

On Gurage Architecture

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from

**JOURNAL OF ETHIOPIAN STUDIES**

Vol. VII, No.1

ADDIS ABABA  
ETHIOPIA

JANUARY  
1969

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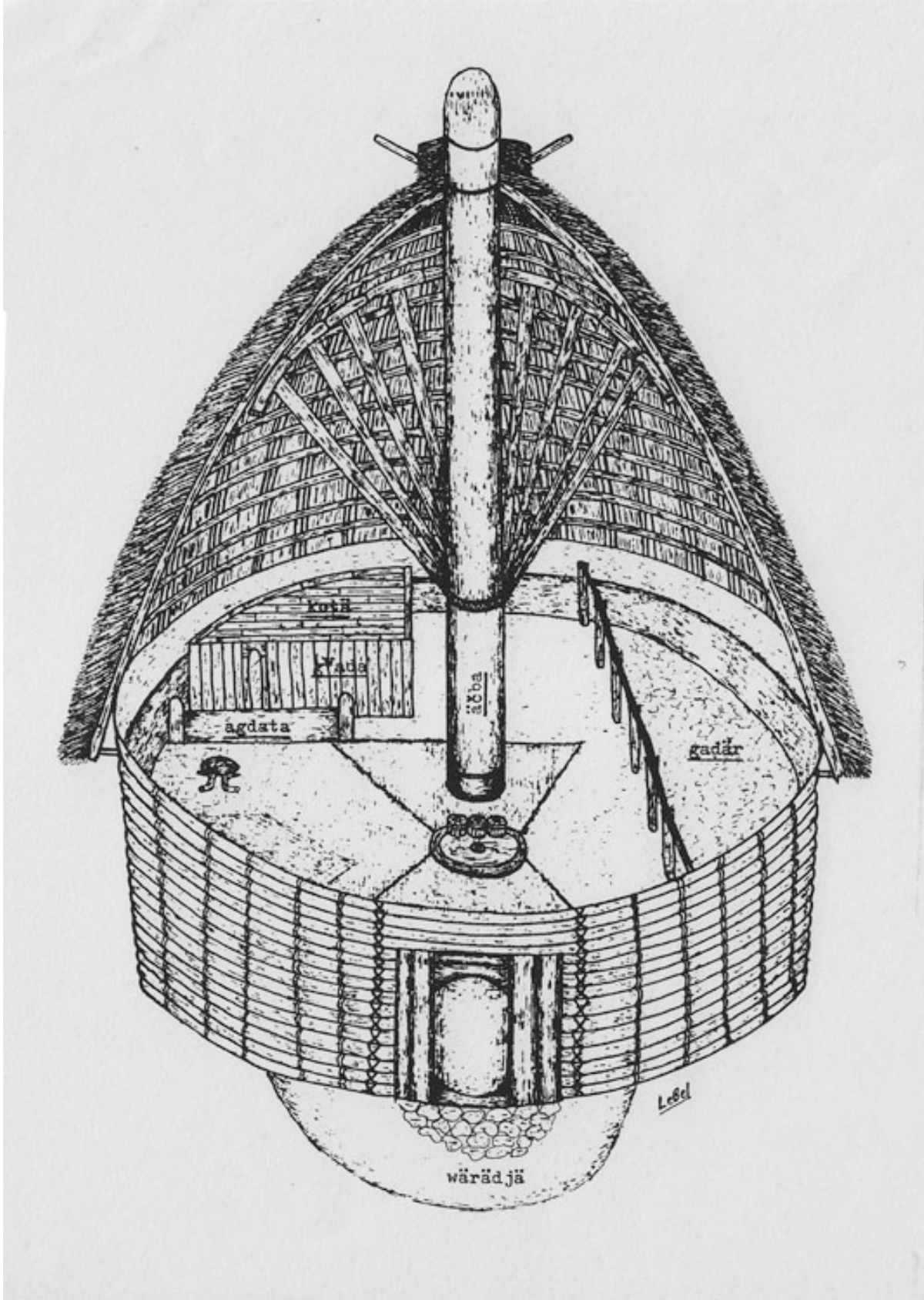
Among the Guragé people of southwestern Shoa, there is a tradition of quality domestic architecture. The Guragé *tuqul*, or *soeur bét* as they prefer to call it, is a landmark of the countryside. So distinguished are these houses that in the national housing exhibition of 1955 in Addis Ababa, the Guragé Exhibition Committee won an award for superior construction<sup>1</sup>. How these people developed such a fine tradition of house construction is somewhat an enigma. But it is certainly one factor that distinguishes them from many areas of the country. The following description of the arrangement and methods of construction should help illustrate this tradition.

