

# Gerontocracy in the on-going modernization

Changes and Continuity of Life Course among the Banna, Southern Ethiopia

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Gerontocracy used to be, and still is, a keyword that characterizes African “traditional” societies. Gerontocratic society is where older person, generally male, enjoys more prestige, dignity and authority than the younger. This study outlines how modernization process lead changes and continuity of life course to the Banna people in southern Ethiopia. The Banna is an Omotic afro-pastoralist group living South Omo Zone.

In this study, the term “modernization” has political and hegemonic implication in such a state like Ethiopia where Amhara-centered imperial domination annexed ethnic minorities in the south, while so-called *amharalization*, becoming Christian, speaking Amharic and adoption of Amhara “civilization”, had embodied modernity in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1990s, the early phase of post-socialist EPRDF regime, Ethiopia has been implementing new development policies especially in socio-developmental sectors that would result in gradual transition of social norms among the peripheral people. Gerontocratic and male-centered social structure of the Banna would inevitably adjust itself to the new era when increase of education opportunity in villages do not tolerate people to indulge in life in traditional norms, and when Health Extension Program (HEP) induces lower child mortality and longer average lifespan.

Traditional life course of Banna men is defined by a kind of grading system; the *donza* system. A boy (*naasi*) becomes *ukuli* when he starts preparation for initiation ritual (*atsa*). After the ritual he becomes a *maz* as he has his hair shaved and spends for weeks or months under strict ritual regulation. A *maz* then becomes a *donza*, adult man, once he has undergone the engagement ritual with his fiancée.

Dignity of *donza* is recognized in two aspects; agedness and masculinity. They are much subdivided from younger to older *donza*. In the past when only men who experienced killing large animal or enemy were permitted to be into adult stage, the dignity of *donza* was secured by showing his bravery and achievement. The characteristics of *donza*-centered gerontocratic social norms is expected to change as on-going “modernization” processes introduce changes and continuity of a sense of value among the people.