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CHAPTER

Ontological Resilience: The Heirloom Crop Enset Thwarting Hunger and Colonists

Kathryn Weedman Arthur, Yohannes Ethiopia Tocha

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Abstract

Histories generally portray southern Ethiopians as pagans who lacked kings because they rely on the historical accounts of their northern Abyssinian conquerors, who adopted Christianity in the first century AD. Justified by a call to spread Christianity and suffering the threat of famine and disease to his empire, Abyssinian emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) conquered and colonized southern Omotic-speaking polities, who cultivated a drought-resistant crop, enset (*Ensete ventricosum*). According to most Ethiopian histories, Boreda were one of the southern Omotic societies, who quickly succumbed to conquest, adopted new agricultural technologies, and paid tribute and corvée labor. Boreda identity and history are entwined with farming enset, a relationship that provided food security, structured their historic settlement landscape, and charted their relationship with technology, each other, and outsiders. The authors argue that everyday practices, such as the farming of enset, are spaces within which Indigenous peoples frame and materialize ontological resilience against colonialism, religious conversion, and persecution. Boreda oral traditions, life histories, and daily practices support their efforts to resist settlers and richly inform the archaeology of their historic places, Bayira Deriya.

Keywords: Ethiopia, heritage, ontology, technology, precolonial history

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Along the southern Ethiopian Rift Valley, a signpost broadcasts “Welcome to the Land of Arts and Peace” to tourists traveling into the Gamo–Guge highlands—a beckoning at odds with Ethiopia’s reputation for recurrent famine and frontier violence. The greeting encourages tourists to experience Gamo people’s peaceful traditional way of life (Zelalem 2018); admire architecturally celebrated bamboo–grass houses (Olmstead 1972); purchase their nationally honored handwoven cloth (Mathiszig 2014); observe their use of handmade iron,

leather, and ceramic arts (J. W. Arthur 2006; K. W. Arthur 2018); and savor slow-cooked recipes that feature enset (*Ensete ventricosum*), a crop honored as “Enset is God!” (Olmstead 1974; Woyesa and Kumar 2022). Gamo Indigenous knowledge, coupled with the Guge highlands’ fertile soil and microclimates, yields robust varieties of barley, wheat, and the drought-resistant crop enset (Borrell et al. 2019; Samberg, Shennan, and Zalvata 2010). Gamo tout their enset culinary arts as a (pro)creative process that encourages peace and food security, fortifying them to withstand centuries of northern Ethiopian incursions and settler colonialization.

Since the fifteenth century, northern Ethiopian Christian texts negatively characterized Gamo and other southern Omotic-speaking peoples as easily conquered and forced to abandon their pagan ways. During his rule, Emperor Zär’a Ya’qob (r. 1434–1468) focused on strengthening the monarchy by unifying the monasteries into a council of clergy, who were charged with establishing churches on sites of pagan religious practices in southern communities (Henze 2004, 71; Pankhurst 1997, 77; Tamrat 1972, 175–176). A document referred to as the national epic of Ethiopia, the *Kebra Negast*, may have been created as early as 1436 for Emperor Zär’a Ya’qob’s coronation ceremony at Axum to solidify his Christian ancestry (Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001). Written in the ancient Ethiopian language Ge’ez, the *Kebra Negast* established the Solomonic dynasties of Ethiopian kings, asserting that Melkenya I (meaning first lord) was the son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and Ethiopian queen Makeda-Sheba and that he brought the Ark of the Covenant and Christianity to Ethiopia (Henze 2004, 46; Tamrat 1972, 250). Subsequent incursions into southern Ethiopia expanded during the Zämänä Mäsafənt, Era of Princes (1769–1855). The era constituted large agricultural Christian polities in northern Ethiopia, who migrated, conquered, and established themselves as rulers of smaller polities (Reid 2011, 22, 30–35)—a process described as the “internal African frontier thesis” (Kopytoff 1987). As tensions between Zämänä Mäsafənt nobility grew, other Ethiopian polities, such as the Oromo, Sidama, Janjero, Damot, and Kafa, began to engage in slave-raiding and expansionist agendas, which destabilized the south (Bombe 2013; Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017; Fernyhough 1994). Zämänä Mäsafənt’s internal conflicts also created turmoil and vulnerability that eventually destroyed northern herds and crops and decimated human populations, which led to the Great Ethiopian Famine (1888–1892) (Pankhurst 1966a; Rubenson 1991).

Ethiopia’s first emperor, Menelik II (r. 1889–1913), seized southern polities, such as Gamo, and declared their staple crop enset as “My Gold” (Pankhurst 1966b, 286). Confronted by a near economic collapse in the late nineteenth century, Menelik II sought to rehabilitate wealth by annexing southern territories occupied by Omotic speakers, who sustained drought through enset cultivation (Pankhurst and Johnson 1988, 52; Rubenson 1991; Tibebu 2018). Emulating his predecessors, Menelik II claimed Solomonic ancestry to legitimize his expansionist agendas to the south. Sara Marzagora (2022, 534) also refers to Menelik II’s claim of affiliation with the Solomonic lineage as an “anti-colonial weapon” to stave off European colonial efforts by recentering Ethiopia’s place in the world as a civilized Christian nation. Menelik II granted southern conquered lands to his settler soldiers, who insisted their subjects speak Amharic, converted to Christianity, and adopted the northern land tenure system with forced tribute and corvée labor (Donham 1986; McClellan 1984).

Most histories regarding Ethiopian state formation advance a frontier narrative in which southern, non-Christian, peripheral-remnant-frontier societies surrendered to northern, Christian, core-developed empires. Frontier theories are a continued process of neocolonialism and neoliberal agendas that attempt to homogenize the African continent and erase all non-dominant narratives (Ogundiran 2009, 2016). Mid-twentieth-century historians and ethnographers focused on southern Ethiopian oral traditions and ritual practices as evidence of their incorporation of the northern empire’s lifeways (Braukämper 1973; Donham and James 1986; Haberland 1964, 1978; Straube 1957). Evidence of historic defensive architecture in southern Omotic- and Cushitic-speaking landscapes has the potential to illustrate planned resistance to the north but is primarily attributed to conflict with neighboring societies (Abebe 2014; Ambo 2021; Molla 1992; Zeleke 2007). González-Ruibal (2014, 229–230) even argued that evidence of Ethiopian rural communities’ resistance to state incorporation exists in their persistent use of locally made products and that, in the process, they “failed to

achieve modernity.” In essence, scholarship regarding southern Ethiopian societies asserts they either transformed by adopting some aspects of the dominant northern empire or resisted and failed to change.