Guragé *soeur béts*, as with many houses of enset cultivating peoples of Ethiopia, are found neatly arranged in villages. A Guragé village settlement is known as a *qaya*. Settlements are usually found along a continuous line, the *jāf'ārā*, which is the principle avenue of the area. This avenue is quite wide and uniform throughout its length, and not infrequently has a large *zəgba* tree somewhere in the middle where the elders often sit to discuss matters of common interest. In all villages, each homestead, *yā at sāb bét*, may consist of one, two, or three houses, carefully arranged in the settlement pattern. Surrounding each homestead are rows of *āsāt*, or *Ensete ventricosum*, which is the most important staple of the Guragé diet and necessary in the construction of *soeur béts*. The *āsāt* fields are carefully arranged around the houses and their thick green leaves help prevent the spread of fire. From each house to the *jāf'ārā* are walkways of thick green grass known as the *g'akāta*. Foot paths, *éma*, connect the houses of the *qaya* together. (See Figure 1.) Extra-village travel is carried on the *jāf'ārā*, which outside the village is known as the *wur éma*.

The maximum number of house types per household is three and consists of a very large, a large, and a medium size. They are respectively the *g'eā*, *xārar*, and *zāgār*, and are the loci of different activities in Guragé home life. Diameters of these houses range from four to ten metres, with heights in equal proportion. The *g'eā* is used for keeping the livestock, storage of goods, and an occasional place for holiday celebrations, or in receiving guests. The *xārar* is used most frequently, as the principal house for the family's sleeping quarters (as well as for guests), for eating daily meals, and for common everyday activities. Prime milk-bearing cattle are sometimes kept on one side of the house. To maintain propriety of the *xārar*, food is almost always cooked in the *g'eā*, so as not to create any congestion in the main living quarters. The *zāgār* is used for the preparation of *wūsa* bread (derived from *āsāt*), the brewing of beverages such as *arāqé*, *sāhār*, and *ṭella*, and a periodic gathering place for the village women who meet to collect milk, butter, or other food articles in preparation for a major celebration. Occasionally, when other quarters are lacking, the *zāgār* may serve as quarters for newly-weds until a proper *xārar* is constructed.

Historically there have been certain modifications in the construction of Guragé *soeur béts*. Many years ago, when there were no eucalyptus forests from which to draw construction materials, people built their houses almost entirely from *dāt* (*Juniperus procera*), *zəgba* (*Podocarpus gracilior*), *g'arābā* (*Syzygium guineense*),

