

## 1. Description

### 1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

- Language family: Afro-Asiatic → Omotic → North → Mao → East → **Bambassi**
- Language names: **Bambassi**, Northern Mao, Amam, Bambeshi, Didessa, Fadiro, Siggoyo
- Speakers live in Ethiopia around the towns of Bambassi and Diddessa in mostly rural settings.

### 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

- myf

### 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

- 34.65 long. 9.83 lat.

### 1.4 Brief history:

- Evidence suggests that Omotic language speakers split from the larger Afro-Asiatic group about 10,000 years ago, and when they arrived in the west and southwest of Ethiopia they continued to diversify. It is from these roots that the Northern Mao/Bambassi language is thought to have originated. The population of Northern Mao has faced invasion, tributization and slavery throughout their history. They have had an agriculture-based economy, and have a long tradition of honey-collecting that used to be a primary cash enterprise. (1)

*“A typical Mao narration goes like this: “The Mao live in the forest and their life is attached to it. The Oromo needed grazing land and felled the trees. The Mao took refuge in the forest. We kept going further and further into the woods while the Oromo advanced, until they came here.” [...] As opposed to the peasant culture of the foreigners, the Mao are (or used to be) slash-and-burn agriculturalist, who move about the forest and tap its resources. The image of the Mao as a forest people is becoming more a fantasy than a fact, as deforestation grows and sedentary villages spread. This fantasy is sustained through cultural practices, which work, in turn, as tactics of cultural resistance.” (12 p78)*

### 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

- Throughout history, the populations in the area have been invaded and enslaved. In the 1880s, the Mahdists of Sudan took control. Later that century, the Northern Mao people were tributary to Sheikh Khagali who ruled from Asosa. (1)
  - The movement of some of the speakers to the Diddesa area happened when they were trying to escape a land tax that had been imposed on the Bambassi area. (1)
- “According to the Diddesa account, those who had no money to satisfy the tax were told they they had to ‘give a child’ for the land they occupied. It is said that some fled to Diddesa to keep from giving up their children while others fled out of fear because they had no money nor children. Some speakers told me that this tax was imposed by Oromo chiefs while others have said that it was the doing of the Imperial (Menelik II) government in Addis Ababa.” (1 p21)*

### 1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

- The climate in the area is tropical, and the environment is riverine and includes shrubland, plains and a savannah ecosystem. (9)
- In the past, Bambassi speakers claim that they lived in the forests that are on the mountains that stretch between Asosa and Bambassi. (1)

### 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

- Estimated between 2-3,000 speakers, currently. In 1982, there were estimates of about 5,000 speakers of the Bambassi language. (1)
- The Bambassi-speaking population lives in the Benishangul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia and the areas in and around Bambasi town in rural areas. (1)
- Northern Mao speakers within the Bambassi wereda live in mostly in Muts’a Mado k’ebele, but can also be found in Wamba k’ebele and the northern part of Kash Mendo k’ebele in smaller numbers. (1)

## 2. Economy

### 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

- Sorghum porridge is considered the staple food. Injera is commonly consumed in many households, but it is not a traditional food. (1)
- Ensete is a main carbohydrate, although recently there has been less cultivation of it. Ethiopian yam is also major staple in the Benishangul-Gumuz region in general. (7)

*“Ensete is the most versatile plant in the southwestern part of Ethiopia. The corm and pseudo-stem are prepared for food; the leaves are used as covers for cooking pots or placed on the floor for honored guests if there are no chairs, and occasionally shredded and used as skirts by certain ethnic groups; and finally the strong fibers of the central stem of the leaf are plaited to make rope.” (7 p5)*

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

- The Northern Mao eat significant amounts of fish from the Dabus River since it is typically more fruitful than hunting as larger animals have become more scarce. Elephants also used to be hunted when they were more present in the area(1)

*“Traps for hunting larger animals, like gazelles or antelope, are made from bamboo and with a trap-door propped up on the inside by a stick on a rope. When the animal enters and touches the rope, the door is triggered and falls, enclosing the animal. Human feces is used as bait to get the animal to enter the trap.” (1 p23)*

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

- Traps, snares and spears are used extensively in hunting and fishing. (1)
- The Bambassi carry a spear with them, especially when walking to another village or to their cultivated fields. However, the spear is not used for anything war related anymore. (12)

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production:

- Hunting, fishing, herding and milking are primarily men’s activities. However, both men and women participate in cultivation labor. (5)

2.6 Land tenure:

2.7 Ceramics:

- Products or crafts made by the Bambassi people are mostly baskets and pottery. (9)
- Most of the Mao have transformed their knowledge of pottery-making under the influence of neighboring groups such as the Oromo and Bertha. (12)

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

- Their neighbors will not eat horse, donkey, mule, giraffe or elephant – and the Bambassi *may* have abided by these taboos in the past, but currently the taboo is not observed. (3)

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

### 3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

- No specific height information found, but from photos it appears that the Northern Mao are typically an average height (compared to US), or slightly taller than average. (12)

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

- Again, no specific information found, but from photos weight appears to be about average, with no indication of obesity or below average weight. (12)

### 4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Not found

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Not found

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Not found

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): No information found

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

- Female: When the girl is about age 15, husband may claim her if she has been promised to him.