We offer an alternative history to Ethiopian frontier narratives by listening, learning, and becoming articulate in the oral traditions, life histories, and ontologies of one Omotic-speaking Gamo polity, Boreda. We challenge historical reconstructions that argue small states either resisted and failed to “modernize” or homogenized and succumbed to dominance. Associating Indigenous peoples with “traditional” material culture and crops focuses on the final product. It fails to reveal how defining being shapes the importance of process, interaction, and co-creation of material culture. We propose that Indigenous people often focus on the importance of the creative process, built on generational knowledge transmitted orally as part of heritage (K. W. Arthur 2020; Ogundiran and Ige 2015; Schmidt 1997). Generational knowledge is created through longitudinal experimentations, observations, and testing, which is the application of scientific knowledge to complete a task—a technology. The failure to recognize Indigenous material production as technology and science is an entitled Western perspective (Smith 1999).

Material technologies are anchors that constitute and reconstitute the nature of being and belonging, which can provide resilience in the face of colonization. Technologies, such as Boreda enset cultivation, manifest through assemblages of knowledge and practice structured by ontologies (K. W. Arthur 2018). Boreda-Gamo ability to nurture change and stability through settler violence and occupation is a testament to the resilience of their Indigenous ontology. In the following section, we review northern Ethiopian narratives about Boreda-Gamo histories to illustrate how dominant cultures often weave histories about their conquest and assimilation of non-dominant cultures. We then reveal how Boreda’s historic mountaintop heritage sites, Bayira Deriya, invoke Boreda counternarratives of resilience to settler violence and persecution. Bayira Deriya are perceived as powerful places representing the critical connection between fertility and well-being. On these ancestral historical settlement sites rich with fertile lands, Boreda care for a series of sacred forests, *dubusha*. *Dubusha* practices serve to reinvigorate their ontology, which guided their way of sowing, tending, harvesting, and consuming ancient crops, particularly enset. Men and women working together to reproduce enset was ontologically correct practice, which they trusted would save them from drought. We believe archaeologists would greatly benefit from deeper explorations of the threads that tie oral histories to material culture as a place of rich cultural agency.

Settler Narratives: Enset and Gamo

Menelik II referred to enset as “my gold” because it was a drought-resistant, hand-cultivated crop that did not require plows with oxen, which in the late nineteenth century were ravaged by drought and rinderpest (Pankhurst 1966b, 286). Menelik II did not desire to import the crop enset from the south to the capital to alleviate famine. Instead, he appreciated enset’s ability to sustain southern rural populations, whom he depended on for cereal crop production needed to support the northern economy. The state reconfigured southern land tenure and politics. Northern soldiers (*neftennya*) were sent to established fortified towns, where southern elites with significant land were declared nobles (*balabbats*) (Donham 1986). *Neftennya* and *balabbats* were given the right to procure tribute (*gult*) in the form of crops and corvée labor from southern peasants (*gebbar*), who maintained their inherited land rights (*rist*). The pressure to provide cereals as tribute associated with intensive land clearing and ox plowing may have diminished enset production, increased deforestation, and escalated food insecurity (McCann 1995, 52–54; 1997). Prior to Menelik II’s incursions, seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit missionaries living in Abyssinia described admiration for the enset cultivation of the southern Omotic-speaking kingdoms of Nareâ and Damot:

When it [enset] is cut at the base, 500, 700 and sometimes a thousand grow from the same one. ... they put it in pits in the ground where it keeps for many years and is taken out and made into *apas* or

pap [a soft food]. In the Nareâ region [Ennarea Omotic kingdom in southwestern Ethiopia] it is the sustenance of most of the people. (Manoel de Almeida, 1628, in Beckingham and Huntingford 1954, 47)

This tree, which the natives [of the kingdom of Damot] call ensete, is wonderfully useful; its leaves, which are so large as to cover a man, make hangings for rooms, and serve the inhabitants instead of linen for their tables and carpets. They grind the branches and the thick parts of the leaves, and when they are mingled with milk, find them a delicious food. The trunk and the roots are even more nourishing. ... The word ensete signifies the tree against hunger, or the poor's tree, though the most wealthy often eat of it ... this tree when it is cut down groans like a man, and, on this account, [they] call cutting down an ensete killing it.

(Lobo visited in 1624–1630, translation Johnson 1887, Part II Chapter XI)

Linguists and archaeologists suggest that enset was likely intensively collected in southern Ethiopia ten thousand years ago by Omotic-speaking hunters and gathers (Blench 2006, 159–160; Brandt et al. 1997) and possibly domesticated circa 2000 years ago in southwestern Ethiopia (Hildebrand, Brandt, and Lesur-Gebremariam 2010; Negash 2020).

Among the Omotic speakers, whose territories were under incursions from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, there were forty enset-dependent polities in the Guge highlands. These polities were collectively named *Gamu*, a disparaging Amharic term meaning “they stink” assigned by Abyssinian empires (Woldemariam 2013).¹ Emperor Zär'a Ya'qob (r. 1434–1468) sent Amhara monks to destroy southern sacred forests, insisting they abandon their non-Christian ways and pay tribute in horses (Pankhurst 1997, 77; Tamrat 1972, 176–177). Tabots, regalia, and documents dating to the fifteenth century in Gamo Orthodox churches further attest to Yaqob's missionizing efforts (Abélès 1977; Azaïs and Chambard 1931, 260; Bureau 1978). In 1540 Portuguese missionary Francisco Álvares wrote, “almost a kingdom in size; they are pagans, little valued as slaves; they have no king, only chiefs who rule separately. This is called *Gamu*; it runs mostly towards the west” (translation Beckingham and Huntingford 1961, 454). An early sixteenth-century account of Muslim Ahmad Gran's invasion of Ethiopia, by Yemeni scholar Shihab al-Din Ahmad, referred to *Sufgamo* (“very high Gamo”) and *Bargamo* (“beside the water Gamo”) as “brutes without religion” who were “only by convention” part of Imam Ahmad Gran's kingdom (Pankhurst 1997, 209–210). The Kingdoms of Kucha (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954, 1xv), Sidama (Abélès 1977; Bombe 2013), and Oromo (Abélès 1977; Hassen 1990, 40–41, 141–142; Olmstead 1997, 29) attacked, plundered, and enslaved Gamo. Ethiopian Orthodox priest Abba Bahrey, a Gamo citizen, wrote in 1593 that he lived in a “merciless age of turmoil” when the “king [Admās Sagad, r. 1559–1563] put himself at the head of... the army [who] threw itself like a pack of wild beasts on the Galla, who were all killed” and the Dāwē Oromo whose “readiness to kill people, and the brutality of their manners ... laid waste to his country which was called Gamo” (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961, 123, 111–114). Gamo was a tributary to the Kafa state in the eighteenth century under Šagi Seročo (r. 1775–1795) (Huntingford 1955, 104–105).

