exhaustive and comprehensive ethnographic records have been repeatedly mentioned in recent anthropological studies. For instance, Nahu(1998) said, “Although occupational groups in African societies are very important since they provide agricultural tools and utility goods to the community, they are given less attention by scholars who focused on the dominant group”. Hallpike(1968), Ambaye(1997), Damtew(2000) on their part state that there is no comprehensive study concerning despised artisans of Ethiopia. Similarly, the researcher’s assessment of available documents and records, articles and other related scholarly works proved the inadequacy. In addition, the absence of remarkable change in the methods and means of craft production and similarity of crafts through time are partly evidences for the minimal attention that have been paid, not only by scholars but also by other responsible bodies.

In fact, the presence of craft workers in Ethiopia has been recognized since long time ago. However, the earlier works which reveal their presence were from casual encounters [with artisans] while conducting research with in the larger community (Nahu, 1998: 23). In those earlier works, any issue concerning artisans was discussed or presented with in few lines. Particularly, concerning artisans who live scattered among the majority farmers and semi urban communities (like artisans of Dembecha woreda), it is possible to say no detailed studies have been carried out.

Although existing literatures dealing with artisans of Ethiopia are inadequate, the southern part seems to have advantage over the northern part in ethnographic records. A number of scholars have studied artisan groups in the southern part. For instance, Hallpike(1968) studied the status of craftsmen in Konso, Todd(1978) studied the Dime society, Teketel (1985) studied the Fuga in Kembata, Pankhurst(1999) studied the issue of caste system in Southern Ethiopia. Moreover, someone can mention the comparative studies of team of researchers compiled in a book entitled *LIVING ON THE EDGE: MARGINALIZED MINORITIES OF CRAFT WORKERS AND HUNTERS IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA*

(2001) to claim the imbalance of scholarly attentions concerning the south- north dichotomy.

In the north, the live of marginalized artisans has been a neglected issue despite long tradition of writing. If there is, it is either on Falasha (Bet Israel) or Wayato to describe them as different ethnic groups. In fact, Damtew(2001) studied artisans who live in a monastery in Menze of Amhara. He tried to understand the general life experience and setting of these monastic artisan communities through time in what he called "segregation and integration" point of view. There are also scholars who give relatively better attention, at least in allocating pages to artisans of Northern Ethiopia while studying the dominant society. For instance, Messing(1957) dedicated 37 pages to describe the production process of crafts and division of labor among artisans while studying the Amhara society in general and Simoons(1960) gave 23 pages in his book entitled "Peoples and Economy of North West Ethiopia" to highlight their historical back ground, causes of marginalization, and to some extent about production of crafts artisans. Otherwise, as far as my reading is concerned, the issue of Northern artisans in earlier works is sketchy and devoted to mention as they are neglected, marginalized, despised, caste etc

Almost all the above literatures (either in the northern or southern part of Ethiopia) maintained that artisans are marginalized occupational groups in Ethiopia. Though there is a variation in the form and degree of marginalization, the omnipresent craft workers in particular and minorities in general were socially excluded, spatially segregated, culturally subordinated, economically disadvantaged and politically disempowered (Pankhurst,A., 2001:2) However, scholars have been in controversy about their origin, identity and the reasons and causes of the marginalization. "Who are these marginalized groups? from where did they come , and why are they marginalized" were the questions that have puzzled those early scholars. In attempting to answer these questions, different perspectives have emerged. Though it seems difficult to reach at conclusive end from a specific and ready made perspective about the socio- economic life of artisans,and factors and forms of their marginalization, reviewing the perspectives is found necessary, at least to describe the data.

## **1.6.2. Review of Perspectives about Marginalized Minorities in Ethiopia**

### **1.6.2.1. Origin and Identity of Marginalized Minorities**

Different assumptions have been forwarded concerning the origin and identity of marginalized minorities in Ethiopia. In relation to the purpose of the research, the perspectives can be categorized into three generalized groups. The first perspective justifies the origin and identity of marginalized minorities in 'a remnant' model. As Levin (2000:169) said, "The model considered the marginalized minorities of today as fortuitous remnants of aboriginal populations who were simply subjugated by dominant Ethiopian stocks". Basically, the theory assumes separate ethnic origin and external imposition of marginalization. Accordingly, it claims that minority groups of today were separate ethnic groups with their own identity, but later forced to adopt new socio-cultural and economic setting. This notion was clearly justified by Jensen in relation with "hunting minorities". Jensen (1959) considered the marginalized groups as aboriginal autochthous populations cultivating tuber crops that became 'submerged or depressed and were forced to adopt hunting by more powerful immigrants with superior agricultural technology (cited in Pankhurst.A, 1995:19). Explicitly, her justification was to proclaim the despised and marginalized hunters of today were a single ethnic groups and later forced to live aside with their newly developed economic activity, hunting.

From this, it seems possible to say that Jensen's justification stem either from considering the 'conquerors' homogenous; as there was no differentiation among themselves or from implicit notion of denying the organizing principle of common experience (marginalization in this case). Whatever it might be, perception of common ethnic origin for minorities of today has been challenged. Accordingly, Pankhurst(1995) suggests "...the remnant theory alone seems untenable, and could only apply to hunter groups and not to part-time craft specialists, whose relationship with the rest of the population is part and parcel of their identities"(1995:20).

The first group of scholars (Cerulli, 1922; Straub, 1963 cited in Pankhurst.A,2001) who endangered the above assumption claim that “the conquerors were also thought to have brought their own ‘pariahs’ who then mixed with the ‘original’ dominated peoples to form the contemporary marginalized groups we see today”. This argument stresses on the common experience shared among the dominated ‘original’ and ‘pariahs’ of the dominating groups as a basis to form “a united cultural layer”. On the other side, Haberland relates the status of minorities with ‘divine kingship’. After describing the omnipresence of special castes and caste systems Haberland (1978:132) concluded that

*The decisive factors were... the contacts with groups who brought with them the idea of state differentiated, society and kinship. It did not matter if these groups who formed the special castes were pygmies or other hunters and/or autochthons or if they have arrived together with dominating new comers.*

In other words, rather than being members of the original population subjugated by powerful migrants, he considered the special casts as marginalized groups which migrated with invading groups and brought with them hierarchical values according to which craft workers were closely dependent on, and subservient to, the royalty (Pankhurst.A, 2001:9). By this he tends to claim the artisans to be separate groups in one way but never stand alone.

Despite their differences on the origins and identity of marginalized minorities in Ethiopia, almost all the above scholars insisted that despised minorities in southern Ethiopia should be understood as marginalized minorities whose present position was imposed by the dominant groups from without.

However, since there is a prevailing difference in the historical process that led to the formation of despised groups and in the form and degree of their marginalization within the south let alone to the other part of Ethiopia (Freeman and Pankhurst.A, 2001), applicability of the remnant model is disputed. Furthermore, there is no difference in language, culture, religion etc among non- craft workers and craft workers in the research site to claim originality or lie out ethnic identity and even different binding element. Of

course, the ethnic perspective may have its own significance at least in describing the forms of marginalization.

On the other hand, some scholars view marginalized minorities found in most parts of Ethiopia as migrants. In relation to this Levin said: "...in many instances the members of caste groups are highly skilled craft specialists who have migrated and settled among one or another host tribe for the sake of finding a regular source of demand for their products"(2000;169).

Scholars have insisted on the origin of marginalized minorities particularly craft workers in Ethiopia to be from the division of labor that a society experienced in the means, mode and process of production and distribution of the economic system (Todd, 1978; Lewis; 1970). In other words, the 'internal specialization' theorists suggests, "Craft work developed through internal differentiation and specialization within a given population"(Pankhurst, A. 1995: 20). In line with this, H. Lewis (1970;185) argues, "Since there is no cultural or physical difference between the majority and the craft workers, the phenomenon of occupational caste in Ethiopia must be looked at as a distinctive division of labor, a system for the production and distribution of goods and services which demand special skills and training". However, he didn't give explicit justification for the sources of discrimination and prejudices for the special skills. In fact, his main interest was to argue against what he calls "the highly improbable reconstruction" of the 'remnant' perspective by taking economic inequality accompanied by cultural values perpetuate marginalization . In addition, Todd (1978) in his theory of "internal social differentiation" also took the notion of division of labor and argued that specialization arises from the sequential link of surplus, availability of resources and technological advancement. In the following statements, he argues:

*Societies produced relatively stable methods of production which did not consume all, even most, of the members' time while producing more than a subsistence level of food. As the knowledge of the country improved, resources such as iron ore....clay....become known and the people realized their usefulness. The techniques to make use of these resources were developed and the products from them became in demand (1978: 151)*

This is to say that the production in surplus resulted in various specialists with some kinds of inequalities but related and substantiated each other

### **1.6.2.2. Sources of Differentiation and Relation**

Different assumptions have been presented concerning the causes of marginalization or low status of artisans. The first group views the inequality is primarily due to economy. According to this perspective the marginalized groups are labeled as special classes placed at the lower social strata. However, it wasn't to synthesize Marxian and Weberian views of social class, which is "invariably related to industrial or modern economic development, factors that facilitate a large economic surplus" (Tuden and Plotnicov 1970:18). The interpretation of the class perspective, rather, is based on the assumption that differentiation is essentially a result of internal division of labour and is driven primarily by economic rather than cultural factors (Pankhurst, A. 2001:15). In a relatively better justification Haberland (1979) explained the division of tasks to be the sources of inequality, when further approved by beliefs. He justified in such away that:

*There is rigid division of activities respective to function. This division must be sanctioned by law and/or religion. It is conceived as preordained and invested with religious ritual or even mythic meaning. These tasks though vital for the welfare and existence of the society must involve also some degree of fear and awe or some belief that the powers of these groups are combined with unclean and/or spiritually degrading qualities (Haberland, 1979:129).*

The second explanation rests on symbolic meanings of crafts and craft working. Symbolic explanations for the marginalized status of craft workers stress either the symbolism of the materials and techniques used in craft production or the cultural stereotypes attributed to artisans and the symbolic role they play in the moral conceptions of the dominant society (Pankhurst .A, 2001:17).

In his discussion about the status of craftsmen among the Konso of south west Ethiopia, Hallpike maintained that religious prejudices, relating to the color and characteristics of the materials have been responsible for the status of craft workers (*bauda*) (1968:264-65). He discussed the conception in such a way, "Cotton ripens in the hot months, when the

flawed because they tend to focus solely on the process of production and not the uses and meanings of the products (Pankhurst, A., 2001: 18). However, it can be expected to have implications and relevance to study socio- economic status of artisans where religious and cultural matters intermixed and become sole governor of the day to day activities of the society like in Dembecha woreda.

The third explanation is what has been called cultural area approach. This explanation is said to be derived from Simoons's explanation concerning smiths of North West Ethiopia (Pankhurst,A. 2001). After he explained that iron working was introduced to Ethiopia in fairly recent times, Simoons declared that the social position of smiths is derived from their respective areas of origin. Hence, he elucidates that North West Ethiopia straddles the border between Negro Africa; where most people regarded blacksmiths as members of honored profession, and the Middle East, where blacksmiths are commonly form separate low social status groups whether they are classes, castes or tribes (Simoons, 1960:179). Simoons thus asserts that the variation in social position of craft workers in their respective 'host' society is due to the influence of external values which are either diffused or imposed.

In a similar way, Haberland perceives the social position of the southern craft workers in Ethiopia mainly silversmiths and weavers in light of the already existing castes in artisans' 'origin'. He suggested that "*both handicrafts, 'originated' in Northern Ethiopia ...Hence, their status varies*" (Haberland, 1978: 130). However, applicability of this perspective to the case on hand is doubtful due to lack of historical sources to trace the origin of craft workers in the study area.

### **1.6.2.3. The Concept of Caste**

Another major question raised by early scholars to understand the status of minorities is the applicability of caste concept out side India. Accordingly, there are two divergent schools of thought.. The first group which comprises those commonly called the "indologists" argues that "it is inappropriate to use the word caste outside of Indian context" (Tuden and Plotnicov, 1970, Coy 1982, Todd, 1977). This group stresses on the

importance of cultural dimension (Tuden and Plotricov, 1970:16) Thus, they consider the application of the term elsewhere as fallacious.

On the other hand, the second school, by emphasizing the gross structural similarities in their wide comparative analysis (Ibid: 16), insists that the concept caste can be used outside Indian context. Accordingly, many scholars have used the term 'caste' in African and Ethiopian contexts. According to Pankhurst (2001:11) the first argument in favor of using the concept in African context was presented by Nadel (1954). As stated by Coy (1982:9) Nadel's approach to caste and caste system was a structural one: seeking characteristics in the African caste groups that were reminiscent of the Indian situation. Later, many scholars like Todd (1977), Quirin (1964), Hallpike (1968), Shack (1964) and others who studied marginalized groups in Ethiopia have used the concept widely. In line of this, H. Lewis argues that the term can be used in any phenomenon of social stratification outside of Indian context. He, then, tried to justify his argument by mentioning comparable (with Indian context) characteristics of Ethiopian artisans. He said that "out of the seven Leach's (one of the leading 'indologists') characteristics of Indian caste groups, six are evident in Ethiopia. Those six characteristics are 1 Endogamy ,2. Restrictions on commensality 3.Status hierarchy, 4. Concepts of pollution 5. Association with a traditional occupation 6.Caste membership ascribed by birth (H. Lewis, 1970, 182-183).

Some others focus on three issues that are considered essential for defining castes: 1) the extent of patron-client relationship and the control by the client group over their means of production 2) whether the different status are divinely ordained on the basis of concepts of purity and pollution or are simply different status, and 3) whether there is a hierarchical ranking with in the caste groups or simply two occupational categories of cultivators and artisans ( Hamer, 1987:56-57).

Generally, it can be said that scholars who studied marginalized minorities have used the concept of caste with different nuance. However, nearly all the attempts to apply caste arise from the application of Leach's criteria (Coy, 1982:14). But, there was a general consensus on the fact that caste in India is a full fledged system which consists of a large

number of rigidly segregated caste groups woven into fabric that covers almost every aspect of ranked group relations (Teketel, 1985:4) Therefore, Indian caste system with its elaborate and complex organization has no comparable institution. Despite the debate to the applicability of caste in Ethiopia, Pankhurst suggested two prevalent ideological factors that require further consideration: myths and notions of pollution (Pankhurst. A, 1995:13)

To conclude, the researcher does not attempt to correlate the context of marginalization in Dembecha woreda with any other setting. In fact, the aforementioned characteristics of caste relation in Ethiopia will be applied to investigate the change and continuity of aspects of artisans' marginalization in Dembecha woreda.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2. An Overview of the Study Area and the People

The purpose of this chapter is to provide brief information about the physical environment and basic features of socio-economic condition of the study area. The first section deals with location, geographical features, means of livelihood and population size with their religion and ethnic composition. The next part is devoted to examine alleged organizational differences among craft workers and the dominant society.

#### 2.1. General Background to the Study Area and the People

West Gojjam, where Dembecha woreda is located, is one of the administrative zones of Amhara regional state. Situated to north of Addis Ababa, the zone is boarded on the south by the Abay river which separate it from the Oromia Region, on the west by Agew Awi zone, on the north west by northern Gondar, on the north by lake Tana, on the north east by Bahir Dar and the Abay river which separates it from South Gondar and on the east by East Gojjam. According to the present political administrative system, west Gojjam is divided into fourteen woredas where Dembecha is one of them.

Dembecha woreda is located at a distance of 350km away from Addis Ababa and 205km from Bahir Dar, capital city of Amhara Regional State. The woreda is surrounded by other woredas virtually with the same socio-cultural background, but probably it is the woreda where large proportion of craft workers live. The woreda shares borders with Bure wonbera in the west, Jabi Tehnan woreda in the northwest, Bibugn in the north and with East Gojjam in the east and south. According to the woreda information bureau, it lies approximately on a total area of 979.26km<sup>2</sup>. Its altitude ranges from 1500-2999km with annual temperature of 4.8- 1.8<sup>0</sup>C. It received 1006mm average annual rainfall. There are three agro- ecological zones; highland (*dega*) accounts 11%, middle highland (*woyena dega*) representing 83% and lowland (*kola*) covers 6% of the total land area of

the woreda. Thus, it is dominantly characterized by a temperate climate. The topography of the area consists of 60% flat, 30% mountainous and 9% valley with 65% red, 25% brown and 10% black soil types<sup>2</sup>.

According to the 2007 population and Housing Census Dembecha woreda had a total population of 129,228. Out of which the majority lives in rural areas and only small segment lives in urban areas.

The socio- cultural and economic condition of the people in Dembecha woreda generally owes to rural 'traditional' way of life. Socio- cultural relations and organizations embodies kinship, family, marriage, and spatial arrangements. However, the composition of people in a village was not kin related, each village contains heterogeneous group of people. In terms of religion, except about 1,308 Muslims and few Protestants, all inhabitants are followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

Economically, the majority of the woreda's populations are sedentary agriculturalists. They largely depend on cereal farming which is practiced by Ox-drawn plough. In the highland part, potato, barley and wheat are the major crops grown where as cattle, sheep, horses and mules are important animals reared. The crops grown and livestock raised in both the mid highland and lowland areas are almost similar; *teff*, *sorghum*, *oilseeds* and *dagusa* are the basics with the keeping of cattle, goats and sheep. Chicken and bees are also kept in all ecological zones though they are of minor importance. Surplus grain may reach the market even in larger quantity. Many families in the town are engaged in small scale trade. Besides, preparing liquors for sales such as *t'ella*( local beer prepared from barely and maize) and *areki* is the main livelihood for many females. The woreda is known for its *areki*, which is now increasingly generating income for many families, and it controls the local markets and is being exported to other adjacent areas.

