

The Agaw language: A linguistic substratum of Ethiosemitic Languages

(A paper for Discussion)

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Synopsis

Migration has a big role in introducing new languages into a society, in extinction of minority languages and in the development of other languages. Agaw and Ethiosemitic (ES) languages can be typical examples that explain this phenomenon of contact-induced language changes. Some three thousand years ago, the inhabitants of the whole Horn of Africa and the western Red Sea shores were Cushitic races. Of the Cushitic people, Agaw people were the indigenous inhabitants of the highlands of today's Eritrea and Ethiopia; and 2800 years ago, some Semitic speaking people started to cross the Red Sea towards these highlands as merchants and traders. Eventually these people settled in enclaves among the long established Agaw speaking people, and together, they occupied the same space for more than two millennia; and resulted in change and shift of languages. Although the Ethio-Eritrean majority always believed that the other non-Semitic languages of the region borrowed from ES languages, the effect has never been one way.

The Agaw language is extinct, but its influence in ES languages is ubiquitous and is at every level of linguistic analysis. This paper highlights that the indigenous inhabitants of the Ethio-Eritrean plateau were Agaw speaking people. The influence of Agaw language in phonology, lexicon, syntax and morphology on ES languages is discussed and some examples are given whenever possible. With this background, the paper sheds light that the Agaw language is the main linguistic substratum to ES languages, particularly Tigrigna and Amharic languages, at the deepest level.

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Introduction

In today's world, most societies are multilingual due to migration and globalization. Language contact and interaction is part of the social fabric of the daily life. Languages interact and influence each other in various ways. One of such phenomenon, where two Afroasiatic languages, mainly Cushitic and Semitic, interact to the extent that new languages are created, and the ancient languages are either dead or are in the brink of extinction, is East Africa and particularly the Ethio-Eritrean region. The contact between Agaw and ES languages¹ can be a typical paradigm that explains this phenomenon. These two languages have occupied the same space for more than two millennia and adopted features from each other. This contact eventually led to extensive language transfer of various types and resulted in the creation of new languages rendering the ancient languages to extinction.

Three thousand years ago, all the Horn of Africa, which extends from Southern Egypt as far as the Northern part of Kenya, was inhabited by the various people of Cushitic branch. The modern Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands, as far as central Ethiopia, was inhabited by the Agaw people. (Tamrat 1986, Gamsta 2003). In about 2800 BCE, small number of Proto-Ethiosemitic (PES), a dialect of the Yemeni language of the first millennium BC called Epigraphic South Arabian, speaking merchants crossed the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula (Kitchen et al 2009). Eventually these people settled in enclaves among the indigenous Agaw people. They maintained commerce activities and formed a separate social group in urban areas. This led to the establishment of towns and the usage of PES language as *lingua franca* among the people who were involved in trade and the urban dwellers; as well as a second language by the Agaw people of the countryside. The PES language slowly diffused to the social fabric of the Agaw people, and the majority of Agaw speakers at the time abandoned their language and shifted to the language of the immigrants (Ehret 2010).

The formation and settlement of urban areas eventually culminated in the establishment of Aksumite kingdom by first millennium CE. Geez language, a language derived from PES language, took a special status as a language of governance and as a *lingua franca* of the Aksumite kingdom. With acceptance of Christianity by the Kingdom of the sixth century CE, Geez language overwhelmingly dominated the region from politics to religion, limiting the ancient Agaw language to the peripheries and as a language of uncivilized and pagan people. The kingdom was so unified and centralized, and those who rebelled were treated harshly and forcibly evicted from the central settlements of the territory to the peripheries (Munro-Hay 1991). The effect of such treatment is reflected in the current settlement and the life of the current Agaw-derived language speaking people.

¹ Agaw is a branch of Cushitic language and includes Blin, Ximra, Kayla, Kemant, Qwara, Awi and Kulisi. Whereas ES is a branch of Semitic language which includes Geez, Tigrat, Tigrigna, Amharic, Guragie, Harari, Argoba...etc.