By the late nineteenth century, Boreda polity appears separately from Gamo on pre-conquest maps and in the text as Borodda (1888; Borelli 1890) and possibly Busia (Smith 1897). Boreda king Gele (likely Gola, the eighth Boreda king) traded ivory and elephant teeth with Kucha (Borelli 1890, 362, 438–439; Neumann 1902, 383) and grew cereal crops and produced cloth for trade (Smith 1897, 230). Captain Vittorio Bottego's expedition on May 27, 1896, described Borodda as an area of unrest months before it was defeated by Menelik II's forces in 1897:

in Borodda, a town north of theirs [Ganti], a band of Amharas, armed with fueili [Fusil Gras French service rifles purchased by Menelik] left by their companions who reside in Ualeita [Wolayta], has settled. The Chiefs of Borodda split into two parties: one [Meggaro] accepted the imposition of heavy tributes, and then joined the invaders in raiding their neighbors; the other [Sagara], who did not want

to submit and betray their country, hid in the mountains ... we see the beautiful crops on the mountains of Borodda.

(Vannutelli and Citerni 1899, 252–253)

Following conquest by Menelik II, British officers, biologists, and French archaeologists wrote with admiration about Boreda mountaintop settlements with fertile agricultural fields:

King Magero [Boreda's ninth king]... lived on a beautiful and well-cultivated hill ornamented with trees, grassy slopes and brooks ... gave me a very cordial reception ... sent me a hundred men laden with food and drink. ... The hilly district of Baroda [Boreda] afforded us a superb view of the beautiful lake Abai. The land of Gamo appeared to me a veritable fairy-land; the country was magnificent and the views of lake and mountain grand ... still traveling through the beautiful district of Gamo with its hills and red soil, its clay and rocks, flints and iron, its forests, hamlets, and cultivation and where ever we went abundant supplies (Welby 1901, 151, 153, 166–167, visited in 1887).

I called upon this chief to pay my respects and was very well received. ... The districts of Kambata, Walamo [Kucha, the term Walamo is now derogatory], and Baroda [Boreda] are extraordinarily fertile and productive, but enormous areas are left uncultivated on account of the exactions of the Abyssinians. A tax of one-tenth is levied on all produce, and this inevitably tends to prevent the people from growing more than is essential for themselves. With a just and stable administration, the total production of this part of Abyssinia could be increased many times over. (Hodson 1927, 28–31, visited in 1915)

We arrive without difficulty at Borodda [Boreda], the great katama [town] of fitaorari [Leader] Amde Mikael, completely lost in a canopy of musa ensete. The country is less cultivated than Gamu [Gamo]. We rediscover the red earth of Harar. ... The rainy season is over here. The seeds have germinated. While in Gamu [Gamo] the peasants were still ploughing, the barley is already growing, the sorghum is high enough to ripen in a month. (Azaïs and Chambard 1931, 269, visited October 5, 1926)

In the long ascent of more than 3000 feet to Borodda [Boreda], the track soon led once more on to red soil ... where several tracks meet was shaded by several very lofty wild figs ... newly-ploughed land, green crops and ensete plantations, surrounding Borodda. This rather untidy straggling katama (town) is the centre of Borodda [Boreda] district.

(Scott 1952, 137, visited 1948)

Northern Ethiopian and European narratives initially denigrated Gamo–Boreda religions and political-economic systems. However, after incorporation into the state, Boreda kings became cordial and generous owners of fertile land rich with enset. Most historiographies recount that Boreda and other Gamo either quickly submitted, made a pact, or were defeated rapidly by Menelik II (Abélès 1977, 1981, 40–42; Bureau 1978; Freeman 2002, 31; Olmstead 1997, 29).

Boreda Wogay Shoshshada Pottees

Boreda counternarratives to the national Ethiopian history enrich our understanding concerning how their relationships with material culture and ancestral historic sites conjure memories of the vital bond between change and reproduction in their heritage ontology. Knowing that I was studying Boreda history, an elderly diviner told me, *wogay shoshshada pottees*, meaning “history is constantly changing like a snake” (K. W. Arthur 2018, 2020). Her phrase resonated with a familiar Boreda proverb elders told to youth, encouraging them to model the life of a snake by progressively shedding their skin and transforming to maintain fertility and well-being. As a novice to Boreda culture, Kathy also was encouraged to change like a snake, and over 20 years, she learned, bit by bit, to become a cultural apprentice by shedding her skin (K. W. Arthur 2018, 2019, 2020). A cultural apprentice listens and learns with epistemic humility and recognizes that community members are the experts and authorities of their own culture, are receptive to adapting a praxis of learning set by community teachers, and shed their culture-bound way of perceiving the world.² Our primary lesson, succinctly stated by an elder, was “Everything we do, it has stages and processes connected to our heritage, *yella*, *dume*, *katsara*, *bullacha*, and *sofe*. We hold it in our minds” (male Boreda Elder interview June 13, 2022). We learned how *Etta Woga* (Fig Tree Culture), a Boreda ontology, organizes all existence into reproductive processes, including every being’s daily, weekly, yearly, and life stages (K. W. Arthur 2018, 63–92). A rite of passage marks each transformation in the life of humans and all other beings. Every ritual had a nine-month ceremonial cycle that was punctuated by a rite of birth (*yella*), growth in seclusion (*dume*), circumcision (*katsara*), marriage (*bullacha*), and incorporation as an ancestor (*sofe*). Abandoning the proper reproductive way for people to interact with each other and with nonhuman beings results in the absence of change and transformation, ultimately leading to a state of being *t’unna*, or infertile, emptiness, and nothingness.