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<sup>2</sup> *Statistical data are found from information bureau of Dembecha woreda*

There are also artisans engaged in tanning, weaving, pot-making and blacksmithing. According to office of small scale and micro finance enterprise, these groups accounts for less than 1% of the total population of Dembecha woreda. The office has carried out registration of artisans in 1997. The registration focused on those artisans engaged predominantly in craft working and reside in a separate village. Based on this, the office posted estimated number of artisans living in the woreda; as there would be 400 households (nuclear family). According to Teweda, chairperson of the office, the exact number of artisans is not still known due to lack of well-organized and all encompassing registration. She reported that though there are numbers of artisans in many kebeles of the woreda, the office made an attempt to register in specific areas where there are artisans who live in a separate village where craft working has been practiced as a principal source of income. She also relates the absence of accurate data with the unwillingness of some craft workers to be registered as a craft worker. As to her opinion, the opposition was from those involved in other economic activities while producing crafts. Thus, it was impossible to find the exact number of artisans that live particularly in the research sites let alone in the woreda.

The research mainly focuses on artisans who live in Shelel kebele and Dembecha town. The first research site, Shelele keble, is one of the 29 kebeles of Dembecha woreda. Shelele is about 17kms away from the center of the woreda, Dembecha town. It takes about 3hrs travel on foot from the town. Its agro-ecological zone is highland (*dega*). Economically, almost all, people are sedentary agriculturalists. The artisans who are found in Shelel live in a specific village called Meged. The village is separated from the residence of the majority farmers by an elevated geographical feature. Meged is somewhat lowland compared with the village of non-craft workers. In fact, the number of craft workers is very small. They may not be more than 25 households. Craft working is the principal means of livelihood but it does not mean that craft working is the only activity practiced among the craft workers. They also farm and rear different animals. According to some of my informants, they had their own farm land even during the strict times of feudalism though it was very small and infertile.

The second research site is the center of the woreda, Dembecha town. The relatively big weekly market days which fall on Saturdays and Wednesdays are held here. Agricultural products, of different kinds, from different agro-ecological zones of the woreda are brought to the town for sale mainly on these days. The products mainly constitute barely, wheat, lentils, *teff*, *dagusa*, red pepper, oilseed, beans, etc. Other consumption requirements like salt, coffee, sugar, fabrics/costumes, etc are brought up by traders from national or regional markets and then distributed either directly to the consumer or by other small-scale traders. It is only here that transaction of cattle, sheep and goats is carried out. If it is in another kebele, it is occasional; particularly during periods of annual festivals like *miskel* (the finding of the true cross), Eastern, Christmas, etc. Saturday and Wednesday are also the only days when people can obtain such items as pottery, spears, plowshares, and leather goods; "the work of caste specialists with whom social intercourse is ordinarily avoided" (Levin, 2000). Similarly, the only secondary and preparatory schools [one each] with one kindergarten, three elementary schools are found here.

There are also more artisans here than elsewhere in the woreda. The smiths are very few next to potters while tanners and weavers are the largest in number. These artisans live mainly in Aroge Amba (lit. old fortress) and Wotebet. These villages are found in opposing outskirts of the town. Though there is no any geographical feature to separate these villages from the rest parts of the town, they are arbitrarily demarcated with the perception or thought of the people, as villages of craft workers. In fact, the villages look different being covered with big eucalyptus trees. Aroge Amba is located in the north east direction from the center of the town. It is very near to Saint Mickeal church which is said to have been one of the oldest churches in Gojjam. Aroge Amba is believed to be residence of royal families. According to informants, Ras Hailu and his families, Diazmach Zewdie and his son, Djazmach Goshu had lived there. According to *Merigeta* Belay, one of my key informants, this village was also the first residence of craft workers who were brought to serve the royal families. As to both non- craft worker and craft worker informants, it has only been recently that craft workers began to shift their center to Wotebet. At present, the majority of craft workers live in Wotebet. It is very near to the big river called Gulla which crosses the town. The river is said to have been the biggest and largest river in the woreda.

## 2.2. Thoughts about Historical Background of Craft Workers

Various scholars have mentioned the omnipresence of marginalized minorities in Ethiopia. However, no explicit and tangible evidence is provided to comprehend the precise origin of these marginalized groups. Thus, their historical origin is controversial and obscure.

Concerning artisans of Amhara region, earlier scholars seem to link their historical background with Falasha of Gonder (Levin 2000; Messing, 1957; Quirin, 1964). Accordingly, the weavers, smiths, and potters have been considered as Falasha and as migrants from Gonder to settle in the rest parts of the region. The tanners, on the other hand, have been taken as originated from Agaw stock. However, none of the scholars provides clear historical evidences. As a result, explaining origin of artisans who settled among the larger society like artisans in Dembecha is daunting task.

Thoughts of elders, life experiences and coping mechanisms have been utilized in endeavors to trace historical background of artisans in Ethiopia. Similarly, apart from thoughts of elders and myths, the researcher could not find historical sources concerning the origin of artisans in the study area. Though exhaustive further ethno-historical study is necessary to know from where these occupational marginalized groups came from, thoughts of elders need to be described.

*Abba Shitie*, church educated elder, supposed that the origin of artisans who live in Dembecha might be from Gonder. The elder suggested that the coming of artisans to Dembecha is related with the construction of st. Michael church. According to his view, the church is one of the seven oldest churches in Gojjam and is brought from Gonder. He stated that

*The ark of st. Mickeal was brought by three monks from Gonder. It has been said that there was a revelation from God to the three monks to take the tabot (ark) to Gojjam, particularly to a place with a name beginning with the letter da. Being led by God's mystery( be egziabhir*

*tamir), the monks arrived at da river around which there was ancient monastery called Gubrit Sellasie. The monks handed the covenant over to the monastery. However, there was no a place or a church to put it. Having understand the problem, the three monks on their return promised to send skilled persons( tibeegnoch). It is commonly stated as the church was built by these skilled persons send by the monks from Gonder.*

Furthermore, *Abba Shitie* said: “It is widely perceived as the artisans did not arrive alone. They were accompanied by their families or other peoples they knew, either during or later”. He also tried to justify his assumption of artisans’ origin by taking the word *felasi*. *Felasi* literally means migrant. Thus the elder suggests that the word might be applied to refer to artisans as migrants, not original inhabitants. Furthermore, he disclosed that the word *felasi* seems to be derived from the name Falasha to remind their origin from Gonder.

With little variance concerning the historical background of the church and the first settlers of Dembecha, *Mergeta Belay* dwelled on 'historical' explanation that kings and noblemen were traditionally move from one place to another accompanied by different occupational groups who could supply the necessary utilities and entertainments. Accordingly, he said:

*Since Dembecha st.Mickeal is one of the seven oldest churches in Gojjam, there were many nobles who made their residence around. So, artisans were brought to produce utensils and other weapons needed by the nobles. Initially the artisans had lived as specialized servants engaged in the production of crafts. Later their number increase when their families and relatives began to settle around serving the neighboring farmers.*

Apart from such thoughts of elders, the researcher could not find historical sources to trace the origin of artisans live in Dembecha woreda. Another important thing worth mentioning is the response of artisans. Almost all artisans stated that their parents or grandparents were live in Amanuel woreda. Investigating historical background of artisans following such views need further exhaustive and extended study.

## **2.3. Basic Features of Social Organization**

The main attention of this section is to outline the basic features of social organization of people of Dembecha woreda in relation with the wider setting, people of Amhara. Likewise, alleged differences [if any] in the social organization of craft workers with the dominant society will be assessed.

### **2.3.1. Marriage**

Marriage constitutes socio-economic conditions and events which could determine one's life, family, and the community at large. Thus, it is a collective responsibility and function. In Amhara, like elsewhere, marriage is the starting point for the creation of a new nuclear family. In Dembecha, getting married for an individual means a shift or a beginning to shift to another socio-economic realm.

In Amhara, for instance, in Dembecha woreda, while selecting a marriage partner for their children, parents apply elaborated set of rules and regulations. They were usually guided by rules that ensure the perpetuation of kinship ties and socio-economic status (Levin 1972, 2000; Hoben, 1973; Messing, 1957). With regard to the first rule of kinship tie, Levin said, "The Amhara rule of exogamy stipulates that marriage partners must not be closer than 'seven houses', that is, spouses must not have a common great-great-great grand parent" (2000:116). In Dembecha woreda this rule is still a critical variable during marriage arrangement among craft workers and non-craft workers as well. In the second rule, socio-economic status is very important in relation to craft workers' intermarriage with the 'host' society. The children of the dominant society are expected to marry from groups of the same religious background with socially accepted status. As it has been mentioned, artisans were despised groups and have given low status. Hence, they were considered poor marriage prospects: marriage with them is considered disgraceful and illegitimate by non-craft workers. Though there are various assumptions and beliefs stated by non-craft workers as grounds to the exclusion, the researcher does not wish to dwell on this subject here. The intention is rather to highlight marriage organization and

principles employed in the study area in relation to the Amhara society, and among the artisans in comparison with the 'host' society.

In relation to socio-economic condition, different issues like family background, wealth, health (absence of hereditary disease) etc have to be assessed before marriage is contracted. In addition, family trait character is taken into consideration. For instance, if members even a member in a family is recognized as drunkard or as a thief, children in that family are likely to be a poor marriage prospect. Normally, elders are sent to the house of the groom after all these are checked and inspected<sup>3</sup>. Though many things are now changing, marriage situation of contemporary Dembecha woreda largely illustrates the above features and characteristics.

Marriage arrangements, particularly first marriage, in the study area mainly justify the interest and status of the family. The role of parents usually begins from selection of a marriage partner. Parents perceive that searching and choosing marriage partner for children is their right and obligation. Particularly, in the past, the interest of the prospective mates had never been consulted. As Levin puts it "they may not even know what their potential marriage partner looks like until the wedding day itself"(Levin, 2000).

Nowadays, however, "The adolescents are no longer content to regard the selection of a mate as a matter to be arranged by parents in accordance with their own interest and standards" (Levin, 1972:125). What Levin maintains is very much similar with the conception of marriage among the youngsters who went to school in Dembecha woreda. Principally, marriage in towns has become more individualized. That is to say, establishment of the union has come to involve personal considerations among educated adolescents. What now matters most is the negotiation and affiliation of the boy and the girl. However, it is noteworthy that though individuals select their marriage partner on their own standard and interest, they do not wholly reject early rules and regulations. It

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<sup>3</sup> *Appeal for marriage alliance is requested and activated by the male side.*

does not also mean that the role of parents in selecting a mate is totally trodden. Parents often claimed that they have to have a part in their children's marriage. Parents that the researcher discussed with insisted that they have to be involved, at least in inspecting whom their children are going to marry. In this regard, *Mergeta Belay* said:

*Since it is the era's [refers to what the society commonly called **semntegnaw shih** (the eighth thousand)] upshot, my children have the right to choice their marriage partner. But they have to let me know before things go further. I am usually afraid of my descent not to be polluted (**zerye endaybekel eferalehu**). Since they may not know whose son or daughter he/she would be. Therefore, I have to involve in the relation. Otherwise, I don't consider them as my children.*

Thus, individual choices are still circumscribed by parental guidance and approval in towns let alone in the rural villages. In the rural villages, marriage is still very much family consideration unless a child went to school. As Levin (2000) describes it, if a boy is left out to farm on his father's land [if he doesn't go to school], his marriage is regulated by his parents' interest and standard.

Indisputably, marriage is also inevitable, procedural, rule bounded, and deserves a great deal of importance among artisans. However, there is a considerable difference between artisans and non-artisans in marriage arrangement like in degree of parents' involvement, in age of children to be married, etc.

The involvement of craft workers in the marriage of their children is less than the non-craft workers due to marriage arrangement rules and number of artisans. Apart from their in-group marriage arrangement, there are guiding principles/rules within the already defined marriage circle. Marriage arrangement among craft workers, at least, has to ensure religion similarity and kinship relation of the prospective couples. Ideally, marriage among the endogamous groups is legitimate after seven generation between couples of the same religion. Besides these, the number of craft workers who live in a village or kebele is small. For these and other reasons, finding an eligible marriage partner in the nearby village(s) comes to be difficult. Therefore, sometimes the children of craft workers forced to migrate out of their birth place to find a potential marriage

mate. In this case, the role of the migrant's family comes to be lessened since the 'migrant' needs to arrange and perform his/her marriage in his new village. It might be partly due to lack of marriage partner that artisans' children of Dembecha left the woreda either to the neighboring woredas or to other regions. Most of the families that the researcher discussed with asserted that they have one or more children some where outside Dembecha woreda.

Furthermore, the migration of artisans' children has been hastened by the societal perception and insults of being unmarried at what is accepted as "appropriate age". Even if it is now changing, the children of the dominant society in rural villages ordinarily get married before puberty. If a person does not get married up to the age of puberty, he/she is considered as socially unwanted and suspected of some problems. He/she is also referred to moral degrading words like *kumo kere* (lit. stand still). This social negligence is not only a problem to the unmarried individual but also brings social obloquy or infamy to the family<sup>4</sup>. The researcher had come across artisans, particularly potters, who came from Amanuel woreda. The following cases may elucidate the issue.

*Birkie is 35 years old potter who lives in Dembecha woreda. She has two children, a female and male. Before she comes to Dembecha, she had lived in Amanuel woreda. Her father and mother were artisans, a weaver and a potter, respectively. They had also practiced farming on their small farm land. She comes to where she is now, Dembecha, while she was about 21 years old. She did not get married until she comes to Dembecha. It was her aunt who let her come. She stayed one year with her aunt. After a year she had got married to the father of her children. He was a weaver from artisan family. Birkie still remembers the gossips and immoral words of her age mates while she was in Amanuel. In her own words, 'they had been whispered to each other when they saw me from far especially, the children's of chewa (lit. wellborn) didn't consider me as human being even when I was a child'*

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<sup>4</sup> *It should be noted that the gossips and foul words were also to the non-craft workers though not as sever and complicated as to the artisans.*

Another potter, Alemitu, who comes to Dembecha before thirty years ago from the same woreda, Amanuel, has similar experience. Her answer for the question why she came to Dembecha was *bayd felega* (lit. in search of non-kin relative). She also expressed the attitude and insults of the people by saying;

*I remember how heart breaking the words of the people were. They had scoff on my being. Though the exclusion and detestation of the people had already there, the problem comes to be severe after adolescence. It was at this time [times of adolescence] that I began sense those words of contempt.*

Furthermore, first marriage of artisans is not marked by elaborate celebration though it is relatively long lasting. This situation sharply contrasts with the case among the majority. As scholars like Alan Hoben (1973) and David Messing(1957) express, first marriage in Amhara, for instance in Dembecha woreda, was celebrated elaborately though it was not usually long lasting. The number of artisans who remarried was small when compared with the majority. Most of the artisans either live with their first marriage partner or lead their life alone. *Ato* Molla, a key informant tanner, relates the stability and being lonely with religion. He said, “God don’t allow a person to marry more than one wife and it is to be respectful to the words of God that you find many artisans with their first marriage partner”. However, *Ato* Belay, an old merchant in Dembecha town, disagreed with *Ato* Molla’s justification while admitting God’s restriction to more than one wife. He suggested, “It may be due to inaccessibility of a marriage mate. If they [artisans] divorce the first, it would be difficult to get another since they are small in number”. This assumption seems logical in relation to the fact that many children of craft workers have been left out in search of potential marriage partner.

### 2.3.2. Kinship and Family

The generic Amharic term for kinship is *zamad*. In the Amhara society, *zamad* refers in the first instance to 'consanguineal kin' (Levin, 2000:76). But the application of the term is not exclusive to "blood relatives". It can be applied in a variety of ways ranging from authoritarian familiarity to endearment (Messing, 1957:400). Hence, the usage of the term among the Amhara in general and Dembecha in particular is subjective or contextual which varies according to the context in which the individual choose to use it. It is not uncommon to hear someone refer to a friend or someone he knows well as *Zamad*. Therefore, the term is frequently vulgarized and broadened to include any sort of positive relation.

Messing (1957) identified three types of kinship relations in Amhara; consanguineal, affinal and fictive. Among the three, the consanguineal one deserves a special function and preference. In Dembecha, to identify this kinship relation, a prefix *yesega* (lit. *ones flesh*) is added. Again within *yesega zamad* (consanguineal kin), people distinguish ones proximity and distantness with prefixes *kirb* (lit. near) and *ruk* (lit. distant). Though there is no fixed boundary to label someone as *kirb zamad* (close kin) and *yeruk zamad* (distant kin), relation in the first place is very strong among members of a family.

The family, as the basic organizational unit, is characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction, but may vary in composition and size of members (Murdock, 1949:1). The variation of members in a given society may range from nuclear form to extended form of family. As Murdock (1949) describes, in the case of the nuclear family the members who are expected to share the same homestead are relatively small in number. The extended form of family on the other hand, embraces two or more nuclear families related or bounded on different basis.

The family level of Dembecha social organization at best is characterized by the nuclear one which is dominated by kin related members. The organizational feature of the study area's nuclear family is similar to what Alan Hoben (1973) in Dega Damot called "the

household” which refers to any group of people who lives together in a single homestead and who depends on a common source for food.

Each nuclear family within Dembecha, as it may be elsewhere, is a distinguished entity, at least in its residential unit. The residential unit of a nuclear family is called *bet* (lit. house). The houses vary in size, type and style across the three agro-ecological zones. The houses in the mid-highland and lowland are predominantly constructed from eucalyptus tree wood walls with roof covered with metal sheet (*korkoro*) and are relatively wide and large. Principally, the highland houses are hut types that are thatched with grasses. This hut is called *gojo bet* (lit. cottage house) and sometimes as *sar bet* (lit. grass house). In the former agro-ecological zones, the ‘grass house’ is used by the poor i.e. the difference in the type of house distinguishes ‘the have’ from ‘the have-nots’ as the size of hut in the highland. Thus, from the external look of the houses, some one can imagine the internal structure and composition as well as the economic level of the family<sup>5</sup>.

