

The Furra Legend in Sidama Traditions*

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This is an extra-ordinary story of a radical Sidama woman known as Furra. Even though it is difficult to trace her exact socio political milieu due to lack of written materials, oral tradition helps us to understand the woman who was both, well-respected and detested. Tales abound of a woman full of wisdom in advising her fellow women and the authoritarian rule she imposed on men. Many women in Sidama reminisce about Furra in their daily tales, plays and songs to their children. Their feelings are profound so much so that at the end of any mourning procession, they mourn for Furra, too. But men? Not so ! The feelings among men run to the contrary; they recoil in disgust as they remember the severity of her authority.

This research is carried out on the basis of accounts provided by reputable people throughout Sidama. In spite of lack of written accounts, which make the date and place of her birth uncertain, Furra is believed to have lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The research also displayed discrepancy among sources with regards to accounts of her birth, upbringing and later life. Nonetheless consensus prevails that she was a Sidama by birth. Concerning her particular lineage or clan, some would say that she was a Hawella Gadire. Others, without tracing her sub clan and patrilineage, say she was from Yanassie or from Kusaye or from Sawolla clans.

There has also been an attempt to trace Furra's youth rather indirectly through her contemporaries. She had a female friend called Argiwe who campaigned on her own, killing a hippo. On the second trip, she decided to act alongside men despite Furra's advice that: "You better quit campaigning with men" ('Aguri! Kuni laballu ledo gaddi gatoheha'). Argiwe not only failed to heed her friend's advice she also had an affair with one of the male campaigners and conceived a child. As it was the custom of the land to oppose pregnancy outside marriage, especially when a girl still lives in her parents' home, Argiwe was excommunicated. Following this, the story goes, the validity of Furra's advice to women and her other abilities brought her the respect of her contemporaries.

This indirect account of her life notwithstanding, Furra's marriage and family life remain a mystery. While most sources agree that she had a daughter named Laango, not all agree on who the

father was. Some note her marriage to Dingama Koyya, another powerful personality noted for his paranormal physical abilities such as installing huge stone-made statues, many of which are still found in different parts of Sidama today.

This account of events implies her marriage was one of convenience and ultimately was instrumental in the suspicious death of Dingama Koyya. That marriage produced a child who also became powerful like his father; it is said he too could move pillars of a big hut with one hand before he could even walk. Frightened by his prowess and above all by his potential, men connived and killed the child without Furra's knowledge. They feared that he would grow to be as monstrous as his father.

Resentful as she was, Furra decided to take over and rule the land in order to revenge what was done to her child. Being the first child of a first wife, she enjoyed favourable upbringing. The fact that she had a revered background paved her way to power. Her rule was eventful for what she did.

In one account, for example, it is told that having observed repeated defeats in battle whereby men had run away, Furra was outraged, and ordered the women to fight. Leading by example, she carried out successful campaigns that demonstrated tactics and wisdom and leading her to become a legitimate ruler of all of Sidama. At the time she ruled, she was said to have organised, advised and sent women to fight while men were forced to do jobs that were previously reserved for women. Her reign was noted for repressive measures like asking men to do extremely difficult tasks.

The radical changes she initiated in society and the oppressive policies she pursued brought her deep dislike among men. On this basis of her partisan approach, she was deemed as *mentu biilo* ('Queen of the Women') and not the 'Queen of Sidama'. Her advocacy and partisanship with fellow women was also reflected in her advice. Once she told the women: 'If, in the future, you prepare food, never show *abicho* (an initial part of *wassa* food processing), because it shrinks over time and you will be asked, "Where did you put the rest?". Neither should you show *shafote burro* (churned butter) to men because in time it wanes and they ask you "where did you do with the rest?"' She

also delivered other pieces of advice regarding a woman's relationships to a man.

The reign of Queen Furra is said to have been fraught with problems and excessive demands imposed upon men. To solve some of the problems, the 'wise people' used to come up with solutions. Then she ordered executions, particularly, of all the short and old bald men. During one of these executions, an old man asked the young men: 'Hide me in inaccessible place and I will be of help at a time when wisdom and advice are unavailable'. His request was accepted and he was hidden in the cave near a river bank and stones covered the entrance to the cave. There he would not be suspected by Furra's followers. Afterwards men continued to visit him, feed him, and in return, receive advice from him.

Unaware of the surviving wise man, Furra once again demanded that the men build her a house between the sky and the land; that is in the air. Puzzled as they were, the men returned to their wise man in hiding. After listening attentively and carefully, he advised them: 'Tell her this. In our culture it is the owner of the house who lays the foundation. So ask her to just do that'. Then the people went back to Furra and told her accordingly; for it was impossible to lay a base in the air, yet respectful of the culture, she did not resist the answer. Ultimately she laid the cornerstone on land and her house was then built with ordinary materials.

