

## **Gurage Traditional Wooden Carved Beds**

Until the emergence of manufactured household furniture, skilled artisans in Gurage country, in southwest Ethiopia's then Shoa Province, would carve any number of items. Highly decorated with three basic colors – green, red, and purple – Gurage beds were works of practical art. One such artisan whom I came to know during my stay in Emdeber, Shoa, Ethiopia in the mid-1960's was Menjie Tabatha. A successful entrepreneur, he also was known as a Fuga artisan. A Fuga artisan could perform circumcision using precisely carved knives, in addition to crafting household objects – carved wooden beds, wooden combs, wooden platform shoes, wooden bowls, and wooden tables. In the sections that follow, I documented Menjie's skills in making carved wooden beds, and once served to have visitors to the village pay for these beds that I would give, with no commission, to Menjie for each buyer. I used to try to keep count of the number of beds Menjie would make, but stopped doing so at around 25 at the time of my departure and return to the United States. I was so proud of Menjie's work that I have been sleeping on one ever since, at least until now.



“Zigba” hardwood timber cut into planks with a two-person saw.  
Some planks would be used as head or sideboards in a bed.



Menjie (right), with a companion at my house in Emdeber.





Menjie carving a wooden pillow that would then be painted and decorated with geometric patterns.



A bed another artisan offered for sale from my home that had few buyers. The workmanship of a Menjie bed was so much better that he had few competitors such as this one.





Menjie using an axe to shape a bedpost.



The bedpost begins to take shape.





Using the same axe, Menjie refines the shape of a bedpost



The bedpost now is almost finished.





While preparing a carved bed, Menjie would use residual wood to carve wooden headrests



A wooden headrest begins to take shape





Gurage headrests have sculpted bases in which butter would be stored for use as a pomade by someone about to go to sleep for the night



With one headrest done, another begins to take shape





Once basic bed pieces have been prepared, they would be brought to my house for assembly prior to painting and carving



Menjie often had a worker do some of the carving that he would supervise





It would often be over taking breaks and coffee that I would learn about Menjie's craft skills and personal anecdotes



An assembled carved wood bed prior to painting and etching





A bed sideboard with two posts lashed on is painted



Once paint has dried, Menjie would use a metal carving tool whose shape would be derived from metal strips from umbrella spars.





Menjie applying paint to a sideboard after finishing the carving of an endboard.



Finishing the etching on an endboard.





Menjie was a family man, and often relied on his wife and daughters to help with the painting of carved pieces. The paints consisted of dried materials from plants with some additives he could afford to add.



Menjie's family at their house preparing cast fired pottery.





Frontal view of the Gurage bed, with a Gurage woven basket at the headboard



My Gurage bed that was shipped from Ethiopia to the United States, 1968





A woven Gurage table hanging on the wall to the right, with an Ethiopia travel poster on the left.