The huts are usually circular at the bottom and conical at the roof. At the center of the houses, there stands big pillar attached with the ground and extends to the roof. This supporting post is called *meseso*. In the case of the hut, the supporting post stretches outside the thatched roof and forms a tuft called *quncho*. A broken clay container is usually put on the pinnacle of the house as “a protection of the rain; not to leak through the elongated wood” (Informants). The inside part of the wall is plastered with mud mixed with straw and painted with dung of cattle. Painting of the smooth wall with dung is for decoration and protection from insect /pest and is done by females. The ground of the internal room is also painted frequently as cleaning of the dust.

The house of nuclear families also varies in its internal partition and accommodation. Predominantly, the house of an average family is constructed with two sections (rooms). The first partition/section is relatively larger than the second. In this section mud

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<sup>5</sup> *But it is not always true; having big house doesn't mean economic well being.*

benches called *medeb* with different height run along the walls. The low mud benches are seats and sometimes 'sleeping beds' for children and other members of the family. Accompanied by these low mud benches, there is a big mud bench used as a seat for honorable guests and sometimes served as 'sleeping bed' for spouses in the absence of the wood made bed. This big mud bench commonly called *segno medeb* (lit. Monday bench). The terms might stand to refer to whom the place is reserved for because sitting on the benches is usually arranged according to rank; "The highest ranking guests nearest the bed, [*segno medeb* in this context] and the lowest near the door" (Hoben, 1973:48). The low status groups including the artisans were not allowed to sit on this big bench, especially, if groups of people were invited in a house. Surprisingly, this bench with its name is available in artisans' house. In some houses, this room contains the hearth for cooking. The fireplace is always dotted with three corner trivets called *gulcha* which is made by potters. For artisans, in addition to the above activities, this room is the working place particularly for weavers and potters. Both raw and processed materials like skins, clay, earthenware pots, metals, etc., of artisans are also kept. Of great importance, this is the section where members of the household spend most of their indoor hours.

The other part in the internal residential room is called *majet*. It is a place where food stuffs and household utensils employed for preparation and storage of food is kept. Storage bins called *gota* which are made from baked mud used to store for agricultural products is put in this section. The granaries/storage bins are peculiar to those who practiced agriculture and vary in size depending on the economic level of the family; the wealthier the family the big the granaries/ storage bins will be. In addition, the number of this storage bins in a house indicates diversity of production. Relatively speaking, the number and size of the granary/ies is/are small in many of the artisans house. This section was considered as females' 'territory'. Therefore, males', especially husbands, frequent presence in this section is usually taken as 'disgraceful'. Conversely, some weavers carry out their handicraft work in this section.

At one side of the living quarters of the house, there may be stall for animals. If there are different types of animals there might be two or more small houses attached with the

main house or stand near in isolation. The sheep and goats are kept alone in a section called *gureno* as the lambs, calves and other young livestock are housed in *guwada* and the larger animals in a section called *gat*. The compound of an average farmer, thus, may contain two or more small houses which are less likely to be found in artisans' compound. In many cases, the compound of the majority is fenced with log or some kind of plants. In contrast, the houses of artisans are small in size and have no much partitions as compared with the majority farmers. Apart from the above mentioned differential features and characteristics of the house of a nuclear family, other aspects are more or less similar to and apparent among the artisans.

The houses in towns and rural villages are very different both in size and style of construction. The houses in the town are highly partitioned into many sections, especially if it is large. The huts are almost lacking here except at some places in the outskirts where the majority in number are artisans. The household utensils are more of manufactured products which contrast to the situation of the rural homestead. Both household utensils and agricultural implements in the countryside are more of artisan products. Artisans' houses, especially tanners', in the towns have only one section and are small. Like the rural houses, many of them were not also plastered with mud from the outside. However, the size of the house which is expected to be proportional to the economic level of a family had no direct relation with the number of family members.

The nuclear family in Dembecha varies in composition and size. The smallest consists of husband, wife and unmarried children. The father is usually the head and authorized person to deal with affairs of the homestead. In many instances, issues of the family are approached through and appropriated by him. Therefore, as also revealed among other societies the head of kin related family in Amhara in general and in Dembecha in particular, ultimately had control over the major production resources and is responsible to the allocation of tasks. The members of each household (nuclear family) carry out assigned activities related to producing, trading, preparing and consuming food etc. The tasks are assigned depend on different basis like sex, age, authority etc. Concerning the division of labor among the Amhara, Messing (1957:174) said, "Tasks involving tools

rather than utensils, and tasks not bound to a fixed daily routine, are usually male occupation". This is also apparent in Dembecha woreda. Males are largely engaged in farming and related out door tasks. The burden of fetching water, preparing food, looking after the children and other domestic activities are usually undertaken by the women. Almost all the above mentioned characteristics and features of the family define the artisans of Dembecha woreda.

However, sex based division of labor tends to be sharp among the artisans. Tanning, weaving(of course,there are few female weavers) and blacksmithing are exclusively men's task while pot-making is for women. The children, in their part are expected to carryout specific tasks in the production and exchange system. Therefore, the tasks which are allocated accordingly and members' accomplishment of these tasks involve social relation and economic cooperation among members of a nuclear family. Therefore, a person, in a family [which is typically expected to contain consanguineal kins] could not be an individual (Bergel, 1962). He/she is liable for whatsoever members do and is also granted to share what they have. He or she has a right to inherit or share what the family has and conversely he/she is liable for what any member does. Inheritance could be manifested both in economic or social terms. Economically, for instance, in Dembecha the basic means of production i.e. land, was transferred from parents to children. As Levin (2000:116) puts it, "Since the Amhara descent is ambilineal, these rights [the rights to use land] are inherited bilaterally, bilaterally- by sons and daughters equally, and through both parents".

Like resources and property, social rank and character traits were conferred to children from parents. In Amhara, for instance, in Dembecha woreda, knowing descent of a person is essential to determine his/her social position. Though the society is ambilineal, line of a father's descent is very important in reckoning and status transmission, people in Dembecha usually ask 'whose child someone is' while expecting the name of his/her father to know the ascribed status.

Concerning liability, each close kin are prone and accountable to the crime committed by any member of a consanguineal kin. Particularly, at times of blood feud, the crime is aligned on the entire family. Likewise, "The Amhara custom of blood feud enjoins relatives to avenge the murder of a kinsman though it is usually observed only by fairly close kin" (Levin, 2000:116). Therefore, the Amhara custom of blood feud recognizes the principle that "a family can not owe itself blood" (Bergel, 1962) and kinship is so important in times of trouble. In general, the above mentioned features of consanguineal kin relationship exactly correspond to what were manifested among the people of Dembecha Woreda, including craft workers.

In addition, though each homestead gives the appearance of self-sufficiency and autonomy, it is bound to larger social context in a number of ways (Levin, 1972). That is to say, though a nuclear family is a distinct economic entity, it can't stand in isolation to the other nuclear families. In Dembecha, as Allan Hoben maintains in Dega Damot, "a household (nuclear family) as an economic unit is dependent on other households (nuclear families) for the exchange of labor and on the market for the exchange of goods (1973: 53). Even nuclear families which are found in different ecological zones of the study area are bound to each other at least to get certain items which they lack.

Though the nuclear family of the study area mainly consists of a married man and his wife with their offspring(s), accommodating extra member(s) is also common. Sustaining additional members is determined largely-though not only, by the economic level of the family; "the wealthier the peasant [the family] the more relatives and servants will be found in the homestead (Levin 1972:56). Accommodating at least one servant of either sex is very common among the relatively wealthy majority non-craft workers. Male servants are preferable by the peasants in the rural villages to females and vice versa in towns.

Likewise, the researcher met with some members of artisan families which contain one or two members who share the same homestead and depend on the common source of food. The following 3 cases may illustrate the issue.

*Ato Molla is a 64 years old tanner and his wife w/o Atitegeb is about 59 years old. They got married before 35 years ago. They begot 5 children but only 3 are alive and only two of them live with them now. In addition, Temesgen live with them since 1995. He is the son of Ato Molla's brother who had lived in Wotebet. Temesgen began to live with his uncle after he lost his father due to the malaria epidemic of 1995 which highly affected the woreda. He assists his uncle in various ways. Temesgen even took the responsibility of the family in the absence of Ato Molla.*

*Lingerew is a 32 years old blacksmith who lives in Shelel. His wife, Asnakech is about 27 years old. They get married before three years. They have a three years old daughter. In addition, Balew, the son of Lingerew's sister, lives with them. Balew is 16 years old. His mother lives in Dembecha town by selling tella ( local beer). He is now a grade five student. He joined the family of his uncle when his mother went to where she is now. He assists his uncle in both agricultural activities and artisanal works.*

In the two cases above, Temesgen and Balew are kin relatives and considered members of the nuclear family. As a result, there is no payment for whatever they deed. Had they not been considered members, payment might be expected, particularly, to the blacksmiths. During the fieldwork, the researcher also came across one tanner family which contains one non-kin related boy.

*Abba Bitaw is about 68 years old tanner and lives in Wotebet. His wife, w/o Misker is about 60 years old. They have 6 children. Now only one, a 25 years old son, lives with them. The elder son lives in Harar and the other one in Addis Ababa. The only daughter lives at Aroge Amba with her husband. In addition, to the three kin related families who live together, Eskahun joined Ato Bitaw's family before six years. Eskahun is 22 years old. He lost his father before 7 years ago and his mother died while he was young. He could reach up to grade 6 and left school before the death of his father due to "mental problem" (ye amero chigger). His father was a good friend of Abba Bitaw. In his own words, "his father was my best brother who had assisted me both at time of*

*trouble and peace. I have a lot of favor which I can't pay back. That was due to this that I brought Eskahun to my family. I thought we would help him. But we don't help him rather we are helped by him. Had it not been for his effort, our (his and his wife's) old age life would have been difficult. Also Tizazu would not attend his education.*

In this case, Eskahun has no countable descent relation with either *Abba* Bitaw or with *ema* Miskere. The family is economically poor. Thus, from this we can deduce that it is not only being wealthy that make a family to accommodate extra member(s); containing additional member(s) is also initiated by social factors.

Generally, it seems possible to conclude that the nuclear family level organization of Dembecha Woreda, including the craft workers, is primarily and predominantly kin based and is partly determined by socio-economic factors. In addition, the craft workers' family varies both in composition and size from the non-craft workers. The members of the craft workers' family tend to be small in number and less diversified when compared with the dominant society.

The familial level of Amhara social organization is also characterized by the extended one. This is partly because of the patrilocal<sup>6</sup> residence pattern of the newly married couples (Levin, 1972; Hoben, 1973; Messing 1957). This extended form of family organization is also apparent among craft workers of Dembecha Woreda. During the field work, the researcher could observe this form of family to be more prevalent among rural artisans than in towns. Here, in the town, though homesteads stand near each other and consider themselves as relatives, many families did not count the relation; they simply said, *zamad nene* (we are kin relatives). Conversely, in Meged, the contiguous homesteads seem to be arranged based on consanguineal kinship tie principle.

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<sup>6</sup> *Patrilocality is usually for a short period of time. The newly established nuclear families commonly transferred their residence to where their agricultural land is located*

The residential arrangement in this area would be related to the spatial marginalization of craft workers. The extended family organization would be clear with the following cases

*Mulat is 35 years old. He lives in Meged with his wife and two of his children. His wife, Semegne is from Amanuel woreda. Her parents were artisans and practice agriculture to some extent. Mulat and his family reside near his parents' house. His house is only about 20 meters away from the parents' house. In relation to this, Mulat said, "my forefathers and parents have been here. As a result, I have no way and reason to be out from Meged. Moreover, since it was my father who is responsible to give me land for residence, I couldn't be far away from his house".*

*Girma is 33 years old tanner. He lives at Aroge Amba, in Dembecha town, with his wife. His house is attached with his parents' house. It is a small house with one room and is called 'dorm'. The 'dorm' is given to him by his father. It is to help his old aged father that he stayed in that small house. He said, "tanning is a tiresome work which is difficult for old people. As a result I am obliged to help/work with my old father. His 74 years old father lives with his younger sister called Yenta Fanta. She trade onion and potato to supplement the income gained from the selling of tanning products. Girma and his father share the income gained from skin products equally. For his own income, Girma has two cows and involved in slaughtering animals and cutting trees.*

*Alganesh is 35 years old potter. She lives with two children in Wotebet. She had lived in Wad Eyesus, another peasant kebele in the study area, before 8 years. She came where she is now due to the death of her husband. Now, she lives near her mother's, a potter, house. The land where she resides is given by her mother and is found in the same compound. But they do not work together. Near their house, in another compound, her mother's brother who engaged in weaving and small scale trade resides by establishing his own family.*

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3. Basic Features of Handicraft Working in Dembecha Woreda

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the basic features of handicraft working in the study area. For this end, tools employed in the production of crafts, process of production, kind of products, application of techniques and technology through time will be part of the endeavor. Moreover, exchange system and living standard of craft workers will be analyzed to shed light on the dimension of marginalization and survival of both the occupation and the specialists.

#### 3.1. General Background to Production and Exchange of Crafts

Craft products that proved essential in various ways for the wider community under study are produced by special groups who have been treated differentially. These groups have often been forced to find themselves at the margins of benefits that the dominant society enjoy. The major handicraft activities that are carried out by these disadvantaged groups are tanning, weaving, pot-making and blacksmithing, hence, the names of the practitioners; tanners, weavers, potters, and blacksmiths.

These groups have also been referred to collectively as artisans, handicraft workers or craft workers. Similarly, the people in Dembecha applied *eje seri* which refer to handicraft workers collectively while *koda seri*, *libs seri*, *shekla seri* and *biret seri* to refer to tanners, weavers, potters, and blacksmiths, respectively. These terms are simply to refer to the activities each group is engaged in. There are also other terms coined as insult or degrade the status of craft workers. These derogatory terms are; *faki* (lit. scratchier), *kutit betash* (lit. thread breaker), *deben ansa* (lit. *deben* taker) and *ketkachi* (lit. someone who bit something continuously)

Deference in skills that each activity requires, raw materials used, the production methods and/or process employed and the final output as well are distinguishing features of each

craft working. The skills required for each activity is distinct but commonly transferred through kin relatives. Children in craft working families usually grow up watching and in the process learning the skill. With an exception to blacksmith who usually learn their skills after they grow up mostly due to the fact that the activity is not practiced at home, other craft workers that the researcher interviewed started developing their skill from an early age. This result in having offspring's of a certain craft working family acquires that skill.

Like the skill, the raw materials used for production in each craft working are different. A tanner works with skin to offer grain containers, slings for carrying babies, sleeping mats and so on. A tanner has to soften the rough skin in order to change into whatever product. Thus, his working life is completely different from say, a pot-maker who uses clay and produces cooking material following a different way. Weavers use cotton threads to supply dresses of all sorts, blacksmiths use iron scraps to make tools like axes, knives, spears etc.

But all these is not to say the craft activities, tanning, weaving, pot-making and blacksmithing do not have any common feature to be referred to collectively as handicraft working/craft working. There are features that can be identified in common concerning the production and the products as well. Therefore, it is the purpose of the following paragraphs to discuss the general background of handicraft working and workers livelihood who live in Dembecha woreda. Technical and technology application in craft production, purpose of production, source of tools and raw materials used in production and marketing conditions will be frames of reference to highlight the situation of handicrafts and handicraft working in the study area briefly.

Handicraft working in Dembecha is a small-scale home based activity carried by using local skills with locally available tools and raw materials. Except blacksmiths who began to use 'modern' blower, artisans in the study area processed handicraft working with tools so simple that they might be used by their forefathers. The tools used in production are made out of materials available nearby. In some cases, the craft workers use naturally found materials as their tools. Potters usage of stones to smooth their clay pots can be a god example of this. In some cases even hands and feet are important production tools

supplemented by the simple tools. In general, craft production in Dembecha woreda is still moved by 'traditional' techniques and technologies.

Craft products in the study area were not diverse in type. Almost all types of crafts were utilitarian, produced to be utilized. The craft-products largely are either agricultural tools or utensils. This was similar with what (Cassier, 1975) reported concerning Ethiopian handicrafts: 'commonly produced to be used'.

Craft workers directly relate the lack of diversity in their offerings to the interest and demand of the customers. However, it doesn't mean that all craft workers are acquainted with the skill to produce crafts with new style and type. Some artisans even disclosed that the only change that they did to their forefathers' work is forgetting some products. Thus, the justification was from their knowledge of customers demand. Of course, there are evidences from few craft workers to confirm the above claim. The words of Ato Melkamu, a weaver at Wotebet will illustrate the issue.

*I am perfectly able to make different styles of female dresses. I had worked in Addis Abeba for three years. A friend of mine who lives there long trains me how to weave with new styles and I used to produce beautiful dresses with special decorations and embroidery. As soon as I came back I started to make those dresses. But the dresses have no great demand. Their prices are of course a little expensive though it is not the main reason that holds back customers to buy.*

It is true that the emphasis of craft workers on utility, which results in a very limited type of production, is partly caused by the fact that the demand from the society guides the supply of the artisans.

Development or change of the community that exploits the crafts is believed to guide and alter handicraft production. Accordingly, Cassier ask as long as the society did not change, why would the handicrafts have to change?" (Cassier, 1975:59). Therefore, it seems logical to say failure of new products is related with material culture of the people in Dembecha. That is to say, since crafts are produced for the community, quantity and

type of crafts are governed by demand of the consumers. The majority of the consumers are farmers, hence, agricultural tools and simple utensils lead the production.

