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## **TIBEB, ART OF THE WEAVER IN ADDIS ABABA TODAY**

Jannes Waples Gibson

*Tibeb* in this presentation refers to the decoration or pattern which is handwoven with supplementary weft into the border of the *shämma* (or *shemma*) worn by women and men in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The *shämma* traditionally was worn by the Christian populations of the northern and central highlands.<sup>1</sup> Today one can find cloth with the woven *tibeb* in most markets. There is no imported textile sold in Ethiopia today that takes the place of these valued textiles. Ethiopian artist Maître Afewerk Tekle has captured the special feeling among Ethiopians for the fine cotton *shämma* in his painting "Mother Ethiopia" painted in 1963. The woven multicolored *tibeb* is a recent addition to an ancient way of dressing. It appeared at the time of Emperor Menilek II who took power in 1898 establishing his capital in Addis Ababa.<sup>2</sup> Members of the aristocracy wore *shämma* with a single color red *tilet* border that may be the precursor to the *tibeb*.<sup>3</sup>

Weavers from the *Dorze* ethnic group in the highlands of southwestern Ethiopia settled in the *Shiro Meda* area of Addis Ababa where they gained their reputation as the most skilled weavers of the *tibeb* by the early 1900s.<sup>4</sup> They were and are not the only weavers of the *tibeb*. *Dorze* people were traditional weavers of the *bulluko* or *dunguze*, heavier textiles requiring strength and stamina to weave.<sup>5</sup> Other textiles featuring the woven *tibeb* are the *nettela*, *kutta*, *gabi*, *anguet lib's* and the ecclesiastical dress with *dirib tibeb* worn by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church. Matching embroidery at the neck or on the edge of the sleeves often complements the woven *tibeb*. However, if the border itself is embroidered it is called *tif tibeb*. The *bulluko* usually features a red *tilet* border called *jano*. *Shämma Komplete* is the name of the dress for women including a *nettela* and *kamis* with matching *tibeb*.

The *tibeb* is woven on a horizontal, two harness loom often constructed over a pit allowing for more looms in a space.<sup>6</sup> An attempt to introduce multiharness looms in the 1950's failed.<sup>7</sup> It is curious that the color of the woven cotton *shämma* has remained white in Ethiopia. There was an attempt to introduce pastel colors for the cotton that failed because the colors were not colorfast.<sup>8</sup> Men do the weaving and women spin. Men are also known to spin in some areas of Ethiopia. Though weaving is a specialized craft, spinning of the white cotton is done by all classes of women and continues to contribute to the family income. Elderly women may spin for home use or pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Early historical accounts refer to Muslim and *Falasha* weavers.<sup>10</sup> Weavers travelled with the "moveable courts" and set up their looms on the verandas of the homes of noblemen.<sup>11</sup> There are forty-six weaving communities in Addis Ababa today and each area of the city has at least one weaver in residence. Weaving communities still exist in areas such as *Shiro Meda* where the *Dorze* settled at the beginning of the century, and *Gulele* where there is a community of two hundred forty-six weavers living in close proximity giving each other community support.

The simplest *tibeb* designs are woven with continuous supplementary weft in one or two colors but sometimes the time-consuming process of using discontinuous wefts of many colors is used. Weavers memorize their patterns, count threads and use samples. A patron might ask them to take apart and reweave a favored *tibeb*. Weavers occasionally sell a design but most often they keep them and they are eventually lost when the weaver

dies. They protect their market by keeping samples hidden from other weavers. Those who employ weavers keep them busy so they don't have time to work for anyone else. Ninety to one hundred pattern sticks have been used in the past but few weavers use over seventy now.<sup>12</sup> Most weavers today in Addis are using twenty to thirty.

Cotton, silk, metallic, rayon, acrylic and wool yarns are used for the design. Most weaving now is done with rayon floss or twisted "art silk" (also rayon) imported from India. Sometimes the floss and twisted rayon are mixed for the desired color effect. Pure silk and cotton were used in the past but are not as common in today's textiles. The word *saba* is commonly used today in referring to the twisted rayon. Another word, *suf*, means wool but is commonly used to refer to acrylic yarn in markets today. Imported or Ethiopian machine spun cotton is often used for both the warp and the weft but it is still common for handspun cotton to be used for the weft. One prestigious dressmaker uses pure silk imported from England for the *shamma* and the *tibeb*. The favored imported cotton at present is from Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> Metallic threads are imported from India, Japan or China. They may even be imported from Greece if the weaver or dressmaker can obtain them.

Weavers today may come from a traditional weaving family or area but weavers also weave because they like it and it provides a steady income. A young weaver usually starts his apprenticeship by winding the bobbin. He learns at the loom by standing to the left of the weaver counting threads. A single color border of supplementary weft (*tilet*) is attempted before the weaver attempts to weave the *tibeb*. Weavers work for themselves on private commissions or selling their work at local markets. Some weavers work exclusively for dressmakers or business people who might employ ten to fifteen weavers or more. The large cooperatives that were started when the previous government nationalized businesses in 1976 have become defunct but cotton is still grown in Ethiopia and factories still produce spun cotton yarn.

