LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The languages spoken by the Gurage are known as the Gurage languages. The variations among these languages are used to group the Gurage people into three dialectically varied subgroups: Northern, Eastern and Western. However, the largest group within Eastern subgroup, known as the Silt'e, are identified foremost as Muslims.

The Gurage live a sedentary life based on agriculture, involving a complex system of crop rotation and transplanting. Ensete is their main staple crop, but other cash crops are grown, which include coffee and Khat. Animal husbandry is practiced, but mainly for milk supply and dung. Other foods consumed include green cabbage, cheese, butter, and roasted grains with meat consumption being very limited.

The Gurage raise Zebu cattle. These cattle give very little milk, which is seldom drunk. Instead, it is churned into butter. A typical Gurage household has a large quantity of spiced butter aging in clay pots hung from the walls of their huts. Butter is believed to be medicinal, and the Gurage often take it internally or use it a lotion or poultice. A Gurage proverb states that “A sickness that has the upperhand over butter is destined for death.” Different species of ensete are also eaten to alleviate illness.

The Gurage regard overeating as coarse and vulgar, and regard it as poor etiquette to eat all of the ensete that a host passes around to guests. It is considered polite to leave at least some ensete bread even after a very small portion is passed around. It is typically expected that a Gurange will extend hospitality to their neighbors and kinfolk in dispensing ensete freely to them. However, Gurage often hoard extra food and eat it secretly to avoid having to share it.

STUDYING GURAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/
WHO SPEAKS GURAGE?

The Gurage languages (also known as Guragie) are the languages spoken by the Gurage people, an ethnolinguistic group of the fertile and semi-mountainous region; some 150 miles south and west of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The groups that are subsumed under the term Gurage originated in the Tigray region of Ethiopia as the descendants of military conquerors during the Aksumite empire. The Gurage are mainly Christian—members largely of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church—and Muslim. Settled agriculturalists, the Gurage centre their lives on the cultivation of their staple crop, or fals banana (*Ensete ventricosum*), prized not for its “false” (or inedible) fruit but for its roots.

The Gurage have no centralized institutional political power or leadership. Local power is vested in lineages; these descent groups display corporate rights, obligations, and influence. In contrast, the religious or ritual system is highly centralized; ritual officials sanction the authority of the political elders. One of the interesting aspects of this religious-political asymmetry is the integral place in the system assigned to the *Fuga*, the local representatives of what are believed to be remnants of earlier inhabitants of the Horn of Africa. This lower-caste group of artisans and hunters are also ritual specialists whose powers are both feared and are deemed to be essential in all major Gurage religious functions. The Fuga share a ritual language with Gurage women, which Gurage men may not learn lest they discern the mysteries of the female initiation ceremonies.

WHY STUDY GURAGE?

The Gurage people are an ethnic group in Ethiopia. According to the 2007 national census, its population is 1,867,377 people (or 2.53% of the total population of Ethiopia), of whom 792,659 are urban dwellers. This is 2.53% of the total population of Ethiopia, or 7.52% of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region (SNNPR). The Gurage languages are written with the Ethiopic alphabet. The Gurage subset of Ethiopic has 44 independent glyphs. The Gurage languages do not constitute a coherent linguistic grouping, rather, the term is both linguistic and cultural. The Gurage people speak a number of separate languages, all belonging to the Southern branch of the Ethiopian Semitic language family (which also includes Amharic). The languages are often referred to collectively as “Guraginya” by other Ethiopians (-inya is the Amharic suffix for most Ethiopian Semitic languages). The Gurage languages, which are not always mutually intelligible, belong to the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Some of these have been influenced by neighbouring Cushitic languages.