Quantity and types of craft production also vary from season to season. Production tends to be large in amount and relatively diverse in kind following the subsiding of the heavy rain up to the onset of the rainy season. The *bega* (summer) season is when major religious and social holidays with elaborate celebration are held. In addition, agricultural yields are harvested. Thus, market places are crowded with different agricultural products and circulation of items tends to be fast. The buying capacity of farmers also increases. All of these create good atmosphere for the craft workers particularly to town artisans to sell their products. However, it should be noted that price is usually low during this season but buying capacity or the income, to buy agricultural products, is better than in winter.

On the other hand, *kiremet*(winter)season does not bring such good news. The farmers are all busy plowing their land, sowing, treating their plantation, etc. As a result, these tasks consume their time to travel to market places. This is partly due to the poorly constructed road. Since many roads in the rural areas were not well- built, they get easily muddled and appear difficult to travel whenever it rains. This discourages the farmers to go to the market places even if they have time. Moreover, farmers' visit to markets is discouraged by economic standard i.e. seasonal agricultural production with poor saving culture make farmers not to involve in the exchange at winter. In addition, some craft activities like tanning and pot- making are highly affected by the rainy weather. Both of them need much sunlight and neat ground to dry.

The supply of craft products is also affected by the amount of time spent in production. The amount of time spent in craft production varies from place to place; typically from rural areas to towns. In rural areas artisans spend less time in handicraft working than their counter parts in urban areas. This is due to the fact that many of the craft workers carry out craft working on parttime basis. Basic features like the development of the technology of production, the changing economic importance of their products and

function of products, of each handicraft activities will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### 3.1.1. Tanning

Tanners constitute the largest number and are highly despised groups among artisans of Dembecha town. The majority of them live in an area called Wotebet<sup>7</sup>, which is located near a big river, called Gulla. Though there are potters, smiths and weavers, the tanners are the nearest to the river. According to some elderly tanners, their 'original' residence was Aroge Amba. Their resettlement in Wotebet was due to the decreasing in water volume of a river called Kusit<sup>8</sup> since working with skins needs enough water" (Informants).

Tanners produce limited kinds of crafts which are essential for the agrarian societies of the study area. Their main products include sleeping hide, sacks, pillows, slings for carrying babies and the like. The main raw material of tanners is hide of cattle. In the past, the hide was offered to them directly from the consumers. Nowadays, however, the hide is mostly bought from the weekly market by the tanners themselves. Consumers no longer provide the raw hide to the tanners unless, as some tanners explained, they want to request a special mat named *lamenet*. The *lamenet* is not made like all other mats. It is carefully crafted without scratching the hair and is not used as a normal sitting or sleeping mat in the consumer's household. It is stretched on the wall and is used only when honorable or elderly guest visits the household. Thus, its existence may be due to its social value and affection to the deceased cattle

Even though production techniques and process of tanning vary from product to product, its basic process applies some common features. Producing hide products requires soft and lubricated skin. Making skin ready for production usually begins with wet or dry raw skin. However, since dry skins cost more and are not suitable to produce some items like

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<sup>7</sup> This contrasts with what Messing (1957) maintained; tanners among the Amhara are considered 'rustic', they do not like to live in town.

<sup>8</sup> The name of the river is believed to be taken from the impure water due to the hide soaked by the tanners. It connotes dirty and bad smell.

straps, the tanners prefer the wet one. The wet skin is pegged along its periphery with wooden hooks to dry. This is done after unwanted parts are removed. Skins are scraped on the inside with knives to remove all unwanted flesh and ligaments as to be stretched tight in the sun. At this stage, the skin is not required to dry very well. The half-dried skin is then taken to the near by river and soaked. After two or three days the wet skin is taken out of water and again pegged on the reverse side. It is carefully scratched to shade the hair. Then, the skin has to be softened either by trampling on it or sometimes with a small stone or with their hands. The skin is still half- wet but near to dry. Finally, the skin becomes easy for duplication.

However, these days many items are not needed as they used to be. According to informants, tanning products were necessity for most of the agrarian society. It was these products that they dress, slept on and held their babies with. But gradually, the society needed them only on special occasions like weddings. But nowadays that does not seem to persist. Ato Molla, a tanner in Wotebet remembers how sleeping mats had been important,

*In old days there was no marriage without **mekeda** (hide-pillows) and **gendi** (hide sleeping mate). We (tanners) were too busy from January to April to fulfill the demands of all those weddings. We even had to buy raw skin from Amanuel and Jiga, the nearby towns, starting from November and we sometimes failed to satisfy the consumers. Now every child is off to school and they do not want to get married. Even parents in **kola** (lowlanders) do not care whether children get married or not. In general, tanning, nowadays, is to sustain our live since there is no alternative.*

Furthermore, tanners have never experienced a luxury life even during those times, when their products were in great demand. Their living condition is still pretty low. They could produce more but the demand limits them. In rainy seasons the environment also hinders them and makes their working life harsh. First, since there are no many feasts or holidays many cattle are not slaughtered. So, it is not easy to find the skin. Even if it is found, the absence of enough sunlight makes it difficult.

Generally, tanning is a practice on a rapid decline and the tanners live in abject poverty. Products which had been basic utility like skin clothes, now become faded memories of elders. *Abba* Ayalew who estimates his age to be around 82 remembered how important wearing a tanned cloth had been.

*There were few tanners who were said to have been brought by Ras Hailu and they happened to settle around Aroge Amba. The tanners primarily produce clothes for wealth farmers. I used to wear skin until my adolescence. But I wear a tanned skin only once and that was when my father brought it from Gozamen, a place in Gojjam. It was later the noble men and some popular wealthy farmers began to wear whitish cotton clothes. Even we adopt wearing shema (cotton cloth) gradually.*

In general, the present situation indicates that good days are not coming for tanners. Unless coping mechanisms are devised, today's highly valuable products of tanning will be memories of the past in the near future. The following table illustrates main products of tanners with cost of raw material, selling price, basic features and functions of the product. This will help to understand the economic position of tanners and role of products which would in turn help to imagine their survival.

Main products of tanners	Cost of Raw material	Cost of Finished product	Basic features and function of the product
<i>Ankelba</i>	20-25birr*	30-33birr	It looks like a half sack and is used to carry baby on the mother's back with straps and a bottom tied to the mothers shoulders, chest and waist. It had been in use for many generations. Mothers claim that it helps the baby get a good posture as it is a strong sheet made out of leather. But this perception can not save it from being slaughtered by manufactured replacements. Nowadays in towns people use factory garments abandoning it completely. Even rural villages

			near the town, Dembecha, began to use the garments. Mothers claim that though the hide-made <i>ankelba</i> has many good aspects, the newly arrived manufactured garments have superior qualities of lightness and they are not stinky as the former. From this we can deduce that the sling would be kept in the course of the material history of the Woreda.
<i>Aqomada</i>		40-45birr	It is a sack used for transporting grains. One cow or ox skin is enough to produce a sack. It also serves as a means of measurement to know how much a farmer's annual yield is. An <i>aqomada</i> full of grains is believed to weigh 100kg. It is now replaced almost totally by plastic sacks and is only found in some elders' houses which might be bought before the mushrooming of these plastic sacks.
<i>Jendi</i>		50-70	It is a fin tanned skin used as bed sheet over the big mud bench called <i>segno medeb</i> or over a simple bed. It is used by parents in rural villages to sleep on. It is again used by elders and honorable guests. Nowadays, however, people reported that they are not interested to sleep on it let alone to buy.
<i>mechagna</i>		18-25	Looks like <i>mergechi</i> (used to tie agricultural implements) but longer than it and used to tie loads on donkey. From skin of an ox about five <i>mechagna</i> can be produced.

Table 1

\*The price is to skin of an ox. The profit from the products can be calculated by taking the number produced from an ox skin

### 3.1.2. Pottery

Pottery in Dembecha like in most other parts of Ethiopia is exclusively women's task. To Hallpike (1968) the division of labour based on sex in craft working in general and pottery in particular has symbolic association. He stated that pottery is fairly obviously a specifically female craft since women use pots.... Moreover, in the preparation of the clay it is ground on a grindstone similar to that used for grain, which no man will ever use (Hallpike, 1968:263). The fieldwork data is fairly similar with Messing's justification. Messing (1957: 87) pointed out that pottery is considered as an extension of preparation of food and therefore a strictly female occupation. Men are accepted to be engaged in tasks away from home, and it is in every one's general consent for a man not to mess in a kitchen or task taken as a continuation of it. Both females and men declared that it is old aged culture (*yekoye bahil new*) when the researcher asks why craft working is carried out on the basis of strict sex based division of labor. Thus, men's involvement in the process of pot making is considered disgraceful. But all of these don't mean that men have no a helping hand in the production of pottery. There are instances when men take part in the process though not engaged directly in the production. The following case may elucidate the issue.

*Ato Ayenew is a farmer and a weaver. He lives in Meged. He prefers to call himself 'a full time farmer' because he engages in weaving once in a while, only when his customers requested him to make gabi or netela. His wife, W/o Sentayehu is a potter. She does not always make pots. It is only when a quick cash is needed or the price in the market is rewarding that she turns her face to pottery. Ato Ayenew has a donkey on which he mainly transports grain. But he uses the donkey to take the pots his wife makes to the market as well.*

Husbands of potters, like *Ato Ayenew*, sometimes help their wives by transporting the products to market and sometimes the clay soil from different areas to home. Also sons, especially those who are old enough, carry pots as many as six stretched in a long stick they call *shimel* to the market. But men can never participate in the selling. Selling the

pots, like making it, is an entirely women's activity in which men never desire to get into at the expense of their honor.

As it has been frequently stated by early scholars (Cassier, 1975; Karesten, 1972; Pankhurst, 2001) pottery has never showed remarkable change in technological use and technical implementation. Even today, for potters of Dembecha, the most important production tools are hands supplemented by other simple materials like knives, small round soft stones etc. That is to say, pot-making in the study area is still based on personal skill and local knowledge; potters of today manage to pursue their activity in ways their predecessors followed for many years.

An attempt was made by small scale and micro finance enterprise bureau of Dembecha woreda to improve pottery production. According to the chairman of the bureau, Teweda, six potters were trained to use a machine that was designed to make pot-making more ease. She added that after being initially trained, the six trainees were expected to train other more numerous potters and consequently to facilitate the establishment of potters association. But the attempt ended in failure since five out of six left the woreda and abandoned pot making. According to w/o Birkie, the only potter remain in Dembecha, the bureau had arranged training for a number of potters but none of the trainees seemed interested even to attend the training let alone to use the machine. W/o Birkie herself declared that the machine is difficult to operate and time taking. She stated the following

*Using the wheel (machine) has nothing to add to my livelihood. First it requires two people to operate. But we are accustomed to working alone. Second it is so strict in raw material selection. If there is a very small amount of say sand mixed with clay or if there is a problem in the proportion of water and clay while kneading, it immediately stops working. We need to use pure clay and use it with a perfect proportion, otherwise we will waste much time trying to get it right and start all over again. Besides, if we try to compensate the amount of time and energy we capitalize by asking just a few extra cost people would dare buy us. However, I don't deny the pots it (the machine) makes are finer than the those we like to make.*

As a result, this out- of -favor machine is no longer in use in Dembecha. Even w/o Birkie reported that she never used it more than a couple of times though available in her home. In fact, it is clear that if the amount of income was rewarding and sufficient enough to compensate the time wasted and the raw materials' expense, the machine would not be disfavored.

Production process of pots is almost similar with what Takele (1997) observed in potter villages around Addis Ababa. The step begins with selecting the type and suitability of the clay, followed by making the clay dry(to make the soil more fine) and sieving( to separate the coarse from the fine) then kneading and baking of the clay mud follows. The fourth step is coiling, scraping and smoothing the designed pot which later must be decorated and fired.

The products of many potters are not diverse. There are certain products that dominate the market which include cooking pots like *dest*(the smallest cooking pot), *agala*(the biggest and mainly used while serving large number of people), with their seating called *gulecha* (trivets) and liquid containers like *gan* (biggest pot used to ferment local beer called *tella*), *madiga*(smaller than gan and used to fetch water), *tofa*(used to contain water for washing) and *jebena* (coffee pot) with different sizes and shapes.

These products have been parts of the Northern Ethiopian 'Kitchen-culture'. Though absence of creativity among the potters is an observable fact, limited demand of the society has played great part. Especially, to potters like w/o Birkie the demand of the society has been impediment to produce new and more pots. As to her, new items have no customer (*felagi yelachewm*). She said: "After I took the training in Gonder for three months, I decided to produce other items like flower vessels and candle bromes. But I relinquished to produce more since the already produced, two pieces each, have not been sold"

In addition, recent times have displayed a tough competition from modern plastic and steel products to pottery products that have once dominated their kitchen for many years. Liquid containers are being replaced by plastic jars and cooking pots especially *dest* is supplemented and even, sometimes, replaced by steel version of it, simply called *biret*

*dest* (lit. *dest* of iron). The durability of pots seems to hasten the replacement. Pots get easily broken while they are transported to/from the market and in use as well. Of course, pot products are at better situation in resisting the influence of 'modern' products when compared with other craft products. These pushed the already staggering business of pottery to an even deeper abyss. The reason that clay products are still in great demand despite the widely circulating plastic and steel products is for their 'special quality of keeping the water cool and the *wet* (sauce) hot with its taste'(potter informants).

Concerning marketing, potters described that their income caught in perplexity. That is to say, they do not have a persistent flow of income; what they earn comes and goes seasonally. In summer time (*bega*) when the weather favors the production, the income is somewhat rewarding. But paradoxically even in these times they never felt they were well-off. Amazed by this fact w/o Birkie said: "To be frank, the amount of money we receive during *bega* (summer) is not to be complained. It is just that it gets scattered with the wind, blown away in the blink of an eye". Potters, like farmers are not well acquainted with skills of money management or saving. So, it is not surprising if they squander what they get recklessly, putting into consideration the area is famed for its 'spendthrift' feasts organized now and then. Besides, like other artisans, potters do not have options to sell their products.

However, potters admitted that the current price to be encouraging though no significant change has been observed in their living standard due to the above and other factors that might be related with their experience of marginalization. The following table presents main products of potters in Dembecha woreda with their basic distinguishing character and function.

Main products of potters	Cost of raw Material*	Selling prices of finished products	Basic characteristics and functions of products
<i>Gan</i>		60-80 birr	It is the biggest pot. It has two ears. Its main use is to ferment <i>tella</i> . It is not available in everyone's house. Its availability depends on the financial capability of the owner because it is used in big feasts.
<i>Madiga</i>		35-40 birr	It is a pot smaller in size than <i>gan</i> . It has three ears. Its main purpose is to fetch water from rivers and streams. Sometimes it used for transporting <i>tella</i> to neighboring houses or place of feasts during social occasions.
<i>Dest,</i> <i>Setatidest,</i> <i>Agala</i>		7-8, 40-50 55-60	These are cooking pots. The objects differ in their sizes and occasions they are used in. <i>Dest</i> is the smallest and is used daily to prepare <i>wat</i> . <i>Setatidest</i> and <i>agala</i> serve during feasts but a difference lies. In elaborately celebrated ceremonies that are attended by a relatively large number of people, <i>agala</i> is preferred.
<i>Jebena</i>		15-17	It is a small, bent, narrow spout and one –handled pot used to make coffee. It widely used in towns.
<i>Mitad</i>		30-40	It is a flat round griddle used to bake injera. It is put on three <i>gulchas</i> (trivets) which are put on a hearth.
<i>Gulcha(trivets)</i>		9-13	Commonly <i>gulcha</i> is produced in three pieces. It is used as a set for cooking objects on the fire.

Table 2

\*For all pot products raw material is free. But potters in the town may require buying firing woods and straw.

### 3.1.3. Weaving

Weaving is the only craft that crosses over religion boundaries in Dembecha Woreda. Both Muslims and Christians are engaged in the activity. It is also a craft activity that participate both male and female. It had been reported to be mainly men's occupations. Most of my informants stated that it was a job of the male sex. But during fieldwork, the researcher came across two female weavers who rejected the notion claiming that they were not the only female weavers and there was nothing special about them. Even though they admitted that they are not good at the 'traditional' long scarf made from cotton thread called *gabi*. Moreover, females took part in the process of spinning the distaff. Cotton spinning measures women's competence within the dominant society. As Pankhurst (1964:277) stated the gentility of spinning prized the women with moral and social reputations while weaving unlikely labeled the weavers at the lower social position.

The materials that are needed for weaving and the production itself are still similar with what Messing had observed in 1957. The main production tools are *mamcha* which is like a comb with hard wood bars with neat rows of their reeds, *ters* (lit. teeth) fixed horizontally between them also the headlong arrangement which consists of a few neat sticks and cards and the small canoe-shaped shuttle called *mawarwariya* made of smooth hard wood and pierced by a hole through which the cotton thread from the bobbins inside the shuttle can later be drawn during weaving. (Messing, 1957: 211).

In the past, handloom cotton thread was the only raw material used to produce the major products of weaving; *qamis*, *netala* (costs 30 -45 birr) and *gabi*(60-85birr). *Qamis* had been worn by Ethiopian women for hundreds and arguably thousands of years. Women in different adjacent society, from the peasants to the wives of noblemen used it though the quality of the production may greatly vary. A 'traditional' Ethiopian dress, *qemis*, is very loose and often is held up by a kind of wide belt that lies around the women's waist. This belt, locally known as *maqanet* (costs 15-30birr), is also produced from cotton thread by weavers. Nowadays, *qamis* as well as *maqanet* is almost out of ordinary use, thanks to the introduction and wide popularity of modern fabrics. *Netala* and *gabi* are very wide scarves worn predominantly by women and men respectively. These products

are made through a process that is carried out repeatedly through generation without a remarkable change.