In this section, we present a narrative familiar to many elite Boreda that demonstrates how their heritage ontology structured their oral traditions and technologies, creating resilience to intrusive settlers. Boreda elites, *Mala*, declare they are direct descendants of northern Ethiopian colonists. *Mala* asserted they birthed (*yella*) the first settlements (Bayira Deriya) dating to the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries (K. W. Arthur, Stretton, and Curtis 2020; K. W. Arthur et al. 2017) and escaped famine through planting the senior crop enset on these fertile grounds. Nurturing their power and fertility, *Mala* offered enset to ancestors in seclusion (*dume*) at sacred forests, *dubushas*. They sanctioned the removal (*katsara*) of non-elite artisans (*Hilencha*) from fertile agricultural land and enset cultivation. Though many *Hilencha* contest *Mala* narratives, as an oppressed group, they do not share an oral tradition and focus instead on lineage histories (see K. W. Arthur et al. 2017). *Mala* men and women worked together (*bullacha*) properly (re)producing enset, the life-sustaining food, and attributed drought and food shortages to incorporation (*sofe*) of settler religions.

Yella: Elite Birth at Bayira Deriya

Boreda elders frequently describe nine historic mountaintop settlements, Bayira Deriya, as their fertile wombs. Under the boughs of the Bayira Deriya sacred forests, archaeological testing revealed a complex system of households, cemeteries, altars, defensive walls, berms, trenches, and gates dating from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries (K. W. Arthur, Stretton, and Curtis 2020; K. W. Arthur et al. 2017). These Bayira Deriya are prominent reminders of the birth of their first people, their oldest technologies, and the connection between fertility and change:

People came here [to the mountaintop] because it is like a womb—a life-saving place. It helped everyone. At the end of May, during the Bonfire festival, every house was full of grain and fresh food. We had a yearly fertility celebration with new foods. We came to the sacred meeting place to thank the land and provided on an enset leaf some barley porridge with butter for the Fig Tree.

(*Mala*, interview June 3, 2022)

The ascription of the qualifier “Bayira” to the noun “Dere” reinforces the concept that the landscape (*Dere*) is constantly changing and, thus, a living, fertile being (K. W. Arthur 2018). Gamo apply the term *Bayira* to various states of being with the connotations of being first or oldest (age), ancestral (stage of life cycle), elite and senior (status), or pure and fertile (value) (Sperber 1975). *Bayira Deriya* are fertile lands where *Mala* assert their status as *elite senior* farmers because of their descent from the *first* settlers who created the *oldest* mountaintop settlements. To learn the histories of *Bayira Deriya*, Boreda elders encouraged us to interview Giya for his deep memories about Ochollo Mullato, the oldest of nine *Bayira Deriya* (K. W. Arthur et al. 2017). Giya shared the following narrative of Boreda settlement in the Boroje tradition and then directed us to another elder, Kuta Kunta, who we also interviewed:

In previous times, the moon lived on the land. It came to Gergeda [Sidama and Oromiyaa] and caused people to have a problem; there was a shortage of water and grass. Some of those people moved here. ... Eight people came with him [Boroje] from Gergeda, and they crossed Lake Abaya. They crossed the lake, which was very small, like a river, because there was no rain. There was a big forest there. They hunted not only lions there but also several kinds of animals, for example, zebra, elephant, hyena, etc. For the first time, those nine people came to live in Shasha Shonte. They then came to the highland place of Ochollo Mullato. This is very old history, so it is before Ahmad Gran [1530s, Somali military and political leader who conquered parts of Ethiopia], before Emperor Menelik II [r. 1889–1913], and before Emperor Tewodros [r. 1855–1868], it is so long ago. (Giya Fankasha interview, May 29, 2006; K. W. Arthur, Stretton, and Curtis 2020, 149)

Boroje came from Mande Gergeda [Sidama and Oromiyaa], and he was the first settler at Ochollo Mullato. He came with eight other clans, including the Amhara, Gondo [Oromiyaa], and Woreta [Sidama].... Boreda people said we need our own King. Then they decided Boroje should be King of Boreda. Boroje said I am not the King of Boreda ... I have an elder brother ... lives in Kucha ... Garela ... became the first King. After Garela was King there was Wa’a, Uruga, Kela, Bala, Anna, Sana, Gola, Meggaro, Anjulla, Ayla, Taddassa, and Zinabe (Kuta Kunta interview, July 8, 2011; K. W. Arthur 2018, 43; K. W. Arthur, Stretton, and Curtis 2020, 156).

Almost every Boreda Elder knew these oral traditions and the list of their thirteen former kings. At the annual Bonfire festival, Xoomppe, on June 19, the Boreda king told the Boroje tradition at *Bayira Dere Ochollo Mullato*, reminding citizens of the power of the elite and the proper path, or *Etta Woga*. Boroje followed the correct ritual path and was rewarded with well-being, fertility, and wealth (i.e., kingship). He left (*yella*–birth) his homeland because of a prolonged drought caused by the refusal of his elders to offer sacrifices for their ancestors. Boroje then left, and he lived in a forested area for a long time (*dume*–growth seclusion). Finally, he moved to the summit of Ochollo Mullato, where he lit the first fire, signaling others to join him (*bullacha*–marriage). Finally, the new settlement included other men and their families (*sofe*–incorporation). Many Boreda consider that all matter in the world, emblematic in the Boroje narrative, could achieve peace, fertility, and well-being if they accepted change and transformed through the proper reproductive path set forth by *Etta Woga*.

Boreda oral traditions also recount that Boroje, an immigrant and founding settler, brought with him eight other men, whose clan names also conjure monikers from external polities, including Amhara, Oromo, and Sidama (K. W. Arthur et al. 2017). Drought and famine precipitated northern (Amhara), western (Kucha and Kafa), and eastern (Oromo, Sidama) polities toward Boreda *Bayira Deriya*, bountiful with desired crops and labor (K. W. Arthur et al. 2017). Subsequently, in 1897, the Abyssinian state subjugated Boreda.

The name of the oldest Boreda settlement, Ochollo Mullato, translates to “the place where people were saved in war.” Berms, trenches, and walls surround the settlement in defensive locations, suggesting that Boreda fiercely defended their autonomy against neighboring polities (K. W. Arthur, Curtis, and Stretton 2020). Boreda *Mala* (elite farmers) conflate their histories associated with Sidama, Oromo, Kucha, and Amhara incursions. In doing so, they created a story that legitimizes *Mala* entitlement to power in the form of kingship (*Ko’a*),

providing a list of ancestral kings who lived at Bayira Deriya and owned the most fertile lands. Thus, a foundational element of Boreda identity, visible in their settlement history, is their relationship with enset and its bounty.