The capital of Addis Ababa provides the consumer with an infinite choice of design pattern when purchasing a textile with the woven *tibeb*. Three inches is normal for the width of the *tibeb* but it can be as wide as the customer wishes. *Isom dink* which means refined and *Saba* (Queen of Sheba) are examples of traditional designs still favored today. The *dirib tibeb* worn by the clergy and associated with the royal family is another popular design featuring red, yellow and blue yarns with metallic gold yarn. *Tind dirib tibeb* is a design that can be worn on either side. Names of other designs include crosses, stars, fish, snakes, backyard seedlings, lady's necklace and grapevine. One is called *tukul* representing an Ethiopian house, another *zenbaba* representing a type of palm tree. Contemporary designs include one representing the stained glass windows at Africa Hall in Addis Ababa, the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. *Tito tibeb* was in vogue during the visit of the late President of Yugoslavia to Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup>

The most important markets in Addis Ababa are *Adarash* and *Kolfe* in the *Merkato*, *Shiro Meda* and *Gulele*. Other markets are *Shola* and *Addis Gebia*. *Shiro Meda* market is busiest early Sunday mornings when weavers and merchants bring their cloth. The cloth with *tibeb* is sold in lengths or made into wearable items. There is some exporting of these textiles but the majority are made and sold in the domestic market. Goods are transported mainly by truck, bus or small taxi to markets in the countryside such as *Senbete* on the main road connecting Ethiopia with Eritrea.

Many historical references refer to cotton, cloth trade and the loom in this area of east Africa. Excavations at Axum in northern Ethiopia by a team led by David Phillipson show indirect evidence for textiles.<sup>15</sup> Documentation of specific weave structures and design vocabulary for the woven tibebe as well as other textiles remains sparse. Taboos associated with weaving vary in different areas of the country. Weavers in many areas of the country could provide a wealth of research information. In Addis Ababa today and the significant diaspora outside of Ethiopia and Eritrea *Yehabesha Lib's* or national dress with the woven tibebe is worn predominately by women but also by men for special occasions. It is considered to be traditional, elegant, comfortable, versatile and modest.

#### Endnotes

1. "D'Abbadie (1868), Stern (1852) and Plowden (1868) are the first to describe the ceremonial *shamma* as having a silk border, or tibebe, woven in diamond shapes or checks". Tournerie, P. Color and Dye Recipes of Ethiopia, 1986, p. 6-7.
2. Olmstead, Judith. "Ethiopia's Artful Weavers", Washington, D.C., National Geographic Magazine, Vol 143 1:125-141.
3. Plowden, W.C. Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country with an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848, 1868, p.50. Also a conversation with Tsion Andom.
4. Tucho, Samuel. "The Dorze Weavers of Addis Ababa", 1984, p.4.
5. The bulluko and dunguze are technically not complicated but hard work and tiring to weave. Conversations with weaver Merid Mersha and Ingrid Worede.
6. Gervers states it has been suggested that the pit treadle loom is an old type of cotton loom first developed in India and it may have reached Ethiopia by the same route as cotton itself. Gervers, M. "Traditional Cotton Costume in Ethiopia", 1983, p. 39. Schaedler's theory in a recent publication is that "the pit treadle loom comes from outside of Africa, possibly at a very early date from Asia across the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden and then spreads along the east and northeast coast of Africa". Schaedler, K.F. Weaving in Africa South of the Sahara, 1987, p. 450.
7. Tucho, Samuel. "The Dorze Weavers of Addis Ababa", p. 15-18.
8. Conversation with weaver Merid Mersha and Tshai Yohannes.
9. "A hard working woman toiling full-time might spin enough cotton in a month for a *shamma*". Pankhurst, R. A Social History of Ethiopia, 1990, p. 251.
10. Pankhurst, R. A Social History of Ethiopia, p. 224.

11. Krapf, writing in 1843, said Sahla Selassie (r. 1813-1847) took a keen interest in handicrafts. His palace workshop in Ankober included 600 spinning women, 200 producing fine cotton cloth presented to governors, favorites and families, 400 producing ordinary cloth for soldiers. Pankhurst, R. A Social History of Ethiopia, p. 60.