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Not found, but not thought to be common.

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

- No percentages could be found, but it has been found that monogamy “strongly predominates.” Any plural marriages tend to be confined to men of wealth, but the Bambassi discourage accumulation of individual wealth, so monogamy is the dominating marriage organization. (5)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

- Bridewealth (wedding gifts) sometimes exchanged between the fathers of the girls that are being exchanged between clans. (1)
- Recently there has been some cases of a practice where bridewealth can be used without a sister-exchange in order to secure a wife. (1)

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

- There is a pattern of patrilineal inheritance. (1)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: NF

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: NF

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

- Clans are organized as exogamous overall. (1)

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized? : NF

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”): NF

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? : NF

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: NF

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

- Possibly cross-cousin considering the pattern of exogamy, though no specific preferences were discovered.
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?: NF
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring : NF
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?: NF
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: NF
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: NF
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older): NF
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?: NF
- 4.24 Joking relationships?: NF
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: NF
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules
  - Marriage is typically forbidden among first cousins (5)
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?
  - The tradition of cutting a stick to match height of girl promised to man (described in 4.30)
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?: NF
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)
  - Usually between different Bambassi clans (outside the community) in an exchange. (1)
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?
  - Arranged by a sister-exchange between clans. If a man has no sister to exchange, he can promise a brother's daughter or another girl from his clan who isn't of age yet. A stick is cut at a height matching that of the young girl and given to the man she is promised to. He brings the stick to claim her when she comes of age. (1)
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:
  - Some have rejected the wishes of their clan and refused to participate in what they consider to be a forced exchange. Also, according to Ethiopian law today, sister-exchange is illegal. (1)

### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:
  - None found – warfare appears to be nonexistent with the Bambassi nowadays
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:
  - I could find no evidence of any ingroup killing among the Bambassi, which suggests that the cause of any violent death must come from outgroups, which would have been more common in the past during times of outside conquest.
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: NF
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):
  - The Bambassi have peaceful relationships with their neighbors, and are somewhat receptive to outsiders. They recognize that the Southern Mao (Hozo and Seze) are basically the same ethnically and culturally. When Northern and Southern Mao meet, they usually use another language, like Oromo, to communicate. (9)
- 4.18 Cannibalism?
  - No evidence of cannibalism found. (5)

### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:
  - Live in small family groups (typically no more than six homes) where the men are blood related under the clan head. They are divided into clans, sub-clans and nuclear families. (1) (9)
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):
  - The clans of the Bambassi do not have a tradition of moving when the seasons change. Their movements mostly happened in the past when they were fleeing outside rulers. (1)
  - Transportation is mostly by foot or by mule. (9)
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):
  - There is a male head for each clan, and he is typically the eldest male. They do not have chiefs. (1) (3)
  - They abide by the rule of the local Ethiopian government and have a distinct identification with the national culture. (9)
- 5.4 Post marital residence:
  - The female moves to her new husband's clan and lives with him in a patrilocal residence. (1)
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):
  - The Bambassi are not a territorial people and there is no evidence of any sort of active defense of their areas. (12)
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex): NF
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: NF
- 5.8 Village and house organization:

- The Northern Mao have houses that are more unstructured than those of their neighbors, and this has to do with Mao moral values. (12)

*“Mao houses are smaller and more disordered...Activities are badly organized among them. ...the Mao, who share the same economic status and oppose the formation of individual wealth...tightly linked to inhibiting inequalities within the group.” (12 p77-78)*

- Traditional organization of domestic space for the Northern Mao is to have the front space for guests and animals, and the back space for any other activities. (12)

#### 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

- No specialized village structures

#### 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

- The homes of the Bambassi are cylindrical or beehive-style huts. (3)

- Reed and bamboo, wood and mud, or wood and thatch are used to create huts. (9)

- A diagram of a typical Mao home depicts the bed as a sleeping area. (12)

#### 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

- The clans are organized as non-totemic and exogamous. They are patrilineal and patrilocal, so most of the people live in small family groups where all the men are related by blood under the clan head. (1)

#### 5.12 Trade:

- The Bambassi town has a weekly market on Saturdays, and the Ganza people who speak a similar language to Northern Mao come into town for the market. (1)

- Baskets and pottery are typically trade items. (9)

- Income sources for the Northern Mao include sorghum, onions, spices, and other grains and crops. (9)

#### 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

-The use of northern Mao language in public areas has been ridiculed in some cases.