In proverbs concerning Boreda kings and conflicts, enset has a prominent role:

King Sana Gulo of Boreda is a Fat Ox
Enset is Xaallehehay
King Kayo son of Kamba Ochollo is rich in food

(Manary Abata interview, June 28, 2012)

I am the tall son of Ana Sana of Boreda
Outside I spend the night with enset
I am the tall proud owner of all above
King Sana of Boreda
I am the fighter of Menelik
Seven years I fight with honeybee
I am the son of Tana Tona

(Doha Dola interview, July 3, 2012)

Enset is *Xaallehe*, spirits, or the essence of life in all beings. Enset is more than food; it is a state of being. The demise of physical existence cannot destroy the essence of being as it is resilient and persistent—ever-changing. In the proverbs above, the son of King Sana of Boreda was King Gola (eighth King of Boreda), and Tona of Wolyata (neighbors to the north) fought Menelik II, the honeybee. Bees symbolize state hierarchical structure, and the opening line for a national song encourages farmers to be loyal working bees (Segers et al. 2009). The same Menelik, whose polity was persuaded by famine to conquer Boreda in 1897, referred to enset as “My Gold.” Boreda guarded and protected their most valuable crop and the source of prosperity for Boreda kings at Bayira Deriya—enset—a crop they also offered to their ancestors to maintain their elite status at the sacred forests, *dubusha*, on their ancestral landscapes, Bayira Deriya.

Dume: Knowledge and Power Enclosed in Bayira Deriya

Enset is not just food; it is a critical element in rituals associated with each life cycle stage from birth to transformation into an ancestor at Bayira Deriya. Offerings to ensure continued fertility are placed on enset to feed the ancestors through one of the wombs of the earth—the female fig tree hollows. Fig tree stands are the most sacred forests at Bayira Deriya, referred to as the “gray hairs of the elders” (K. W. Arthur 2018). The fig trees, *Ficus sur*, were also male—erect trees with roots penetrating the earth animated by the essences of deceased elite *Mala* men and women, whose heads they were planted over. Today, there are few remaining forests in Boreda other than those associated with Bayira Deriya.

Elite Boreda farmer narratives emphasize that when their immigrant ancestors arrived at Bayira Deriya, they established their homes by clearing the densely forested land:

Bayira is where everything is fertile, people, animals, and crops ... in previous times in Awesto, Kodo Moko, Mullato, all Boreda was forested, and people came from Gergeda settled in these areas. ... There was a big forest and the people who cut the trees were the first settlers. (*Mala* interview, May 28, 2006)

The first people they had a great fire and got water from the springs, and collected food from the forest.

(Mala interview, July 6, 2006)

Ox Ox

Like my brother, we use you to get food

Without your help, there is no food

Olive tree and Fig tree

There are many big ripe fruits like Koyiro girls

(Mala song, 2006)

Early settler farmers removed trees and began growing enset, though they left stands of fruit-bearing trees such as endemic olives and figs. Beneath these groves, there is archaeological evidence of stone and earthen fortifications, which Boreda built to defend themselves against neighboring polities such as Gergeda (Oromo, Sidama, Kucha) and incursions from the Christian north (K. W. Arthur, Stretton, and Curtis 2020).

Fig tree forests, *dubushas*, laden with defensive architecture, became havens, where elite Boreda propitiated ancestors with enset to elicit health and fertility. Over time, the defensive walls and sentry posts became altars, open battlefield grounds enlisted funerary crying ceremonies, and berms and trenches enveloped the deceased. Red barley porridge placed on enset leaves was left on ancient defensive walls and in the hollows of fig trees. On graves, they set enset leaves with lamb and said, “Old soul, take this,” then the souls left their bodies to become ancestors. Enset was an essential element representing fertility at every Bayira Dere *dubusha* ritual commemorating status changes for elite Boreda.

People who transformed through the entire proper path *yella*, *dume*, *katsara*, *bullacha*, and *sofe* and participated in rituals at the sacred forests with the correct elements (enset) were considered *Mala*—farmer elite full citizens. On the dark green enset leaves, women gave birth (*yella*), men and women were circumcised (*katsara*), marriages were consummated (*bullacha*), and the elderly sat to be warmed by the fire (*sofe*). Fig sacred forests high on Boreda mountaintops are a physical reminder of the authentication of power of elite *Mala* farmers and their right to control fertile agricultural land and Bayira Deriya.

***Katsara*: Excising Artisans from Bayira Deriya**

Essential to enset production and consumption were iron tools made by Boreda artisans. Iron production required the knowledge and skills of ironsmiths, potters, and leatherworkers. Leatherworkers produced cattle horn tuyeres and leather bellows that forced the air in and out of the ceramic furnace made by potters to heat and transform iron ore. Yet artisans were perceived to transgress the tenets of Boreda ontology and were ascribed a low status in society:

Leatherworkers and potter/ironsmiths ... cannot sit on the north side of the *dubusha* [sacred meeting place] ... cannot go in the *Kasha* [sacred forest]. (Mala interview, July 5, 2007)

We had no right to food, and the *Mala* took all the good food. We lived closely together and had no land. We could only walk on the lower [non-agricultural] land and sit in the lower part of the household.

(*hilencha* interview, June 28, 2008)

Boreda ontology prescribed a distinction between pure elite *Mala* and marginalized non-elite artisans (*Hilencha*) that prohibited artisans from access to rich agricultural land and foods. *Mala* endowed themselves with the power to excise (*katsara*) craft-specialist from Bayira Deriya. Rites of passage were a mechanism of social reproduction that affirmed Boreda ascribed occupational statuses and the transfer of technological knowledge (K. W. Arthur 2018, 2019). *Mala* levied a grave insult on male artisans, associating them with giving

“birth to stones.” By birthing clay, stone, or iron ore from the female earth, male artisans transgressed women’s reproductive roles, according to *Etta Woga*. *Mala* perceived that an artisan performed their first transgression in life during the *dume* (seclusion) phase of their puberty rites of passage. Conventionally, *dume* was the stage during which Elders educated youth concerning their future trade, such as proper quarrying. *Mala* forbade artisans from entering Bayira Deriya and severed (*katsara*) artisans from participation in final rites of passage (*sofe*) that conferred full adult status. Artisans—*Hilencha*, previously *!tsoma*—were considered to live without seniority and prestige, and *Mala* often referred to them as *t’unna*, infertile and impure. While artisan low status was conferred at birth, rites of passage practices ensured they would never be socially recognized as mature adults. Artisans were perceived as refusing to change, and consequently, they were restricted access to fertile land and rich foods.