The handloom thread is mainly spun by wives of both weavers and the *chewas* (non-craft workers). It is organized in such a prismic shape to give what is called *liqaqit*. Sometimes when the customers want a specially made product they bring the *liqaqit* with their order. Then they deal with the weavers on a due date to go back to their lives and come back at that date to take the finished product. The production may take from fifteen days to a month based on the amount of products the weaver is trying to make at a time. Weavers are famous for their craft are always ordered by many customers even from great distance, so they have a busy schedule. A weaver's wife makes the handloom thread he finishes it and then the product is taken to be sold in the market or to town where there are certain shopkeepers who buy them to sell it for a higher price.

Nowadays, weavers are witnessing changes; especially in the raw material they use for production and as a result their products. The long used cotton thread is slowly being out of favor leaving its place for a factory made thread. *Gabi* and *netala* are not very much in demand. An easier to handle and wear, colored scarf made from the newly arrived threads is what every farmer and some of the town people wear for ordinary use. They call it *Gojjam azene*.

Some weavers reported that the thread has improved their life. Banchiamlack, one of the female weavers said: "I have never made *gabi* or *netela*. It is difficult to do so with handloom thread. I always make *Gojjam azene* to be frank; if it wasn't for the colored threads, I wouldn't have tried weaving". Another weaver, *Ato Atrsaw* said: "*Gojjam azane* is easy to make. Besides, it has great demand. That makes me want to do it."

But this is not the reality among weavers in deep rural areas. In rural kebelas most of the weavers perform their craft only as a supplement to a job they conduct more seriously, farming. Though they turn their faces to weaving when the customer requested and the income they generate is more like a supplement to their agricultural products, the people remain loyal to the 'tradition' some how. They still use hand made cotton thread and they make *qamis* and *netala* more frequently than their town counter parts.

The use of the traditional *qamis* nowadays is restricted to special occasions like religious holidays and ceremonies. Rural women in the highland part of Dembecha Woreda have more inclination to wear the *qamis* than urban women. The recent trend in big towns that seems to lead 'modern' women to traditional dresses does not base its roots in Dembecha. Even in those areas, the production and *qamis* is the one that showed great decline.

*Jano* (costs 60-80birr) is a special kind of *gabi* with carefully woven colors around its borders. This kind of *gabi* has social value: people usually prefer to keep it in a special place and wear during important occasions. But now even elders do not use it many times. It is almost abandoned. Weavers who want to pursue 'traditional' weaving are staggered by the swallowing modern garments. As a result, some of them leave the area and some aspire for big towns. Ato Melkamu, a weaver stated that his friends were already in Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa. He said: "In big towns you make real beautiful dress and you earn much. Traditional dresses in big town are more a fashion trend that becomes of every day use. I think it is partly due to this that some weavers migrate to these towns".

In Dembecha since 1998 E.C there was an attempt by small scale and micro finance enterprise bureau to organize weavers in groups and enhance their productivity. In the cooperation the product was continuous despite the demand and order of customers. The weavers were 16 in number at the beginning. Now, there are nine weavers. These weavers have a section in the market to sell their products. They mainly made *netala* and *gabi*. In addition, *tibeb*, carefully crafted and expensive of all cotton products is made predominantly during wedding season. The workers appreciate working together and shared the income equally. But since the bureau did not assign trustworthy manager and since the market is not dependable, they began to loose trust in the cooperation and they left it one by one (informants), now only nine left to work in a compound together. In general, weaving like other craft activities is declining or is replaced since weavers are now migrating out of Dembecha and the majority is more interested in modern fabrics.

### 3.1.4. Blacksmithing

The smiths of Dembecha woreda are probably the fewest in number and wealthier among the artisans. Blacksmithing as a manual occupation involves a team of workers, at least three. Two strong workers are employed in hammering. A third one, usually older than others, is responsible in guiding the hammering by rotating the heated iron scrap to the position that needs to be hammered. He uses a pincer called *gutet* to hold the heated iron.

Blacksmithing has showed remarkable changes in increasing the scale of production and in improving tools of production when it is compared to other crafts. For instance, *wonaf*, a material used for bellowing and is made from goat skin had been used for many years. It is now being replaced by a modern blower which is alternatively called *tubo, medeb or shanko*. This modern blower works with electric power, similar to light bulb in our houses. That makes it preferred by the smiths to the tiresome manual *wonafe*. Smiths proudly prove as it has played unprecedented role to increase both quantity and quality of products, hence, their income. Accordingly, Mekicha, a blacksmith informant in Wotebet, said:

*we had not been living. Blacksmithing now become a business that every body needs to join. It helps improved my income. I can make many products in a short period of time and easily. I can also make different products in different styles. It saves time. In general it brings us (blacksmiths) to life.*

However, it was only in the town where electric power is available. Artisans in Meged still work with the 'traditional' goat skin bellows. Here, production is usually held on request. That is to say, if customers do not request a certain craft to be produced, blacksmiths will not take the initiative. Thus, much of their working-hours are dedicated to sharpening dull items and repairing broken ones. Thus, comparatively their income is so skimpy.

Another fact that favors blacksmithing is the economic activity of the dominant society, agriculture and material culture of the people. Agriculture which is the back bone of Dembecha Woreda as also to Ethiopia is still practiced in an ox-drawn plough

accompanied by blacksmith products included in the following chart with their function and feature.

Main products Of blacksmiths	Selling price Of a finished product	Basic features and functions Of the product
<i>Maresha</i>	80-110birr	It is the major plowing tool used in an oxen draw plough. It is fitted at the bottom tip of the straight digging-stick called <i>erif</i> . There is no still substituting tool for this smiths craft.
<i>Machid</i> (sickles)	7-10birr	It is curved well but not teathed and has handling made from simple wood. It used to be the main agricultural implement during harvesting. But now It is rapidly replaced by well teathed sickle made in the factory and is used rarely to cut thick wooden stalks.
<i>Materebiya</i>	20-28birr	It is a small sharp blade with half-conical to fit wooden handle which has a knoll at the elbow. It is the most common one used to cut wood for fuel, to clear agricultural land etc. It is commonly considered as a necessity for a farmer whenever he is at the farm land. It is usually kept sharp and is taken to smiths to be sharpened most frequently.
<i>Kara</i>	10-17birr	It is somewhat curved with the cutting edge. Knives vary in size. The smaller commonly used for kitchen activities while the relatively bigger once for slaughtering animals and are kept safe in a special place until feast seasons.
<i>Mero</i> (chisel)	20-27birr	It is half-circled and sharpened at the end and is used to make hole on wood specially plowing wood tools

<i>Doma</i>	28-35birr	It is heavier of all tools that are operated by hand. It is two sided and a straight wood handle is inserted in between. One side sharp point used to dig hard baked soils. The reverse side is with sharp blade used to scraping and harrowing the soil. But this tool is not commonly found in all houses and its production with out request is minimal.
<i>Ankasye(spear)</i>	7-12birr	It is considered illegal but smiths produce it. Spears may be two or one pronged. The spears have a hole in the other end to be fitted with a straight wood handle. Sometimes spears can be produced from straight metals by sharpening one end; this type has no wood handle.
<i>Chubie(dagger)</i>	8-20birr	It is straight and sharp from the two edges. It differ from the kitchen knife having two sharp edges with sharp ends and also smaller in size but wider.

Table 3

### 3.2. Exchange system and Living standard

In the past, bartering was believed to be the common form of exchange for craft workers. Craft worker informants in Meged expressed that artisan products, predominantly pots, had been exchanged with grains. Concerning cotton clothes and iron implements exchange with grains was not preferred. For these crafts, grains were paid as substituting mediums of the total money price. Thus, cotton clothes were sold and iron tools were sharpened/ repaired and sold in cash while females' products were exchanged with grains for direct consumption. Quantity of the grain had to be bargained and fixed based on the quality, size and type of the craft product. In addition, productivity of the agricultural season had to be taken into consideration. If the farmers' agricultural production is affected/disturbed, craft workers would not expect large quantity. Barely and sorghum were main grains used in exchange for the crafts. Grains like *teff* and oil seeds that were/are highly demanded to be sold outside the region; were not used in the exchange

rather preferred to be sold to local merchants. That is to say, expensive and highly valuable products for cash income, like *teff* and oil seeds, were not paid to get crafts. Thus, artisans were required to sell crafts in cash to get such expensive grains. In other words, grains exchanged with crafts were those that cost low price and were in demand for domestic consumption.

Nowadays, craft products are sold in money. In fact, when visiting Saturday market the researcher observed small pots being exchanged with grains. Potter informants reported that exchange with grains is not preferred and usually done as last option; when market hours come to end. Otherwise, almost all craft products are exchanged with money. Price is fixed through bargaining based on the prevailing market situation.

Marketing of crafts is usually guided by the price of agricultural products. Circulation and price of crafts were determined by the marketing environment of agricultural products: when the price of agricultural products rise and circulation become fast, crafts marketing is more likely to follow similar direction. As a result craft working remains dependent activity.

Concerning living standard of artisans there have been great changes when compared to the situation before the 1975 land reform. In the past, subsistence was mainly based on craft production. Craft workers both in the town and rural villages relied predominantly on craft production due to the prohibition to own cultivable land. Nowadays, however, crafts as a sole means of livelihood is said to have become less important. Artisans in rural villages, like in Meged, have gradually inclined to farming. Some of them totally dwell on farming for their subsistence while many practiced handicraft working and agriculture side by side. The craft worker farmers who are still engaged in craft working, seems advantageous economically. Because, they can produce food for their family consumption in farming while cash requirements are met by the income derived from crafts.

In the town, Dembecha, attempts were also observed either to shift or supplement craft production with other economic activities. Many artisans are taking part in small scale

trade and other seasonally profitable activities like trading in sheep, goat and chicken at times of festivals. Female artisans tend to spend much of their time in distillation of *arki* and trading vegetables. Therefore, artisans are more likely to abandon craft production or tempted to leave the occupation. Almost all tanners and potters, reported that had there been alternative means to make a living, they do not want to practice craft working. Some of them mentioned the insufficiency of the income from crafts, while the majority combined the low income and nature of the particular craft activity for wanting to leave the occupation. The words of Birkie, a potter in Wotebet and Temesgen, a teen tanner in Wotebet may illustrate the issue. The potter said

*Pot making is tiresome(dem metachi) and fades beauty (melek yatefal). There is no time to rest; we have worked all the year round. Despite the restless working, we can't live good life, even sometimes it may be difficult to eat lunch and dinner. So, if I had an alternative even with less amount of income, I wouldn't practice it.*

In a similar way, Tadle said: "I am struggling to abandon tanning. It is tiresome especially when you see the gain, you feel hopeless. But I still practice tanning due to lack of capital to run other activities. I have a programme to buy a sewing machine".

In fact, they admitted the fact that the price of crafts have showed great change. But the income is not sufficient enough to fulfill demands of the family since the price of other items have been increasing more than the price of crafts. As a result, the income from crafts is not self sufficient, even to feed a family let alone to run other business since its value is greatly determined by the price of grains.

In general, the living standard of artisans in Dembecha Woreda is not changing. Of course, according to the view of some artisans in Meged, after the 1975 land reform their economic position has improved since they are granted land to produce grains. But still their living standard is not improved to the expected level. An ordinary farmer needs to partition his agricultural products to earn cash and for family consumption, artisan farmers can sell their part time produced crafts for cash. In this case, the artisans' living

standard is expected to be better than the ordinary farmers. In reality, however, though it could be said that their living standard is better than the past, no significant improvement is achieved. This is mainly due to land size and the perplex condition of craft working. In other words, the economic situation of the artisan depends on the size of the cultivable land which is smaller than the majority farmers. In addition, practicing farming and craft working seems difficult since time to crafting is available when price is lowered, during *bega* (summer). Conversely, this season seems good to full time craft workers since the buying capacity of what they earn from crafts relatively comes to be good.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4. Factors and Forms of Marginalization

#### 4.1. Cultural Marginalization as a Factor

The source of craft workers' marginalization arises from stratification of the society. In Dembecha, like elsewhere in Amhara, people have been given different social ranks based on prestige. In the stratification, social status was acquired through inheritance. Status was thought to derive from land, and land is thought to be hereditary (Hoben, 1973:8). Thus, economic factors have to be taken as part of the nature of status hierarchy of the society.

The data collected during the fieldwork reveal that the marginalization of craft workers emanate from the social order and birth ascribed status of the society. Hoben (1970) divided the stratification of the Amhara society into three social strata. These are: the nobility, the clergy and the farming population. However, the artisans are assigned the lowest status in the hierarchy. The nobility as a social category includes all who are said to be genealogically having aristocratic descent from the founding fathers (*akgni*) and the royal lineage. The clergy and the farming population could have access to land by birth as ordinary persons. Despite the genealogically determined difference in social position, the noble and the commoners all together form a single dominant group as *balabat* (wellborn) against other social groups like artisans.

In relation to the focus of this research, the categorization of the society in the study area is between despised handicraft craft workers (*eje Seri*) and prestigious commoners (*chewa*). The category of handicraft workers includes tanners, potters, weavers and blacksmiths. These groups of the society are the despised ones among others. The categorization of artisans as inferior social groups is attributed to different factors.

Among the factors, the pressing ones are attributed to different mythological assumptions, beliefs, negative characterizations and normative assumptions. The explanation that has been frequently mentioned by the non-craft workers as factors for the marginalization of artisans is fairly related with what Pankhurst (2001:8) forwarded; "Cultural marginalization is expressed in negative stereotyping, polluting work and mythological justifications for the low status of minorities".

#### **4.1.1. Myths about the Origin of Craft Workers**

The first myth explains that craft workers, excluding tanners, came out from the soil while a farmer farm. This myth portrays artisans as created unlike ordinary human beings who are said to have been created on the image of God. Hence, it is believed that God created them by using farmers as agents. This means artisans were created after the farmers who owed the 'noble occupation', farming. This myth seems to play a major role in portraying the quality of the artisans work and their place in the society. They are thought to possess the occupation of dishonored creatures.

However, the social position of craft workers is not exactly related with the occupation. This is because, members from such a despised artisan groups who abandoned craft working years ago are still considered social inferiors. In addition, as Karsten (1972) stated ordinary farmers can involve without damaging their status.

The content of the second myth is similar with what Damtew (2000) and Reminick (1978) explained in relation to the Menze ideological myth about evil eye nature of craft workers. The myth is explained in such a way that:

*The buda nature of artisans is due to Eve's lay to God. Eve had thirty children until the day God came to her and asked to show him all. She showed him fifteen of them hiding the rest fifteen. As he knew she lied to him, it is believed that God has said to her "Good! Let all you hide remain hidden from you". Then, the fifteen became invisible to her and human beings in general. It is believed then that all the fifteen are cursed children of Eve had become various sorts of the evil spirits of which the buda people belonged to mystical power related to the evil eye.*

The next origin myth depicts as craft workers share kinship ties (through Adam and Eve) with human beings in general but fallen from higher status due to their evil deeds. Accordingly, the following myth has been employed to put the artisans at a distance by associating them with non-Christian groups called *Endorawian* who have been associated with and known by secret and magical deeds. *Mergeta Belay* explained the myth as:

*There were anti-Christian groups in Israel called Endorawian. Initially, these people were blessed with the skill of art (tibebe). These people were well known in their secret evil power which enabled them to discover materials from soil, solid iron and cotton fiber. This power was known only among Endorawian and was transmitted genealogically. But latter, they began to use it against human beings in general and Christians who had lived around them in particular. In addition, they were capable of reincarnating the deceased. Like the art of making objects, the power of reincarnation was secret, not seen and acquired by anyone out of their genealogy. Latter, having seen their evil deed, God gave power to Christians to control them.*

This myth implicitly assumes that the art of making materials from the soil, solid iron and cotton fibers need to have secret power. Accordingly, the ability of the workers is believed to be resulted from magical forces and the process come to be considered as dangerous transformation (Simoons, 1960). In addition, in technologically simple society (like Christians in this myth) those who can work such transformations are naturally assumed to have supernatural help (Quirin, 1977:251). Hence, craft working is considered as evil driven. This is because, it is thought to be discovered and acquired by the evil possessed people. In other words, as Haberland (1979:129) stated the tasks come to involve some degree of fear and belief that the powers of these groups are combined with unclean and/or spiritually degrading qualities. In addition, Endorawian were said to have been conquered and accepted Christianity forcefully. As a result, they have been kept under control of the conqueror and became liable to provide materials which were needed by their master.

Another myth which has a similar connotation with the above one, associates the origin of craft workers with a cruel and 'anti-Christian' man called *Kayla*. *Abba Ayalew* explained:

*There was a man in Israel called Kayla. It was called so, because Kayla had burnt churches and massacred Christians. In due course of time, Kayla and his followers came under the control of Christians and subjected to serve them. However, Kayla and his followers had frequently revolted even after submission. Being offensive, the kings and masters come to be very serious; it was gradually that these rebellious groups were baptized by their masters. Hence the occupation they engaged in is considered disgraceful and dishonored.*

In *Abba Ayalew's* view, this had been due to the unreliable and offensive nature of craft workers that they kept under 'true' Christians. Accordingly, if they are left to be free and self administer, they would be offensive and became treat to such harmonious flow of Christianity. It is assumed that craft workers had been restricted or prohibited from economic benefits since economic well being is considered a vehicle to power or equality. In other words, the above two myths indicate the type of relation that was maintained between the dominated and dominant; which was expressed in an "asymmetric upward flow of difference"... which was "characterized by mistrust, suspicion, and malicious rivalry" (Hoben, 1970:95).