1. The Ethiopian Herald.





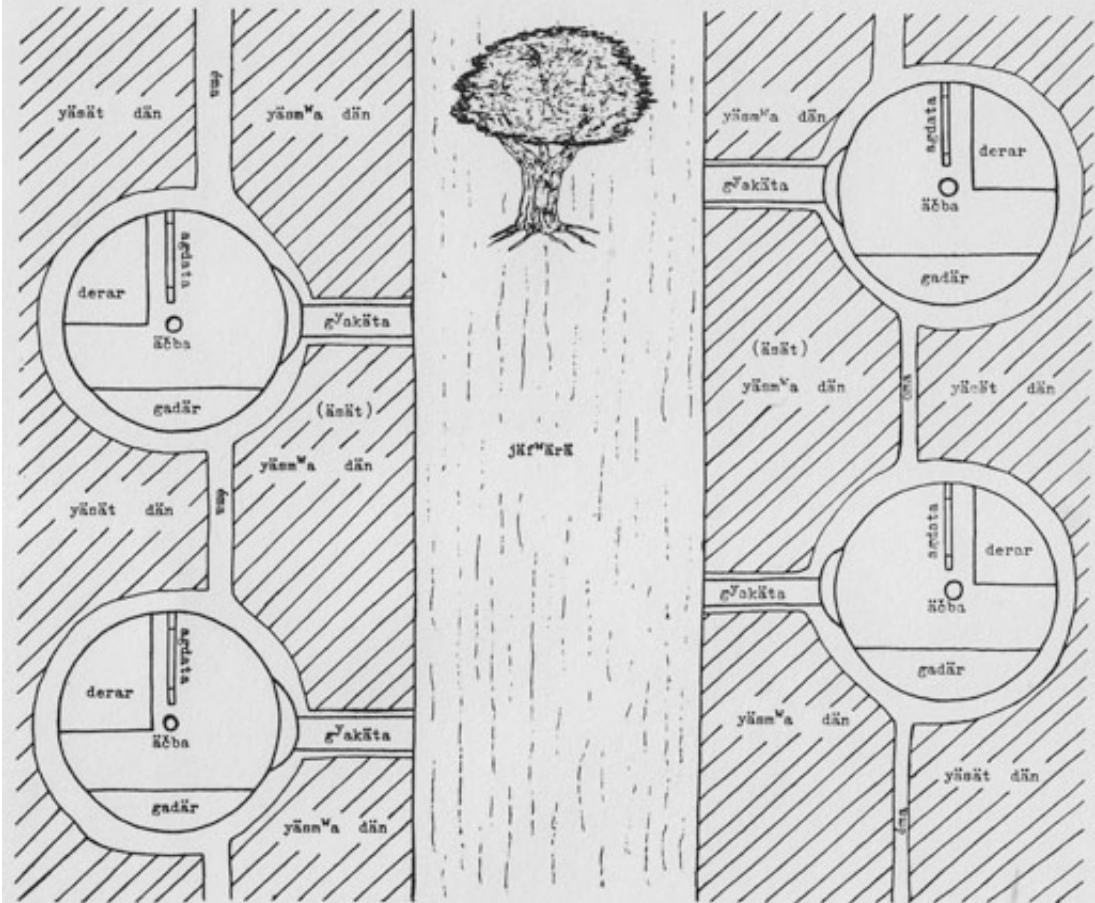


fig. 1

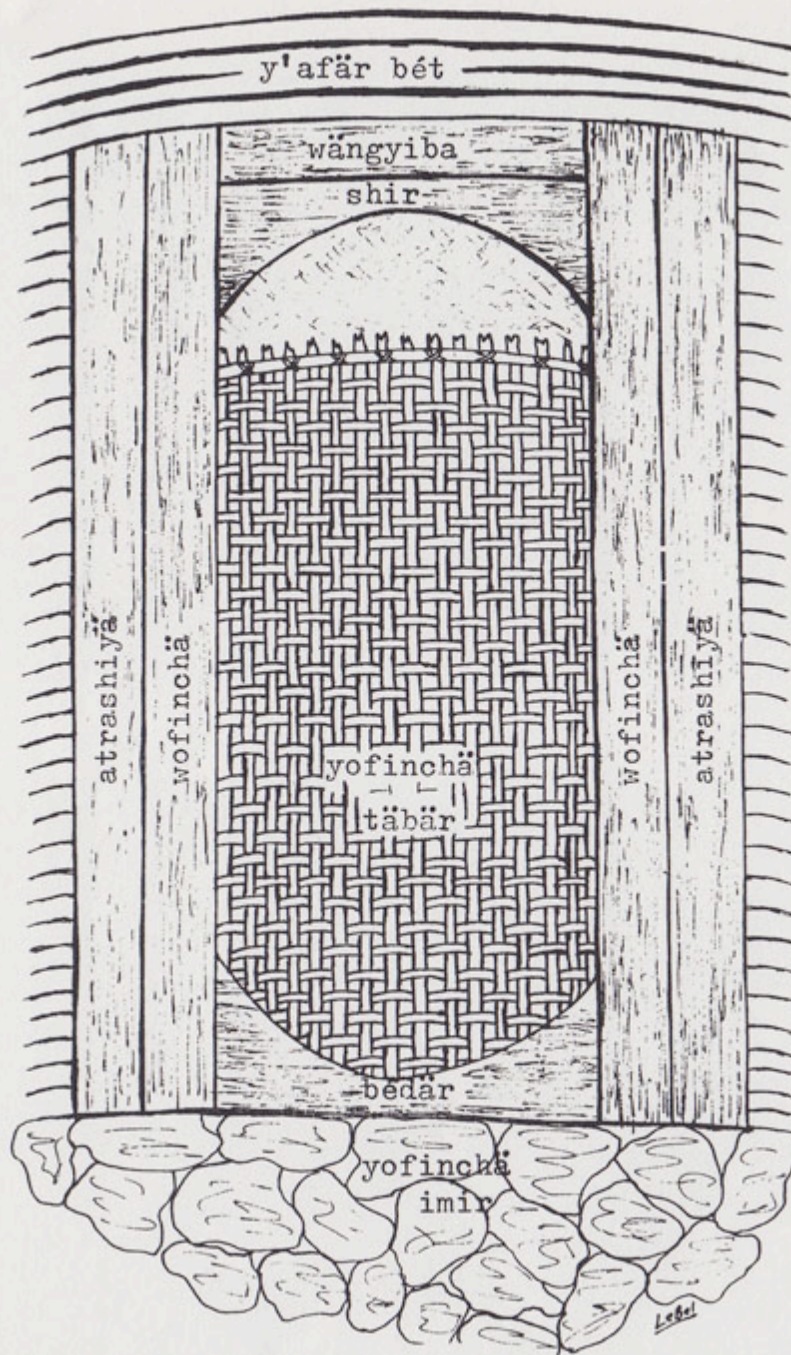


fig. 2

y'oh<sup>v</sup>inā  
bét

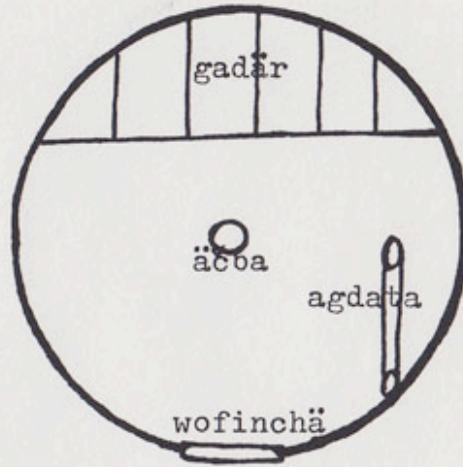


fig. 3

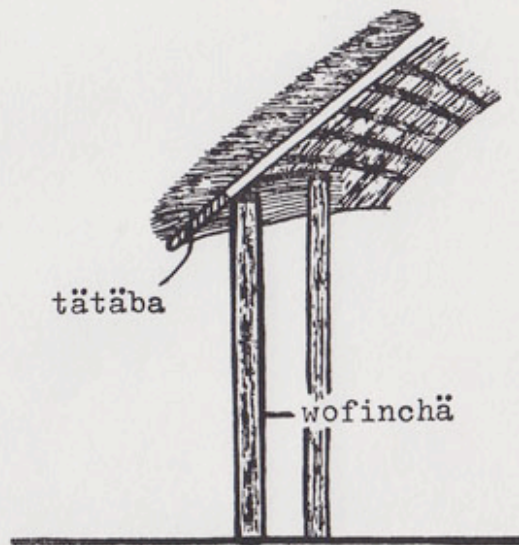


fig. 4



*wānkisā* (Amharic *čočo*), *inét* (*Arundinaria alpina*), *déyā* (palm), *wurbé abta* vines and *wādārā* (*āsāt* dried-leaf rope). One man's settlement became the nucleus of the future *qaya*, as his descendants proliferated the *jāf\*āfā* with houses and *āsāt*. These houses were somewhat large in diameter, but the walls were rather low, the average being around one and one-half metres. The houses had only one door, *wāzgāb*, and the opening was oval-shaped and consisted of two sets of two vertically placed beams, the inner *wofinčā* and outer *atrašiyā*, with fitted crescent-shaped wood at the top, the *shir*, and bottom, the *bédār*. Sometimes, because of heavy use, the *bédār* was made of hewn stone. A reinforcement beam, the *wāng'iba*, was placed just above the *shir* and was inserted in carved slots as were the other pieces. The arrangement of the traditional entrance is shown in Figure 2. Inside the houses were cattle-stalls, the *gadār*, which were partitioned by simple posts, the *naqwoča*, reinforced by a horizontal beam, *yāk\*atāmar*. Originally the *gadār* was placed behind the centre-post opposite the door, as shown in Figure 3. Such houses were known as *y'oh'inā*. Later on, the *naqwoča* were moved to one side as storage needs increased. And, typical of village symmetry, all houses on the same side of the *jāf\*ārā* had the *gadār* on the same side of the house, with an opposite pattern on the other side of the road. A storage area, the *derar*, was located behind the main plank-fitted partition, the *g\*ada*. The plank roof of the *derar*, the *kotā*, kept dust out and served as additional storage space for extra floor mats. In addition, most houses had a large hewn horizontal plank, the *agdata*, which was held in position by two vertically placed posts, the *qaraba*, at each end. The *agdata* was a small partition behind which temporary storage was made. It was the first type of partition to emerge in the evolution of Guragé houses, and when storage needs increased and the *g\*ada* was added, the *agdata* was retained despite its superfluity. In none of these structures were nails used. All assemblings were done with rope or notched fittings. As time passed, the houses became more elaborate in their construction and furnishings.

In today's traditional Guragé house, the interior furnishings are numerous and serve a variety of functions. Between the umbrella sprits that support the roof and the *g\*ada* are several separated beams, *zāg\*irā*, on which is placed freshly-cut wood to dry, the height serving as a convenient storage place as well as providing maximum exposure to rising warm air. In front of the *āčba*, or centre-post, is the circular fireplace, the *mijača*. It is rimmed with cow dung and clay, or, in wealthier men's houses, of stone. The rim is called the *g\*ādārāt*. In the centre of the *mijača* is a small pottery bowl, *tinkiyā*, which prevents coals from dying out completely, especially during the night. Cooking on the *mijača* is facilitated by the use of three clay pot supports, known as *gonziyā*. The floor is disinfected by adding water and cow dung, which gives the appearance of a smooth green matted floor. When smut, *řirim*, from pots is rubbed on the fireplace ring and the base of the *āčbā*, the contrast is quite striking. Woven *āsāt* mats are placed in different parts of the house and are identified by their location. *Yāčābėjipā* is especially designed to fit around three sides of the *āčbā* and conform to the edge of the *mijača*. *Yofinčėjipā* is contoured to the opposite side of the *mijača* and extends over to the door. *Yāqaqetjipā* fills the gap between the other two next to the *mijača* on the right or left side and extends over to the wall. A space, *yārėjifté*, is left barren between the cattle-stall and the *āčbā* because of the frequent movement of cattle in and out of that side of the house and its use as a feeding area for the cows. Cowdung plaster walls are frequently left plain at the bottom and whitewashed from midway to the top with a local lime, *wābarā*.