In *Mala* oral traditions, artisans also transgressed by collaborating with northern settlers, sharing Boreda technologies needed for crop production, and adopting Christianity. *Mala* assigned a low status to craft-specialists as resistance to the state and Christianity and as a means to consolidate power:

Yes, I told them last time about leatherworkers and potters-smiths. In ancient times they were of the King’s family. So, in earlier times when the spirits lived in the world, the leatherworker and potter-smith took his son ... they put him in a small iron box and they threw him in the water. [When the spirits learned this, they] said to them, in this world, you have no authority, and year after year, you will live under the others. So, in this case, craft-specialists and farmers do not eat together, they do not live together, and they do not marry together

(Giya Fanikasha interview, May 26 and 29, 2006; K. W. Arthur 2018, 44; K. W. Arthur et al. 2017, 10).

According to Boreda tradition, the Spirit punished the craft-specialists by rescinding their power as kings and insisting that they not marry, eat, or live with farmers. Artisans had enclosed the Great Spirit’s son in an iron box. Several Elders stated that Christian settlers brought burial boxes held together with iron nails. For many Boreda, an iron casket was a physical barrier to an individual’s ability to become part of the ancestral milieu. Craft-specialists misused their technological knowledge by providing their technologies, such as ironworks, for tribute to settlers. *Hilencha* breached *Etta Woga*’s prescribed process for iron transformation to create farming instruments to ensure food security. Consequently, craft-specialists lost their dignity, *bayira*, and became impure and stigmatized:

The artisans did not sit next to us; they did not share our food. They had to remove the waste products from our house. They could not sit on the upper side of the house in sacred places. They could not enter the sacred forest. They sat on the edges for weddings, mourning, and ritual induction ceremonies. We did not marry. We still do not marry. *Mala* are *bayira* and keep rules, keep our dignity.

(*Mala* interview, 2007; K. W. Arthur 2018, 46)

Reaffirming their impure status, *Mala* forbid craft-specialists from entering Bayira Deriya *dubushas*, sacred forests. *Mala* frequently perceived themselves as followers of the correct path defined in *Etta Woga*, blessed with the opportunity to become political leaders and ancestral spirits. Farmers’ exclusion of artisans from fertile agricultural land surrounding Bayira Deriya reinforced *Mala* access to wealth and food production.

Bullacha: Mala Properly Coming Together at Bayira Deriya

Conscripting the most fertile soil, *Mala* men and women worked together (*bullacha*) in agricultural production, respecting *Etta Woga*, which saved them from drought:

In the time of Ko'a Anna ... old women from the village had a meeting “We are leaving”, because they said there is no rain, and we can't stay for long here ... these elder men are not taking responsibility and because of this our village has drought. If they sacrifice for the spirit Xaallehe, it will be okay. ... The village elders (men) discussed this issue and then they agreed ... they did it in their cultural way.

(artisan interview, June 2, 2007)

The tradition recalls a period before Menelik II, when *Ko'a* (King) Anna, the sixth king of Boreda, ruled. The rains failed for three long years because men failed to honor the spirits properly. Sanctioned by *Etta Woga*, women were culturally prescribed to confront men and re-establish the correct path to rain and food (re)production.

Ontologically, farmer men and women engage in correct practice in their interactions with the earth; thus, *Mala* are entitled to the best fertile land.

Mala men must plant seeds, the earth is female ... and female on female is forbidden, it would not work. The earth is a woman. The earth is like a woman, she gives birth and is considered female. The rain is male because he penetrates the earth.

(*Mala* interview, June 13, 2007)

Agriculture is a reproductive process in which men penetrate the earth with hoes and plows. They create terraces, drainage ditches, and fields in the female earth's nutrient-rich red nitisol and luvisols irrigated by biannual male rainfall (Coltorti et al. 2019).³ Women have patience and care for crops by removing impure weeds and pests and then birth crops with hoes and sickles.

A man primarily sows his fields with crops that are descendants of those grown in his father's fields. Seeds are the ancestors' gift and are stored in *moyeletti ayffe otto* (ancestor's seed jar). Root crops are propagated through cuttings from lineage plants. *Mala* perceive the most valuable and oldest *bayira* crops are their patrimony.

The oldest (*bayira*) crops are sorghum, barley, and wheat, but enset and qoltso are older. (*Mala* interview, June 28, 2012)

In Boreda to learn the process of [making] enset is difficult; it needs clarification. Enset has a life cycle. It bleeds when it is cut like [during] *katsara*. Then we bury it in the ground like a fetus; it is in *dume*. When I mix it with others [ingredients] for a meal, this is *bullacha*, and when we sell it at the market or eat it, this is *sofe*.

(*Mala* interview, June 27, 2012)

Bayira crops enset (Olmstead 1974) and qoltso (Utallo, Shano, and Degaga 2021; wild edible tuber *Arisaema schimperianum* Schott) are “famine-preventing” and associated with life cycle processes: planting (*yella*), growing in the earth (*dume*), circumcision or cutting/pruning (*katsara*), coming together or processing (*bullacha*), and reincorporation or consumption (*sofe*). Like humans who continue to transform into different stages in life through a ritual rebirth, so too do *bayira* crops such as enset. Women birth (*yella*) enset corms from the earth. Men cut (*katsara*) the central waste (apical meristem) and divide the remaining corm to prevent germination and enhance sucker production: *hatsa* (1 year—water), *baha* (1 year), and *garuda* (1 year). Men insert pieces of the split *hatsa* corm closest to the western reproductive—hearth side of the house, and with each subsequent transplanting, it is placed farther from the home. The fetus corm (*gatchino*) grows in the seclusion (*dume*) of the earth's womb. Women put manure as nutrients to encourage enset growth. After the *garuda* planting, the enset is allowed to grow for six years to become an adult and flower.

The processing of adult enset into food also incurs life cycle processes. Women and young girls remove (*yella*) the leaves and the edible corm, and men cut (*katsara*, umbilical cord) the enset stem. Next, women set the newborn enset stem and the corm on a bamboo board and grate (*katsara*, circumcission) with bamboo scrapers. They then combine the stem and root scrapings, wrap it in an enset leaf, and bury it in the ground (*dume*) to ferment, gestating into an edible product.