Another myth<sup>9</sup> claims that craft workers are cursed creatures due to their disloyalty or denial to Christ. Accordingly, craft workers are thought to be producers of the objects used during God's Crucification. Non-craft workers asserted that *craft workers used their skill against Christ since they were said to have facilitated both his arrest and Crucification by providing the tongs to pull him out of a crevice and finally the nail to crucify him with.* (*Damtew, 2000:95*) This explanation was employed to depict the alleged 'anti-Christ role'.

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<sup>9</sup> *This myth was the most frequently mentioned myth among non-craft worker informants.*

In general, the above myths portray craft workers as either cursed creatures due to their evil deeds or revealed unnaturally. Implicitly, the myths describe the craft workers as migrants i.e. as they are not 'original' inhabitants of where they are now. The myth that traces the origin of craft workers from Israel through Kayla or Endorawian was also to depict different ethnic background. However, as far as the researcher's observation and investigation is concerned, there is no distinguishable physical or cultural feature. This is to say, the researcher doesn't come across with reasonable ground to label craft workers differentially in cultural terms save the frequent expression of we (to refer craft workers) and they (to refer non-craft workers whom craft workers prefer to call *chewa*). In addition, despite the dominant society's venture to maintain differentiation in myths, the craft workers do not seem to accept any origin category. Furthermore, the myths signify that the type of relation between the dominant and the dominated, which should be maintained through negative characterizations of these people by associating them with offensive or destructive character.

#### **4.1.2. Negative Characterizations and Normative Assumptions**

There are different negative characterizations and assumptions that are employed by non-craft workers in an attempt to rationalize the marginalization of craft workers. Predominantly, artisans of Dembecha are considered as having poor life style.

One of the non-craft workers key informant disclosed that artisans are characterized as untrustworthy and unreliable. This characterization in the first place traced the unreliable nature of artisans from the myths explained above, which depicts them as deniers of Christ. The unreliability is also maintained in relation to craft working. Non-craft workers complained that artisans did not care about customers. They stated that artisans primarily produce by calculating the amount of money they would get. Accordingly, as long as a craft worker earns good income, he/she does not care about customers. This seems to depict, as craft workers have no place for social values and norms. Non-craft workers further disclosed that artisans replace the good qualities of raw materials offered by customers with the poor one. Some non-artisan informants also exemplified the unreliable nature of artisans with keeping/respecting the promise to finalize production.

It is commonly believed that artisans usually do not accomplish items ordered on the date they promised.

In addition, artisans are considered as unable to save and are also perceived as thoughtless about their future. Non-artisan informants claimed that artisans want to live luxurious life whenever they get money or not. It is said that artisans never kept money for tomorrow (*lenege malet ayawkem*). In this regard, one of the non-artisan informants in Meged reported the following:

*artisans do not care about their house, cloth, utensils etc. They are primarily focused on what to be eaten. No matter how much they earn, nothing is left to improve their life. During bega (summer) season, they look like thousands birr paid government employed. During Kiremit(winter) they are found at the dooryards of farmers to borrow grains. In fact, since it is a character endowed from their father (keabat yeteworse silehone) they can not change or alter it.*

At such instances, the characterizations are believed to be unchangeable since they are biologically inherited. However, the explanations are deplorable as long as the field data is concerned. For instance, starvation of ordinary farmers at *Kiremit* (winter) is the defining feature of the woreda's economy and it is not uncommon for farmers to borrow grains from relatively wealthy farmers. So, why are these groups do not identified similarly? In addition, though the dominant society blamed the extravagant nature of artisans. But there are wealthy people who used to be artisans. Even these ex-craft workers are now mentioned as wealthy merchants of the woreda. Thus, the explanations are perhaps stemmed from the interest to keep artisans at the lower position. At any rate, such characterizations have great contribution to perpetuate exclusions from equal involvement and treatment.

There are also negative characterizations attached with one particular group of craft workers and exploit as main factors for marginalization. For instance, tanners are associated with the dirt of the hide they are working with and are thought to have bad

sniff. The association with 'impurity' has grand effect in keeping tanners aside mainly in the dimensions of physical contact and commensality. In fact, since tanning is carried out with traditional methods tanners, mainly at their work place, smell different.

Tanners are also said to have different facial feature and physical structure. Non-craft worker key informants asserted that tanners have partial black face with muscular physical structure. As a result, someone having such features is suspected to have a *faki* (tanner) descent and referred as *faki yemaselal* (he looks like a tanner). In actual case, there is no any clearly distinguished physical feature which makes us to identify such people as far as the researcher's field work experience is concerned. This is to say, there is no physical criteria that set tanners apart or unless they see them practicing or selling their crafts, outsiders can't easily identify the tanners from the non-craft workers simply by looking the color and physical structure.

Craft workers are also stereotyped as having no settled abode, moving from place to place as they feel it fit. There is a saying "*Shemanie agerena rist yelewem* (lit. an artisan has no country<sup>10</sup> and land to own). Of course, some artisans admitted as weavers had been moving to trade their products and/or when the nearby nobles need them to produce large quantity of clothes for his servants and family. However, they returned to their family. Therefore, 'wherever an artisan went out of Dembecha, he cannot remain detached; it is his natal home' (key craft worker informants). Thus, according to artisans' view the explanation is speculation of the dominant society to verify their (*chewa*) superior position.

In addition, artisan excluding tanners are characterized as *tela yelesh* (lit. have no grace) or *tela kelal* (lit. light grace). What the society called *tela* is not related with once clothing or physical structure. Non -craft workers mentioned as "*an artisan is disgraceful no matter how huge and well-dressed he is*". Some of them even proclaimed as they could identify a handicraft worker by his grace (*be telaw*). But they couldn't give any

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<sup>10</sup> *However, many of the craft workers that I met live for a long time, even since they were born and believe as they are Ethiopian and 'Dembechian'.*

justification. When the researcher asked 'how', they said, '*simply when you see*' (*zembelih sitayew*). In general, practical evidences do not support the non-craft workers' claim of craft workers as disgraceful. Thus, the characterization is ideological explanation applied by the dominant society to stereotype artisans.

Furthermore, the artisans are characterized as lazy. Some non-craft workers declared that artisans were denied to own land due to their inability to farm. It is commonly believed that farming needs strength and endurance in contrary to handicraft working. Therefore, the dominant society perceive that artisans prefer to engage in handicraft working which simply need skill that can be acquired through imitation and practiced with hand and feet. They are also suspected not able to keep secrets. According to some of non-craft workers, it was partly due to this fact that artisans were kept aside from power and religious activities.

Moreover, artisans are stereotyped as 'anti-social'. That is to say, artisans are considered as they act and/or perform in contrary to norms and values of the 'host' society. For instance, the tanners are suspected of eating scrap from hides they are working with. According to some non-craft workers, tanners in the past did not care about what part to be eaten and who slaughtered the animal as long as it is meat. There is a widely held notion that claims tanners as having relatively muscular physical structure due to their rapacious eating habit. The artisans are also considered 'anti-religion'. Non-artisans claim that artisans do not respect holidays commemorated in the names of Saints and Angels.

However, many of the above characterizations are malicious gossips. First, they have no any authentic ground to say so because disproving qualities are observed among craft workers. Second, though much of the negative prejudices and assumption are apparent among the *chewa* themselves, the legitimacy/ applicability of the characters with their stereotyping value has never committed to memory. Thus, those characterizations that are considered hereditary by the dominant society seem to be deductions recited to defame the craft workers. In this regard, *Ato Melkamu*, a weaver in Dembecha town said:

*So much had been said and is being said. All talks (negeroch) were simply to secure their (superordinate groups) benefit, to claim themselves as balabat. Otherwise we [artisans] are human beings created by one God and we have nothing special except our art of making objects. While in need our hands' products badly, what it mean hating us?*

Therefore, the characterizations cited above are perhaps allegations to rationalize exclusion or restriction of craft workers' participation and involvement in socio-economic and political affairs. Moreover, as Hallpike (1968) maintained in Konso, the stereotypes are based upon the value of the dominant group, they serve not only to reinforce that group's sense of its own identity, but also its sense of superior rectitude.

#### **4.1.3. Associating Craft Workers with Evil Eye**

Craft workers excluding tanners are attached with *buda*. The word *buda* in Dembecha signifies "both the spirit which possess a person and the person capable of causing the spirit possession" (Quirin, 1974:239). In addition, the spirit is believed to be inherited. Thus, once a person is associated with the evil spirit, his /her children are more likely to be suspected of *buda*. Thus, biological relation (through marriage) is more restrictive with such groups of artisans. This is to say, though craft workers in general are considered as poor marriage prospects, those who are known to be born *buda* are more likely to face strict avoidance.

Eye contact is believed to be essential for the *buda* people to attack the potential victim. In other words, the evil eye attack is thought to be accomplished by sly gaze. Though eye gaze is believed to be essential, every eye contact with the *buda* people does not mean an attack. There are also instances when attack of the *buda* spirit became high. Fear, anxiety and worry at times of eye gaze or contact with the *buda* people and periods associated with fecundity and multiplication are believed to increase vulnerability. In addition, playing or acting freely/extrovertly is believed to attract the attention of an envious *buda*. That is to say, when one expresses his/her emotions too freely and becomes too outgoing

with others, he places himself in a position of vulnerability to the evil eye (Reminick, 1978). As a result, people usually do not feel free and “presents a façade of stolidity and silence” at times when people suspect the presence of the *buda*. Since, attack of *buda* in any case is believed to result in “wasting sickness, domestic accidents, infertility, plain bad luck, sick livestock and blighted crops” (Finneran, 2003), craft workers’ involvement in associations usually creates disdain. As a result, the dominant society discourages interpersonal relations and maintains social distance against physical contact with craft workers who are said to be evil eyed. Sometimes, being conscious of such acts or fear, the ‘*buda* people’ prefer alienation particularly during communal gathering.

In addition, it is believed that an entrails of a person died off evil eye attack is eaten by the *buda* people. Non-craft worker informants reported that *buda* people are physically thin due to their taboo or unnatural eating habit. And that is why corpse of a person who died off evil eye attack is usually taken out of the grave by these people (informants).

The society thought that *buda* people conceal their human identity while digging the grave. The explanation assumes the alleged different character they possess. This is to assert differential background. In addition, they are stereotyped as *jib galabi* (hyena rider) because it is assumed that *buda* people ride hyena to reach the grave of the deceased. This seems a symbolic attachment with a negatively perceived animal, hyena. In the study area hyena is considered as some thing having magical force, and its name is employed to refer negative trait. Accordingly, the word *jib* (hyena) is applied to insult artisans as rapacious eater or as evil scavenger.

Though evil eye attack is said to be cured through exorcism, prevention is believed to be better. As a precaution method, frequent contact and intimacy are advised to be avoided. This belief thus is expected to perpetuate spatial segregation<sup>11</sup> which in turn said to have reinforced other aspects of marginalization. In addition, the notion of *buda* affects personal relation. For instance, families whose member is attacked by a *buda* would not

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<sup>11</sup> *However, there are buda people live among the majority having establish neighborhood relation though their presence is not considered good*

have good relation with the person suspected of the attack. Even sometimes, if a *buda* is known during exorcism, he/she will be in quarrel with the 'attacked' family.

In general, weavers, blacksmiths and potters in Dembecha woreda are associated with evil eye which implies low status for both the group and the occupation. Hence, land ownership was restrictive and equal treatment has been nominal. In addition, the fear of evil eye attack has been an ideological force for craft workers marginalization through physical distance which further perpetuates social distance and exclusion. In other words, due to the perception as *buda* is inheritable, and as intimacy/physical contact would hasten evil eye attack, social interaction has been restricted in terms of intermarriage, friendship and neighborhood ties, residential integration etc.

## **4.2. Forms of Marginalization**

### **4.2.1. Residential Segregation**

The spatial dimension of marginalization can be seen in settlement patterns and in segregation during social situations (Pankhurst 2001:2). There are two categories of artisans in Dembecha concerning settlement pattern. These include those live scattered among the non-artisan society forming their own small clusters, and those live in group settlement in arbitrarily demarcated residential units. Those craft workers who reside among the 'host' community are expected to have regular physical contact and relatively good social tie. Hence, they are more likely to develop good relation, save their vulnerability to discouraging feelings/attitudes of the community. In the second settlement pattern, craft workers' social relation and physical contact with the community is less than the first one.

As it has been mentioned, in Dembecha Woreda there are handicraft workers who live in villages found at the outskirts. This shows that artisans are spatially segregated. As early scholars who studied minorities in Ethiopia maintained, such segregated settlement patterns are either voluntary, established to avoid social contact with the majority or forced, initiated by the majority to keep themselves untouched by the despised people (Damtew;2000, Pankhurst; 2001).

In Shelel, a rural kebele, the artisans relatively suffer the extreme form of spatial segregation. Relatively speaking, Meged where artisans dwell is far from the residence of the dominant society. Geographically, the village situates in a lowland part of the kebele where the soil is very poor. The main residential unit of the dominant society is somewhat elevated area privileged with dense forests. Meged is referred as *yeshemaniewoch mender* (lit. village of artisans) which holds a negative connotation, associated with despised and low status groups. Though not as severe like what Damtew (2000) reported concerning monastic artisans of Menze, the village is feared by ordinary farmers. Especially in the past, visit to Meged was not common unless farmers want to buy or order products. Mainly, children were not sent to the village. This was due to the belief that children are more susceptible to the evil spirit. That is to say, the evil eye attribution to spatially segregated craft workers of Meged has hindered social relation with ordinary farmers.

Moreover, residential segregation has perpetuated sense of group identity which further makes relation of craft workers and farmers problematic. According to informants, at the time of the revolution (1974) there was inconvenience between children of farmers and artisans, particularly among adulterates. As a result, the presence of some adolescents from one village in another was not considered healthy though their parents were in a 'no-war-no-peace' dormant relationship. Therefore, there were instances when handicraft workers' relation with the dominant society was characterized in quarrel which had expressed in various incidents. However, such relations and sense of group identity have been positively affected by the socialist regime.

Though the regime has played immense role in improving socio-economic position of craft workers, its resettlement programme did not bring significant change. This was partly because of the unwillingness of artisans to leave the village. In addition, some resettled artisans were returned soon to Meged. According to some potters, it was due to the unavailability of clay soil outside Meged that they did not leave the area. They declared that pot-making outside Meged is unthinkable since transporting the clay requires a lot of time and energy. In addition, some artisans disclosed that they are

comfortable and feel more at home in Meged; being far from the insults and negative stereotypes thrown against them for generations. Therefore, settlement of craft workers in Meged is both voluntary and forced.

Settlement pattern of artisans in Dembecha town is also characterized by segregation. As it has been mentioned, Wotebet and Aroge amba lie at the outskirts of the town. Handicraft workers and the names of these sites are inseparable. Mainly, the name Wotebet connotes craft working among the people of Dembecha Woreda. If someone said *I am from Wotebet*, he/she is more likely to be considered as an artisan. As a man from Wotebet is called as *yewotebet faki* (tanner of Wotebet) or *yewotebet shemani* ('weaver' of Wotebet), a man from Dembecha is expected to be referred likewise elsewhere in Gojjam, particularly in neighboring Woredas. This signifies that though there is no cultural difference among different occupational groups, residential segregation initiates sense of differential grouping.

Like in Meged, the spatial segregation in Dembecha town is maintained both voluntarily and forcedly. For tanners, settlement at the margins of the town is necessitated by the nature of their work, save pushing factors. Tanning which is still practiced in 'traditional' way requires sufficient water. To this end, settlement of tanners has to take location of water bodies into consideration. Accordingly, settlement of tanners in Dembecha follows rivers called Gulla and Kusit. For potters settlement in Wotebet is said to be forced. In this regard, w/o Alemitu said:

*settlement in Wotebet is historical resulted due to the order of the noblemen who had lived at Aroge Amba. The nobles had believed that the smoke that comes out during firing of pots cause different diseases for non-potter community. As a result, our mothers were not forced to shift from Aroge Amba to this place. Even after the fall down of the monarchy people used to influence official not to give land land for potters.*

There is no explicit reason that clarifies how or why blacksmiths and weavers come to settle in Wotebet. Nevertheless, it is likely to say that since they are neglected in the

'world' of non-craft workers, weavers and blacksmiths might chose to settle with 'co-specialists', tanners and potters. It is partly necessitated by forced endogamy. That is to say, since weavers and blacksmiths commonly get married with potters, their settlement is indirectly dictated phenomenon. In general, settlement pattern of craft workers in the study area revealed the spatial segregation of occupational groups.

Nowadays, however, residential intermixing is observing. For instance, in Meged some handicraft workers who take farming more seriously consider leaving the area where they had refused to abandon during the resettlement programme. In addition, in Dembecha town non-craft workers are began to settle at Wotebet [at the edge] due to the town's municipality residential land distribution programme.<sup>12</sup> This spatial integration has played pivotal role in integrating craft workers with the dominant society. Because, residential proximity mean physical contact that is more frequent than before with the dominant society. As a result, their involvement in different vicinage oriented social associations and chance to establish neighborhood tie is expected to be high. Therefore, when handicraft workers who were pushed or push themselves to the edges of the villages come closer and closer spatially, integration with the dominant society would come soon

#### **4.2.2. Social Exclusion**

##### **4.2.2.1. Restriction in Social Associations**

There are different social associations established on the basis of kinship tie, vicinage, religion, friendship tie etc. This includes *idir* (burial association), *mahiber* (religious feast association), *iqub* (rotating credit association), *shiha*; (group cattle keeping), etc. These are voluntary associations utilized on a reciprocal basis to accomplish different venture or goals.