Three types of seat are to be found in the Guragé household, the *tāqāshā'* the *burčēmā*, and the *q\*anša*. The first is a circular wooden disc. The second is a three-legged stool. Two kinds of *burčēmā* have emerged, the older with free-



standing legs, the more recent with vertical supports from the seat to the leg bases. The *q'anfa* is a two-piece seat that is assembled by placing the peg projection of the back into the hole in the seat.

Pottery adorns the upper part of the walls and is hung in a horizontal line. Meals are served in pottery, either on a two-toned *āsāt* mat, *yāwādārā*, or else on a reed basket, *yāwārāp'ā tābār*, with carved horn spoons, *yāwārāp'ā anqāfo*, for eating and *yārāšāp'ā anqāfo*, for serving. When roasted grains are served or *āsāt wāsa* bread is served, a conically-shaped basket with a bowl top, *sāf*, is used.

To protect the household from night-time thieves and hyenas, a woven reed transportable door, *wāzgāb*, is placed in the doorway. Two vertical posts with holes bored in them, the *mačmā*, are placed on each side of the doorway. Horizontal beams, *umwā*, are inserted in the holes of the *mačmā*, thus locking the door into position for the night. This would not deter an obstinate thief and one could always dig under the door. This practice has disappeared in recent years, however, and no longer constitutes a threat. In the daytime, a shorter reed door, *yofinčā tābār* is placed in the doorway to reduce wind and to discourage stray dogs.

Over the past few decades this picture has gradually changed. Today, most houses have two doors. The second door support, the *arašiyā*, is disappearing and is being replaced by a wider, sturdier *wofinčā*. Furthermore, the transportable door has been replaced by a hinged door, and the *shir* and the *bédār* have been made entirely horizontal to fit the contours of the door. Walls have become taller, to heights of three meters in many houses, which permits greater illumination. Instead of cowdung plaster on the walls, most houses are now built with mud thatch, for greater durability. The two-tone colour pattern has disappeared along with the old plaster and walls now have solid whitewash, often with lime brought from Addis Ababa. Windows have been seen with increasing frequency, particularly in houses that the proprietor intends to rent, or in houses where an educated member of the family has exerted his influence. Most of the wood in today's houses is eucalyptus, both red and white, and reflects the ubiquity of the tree in rural areas of Ethiopia. With greater communications, rising prosperity has caused many families to dispense with local pottery in favor of imported glassware from Addis Ababa. The same pattern is true with wooden furniture, and standardized wooden tables and chairs are found with increasing frequency. But most unusual is the small but growing number of houses that have cement floors, an innovation introduced by American Peace Corps volunteers living in the area. Finally, the erosion of village security has resulted in the erection of many tall imposing fences around compounds for protection.

The actual construction of a Guragé house is as follows. The owner first spends considerable time in amassing materials for the house. This includes a large timber for the *áčba*, bamboo strips for the outside, split planks for the wall, thin saplings for the roof, and shaped *wofinčā* beams with a carved seam in the outer edge to hold the bamboo. Formerly these materials could be obtained from the owner's own forest land, but increasingly dense settlements and dwindling supplies have forced men to cash remittances in order to provide the necessary supplements. The amount of time involved from the time the owner decides to build his house until the construction actually begins may be as long as three years, depending on the facility with which he obtains the necessary materials. Construction time may only consume one month, and is usually begun after planting, which is just before the principal rainy season, or just after the rains. Labour is supplied by village workers, who reciprocate voluntarily each time a local resident wishes to build a house. The number of workers involved in the construction of a house ranges from five to thirty.