Women own vast processing and cooking knowledge that allows them to bring together (*bullacha*) enset with various spices, legumes, vegetables, and grains. They create nutritious and delicious porridges, breads, roasted foods, and boiled enset recipes. Recipes include ancient crops and incorporate government-introduced crops, such as potatoes, triticale wheat, and maize (Utallo 2013). Elders indicated that agriculture was expanded into the lowlands during state incorporation to produce tribute crops such as sugarcane, maize, and teff, which are not associated with a life cycle process.

The consumption of foods for daily and ritual propitiation of ancestors was considered the loss of the food's bodily form and the beginning of its incorporation into another life status (*sofe*). Likely for hundreds of years, Boreda staved off famine through devotion to *Etta Woga*, a way of perceiving the world that structured their agricultural (re)production—technological processes reaffirmed through daily practices yet invisible to non-believers.

Sofo: Incorporating Settlers at Bayira Deriya

Strangers have to live under our culture.

(Boreda Elder, June 3, 2022)

From 1897 to 1936, Boreda incorporated (*sofe*) into their lives Menelik II's soldiers and Orthodox priests while simultaneously averting drought (recorded in 1905, 1911–1918, 1926–1931) (Rubenson 1991; Tibebu 2018). Settler soldiers established a new town at Gibe adjacent to the oldest Bayira Dere, Ochollo Mullato. Boreda *ko'ati* (kings) lived in the valley between Gibe and Ochollo Mullato. Boreda oral traditions recount a history of conflict over state incorporation between the eighth Boreda Ko'a Gola's sons. Meggaro advocated a transactional agreement with state forces and lived at Ochollo Mullato, ruling the lower (northern) Boreda region. Sagara, who resided at Delama, Dembe Chileshe, ruled the upper (southern) Boreda region and encouraged fighting the state. Eventually, Boreda Ko'a Meggaro ruled indirectly as *balabbat* for the state and was granted the power to force tribute and labor.

In Menelik's time, people paid tax in the form of food grains in every place, to the leadership of Amhara who appointed tax collectors. People paid one-tenth of their cereal product as tax. We had to carry grinding stones and grind cereals for the Amhara to avoid being imprisoned. (*Mala* interview, May 31, 2012)

In Ko'a Anjulla [Meggaro's son] time, he oppressed people; if someone did not pay the tribute, he would slaughter your animals. (*Mala* interview, June 3, 2022)

Bazo Ko'a [during Ko'a Angulla time] ... he made sacrifices for the ancestors, for the rain, for soil. He would go to the lowland to Lake Abaya and bring water with him. He sacrificed a goat and the snakes came and ate this and the water from the lake. Then there would be rain.

(*Mala* interview, May 31, 2012)***

By many Boreda accountings, oppression continued through the reign of King Anjulla, the grandson of King Gola, who, according to Boreda proverbs, fought Menelik II. Boreda continued their *Etta Woga* rituals, as *Bazo ko'ati* (lowland kings) propitiated snake spirits to prevent drought. Deceased kings were not gone forever; their

souls, spirits, or essences transformed into snakes and were called upon to cooperate and prevent drought. Elders also engaged snake imagery to explain the abandonment of Bayira Deriya.

Today it [Garu Bayira Dere] is abandoned, some moved away, as many people became sick. A bad snake lived up there, it bit them, and they died so people left. People forgot to sacrifice for *Xaallehehe* for their health and for the rain.

(*Mala* interview, May 30, 2008)

After leaving Bayira Deriya, many elite *Mala* Elders continued well into the twenty-first century to practice *Etta Woga* and attend church, exemplified by the expression “*Etta Woga* is my culture. Christianity is my religion.” Most craft-specialists and *Mala* born just before or during the Derg militant Marxist–Leninist regime (1974–1991) began to practice some form of Christianity or Islam (K. W. Arthur 2013). For most artisans, the Derg was “good, provided land and made them equal with others,” contrasting with most *Mala* experiences.

The Derg tried to teach us that all are equal ... we [*Mala*] disagreed. ... Derg said you must drop your practice of sacrifice ... and work for the government. They would give punishment for breaking rules—like going to jail or beatings.

(*Mala* interview, 2008)

Derg “teachers” settled in Boreda, established followers, forced abandonment of *Etta Woga* ritual practices and regalia at Bayira Deriya, and introduced new foods. Derg Christian settlers insisted the Boreda annual Bonfire festival, *Xoomppe*, merge with the northern celebration in September, marking the discovery of the True Cross on which Christ was sacrificed, *Mäsqäl*. The practice of *Mäsqäl* may have been known in Boreda as early as the fifteenth century when Ethiopian King Zär’a Ya’qob ordered monks to promote the practice (Kaplan 2014). The Bonfire Ceremony, *Xoomppe*, previously occurred on June 19, signifying the beginning of the primary agricultural season. Formerly, the *Ko’a* had blessed (sterilized) farm tools by placing them on the bonfire during *Xoomppe*. The Derg eliminated local ritual practices, redistributed land, and forced the use of industrialized fertilizer.

Since the time of Haile Selassie, we have had difficulty with our enset; it has insect and worm disease. The government forces us to buy their fertilizer, but we prefer cow fertilizer.

(*Mala* interview, July 12, 2011)

Today, introduced crop varieties and fertilizers and restrictions on ritual practices have been detrimental to Boreda cultivation practices. The most common pests for enset are bacterial wilt, which is prevented by tool disinfection (Borrell et al. 2019), as practiced historically at the Bonfire festival. Mealy bug and nematode infestations of enset roots are best controlled by inspecting and removing infected young plants and maintaining soil nutrients with manure rather than introducing chemical fertilizers (Addis et al. 2010; Borrell et al. 2019; Kidane et al. 2021). Mealy bug infestations are found on enset at higher rates near eucalyptus, which Haile Selassie’s regime brought to the south.

At the forefront of the minds of many Boreda Elders is the harm that ensued because of their negligence to properly honor the spirits at Bayira Deriya and abandonment of *Etta Woga* agricultural practices. They attribute the decline of devotees to *Etta Woga* to the presence of evangelical churches. The Mekane Yesus Church, established in Boreda in the 1970s, and Kale Heywet Church in 1997 have increasingly gained followers in Boreda (Bulaka 2015).

These days, we are divided; we are Muslim, Protestant, and Orthodox. We no longer sacrifice for the ancestors and for *Xaallehe* near big trees, for the rain, for the wellness of us all. We are divided, and

this is why we have famine and drought. (*Mala* interview, May 5, 2008)

The ficus tree had its traditions. The spirits will be back when there are four signs: people cry because of drought and death, snakes leave their skins forever, and frogs and insects hide. In the past, we could hear them clearly. Now they are gone, the streams are dry, and the birds are crying. The hills have become flat.