*“Attitudes of speakers toward their own language as well as their attitudes to the other languages in the area play an important role in perceptions of relative prestige. Most Northern Mao adults are very proud of their language, though they recognize that they are relatively small in number and for this reason don't speak it publically, unless with other Northern Mao speakers [...] Children of school age, however, are much less comfortable with their language outside the home [...] report children complaining of being called 'backwards' and even 'dogs' for speaking their mother-tongue in the Bambassi area in the presence of other non-Mao children. The adults have suggested to me that this is the result of lack of language development [...] as well as their history of slavery and mistreatment.” (1 p35-36)*

## 6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

### 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

- Older members of the clans practice parts of the traditional system, but those in the Diddesa area have mostly adopted Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. (1)

### 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

- The elders still practice the tradition of consulting their medicine man or traditional healer, who tells the future, blesses hunts and homes and offers healing remedies and sacrificial rituals. (1)

### 6.2 Stimulants: NF

### 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): NF

### 6.4 Other rituals:

- Many homes are constructed with an altar space inside dedicated to traditional religious practices. (1)

- The Bambassi harvest honey, and it is closely tied to their identity.

*“The relevance of honey is such among the Mao that several major rituals revolve around it. Meaningfully, the Mao celebrate rituals of blessing, propitiation and thanksgiving which are restricted, in other groups, to cereals. It is only logical that there is an interesting material culture associated to honey, which includes calabashes for transporting and storing honey, beehives and pots for preparing and drinking honey wine.” (12 p78)*

### 6.5 Myths (Creation):

- The Bambassi traditionally believe in a higher, supreme being called Yere or Yeretsi who lives in a “serene heaven” (3)

### 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

- Feasts and dances for certain (unspecified) special occasions. (9)

### 6.7 Sex/age differences in RCR:

- Speakers who are over age 50 and practice Islam almost always wear clothes that identify them as Muslim, but they do not tend to maintain the practices of abstaining from alcohol and certain meals.

Younger people are more likely to go to daily prayers and keep Islamic practices express concern that the elders do not. (1)

### 6.8 Missionary effect:

- The majority of Bambassi in the western area practice a form of Sufi Islam and therefore keep Koranic dietary restrictions. (1) They put a high value on the Arabic language. (2)

- Christianity came to the Didessa River valley approximately two generations ago in the 1970s, and was probably brought by protestant Oromo Christians also settling in the area. Now, those in the Diddesa valley have mostly adopted Ethiopian Orthodox (Tewahedo) Christianity. (9)

#### 6.9 RCR revival:

- There is not a movement to revive the practice of the traditional religion. Those that still recognize it are typically among clan elders. Overall, the Northern Mao people are somewhat receptive to religious change. (1) (9)

- The Bambassi still use the traditional name for the supreme Deity, even if they practice Islam or Christianity. (1)

#### 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

- No information found about the traditional religion beliefs.

#### 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?: NF

#### 6.12 Is there teknonymy?: NF

#### 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

### 7. Adornment

#### 7.1 Body paint: NF

#### 7.2 Piercings:

- Traditionally, men wore brass earrings in the right ear, and women wore round brass earrings in both ears. (1)

#### 7.3 Haircut: NF

#### 7.4 Scarification:

- The Northern Mao may have practiced facial scarification featuring the 'alif' (first letter of the Arabic alphabet and symbol for God in Islam). The scars would have been vertical lines, and they meant that "Arab" raiders had taken the individual into slavery. (6)

#### 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

- Both men and women wore bead necklaces, traditionally. Today, the men do not wear jewelry, but the women still do. (1)

#### 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

- Adornment such as necklaces are taken away in certain situations. (12)

*"Traditionally, Mao women wore many necklaces made of thick amber beads, which hanged around their necks over their naked breasts. Although in some marginal areas it is still possible to see women in this guise, most have renounced nudity, especially when they go to markets and towns. They have not abandoned their adornments, though, because they are crucial in their constitution as persons: necklaces are worn from a very early age and they are only taken away in traumatic occasions, such as severe illnesses or mourning."* (12 p75)

#### 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

- Women wore a plaited bark skirt traditionally, but that was replaced later by a knee-length skirt made of long strands of dry, knotted grass. (1)

- Now, all of the women wear skirts and many wear scarves. (9)

- Men wore gazelle skin loincloths. (1)

#### 7.8 Missionary effect:

- Clothing today is mostly a combination of western style (usually tattered) and men's long white gowns (jalabia). (1) (9)

#### 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

- There has been no evidence of this, as dress has become more like that in the highland towns that seem to have more western influence. (9)

### 8. Kinship systems

#### 8.1 Sibling classification system: NF

#### 8.2 Sororate, levirate:

- Typically, levirate marriages are practiced in cultures where exogamous marriage is *forbidden*. There is no evidence of the Bambassi having levirate or sororate practices, especially since they abide by exogamous marriage rules. (10)

#### 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): NF

### 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

- The infant mortality rate for children under 1-year old is 140 deaths per 1000. (9)

- The Northern Mao/Bambassi language is considered to be endangered by UNESCO. (1)

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