As the construction time approaches, the owner terraces off his land with his *āsāt* digging stick, the *marāša*. A construction foreman, the *kānā*, supervises the preparation of the materials as well as the stages of building. The *kānā* is skilled in chopping and shaping the fine details of the *wofinčā* and the *āčba* that specialized wood craftsmen, the Fuga, have prepared.<sup>2</sup> The diameter of the house is determined by placing a stake where the *āčba* is to be sunk, and marching toe to toe to a satisfactory radius. Each foot-measurement is known as one *jéf*. Once the limit has been determined, the village workers who have assembled to assist in the construction tie together dried *āsāt* leaves into lengths of rope, *wādārā*, which will eventually make one rope the same length as the prescribed radius. A circle, *ṭābāb*, is then traced by marching around the stake with the *wādārā* stretched outward. Village workers then dig a trench in the *ṭābāb*, into which are placed split timbers of red and white wood that will form the wall. These outward-leaning timbers are then known as *gordāra*. The *gordāra* is fastened together by attaching horizontal strips of split bamboo (or finely hewn strips of red eucalyptus when bamboo is not available) with *wādārā* rope and *abta* vine in vertical rows. The outside horizontal wooden strips are known as *g\*alā*. Together, the *gordāra* and *g\*alā* are known as *y'afār bét*.

After this first stage of construction has been completed, the workers begin assembling a scaffolding that will permit them to attach the *āčba* and the roof. The scaffolding is known as *kotakot*, and consists of Y-shaped beams that are fastened together with *wādārā*. The main pressure point of the *kotakot* will be against *y'afār bét* so as to retain its circular shape in the later stages of construction when workmen will be climbing the roof. The *āčba* hole, *yā āčba g\*odja*, is then dug and the bottom is lined with stones so as to prevent sinking once the centre-post has been erected. Workers then tie *āsāt qanča* rope around the *āčba* log and drag it into the house through the door so as to form a perfect diameter. Since the length of the *āčba* must conform to the diameter of the house, necessary adjustments are made at this time. Then with men on the *kotakot* pulling the *āčba* up with ropes as men on the ground push up with cross beams and Y-shaped wedges, the workers all join in choruses of yelling and cheering as they struggle to raise the *āčba* up to the level of *y'afār bét*, and, finally placing the end in *yā āčba g\*odja*, pull the other end over to the centre until it is perfectly vertical. This feat usually shows that the greatest struggle has been completed and is often marked by the slaughter of a bull, sheep, or some other animal, and all the workers join in a feast.

Little time is spent in feasting, however, and workers soon prepare for the construction of the roof. First, pairs of undecorticated saplings, *wutara*, are evenly spaced in vertical arcs so as to form a dome-shaped roof. The space between each *wutara* is about thirty centimetres. To preserve the dome shape, *wādārā* rope is attached from the lower ends of *wutara* to *y'afār bét*. This *wādārā* is known as *yeotara wādārā*. Then horizontal strips of split bamboo, the *zapa*, are attached from the inside to the *wutara* with *wādārā*, thus giving the roof skeleton the appearance of a large fish net. To reinforce the roof, split strips of wood of various lengths and widths, *zārābu*, are attached with *wādārā* to the spaces between each *wutara*. The roof frame is given additional strength at the *āčba* joint by interlacing *abta* vines. This reinforcement is known as *yénbét*. The attachment of the lower roof frame to *y'afār bét* is also done with *abta* vines, and the joint is known as the *dim'amwāt* (which should not be confused with the Guragé religious cult,

2. See Shack, "Notes on Occupational Castes among the Gurage of South-West Ethiopia", *Man* 1964, p. 54.



*Dām'am'it*). The house then takes on a new name, *yāskur bét*, and is no longer *y'afār bét*.