(*Mala* interview, June 17, 2011)

After centuries of incursions and settlement from “strangers,” Boreda insist that religious conversion is responsible for the erosion of *Etta Woga* practices. Particularly harmed were their agricultural practices that thwarted food insecurity. Askalay’s description above of natural disasters such as droughts, loss of biological diversity, and mountain erosions draws us back to the proverb *Sorsha Mela Pota*, constantly changing like a snake. If snakes leave their skins forever and fail to change, everything will become stagnant, and disorder and chaos will ensue! Only through proper actions—reproduction can new life and order be reinstated from disorder.

Becoming Ash?

Bayira Deriya, Boreda ancestral landscapes, provide archaeological evidence of large historic garrisoned settlements dating from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries and surrounded by sacred forest. These fig tree forests are where many Boreda practiced their Indigenous religion and farmed *enset*, engaging technological processes informed by their ontology. While they were forced to abandon their religious practices during periods of state incorporation and socialism, as many Elders told me, “they could stop our practice, but not erase what we held in our mind.” However, in 2022, when we returned to one Boreda Bayira Dere, the landscape was struggling, the ground was bare, nearby there were no more than a few houses with *enset*, and a cell tower projected from land once sacred. Only two elders we knew survived the previous five years. We interviewed them at their last intact sacred forest, *dubusha*. Nearby, others set up a white tent; they were loud and successfully disrupted our conversation—they were Pentecostals. The Elders were disturbed.

Protestants behind us are poisonous for this place; they are the enemy. We came here to pray for the landscape; the *dubusha* listens and heals. The proper system for growing crops is changing. It makes me sad and pains me. The land is turning to ash.

(*Mala* interview, June 3, 2022)

There had been much change. From 2012 to 2018, the head of state was a member of the Pentecostal Apostolic Church, increasing membership throughout the country (Haustein 2013). As among other Gamo districts, the increased presence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) proselytizing a cash crop economy combined with growth in Pentecostalism focusing people on the future, individualism, and the market led to the erosion of *Woga* practices (Freeman 2013). In 2017, an armyworm infestation destroyed Boreda maize, a crop that NGOs had encouraged their dependency on as a cash crop. A few years later, the COVID-19 pandemic and severe droughts lifted the level of food insecurity to “stressed,” particularly for those with limited land and poor crop diversity (Cholo et al. 2019).

We have four different religions [Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, Pentecostals] that came that have made problems with our *dubusha* system here; the new religions have caused divisions with our practices; you [Kathy] a long, long time ago you came here, and you saw this area, it was not like this, now everything has turned to ash because we have stopped our practice and ignored the spirit of *Etta* [ficus tree].

Boreda resilience through settler missionization, land conscription, and collecting tribute and taxes manifested in their technological practices, which *Etta Woga* informed. Northern Christian settlers could directly observe the presence of ritual material culture and ritual practices at the Bayira Deriya *dubusha* historic sites and force their abandonment. However, settlers did not understand *Etta Woga* ontology and how it imbued daily agricultural technological processes and practices. Enset production and consumption sustained local labor, and its export was of little interest to settlers, who preferred other crops.

Interpreting Boreda oral histories through understanding their ontology bestows a more profound understanding of their material cultural practices and historic sites, Bayira Deriya. Boreda heritage and ontology challenge dominant narratives about precolonial African “frontier” histories. Their ontology and technological process enabled them to retain an independent identity and develop resilience to incursions and settlement. Boreda exemplifies how many African ontologies inform historical perspectives and daily practice, emphasizing the union of fertility with change. The concept of transformation reverberates throughout the continent in association with the propitiation of ancestors at sacred forests (Karenga 2004, 98–99; Martin 2008; Mather 2003; Ogundiran 2009). Respect for nonhuman beings and their proper transformation encourages people to engage in a moral obligation that restores, heals, and repairs landscapes. *Mala* Boreda authenticated and claimed the best agricultural lands and political power based on their heritage as first settlers at Bayira Deriya, where they conferred their elite titles and commemorated their ancestors. Among many African societies, elites had revelations, which supported their claim of descent from first settlers and often accompanied beliefs in ancestral land spirits occupying sacred forests (Chouin 2008; de Boeck 1994; Gombya-Ssembajjwe 1995; Sheridan 2016). Through time, forests became “multiplex landscapes,” “powerfields,” or “powerscapes,” where contesting interested parties reinforced and legitimized their authority through rituals such as burials, sacrificial offerings, and initiations (Aleru and Adekola 2016; Ambo 2021; K.W. Arthur et al. 2020; Berhane-Selassie 2008; Ogundiran 2016; Pikirayi 2016, 89).

Importantly, ritualized transformation is applied not just to humans but to all beings, highlighting the importance of process and the interdependence of all beings, expressed in many African ontologies (Karenga 2004; Martin 2008). As an example, *Etta Woga* privileged people’s respectful interaction with crops during technological reproduction, which they believed produced more reliable, healthy, and tasty foods. Boreda *bayira* crop enset sustained their populations for generations. Success in agricultural reproduction of the oldest life-sustaining crops required adherence to ritualized practices associated with life cycle processes: birth, growth, harvesting, cooking, and consumption. Cross-cultural life cycles animate African technologies, particularly associated with iron and agriculture (Schmidt 1997). More significantly, however, life cycle technologies illustrate the presence of scientific processes and the integral ability for change in precolonial African societies. Ritual serves as a mnemonic device for structuring the complex knowledge and skills associated with the successful production, allocation, and distribution of resources and products. Precolonial African societies adhered to ontologies that embodied transformation and scientific processes as their foundation; they were material scientists and resilient (K. W. Arthur 2020; Ogundiran and Ige 2015).

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Notes

- 1 The term was eventually abandoned during the Derg regime (1974–1991) when an Omotic word, *Gamo*, meaning "lion," was selected for its association with prestige and seniority.
- 2 The contents of this article were produced through informed consent with Boreda community members. The contents comply with American Anthropological Association ethical standards and are approved by the University of South Florida Internal Review Board for integrity and compliance with informed consent #103527.
- 3 Gamo highlands are located within the intertropical convergence zone which produces biannual rainfall: shorter but heavier rains in March–May (*Belg* season) and longer but lighter rains in October–November.