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<sup>12</sup> *If the new settlement system is continual, artisans will be at the center of the town. But there is a rumor as tanners are going to be settled on the other edge of the town.*

Though the associations are said to be voluntary in principle, there are rules that govern roles, relations, actions and responsibilities of members. The rules are usually devised based on social norms that tend to differentiate individuals implicitly. As a result, craft workers did not participate in associations organized among *chewa* people. There are different factors upheld among the dominant society to avoid craft workers. Of all ideology of evil eye, impurity, settlement pattern, 'unreliability' are the most frequently mentioned factors among non- craft workers.

In the past, associations organized among non-craft workers were highly preventive. As a result, craft workers were forced to establish their own separate associations. Nowadays, however, craft workers and non-craft workers are participating together in an association. This signifies many of the strongest restrictive informal rules seem to soothe, even to be abandoned. The changes can be exemplified by *Ato Molla's* life experience of burial places. He said:

*we were not allowed to be buried in the same graveyard with the rest of the society. Far from the church, at the left side, was where burial of our people used to be conducted. Nowadays, that is not the case. Everyone shares the same cemetery. It is likely that I am not pushed like my father.*

Nowadays, it is common for a craft worker and a farmer to sit next to each other in communal gatherings. However, it is not to say that all is well. Though many of the strongest forms of discrimination seem to soothe, even to be abandoned, artisan in Dembecha Woreda are still reminded very often that they are different from and unequal with the rest. The change and continuity of the exclusion will be discussed in different associations.

One of the predominant voluntary social associations in Dembecha woreda is *idir*. Its main purpose is to help members in time of death. This association is mainly formed around the residential proximity. Thus, neighboring households are more likely to be in one *idir*. Accordingly, craft workers were obliged to have their own *idir*. So, the involvement of craft workers in an *idir* is greatly affected by their settlement pattern. But

it should be noted that geographical distancing was an extension of the segregation. Hence, exclusion from *idir* membership was implicitly forced phenomenon.

The unequal treatment is also evident in number of people who attend funeral of craft workers. In principle, anyone residing in a *got* (an area less than a kebele) even in a kebele should attend funeral of the deceased even though they don't belong to the same *idir*. One's absence from funeral of his 'townsfolk' is usually a prerequisite to the soaring of a relationship with the family. Nevertheless, many people were not attend the funeral of craft workers. In due course of time, however, the number of people who attend funeral of artisans' is displaying an increase. Since both groups began to integrate in other life occasions, people in Meged began to assume attending funerals of artisans as their social obligation. In addition, kinship ties among artisans seem to have great role in enforcing ordinary farmers to attend the funeral of artisans. That is to say, since artisans nowadays involve in different *idirs*, the deceased is more likely to have close relatives in an *idir* which he was not a member. Thus, colleagues from the deceased's *idir* as an obligation and the members from another *idir* attend the funeral not to soar the relation with the deceased close relative.

Likewise, in the town artisans and non-artisans nowadays involve in an *idir* together. However, tanner's *idir* is quite different. Tanners organize their *idir* around their occupation. In fact, non-craft workers attend tanners' funeral. However, after the burial was over, the number of people who accompany the mourners from the cemetery back to home is very few. Many people, even other artisans, do not like to eat and drink in a tanners' house. Ato Molla suggested that

*people's retreat may be due to their perception of impurity. People discerned that our (tanners) food and drink is impure. According to their view, everything we (tanners) touched is impure. Nevertheless, this is not true. We prepare quality food and drink even better than the commoners do.*

The second traditional association that was restrictive to craft workers to be members is *iqub*. *Iqub* is said to be a form of saving association in which weekly or monthly payments of a fixed sum is exchanged for the privilege of receiving a large lump sum at

some point in the life of the group (Levin:2000). However, it is an undeveloped association in Dembecha mainly among craft workers in particular and farmers in general. Among the artisans whom the researcher interviewed, only eight participate in the saving association. Seven of them were in the town and only one rural artisan took part in an *iqub*<sup>13</sup>.

*Iqub* is organized among members who are known each other very well by taking economic standard as basic criteria. This signifies that people can join an *iqub* as long as he/she can afford the payment. However, since craft workers were alienated from economic advantages, they would not fit with the requirement of non-craft workers' *iqub* payment. Therefore, economic standard has its own part in initiating exclusion. In addition, the negative characterizations of craft workers as unreliable, untrustworthy and itinerant discourage artisans' involvement. In general, though financial capacity is mentioned as basic requirement, artisans' involvement in an *iqub* organized among non-artisans is implicitly prescriptive. As a result, like other associations, to be a member in an *iqub* was implicitly prescriptive. However, relatively speaking, *Iqub* is more democratic and inclusive of all social associations.

The third one, *mahiber*, is the most predominant religious oriented association. It is an association in which neighbors, relatives or people, who know each other, gather once a month to chat, eat and drink. As Levin (2000: 224) stated the chief purpose of *mahiber* is to eat and drink in honor of a certain Saint in His day every month. For instance, people who celebrate St Mary's *mahiber*, gather at the 21<sup>st</sup> of every month (E.C), on the feasts of St Mary in one of the member's (who is responsible for all the food and drink) house. In the next month, the members gather in another house, and in this way all the members have the opportunity to take the *mahiber* to their houses turn by turn.

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<sup>13</sup> Though called as *iqub*, its purpose is not to accumulate money and receive as in turn. Members pay ten birr monthly and used to buy an ox for Christmas. My informants told me there is no formal means of saving. Monthly payments are held in *Mahibers* but the money does not circulate. It is deposited to help members.

The members also help each other in different occasions. For instance, members help each other in agricultural activities. Joint labor is thus very common for members of a *mahiber* in Dembecha. If an ox or oxen belonging to a member die or if a family member pass away, all the other members collectively do the farming activity. In such times, he/she is not required to provide with food and drink unless he wants to do so. New members can join *mahibers* on the general consent of the members. If the new comer is in a bad relation with one of the member, his/her request to join the *mahiber* will not be granted.

In the past, membership for artisans in a *mahiber* arranged by the dominant society was restrictive. But they were invited to a household in whose house the monthly feast took place. During the invitation, however, artisans were not given equal attention and privilege. In this regard, W/o Alemitu, a key informant potter, said

*Some people invited us (artisans) but they made us sit in guwada (a room where animals are kept in night). Of course, this happens when there is no space left in the main house, in cases when there is enough space for us, we used to sit in the main room. But eating with the balabat was unthinkable. In addition, those people who invite us were not volunteer to accept our invitation.*

This depicts that sitting and eating were not merely placing oneself and partaking food respectively. Eating together being sitting down side by side was considered a manifestation of equality. Therefore, commensality was restrictive. Even for tanners, commensality still seems uncommon<sup>14</sup>. In addition, relation at such instances has not been reciprocal. Though craft workers were invited, non-craft workers' were not accept the specialists' invitation.

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<sup>14</sup> Tanners are still facing difficulties about being a full member in such feast oriented associations due to the perception that connects tanners with dirt.

In the past, craft workers who were considered as not good for fertility, were not encouraged to join associations that assert joint labor like *mahiber*. As a result, handicraft workers had been forced to organize their own *mahiber*. In due course of time, however, certain changes come to be seen; few farmer artisans began to be included in the wider *mahibers* of non-craft workers. That is to say, craft workers, nowadays, can join different *mahibers* if they are economically fit, in offering foods and drinks in their turn. The only difficulty seems to lie in *mahibers* organized by elders because acceptance among ex-members is mandatory. According to craft worker informants, elders are still inconvenient and do not feel comfortable on the presence of craft workers in communal gatherings let alone in a *mahiber* which is associated with both secular and spiritual life matters. In this regard, Ato Lingerew, a blacksmith in Meged said: "Most elders are conservative, they don not agree with all the changes that are happening. They are still with their obsolete perception or thoughts (*bedirow astesaseb ena limad*). They don't like to include and even to invite us (craft workers)."

Another restrictive association in Dembecha woreda is *shiha*. It is a local social association embedded with economic matters. It is an association peculiar to rural villages in Dembecha Woreda. Residence proximity and good relation largely govern the establishment of this association. Members keep cattle together and arrange joint labour at times of harvest. Particularly during thrashing, the labor is gained from the members.

Since craft workers have been perceived to have spell to endanger fertility, their presence in an *awdma* (a circular area prepared for thrashing) was conceived to cause a decline in the quality and quantity of the grain about to be thrashed.

But nowadays, this perception is some what abandoned due to the fact that some artisans are being effective in farming. Since some craft workers who happened to do farming are effectively producing quality products in a great amount, the assumption that asserts craft workers as fertility pollutant has come to be proven wrong and become thoughts of some elders.

In general, pre-existing restrictive rules which were devised on the basis of fertile pollutant and impurity are now improving despite the stagnated perception of elders. Thus, the number of artisans who involve in social associations is showing increment. Another thing worth mentioning is though inclusion is improving, equal involvement in affairs and treatment with in an association is still doubtful.

#### 4.2.2.2. Marriage Restriction

Marriage with artisans is considered disgraceful. Denial of intermarriage with the *chewa* is a salient variable perpetuating low status of artisans. The non-artisan community consider intermarriage with artisans as 'pollutant'. This is because, the categorization as *chewa* (commoner) and *eje seri* (handicraft worker) was maintained in the hierarchically regulated social relation where stratification was based on the concept of *nituh zer* (lit. pure descent) or *atentam* (lit. full bone). Handicraft workers are perceived to have impure descent and are referred to as *atinte godelo* (lit. impartial boned) which said to have degrade even bring to an end the quality of the so-called 'pure' descents. Thus, the *chewa* believed that one's descent status would persist or improve as long as intermarriage with low status groups including craft workers is abstained.

The dominant society asserted a number of attributes that make handicraft workers poor marriage prospects. Of all, the most frequently mentioned was the low status of handicraft workers. Informants most often mentioned that "*anasa nachew*" (they are 'minorities') when they are asked why intermarriage with artisans is restricted and viewed disgraceful. According to some non-craft workers' view, the restriction of intermarriage was due to handicraft workers' evil nature and anti-social/human deeds that are maintained through myths and negative characterizations.

Whatsoever the ideological explanations, handicraft workers' in-group marriage largely arises from *chewas*' avoidance. That is to say, handicraft workers' in-group marriage arises not because of their interest to keep themselves aside from the dominant society. As early scholars who carried out studies on caste groups stated, marriage restriction is a dependant social phenomenon having its determinant some primary social interest. That

means, the group initiating the restriction ordinarily has some apparent advantage which seeks to preserve (Ambaye, 1997:30). The interest of the *chewa* in Dembecha Woreda is primarily to avoid societal negligence. Social respect or prestige is believed to be maintained by preserving the social status inherited from parents. Consequently, artisans are said to be forced to maintain in-group marriage which perpetuate different aspects of segregation.

Forced in-group marriage initially implies biological segregation by preserving ascribed status. Functionally the biological exclusion limits and affects other aspects of relation. This is to say, since people in the study area have been accorded different social position depend on inherited status, relation among different groups reflects the image of inequality. Thus, biological segregation results in differential treatment which is further this can be elaborated in spatial segregation. As it has been already mentioned, in Dembecha, artisans' land was hereditary and restricted at the backyards of their house. As a result, artisans' settlement out of a given village tends to be minimal because married couples were expected to establish new nuclear family on land given by parents. Hence, the perpetuation and/or persistence of spatial marginalization is more likely to occur. Spatial marginalization further effects social distance by discouraging physical contact. This is to say, marriage avoidance in Dembecha Woreda has been served as an initial variable employed by the dominant society to maintain their status by keeping the artisan aside.

Nowadays, however, though intermarriage with craft workers is not approved officially, there are exceptions. The restriction to cross-marriage for young educated seems softened. Unlike in the past, some youngsters nowadays began to cross the boundary. This currently emerged cross marriage seems to be dominated by hypergamous type. That is to say, comparatively, more adolescent males from the higher status, take wives from the lowest status than the reverse. This is partly due to character of status inheritance. If a man from *chewa* group marry a women from artisan groups, status of their family including the wife and children is more likely to attain the husband's status. In Dembecha, people frequently ask '*balabat new?*'(does he has a father?) to know someone's descent. This entails the emphasis to the patrilineal side of once descent.

Though status of someone is highly influenced by and reckoned through the patrilineal line, matrilineal line has also undisputable role in determining once position in the ladder of the hierarchy. A question *nituh balabat new?* (lit. is he or she pure descent?) is usually followed to check both sides. Though half-artisan parented individuals are more advantageous than individuals born from two artisan parents, they are still liable to the lower position mainly concerning intermarriage with the *chewa*. Particularly in the past, marriagability of a person should be attested from both lines. According to the *chewas'* view 'defect' in one side proves unmarriagability.

On the side of handicraft workers, there is no particular rule or sanction that prohibits marriage with the *chewa*. However, only few male artisans prefer to get married with daughters of artisans. The youngsters that the researcher discussed with expressed that they prefer in-group marriage to cross-marriage though they do not want to continue/peruse handicraft working. It is partly due to fear of potential quarrel. The explanation of Temesgen will illustrate the issue.

*I do not want to be engaged with a girl of chewa. Though I know as what matter at most is love in this era, I believe that relation will not continue as it had been initially. As long as you live together, quarrel is inevitable at one day. There is nothing granted as she wouldn't insult me by touching my father<sup>15</sup> (abat yemineka Sidib). If she touché my father, I will not tolerate.*

Thus, self-imposed endogamy is also maintained though it can be said that lack of artisans' interest to get married with the *chewa* may be strayed from their negative experience. In fact, the field data revealed as there is a difference concerning intermarriage with *chewa* between elder artisans and their children. Some elders want their children to get married with the *chewa*. In this regard, *Abba* Bitaw, a tanner in Wotebet, said: "To tell you frankly, I want my children to marry chewa. But this is not due to my ambition to achieve chewa status, rather the need to relieve my children from

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<sup>15</sup> *Father in this sense refers descent. It is also additional example how patrilineal side of one's lineage is dominant.*

this tiresome occupation ( tanning)". The interest to get married with the *chewa* is also reflected among the potters, blacksmiths and weavers.

Furthermore, restriction of intermarriage is also evidenced among the marginalized groups. Especially, weavers, potters and blacksmiths do not want to get married with tanners. They applied many of the discriminatory principles of dominant society to maintain the restriction. The tanners on their part look down upon those artisans by claiming as tanning is blessed by God, unlike weaving, pot-making and blacksmithing.

In conclusion, as Damtew(2000: 86) reported in relation with monastic artisans in Menz, the socio-spatial segregation, cultural and religious exclusion and even biological segregation, are all imposed life situations and the very essence of craft workers marginalization in Dembecha Woreda. In Dembecha as to the dominant group, boundary making and maintenance is believed necessary in order to keep the status quo. Accordingly, social distance is used in all spheres of life justified as a means for the realization of the dominant negative stereotyping and ideological explanations. However, from the fieldwork data it seems that endogamy will be disregarded due to economic shifting, occupational change and observable attitudinal changes of educated adolescents

#### **4.2.2.3. Religious Discrimination**

The myths that are explained among the dominant society to portray craft workers as created differently sounds illogical when it is viewed religiously. People used to argue frequently that artisans were created unnaturally and cursed creatures when they were asked why craft workers are despised and placed in the lower social position. However, their answer for the question 'can we say that handicraft workers are not created in God's image?', was no. But they persist with their notion of categorizing craft workers as 'cursed creatures'.

Almost all of the non-craft worker informants replied that Orthodox Christianity has no particular rule and regulation to differentiate people as long as he/she is a co-religionist. Though the religion has no specific rule or view about the status of craft workers, relation [even in the religious sphere] is bounded with thoughts of inequality. However, it should

be noted that the religion is highly endowed with socio-cultural values. Even some of the principles that the people follow are more of cultural than religious. As a result, this can be said that though it is not official, church rules and regulations seem to enforce inequality and marginalization.

As it has been already mentioned, on the view of Christians the number of days the people should abstain working are so many. For instance, farmers do not practice agricultural activities during many of the 'holidays'. In contrary, artisans carry out craft working during these days. As a result, the dominant society does not consider them as 'true' Christians. According to craft worker informants, however, it is not to be odd or not being 'true Christian', rather due to the nature of their work, handicraft working. They reported that they do not break the canon of the church since they do not dig or cut at such holidays. Any way, it is undeniable fact that the intolerable religiously prescribed holidays honored in the names of Saints and Angels reinforce inequality and marginalization which develops negative perception in the minds of non-craft workers.

Moreover, artisans are not allowed to be a priest. Though there is no special regulation lied against the craft workers, no artisan is allowed to be a priest. According to *Mergeta Belay*:

*The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has no any regulations that restrict people from being a priest as long as they are orthodox Christians. In fact, there is preexist conception that has been told in the church in relation to weavers. Weavers had not been allowed to pray (kidasye) if they passed the day while weaving. Because they (weavers) had used goredo to make the cotton thread strong and white. This goredo was prepared from flour of grains. After they soaked the thread in it, they sip to connect the thread with mewerworiya (the canoe-shaped shuttle). By doing so, it is believed that they the edible substance could enter to their mouth. So, since praying is forbidden if someone tastes edible thing. As a result,, weavers are not allowed to pray if they were preoccupied with weaving.*

However, it should be noted that this 'regulation' is only for weavers. Even weavers, nowadays, do not use *goredo*. In addition, the prohibition of craft workers to be a priest was believed to be due to evil eye nature. Some people disclosed that the *tabot* (ark) would be angry (*yekotal*) with the presence of craft workers who are said to be possessed by evil power. But this assumption comes to be illogical when someone asks why tanners who are not considered as *buda* people are prohibited from being priests. Some people assume as tanners' prohibition may be due to the nature of their work; since they are working with 'meat'(attached with the skin). But a tanner in particular and an artisan in general who abandoned tanning or handicraft working long ago is not allowed to be a priest.