At this point, skilled wood craftsmen, the *Fuga*, shape a niche about three-eighths up the length of the *āčba*. Thick vertical beams are then hewn to fit smoothly around the *āčba*, and are projected out toward the roof, much like the supports of an umbrella. The vertical beams are called *wāka*. To prevent the *wāka* from breaking through the roof frame, a cross-piece known as *dangasa* is attached to the end, resulting in a T-shaped vertical support. The *wāka* is made sufficiently long to maintain the dome shape of the roof, even after the *yeotara wādārā* has weakened. Throughout these stages of construction, the village workers periodically take breaks during which they are supplied with coffee, roasted grains, drinks, and the latest gossip.

Next comes the thatching of the roof. Most of the workers no longer continue building at this stage, as thatching requires only two or three men. One man on the ground ties dried grass, *čāzā*, into bundles and tosses them up to the thatcher, *yāhādiriyā*, who supports himself by *wādārā* rope tied around his waist and fastened to the top of the *āčba*. Thatching begins at the bottom and is done in a spiral pattern toward the top. To prevent the *čāzā* from being drawn too closely to the frame as well as from falling down from the roof, *yāhādiriyā* will first attach horizontal wooden strips of bamboo on the outside. These strips are known as *gišāgād*. Further reinforcement, *tātāba*, is placed horizontally under the entranceway, as shown in Figure 4. Once the top thatching has been completed, *yāhādiriyā* frequently adds extra thicknesses of grass around the *āčba* and secures it with *abta* vines so as to prevent leaking during the rains. To prevent cracking of the *āčba* at the top, a pottery bowl, *yā āčbagārā*, is placed vertically over the end. *Yā āčbagārā* is not made specially for the *āčba* and is usually a pot that has cracked. It has no ritual value and is a purely practical addition to the house.

The completion of the thatching marks the end of major construction of the house. The owner will then concentrate on the interior furnishings. Many times, the *wāka-dangasa* is first only a temporary structure, in which case it will be replaced by thicker beams that are more durable. Once this has been completed, the *kotakot* is removed and the ground is turned over in preparation of the floor. Vertical partition posts, *béna béniyā*, are put into position to determine the size and location of the *derar* and *g'ada*. A horizontal beam, *yāk'atāmar*, is placed on the top of the *béna béniyā*, and vertical planks are attached in the final stage. If the rains have been sufficient, the owner is ready to dig a hole outside the house where he will add straw to allow fermentation of the mud wall. Two throws of mud are added, the first being allowed to seep well into the seams, and then to dry out sufficiently to crack. The second throw, with a higher proportion of straw, will adhere well in the cracks of the original mud. Depending on humidity conditions, as soon as time permits, the owner will add whitewash to the dried mud. Doorstep stones, *yofincā imār*, are placed in a cleared outside doorspace, the *wārādjā*. Then, with the preparation of the floor and the emplacement of the *mijačā*, the owner can look back with pride at his completed house.

The meticulous detail involved in the construction of the *Guragé* house is obvious. This accounts for the high quality of the houses as well as their duration. Many houses last for fifty years or longer, if made with sufficient quantities of red wood (necessary to prevent a termite feast), and require a new roof thatching only every ten or fifteen years. They are cool in the daytime and warm at night, thus providing an ideal house for living in the tropical weather of Ethiopia. The high wall and roof allow smoke to rise up quickly through the roof so that ventilation is never a problem. Yet these houses are facing extinction in the near future. The



principal factors involved are the expense and the exhausting effort required to construct them. At current prices, a ten-metre diameter *g'eā* would cost Eth.\$750, whereas an equal enclosure built with mud, tin, and wood would cost only Eth.\$500. That adds up to Eth.\$250 worth of tradition. A further drawback is that as village security breaks down, the cost of building the *soeur bét* is likely to increase, since the owner will be under increasing pressure to offer direct monetary emolument to the workers. Finally, there is the possibility of fire. With such a heavy investment involved, today's owner is scrutinizing more and more the risks incurred in building a fine *soeur bét*, only to have it turn to ashes. Despite all of these drawbacks, it would be a national tragedy to have such a fine tradition disappear from Ethiopia, for the *soeur bét* has always been a prime manifestation of the country's ancient heritage.

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