

# THE SWEDISH INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH NETWORK

In collaboration with  
The Centre for Gender Studies, Stockholm University

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## **The *Aräqé* Dilemma: The Socioeconomics of Local Alcohol Production, Marketing, and Consumption in Ethiopia**

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### **Summary**

*Aräqé* is a pure grain, home-brewed and distilled alcoholic beverage that is made from an assortment of cereals such as wheat, sorghum and maize, and has a high level of ethanol. In its original state it is pure grain spirit with neutral taste and clear and colorless appearance. Only when laced with flavoring and coloring compounds such as *ghibtto*, *kosso* flower, and honey, before, during, or after distillation, does it acquire a variety of positive tastes.

*Aräqé*, the subject of this study, is a ubiquitous feature of both rural and urban Ethiopia – being produced, marketed and consumed throughout the country with the exception of predominantly Muslim areas. *Aräqé* is more than the alcoholic drink of choice for people living in rural and small town Ethiopia, and its popularity is on the rise even in the big towns and cities. Thanks to its qualities of longevity, divisibility, and high unit value, it is also an important commodity that is produced by, traded between, and consumed in most of the rural and urban areas of the country. Its negative effects notwithstanding, it is a major object of exchange that tie cities to their rural hinterlands and with one another becoming an important component of the social fabric of the society. Thus, it is an important social fact that cannot be dismissed as a fringe phenomenon or be pushed under the rugs.

The study was carried out during the latter part of 2009 under the auspices of the Forum for Social Studies (FSS), a highly respected and independent Ethiopian think-tank by the presenter and his assistant. The data collection informing the study was carried out at five sites around Sululta, Debre Berhan, Dembecha, and Cheha, as well as the town of Arsi Negelle. The study was aimed at understanding and documenting: the way by which it was introduction and spread in the country; the processes, patterns, and arenas of its: (a) production (b) marketing, and (c) consumption; as well as the direct and indirect impacts of each one of the latter on women, children, families, and communities, as regards physical and mental health, wellbeing, economic activities and performance. The presentation at the seminar and the consequent discussions followed the same pattern.

The presentation on the **introduction and spread of *aräqé*** covered: the processes through which, the production, marketing and consumption of *aräqé* was introduced and spread in the study areas, trends in the amounts of *aräqé* produced, marketed and consumed in the study areas, and new marketing trends.

Regarding the **production of *aräqé***, the presenter covered the following sub-topics, namely: the process of production including inputs the implements needed and the process involved, as well as the fuel, labor requirements and arrangements, and the costs of *aräqé* production; the significance of *aräqé* production for the producing women, family, and community; and the impacts of *aräqé* production on the environment, on food grain availability, and on the wellbeing and health of the producing women, their children, as well as their families' cohesion and stability.

As for **aräqé marketing**, the presentation covered wholesale trade in *aräqé* and the urban-rural trade links thereof, as well as local and long-distance trade, among others; as well as retail trade, in specialized aräqé bars and mainly aräqé bets, and other such as drinking establishments and eateries that also sell aräqé, and homes that now and then double as aräqé-bet. In relation to this the issue of aräqé retailing and sex, the significance of *aräqé* marketing for the individual trade and the community at large; and its impacts on retailing families the local community were discussed.

The discussion on **aräqé consumption** covered the current patterns and emerging trends pertaining to overall consumption, consuming cohorts, community norms. Following which it also dealt with the impacts of aräqé consumption such as crime and violence, health of consumers, direct economic impacts, indirect/opportunity costs of violence & crime, and ill-health, as well as attempts at discouraging aräqé consumption by government and community based organizations.

Finally, by way of **conclusion**, the presenter highlighted the fact that the production, marketing and consumption of home-brewed and distilled aräqé cannot be easily dismissed as a purely negative phenomenon, particularly since it provides a large number of people with the only alternative for a livelihood. Hence, possible steps at dealing with it must aim at gradually bringing it within the realm of the legal and official sphere by standardizing and regulating its manufacture, sale, and consumption rather than prohibiting it, which is hardly possible to realize considering the fact that home-brewed and distilled aräqé is widely spread and deeply entrenched in Ethiopian society to vanish so easily.

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