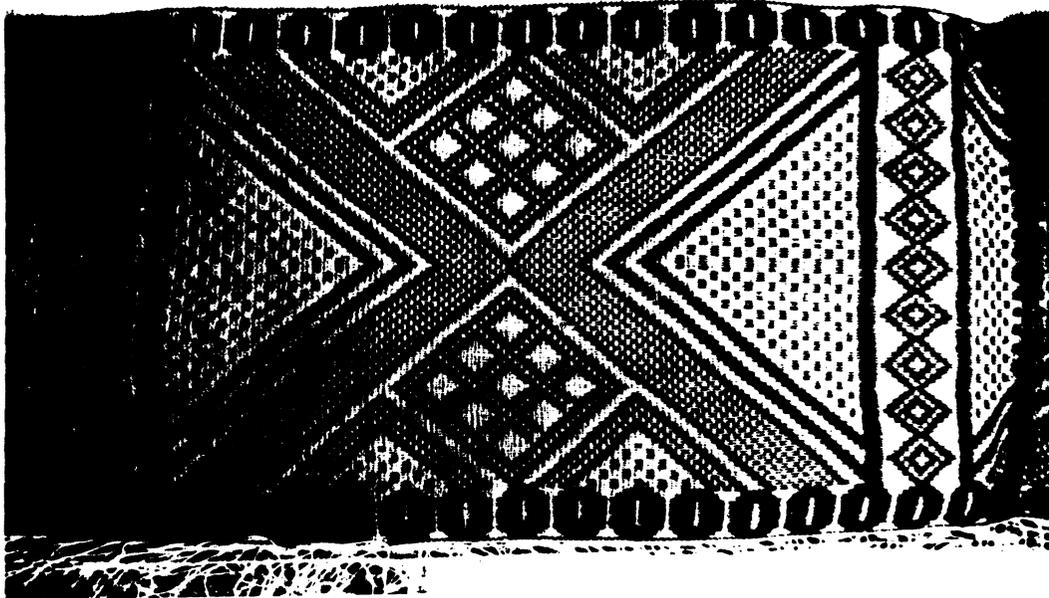
12. Conversation with Tsion Andom, Giuliana Gabbanelli and weavers at Shiro Meda.

13. "Cotton cloth is the universal and only dress of the country and cotton is imported from Cutch." Plowden, W.C. Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country with an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848, p.127. Between 1889 and 1900 Pankhurst says cotton threads were imported from the U.S.A., England, India and Germany. Tucho, S. "The Dorze Weavers of Addis Ababa", chapter three.

14. Information provided by Asfaw Damte.

15. Phillipson, David. Ancient Ethiopia, 1998, p. 83.

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woven tibebe

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## ***Glossary***

*anguet lib's (or yanguet lib's)* - a handwoven narrow but long piece of cloth worn by women around the neck and shoulders. It is a kind of scarf, usually plain, but sometimes decorated like the nettela or kutta with a plain tilet or tibeb.

*bulluko (bullako)* - a handwoven heavy cotton cloth of about ten cubits in length made of thick warp and weft. It serves as a blanket.

*dirib tibeb* - dirib refers to the width of the decorated border of the nettela, kutta, etc. It conveys the notion of "double". A dirib tibeb on the border of a kutta or on the hem of a kamis will be at least twice the normal width, usually wider.

*Dorze* - people belonging to a group from the southern highlands region between Chench and Arba Minch in Gama Gofa Administration region Gamo Awraja.

*dunguze* - piece of multicolored woven cloth, much like the anguet lib's but a little longer, worn by the Dorze community either around the neck or waist (usually during dancing).

*Falasha* - refers to Ethiopians who lived in various regions of Gonder, Northern Wollo and Tigray who call themselves "Bette Israel" (of the House of Israel). They practise what they believe to be the true faith of Judaism.

*gabi* - a handwoven cloth, very much like the bulluko. The gabi is made of thinner warp and weft, therefore lighter, and is used as a blanket or a wrap.

*jano* - red 'tilet' border. Jano refers to the tilets woven broadly on a bulluko, gabi or fine kutta.

*kamis* - Generally refers to a woman's dress made of handwoven cloth. It also refers to a long over-garment that used to be worn by Ethiopian dignitaries up to the early 1930s. It is two and one half times the size of a nettela.

*kutta* - double layer thin cotton shawl worn by women and men. It is usually worn on special occasions but can also be used as bedsheet, towel, or blanket.

*limut* - refers to the absence of both "tilet" and "tibeb" on the border. It appears to be common today to refer to single tilet borders without any decorative patterns as limut also.

*Merkato* - Italian loan word for market.

*nettela* - a single layer thin cotton shawl less fine than the kutta worn by men and women on all ordinary occasions.

*Saba* - Ethiopian name for the Queen of Sheba.

*saba* - refers to colored threads whose tibeb's shimmer. The shimmering threads are usually rayon but could refer to silk or cotton.

*shamma (or shemma)* - any woven cloth either in the form of the toga or made into dress for women or men. It is the generic name for all handwoven garments.

*shamma komplete* - the full national dress. For women it includes the neetela and kamis with the tibeb.

*suf* - means wool but is commonly used today to refer to acrylic yarns in the market.

*tibeb* - a decoration found on the borders of a kutta or dress made out of diverse tilet. It refers to the diverse decorative patterns that are woven on all sorts of handwoven cloth. Some derive their names from the kind of decorative pattern or the name of an event or personality that was prominent at the time when a particular tibeb was popular.

*tilet* - a single color border in place of (or in lieu of) the tibeb.

*tilf tibeb* - the border of the shamma is embroidered, not woven.

*tind dirib tibeb* - tind means couple or "harnessed together". It is a tibeb of more complicated patterns which can be worn on either side.

*Yehabesha lib's* - refers to the Ethiopian national dress. "Habesha" means "Abyssinian". Lib's means "clothing" generally. This term conveys the same notion as "shamma Komplete".

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\* The English version of this book was published in Canada earlier.

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