In this way, the stories say, she ruled for about seven years. Some people say that no one knows for sure how long she ruled. During all that time, her relentless support for women continued. So did her oppression of men and her excessive demands. Towards the last days of her rule, she ordered some men to fetch her a very fast animal (faster than a horse) that could carry her to all the lands she ruled, including foreign battle fronts. Again the men had no choice but to turn to their wise man. He listened and he was relieved. 'The time has finally arrived', he told them. 'Go to the forest and find a wild giraffe', he added. 'For it is difficult to handle, be very careful, be many in number. Take long ropes and tie the giraffe's neck and legs and then submit it to her. As soon as you arrive, ask her to mount the giraffe wearing her *tuuba* (women's clothing). Tell her, "we'll tie you down so that you won't fall down". Afterwards tie her tightly to the giraffe and then untie the giraffe. It will run very swiftly and it will be her end. It is also my time for freedom', he concluded.

The people proceeded as they were told and managed to catch the animal and bring it to Furra. They meticulously followed all the instructions they had been given. When Furra realised that it was the end, it was too late. In that last minute she wondered as to the

remaining wiseman who finished her off saying '*hiko gatio gerchi xagari'e'* and she advised her followers not to forget her previous advice. The giraffe was then released and it run off swiftly through the forests and crossing diverse terrains. Furra's body fell in many places.

The places were later given the name of her body parts. For example, the last body part (kurra) was said to have fallen in a place in Sidama known today as Kurra, in the Dale district, Taqa area. That is where her symbolic grave lies. It seems that, to date, women who pass by that spot never fail to pour milk as a sign of deep respect for the Queen. The act is similar to putting flowers on graves in the West. On the contrary, when men pass along that place, they beat the grave site with their sticks and/or spears recalling it in disgust. They sing in outrage, whereas women sing in sympathy. The following is the men's account of Furra's era:

Bi're Furra mokku waro
Laballu mentoho qishe,
Ka'ayi ka'ayi reito ise!

Qorkete umbo qotise,
Hallo taino hallise,
Dasete umbo dasise,
Salaho ba'nno sadise,
Kurra taino kuriise,
Hako gatona kasise
Ka'ye ka'ye reito ise!

[translation]

During Furra's reign
Men ground and cooked for women
Let her die, let her die!

Her shoulders dropped in Qorke,
Her waist dropped in Hallo
Her limbs dropped in Dassie
Her genitals dropped in Saala
Her remains dropped in Kurra
Let her finish there
Let her die, let her die!

The song, by men briefly reiterates the reversal of the division of labour among the sexes counting the places where parts of her body fell 'Let her die again and again', they repeat. On the other hand, as they console their children, women sing:

Ooso hayye, hayye
Ooso hayye, hayye,
Ati ane shiilo,
Shiilo shite huntuu

Furra and biilo
Furra and biilo

Ani di'afoma
Afinnohu yiino,
Gonfa uddisiise,
Qorke gidiisiise,
Furra gerchu shiino
Furra shiihu shiimo
Furra shiihu shiilo!

[Translation]
Sleep, sleep my children
Sleep, sleep my children
You're my best child
For they killed the best
Furra, you're the leader of woman!

I don't know about it
But those who knew tell
That, they clothed her with Gongfa (traditional
costume)
That they loaded her on the giraffe
That way, Furra was killed by an old man
Let her killer be diminished
Let her killer be diminished!

Similarly, at the conclusion of mourning processions,
women weep for Furra and recall of the good old days
and the difficulties that befell women when Furra's fate
was decided by the remaining old man. Thus, they tell:

Woyi Fura!
Woyi Furra!
Furra biilo
Furra moku warro
Geeru digatino
Gatinohu mittu

Furra xagarino
Furra xagareenna
Mentoho dhibino

[Translation]
Our Furra!
Our Furra!
Furra, women's leader
During her reign
Old men were finished save one
The one who remained,
Endangered Furra
And following her death
Bad luck fell upon women.

Furra inspires many as a symbol of resistance and
eventual victory over 'established tyranny', but as
power corrupts, she fell victim of her own success. For
women she was a liberator, for men she happened to be
a cruel tyrant. Eventually she failed to know not only
the balance but also the limits of acceptable authority.

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available at: 24 Waldeck Road, London, W13 8LY, England.
A slightly different perspective on Furra is now available on
internet at:
<http://ireland.iol.ie/bizpark/m/mmm/spring97/furra.htm>*

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