In general, the explanations are arguable thoughts or speculations that are exploited or perceived as if true under the veneer of 'religion'. The field data revealed that prohibition from being a priest is the extreme and rigidly upheld form of marginalization [even more than restriction to intermarriage] perpetuated by the socio-culturally endowed religion of Orthodox Christianity.

It is dead clear that this prohibition negatively affect the life course of artisans. Prohibition from priesthood means restriction from attending church school, which has been the only way to get educated. Thus, artisans were forced to remain illiterate for decades even for centuries. As a result, 'religiously sanctioned' exclusion was also mean denial of access to education<sup>16</sup>. In addition, prohibition from being priesthood hinder artisans' involvement in some feasts held at the church compound. This further perpetuates weak social interaction.

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<sup>16</sup> *In the past, not only from church education, artisan's children were also despised/discouraged in modern schools. Nowadays, however, children's of artisans and non-artisans are attending modern education sitting on the same chair.*

### 4.2.3. Economic Alienation

As it has been repeatedly mentioned, until the 1975 land reform artisans were denied the right to own agricultural land. Since the right to resources, mainly land, was ascribed, the children of craft workers were left to acquire what their parents used to practice. That is to say, specialized craft activities were to be inherited as the only means of income. In fact, craft workers in Meged were allowed to possess small sized infertile land, limited in their house backyards. The land was called *yeshet merit* (lit. land of ripen). It was called so because the land used was small in size, so that it was not possible to produce grains for the market; the harvest could barely amount more than satisfying the farmers seasonal desire of tasting *eshet(ripen grains)*. Some elders even disclosed that they possessed relatively wider agricultural land but great proportion of it was in Meged. Thus, land ownership to artisans was ranges from total denial to limited access. This restriction stem from status oriented distribution of resources. In this status oriented relationship of Demebecha Woreda, a man's right in all probability was determined by chance of birth. Accordingly, handicraft workers were said to be 'fatherless'(*balabat aydelum*) or they lack aristocratic descent. Hence, they were placed at the lower position, where land ownership is restricted, of social structure.

Moreover, prohibition from economic rights was reinforced by negative characterization and mythological explanations. The following explanation was exploited to rationalize the cause of restriction to ownership of land and property.

*In the distant past, there was no boundary to farm land and residence area. Since the number of people was limited. One could possess land at his disposal. However, as the number of people increased, competition for good land and settlement began which in turn caused conflict among people. A popular king of that time arranged communal gathering to determine/ demarcate boundary of the land needed to farm and settle. Almost all the people who were under his rule were available on time at the appointment place. But the artisans and the Muslims arrived late, after boundary was laid and the right to ownership was granted.*

*Craft workers were late while crafting and the Muslims were late while drinking coffee. The king had passed an order as craft workers should make their living by their skills.*

According to artisan informants, this oral tradition had been widely spoken among district governors during the feudal regime to proclaim as prohibition to land ownership was not a phenomenon arranged during the regime. In other words, the explanation was to rationalize the ideology stating everything happened due to the fault and laziness of craft workers' forefathers. In addition, the oral tradition claims that artisans were not conscious about the use of land by being proud of their skill. But this assumption seems to contradict with the people's perception of craft workers as wise. Practically, assertion of the above explanations seems to secure the interest and advantage of the people positioned above craft workers in the hierarchy. This is also shared and known by craft workers. Craft worker informants reported that the myths were for the sake of authorized groups to suit their rule (*leagezaz endimechachew new*). Even some claimed that the prohibitions to resource and property were 'regulatory controlling mechanisms' to exploit occupational groups. Ato Melkamu, a weaver in Wotebet said, "*They (noblemen) know our (craft workers) potential. Had we had equal access, we would have been lords (geta enihon neber).*" Craft workers' claim seems to hold some truth when we remember the value of land in altering one's status both socio-economically and politically. Moreover, the inevitability of craft workers to the well functioning of other segments of the economy would need to devise controlling mechanisms. That is to say, the necessity to the continuity of craft production in the absence of substituting technologies and techniques would enforce restriction of craft workers in their hereditary occupation.

Furthermore, the Amhara structured social relation is depending on the existence of "legitimate regulatory control". In Amhara, for instance in Dembecha, it was assumed that "people must be contained by the surveillance and regulation of an authority figure with whom the person has a diffuse and personal relationship of dependence" (Hoben, 1970:195). Thus, alienation of artisans from economic benefits was partly to keep them loyal to their occupation and rulers.

Moreover, the alienation to resources and property was rationalized with negative characterizations and ideological explanations. As it has been already stated, the dominant society explained that craft workers excluding tanners endanger fertility since they are thought to be cursed beings. According to the assumption, agricultural land ploughed by craft workers would not produce expected amount of production. Even some people disclosed that places where a craft worker's land rests on during sawing do not grow crops; if it grows, the seedling is usually yellow and thin. Accordingly, when the plantation of ordinary farmers become yellow in color people commonly say '*a shemanie azimera mesel*' ( it looks like artisans' plantation). Such claims were to rationalize craft workers' inability and as not blessed to farm.

The dimension of economic marginalization in association with danger was also evident in livestock ownership. Craft workers, excluding tanners, are not supposed to possess livestock. Because they are said to injure the breeding capabilities of livestock since they possess evil spirits. Practically, however, craft workers can be productive even more than some ordinary farmers. As far as the researcher's fieldwork experience is concerned there is no any alleged difference among craft worker farmers and *Chewa* farmers concerning agricultural productivity.

The alienation from land and livestock ownership seems to have caused a patron-client type of group relation. The patron- client economic relation of artisans with the 'host' society was embedded with a set of reciprocal obligations defined in the context of status difference. Craft workers in Dembecha were provided with benefits like subsistence and sometimes security on the condition that they provide craft services to the 'host' society (Informants).

In addition, contractual based production was usually problematic. Ideally, at such instances, payment is commonly held when the craft worker provide the craft. However, since the customer and the craft workers are known each other (particularly in Meged), farmers have usually requested the artisans to extend the time of payment, to be during the harvesting season. According to some craft worker informants, the farmers might not kept their promise and usually did not bring the payment on their own initiative.

Thus, artisans were forced to go to the house of the farmer to remind or to collect the value of their services from customers. Nevertheless, their presence at the house of a farmer sometimes was followed by insults and gossips. Ato Ayenew, craft worker farmer in Meged, remembered his experience as:

*Once up on a time, a chewa descent farmer ordered me to weave gabi at summer season. The thread was from him. Since there was no work as usual I agreed to work. We agreed that the payment would be during bega (summer). He took the gabi and I waited till February. We had met on roads and at different places. But he had never mentioned the payment. One day I found him returning from Saturday market. His greeting was unusual. He merely said 'de hina walih ' (good afternoon) and passed with out any further conversation. I was so upset but did not want to keep/delay him at that instance. At the morning I went to his house and asked the money. His response was surprising; **godolo shemne hulu sew endanet yimesilhal aydel. Betilemnegnem yanetn genzeb alinekalh**" (" You think everyone is like you, you accursed weaver .I won't take your money even if you ask for it").*

The last speech of the customer indicates despise, low status and perception as artisans are unreliable. Thus, despite the great difference in the time asked for payment, economic relation between artisans and customers was non-reciprocal and discriminating. In general, craft workers are economically disadvantaged.

However, since 1975 craft workers became landowners. As a result, they have shifted to state of being subsistence producers. Right to subsistence production has paved the way for artisans to be included in different socio-economic associations. Being subsistence producers, craft production has come to be carried to earn cash unlike in the past. That is to say, craft worker farmers turn their face to craft working when cash is needed. Hence, the occupation is more likely to be part-time engagement. In general, the change in land ownership rule, from ascribed to achievement, has improved the socio-economic position of artisans in the study area.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 5. Summary and Conclusion

The major question of this study was to answer the question why and how are craft workers marginalized while their products have been basic utilities of the community in Dembecha woreda. To answer the major question of the research, discussing related issues was necessary. Accordingly, basic features of social organization such as marriage, kinship and family are discussed. Discussing these organizing principles was very important to investigate the alleged differences that exist among craft workers and non-craft workers. The finding in this chapter indicates that craft workers have no different organizing principle. Importance of marriage, kinship, and family in organizing the craft workers was found to be more or less similar with the 'host' society. However, parents' involvement during first marriage of craft workers is less than non-craft workers. This is due to migration of artisans' children. Age during first marriage also shows variation among artisans and non-artisans. In addition, craft worker families differ from non-craft workers' in their material possession. This difference is evidenced in the structure and type of the house. The house of many craft workers is small, less partitioned and is *gojo bet* (cottage house) in type. The difference in material possession further signifies the economic difference among non-craft workers and craft workers. Generally speaking, the differences are in status oriented principles. The 'host' society is more akin than the craft workers in applying rules that differentiate individuals.

This is evident in endogamous nature of artisans. The in-group marriage arrangement of workers was developed from the host society's yearn to keep 'purity' of their (*zer*), descent which was believed to be preserved through avoidance of marriage with low status groups. This forcefully acquired phenomenon has greatly affected other aspects of craft workers' social life. Being avoided from cross marriage, their chance of establishing affinal and fictive kinship ties with a wider social realm is endangered. Therefore, craft workers' social relation with the dominant society was nominal; if any, it reveals the image of inequality. This endogamy further affected social relation at the

family level. Since chance of getting potential marriage mate was restricted within a small circle, craft workers have forced to migrate by leaving their parents behind. This means, craft workers are controlled systematically not to widen their social horizon through biological tie. Furthermore, this migration of children means loss of productive force to the family since the basic craft working unit is the nuclear family. Thus, restriction in intermarriage has been the salient variable in affecting craft workers socio-economic life.

It was also important to discuss economic activities of marginalized occupational groups. Handicraft working in Dembecha woreda is a small scale dishonored economic activity. Despite old-age existence and great importance of crafts, production has not been changed remarkably. Most craft workers in Dembecha woreda agree that they do not change their products in type, form and style for a long time. Most of them produce what they have been producing since they acquire the skill. That is to say, the tools employed, the technique applied and objects produced are not different from their parents. Even to some groups, the change is forgetting some crafts that were highly produced by their parents. Handicraft working in Dembecha woreda is thus an occupation which has not been subject to improvement. Different factors have accounted for this lack of improvement. In the first place, the production of crafts is guided by demand of the society to whom they are produced. Since production of crafts is to make a living, craft workers need to consult demand of customers for what and how much to be produced. In addition, since the woreda is predominated by settled agriculturalists and since there is no diverse selling mechanism, craft production is expected to focus on utility. Thus, deviant from the prevailing local market demand would be a failure. The field data revealed that attempts, particularly among potters and weavers, to change type and quality have terminated soon. Moreover, lack of significant attention both at macro and micro level affect the development of craft working tremendously. Handicraft workers have not been rewarded fairly both socially and economically. Economically, for instance, artisans have never been independent to determine their selling price on the basis of quality and expense of production. No matter how important and qualified the craft is, selling price is guided by

selling price of agricultural products. This is partly due to the contemptuous feeling towards craft working and specialists.

Above all, the prevailing situation signifies that the continuity of craft working in the study area is uncertain. Expansion of modern education, right to land ownership and competition with inexpensive imported materials are major treats to the 'indigenous' crafts. Education opportunity of children of craft workers has increased opportunity for alternative job. Approbation of land right has also absorbed craft workers since becoming a farmer mean so much in improving socio-economic position of marginalized occupational groups. Moreover, introduction of inexpensive industrially produced commodities endangered the continuity of traditional crafts in Dembecha woreda. However, not all types of crafts have suffered the same fate or have been affected to the same extent. Tanning has suffered the greatest decline of all craft works while black smiths in the town increased the scale of production and transformed their work into successful business by adopting 'modern' technology (Pankhurst, A and Freeman, D. 2001: 338-339). The demand of pots and hand woven clothes is situational. Some products of potters and weavers are still in demand either due to absence of substitutes or for their special socio-cultural value. In addition, weaving is the only craft activity to participate both females and males in Dembecha woreda.

Examining basic features of social organization and economic condition of craft workers enable us understand alleged difference existed between the dominant society and the marginalized artisans. Having discussed the social organization and economic condition, it was important to ask why craft workers of the study area have been treated at the margins.

The factors that are accounted for the low status of craft workers are mainly cultural constructions retained in mythological justification, negative characterization, and in evil eye ideology. The myths are asserted to rationalize the different origin and identity of craft workers. The myths predominantly portray the craft workers as created unnaturally and descended from cursed siblings. However, as Alula Pankhurst (2001) observed in southern Ethiopia, the myths upheld among the people of Dembecha woreda lack explicit

elaborate justification. In addition, craft workers are stereotyped in negative characterizations and assumptions. They are characterized as having poor life style. Accordingly, these marginalized groups are portrayed as being anti-social, unreliable, wasteful, lazy, drunkards, etc. These characterizations are believed to be hereditary. The perception that considers the stereotyping explanations as inherited characters highly affected social relation of artisans. However, many of the beliefs and explanations are more of wanting than reality.

Moreover, craft workers particularly weavers, blacksmiths and potters are associated with evil eye. These artisans are said to have possessed by inherited evil spirit that treats life and endangers productivity. The tanners, as differential stereotype, are associated with 'impurity'

Therefore, craft workers of the study area are socially excluded, culturally subordinated, spatially segregated, economically disadvantaged and politically disempowered. Many of them were restricted from social associations, intermarriage with the host, from land ownership right, forced to live at outskirts and were considered as 'sub humans'.

In the review literature part, it has been mentioned that various views have been forwarded in understanding the situation of marginalized minorities in Ethiopia. The most pervasive approach was the caste perspective. In essence, different criteria have been pulled out from the seven Leach's characterization of Indian castes. From the prevailing dimensions of marginalization craft workers in Dembecha Woreda, applicability of the concept of caste seems dubious. Of the six criteria that Lewis (1970) mentioned occupational rigidity, ranking of status and concept of pollution and impurity are the most frequently mentioned criteria.

Artisans in Dembecha woreda are nowadays engaged in agricultural and other activities. Likewise, few non-artisans carry out craft working while preserving their status. Ranking of status among craft workers is not clearly delineated. In fact, there is a difference in the degree and forms of marginalization among craft workers. Tanners are the most despised followed by potters. But the position of weavers and blacksmiths is doubtful. The

concept of pollution, which was taken as determining characteristic to caste group, is also inapplicable to all craft workers in Dembecha woreda.

In addition, the origin of craft workers has been subject to controversy. The myths and thoughts of elders portray artisans as migrants. The myths that describe craft workers as different in creation were meant to categorize as they are non-Amhara. Furthermore, life experiences and some forms of craft workers' marginalization in Dembecha tend to trace their origin out of the woreda. That is to say, coping mechanisms and experiences marginalization of Dembecha woreda craft workers are more or less similar with craft workers else where in Amhara region. Therefore, it seems possible to suggest that there would be center of diffusion where craft workers and values of marginalization spread. Furthermore, the current trend of some artisans' migration due to enforced endogamy, small number and limited demand for their products would shed light to their mobile life condition. Apart from such assumptions, the origin of craft workers in Dembecha woreda is obscure.

Whether they are castes or not and from wherever they are, craft workers in Dembecha woreda are marginalized occupational groups. In the past, marginalization was expressed in strict endogamy rules, restriction on joining associations, separate sitting during feasts and ceremonies, separate residential quarters, restriction on land right and sometimes also in ownership of livestock and prohibition from religious affairs. In many cases people of the older generation avoid social contacts with artisans.

However, many dimensions of marginalization are now declining. There is no official marginalization. The change is evidenced in increase in degree of craft workers participation in various communal associations and social activities, frequent contact and mixing in burial, credit association and sharing the same table with non-craft workers. Particularly, economic alienation is now becoming faded memory of elders. Thus, the socio-economic position of craft workers has improved. The change in the system of land ownership, from ascription to achievement and access to education played significant role in changing life situation of artisans.

Approbation of land right has played immense role in changing social trends and relation of craft workers with the host community. Abolition of hereditary land ownership right has paved the way for craft worker to extricate the negative attitude and belief that are upheld among the host community. For instance, craft workers were said to have malign power that could endanger fertility and were considered as cursed beings not to farm and rear livestock. However, after the 1975 land reform many craft workers become successful in farming. In addition to economic significance the success entitled the craft workers with social acceptance. Moreover, the right to land ownership transforms craft workers to be subsistence producers. Being subsistence producers, craft workers are no longer considered as 'parasites' which in turn facilitate integration with the dominant society. In addition, subsistence production changed the type of relation from patron-client to dyadic or to interpersonal. When land ownership was hereditary, economic relation of craft workers with non-craft workers was characterized by mistrust, suspicion and unequal distribution of profits. During those times, relation was conditioned by the interest of the dominant society. Nowadays, however, relation is maintained and expressed through 'market'. The land right also facilitates occupational transformation. Being farmers, many artisans have left their former occupation. This signifies transformation from a precarious and despised occupation to dependable and valued agriculture (Damte, 2000:122). This further induced changes in relation to their socio-spatial relation. In addition, exposure to education has played integrating role by changing the attitude of the society.

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## List of Key Informants

Name	Age	Occupation	Place of Residence
Melkamu Mekkonn	47	Weaver	Wotebet
Molla Bisewr	64	Tanner	Wotebet
Aynew Mesert	51	Weaver	Meged
Alganesh Birhanu	35	Potter	Meged
Birkie Tadesse	35	Potter	Wotebet
Alemitu Shiferaw	40	Potter	Wotebet
Lingerew Tsega	32	Blacksmith	Meged
Merigeta Belay	67	Government Employed	Dembecha town
Bitaw Anteneh	64	Tanner	Wotebet

# DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this is my original work, has not been presented for a degree in any other university and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name Birhanie Alemu

Signature [Signature]

Addis Ababa University

June 2010

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**AUTHOR**

Birhanie Alemu

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