Language is one of the important aspects in studying and depicting history of an ethnic group (Ehret 2010 & 2011). According to Ehret (2011), to apply language as evidence in history of a certain ethnic group, there must be a systematic phonological reconstruction of the language and the languages in which the words appear. In this aspect, the paper identifies some language features between ES and Agaw languages. The contact-induced language change and shift between ES and Agaw languages are also addressed. In the same context, a comparison between Agaw, particularly Blin and ES (Tigrat, Tigrigna and Amharigna) languages is drawn, and supported by few examples to indicate the substratum influence of Agaw languages on ES languages.

Language Influence

When speakers of different languages interact or occupy the same area at the same time, language contact takes place, and the languages influence each other or interfere with one another. Such contact and interaction of languages have a variety of outcomes ranging from borrowing few words to formation or extinction of language; depending on the length and intensity of contact, the types of social, economic and political interaction between the speakers; the functions served by the communication; and the degree of similarity between the languages spoken. The extent of language-language influence on each other can be categorized into three: substratum, superstratum and adstratum.

Substratum influence refers when a language with a lower power (prestige) influences a language with higher power. The substratum language usually diminishes and becomes endangered. On the other hand, **superstratum influence** happens when a language with higher power influences the language with lower power. The superstratum language usually succeeds and becomes dominant/ superior language. Whereas **adstratum influence** is when two languages mutually influence each other without any noticeable status difference. In the latter case, both languages simply borrow lexical words from each other and no replacement of language takes place.

Agaw and ES languages have occupied the same area for more than two millennia. Thus, it is apparent that both languages had interacted and influenced each other; and either the language evolved or new languages are formed as we know today. The influence of Cushitic in general and Agaw in particular in ES languages is clearly detailed by Lesau (1945) and Appleyard (2015), where contact features are seen at every level of linguistic analysis. The assumption is that when the indigenous inhabitants (Agaw speakers) switched to ES language they brought some linguistic features from their original language.

The interaction of Agaw and ES languages in the Ethio-Eritrean plateau is considered as substratum-superstratum phenomenon; where the Agaw language provides the main linguistic substratum to ES languages. Thus, the Agaw language is seen as the linguistic bedrock, especially, to Tigrigna and Amharigna languages at their deepest level (Appleyard 2006). This

substratum influence of Agaw on ES languages can be identified in the latter language's phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics and morphology (Leslau 1945, Crass and Meyer 2011, Appleyard 2015).

Phonology

It is commonly assumed and believed that Geez scripts were introduced to the region with the migrant ES speaking people. However, some scholars see Geez script as of Cushitic origin adopted from Egyptian Hieroglyphs (Gabriella 2001, Shelemay 2005, Bekerie 1997). Similarly, researchers such as Munro-Hays (1991) concur with the African origin of Geez writing system in the region, albeit the Sabean influence. Geez graffiti and inscription existed in the region long before the arrival of Sabeans and were as old as the South Arabian inscriptions. Thus, it is possible that the Geez and Sabean scripts developed parallel on both sides of the Red Sea with a reciprocal impact². Munro-Hays (1991) puts his arguments with regards to this issue as follows:

"Evidently the arrival of Sabaeen influences does not represent the beginning of Ethiopian civilization. For a long time, different peoples had been interacting through population movements, warfare, trade and intermarriage in the Ethiopian region, resulting in a predominance of peoples speaking languages of the Afro-Asiatic family. The main branches represented were the Cushitic and the Semitic. Semiticized Agaw peoples are thought to have migrated from south-eastern Eritrea possibly as early as 2000 BC, bringing their 'proto-Ethiopic' language, ancestor of Ge'ez and the other Ethiopian Semitic languages, with them; and these and other groups had already developed specific cultural and linguistic identities by the time any Sabaeen influences arrived. Features such as dressed stone building, writing and iron-working may have been introduced by Sabaeans, but words for 'plough' and other agricultural vocabulary are apparently of Agaw origin in Ethiopian Semitic languages, indicating that the techniques of food-production were not one of the Arabian imports." (Munro-Hays 1991 p. 50)

Regardless of the origin, Geez scripts are part and parcel of the Ethio-Eritrean people's culture and heritage, be it of Semitic or Cushitic origin. The basic Geez scripts consist of 26 letters and the scripts could reach more than 40 phones depending on the language used. Some of the common additive letters in Geez scripts are the labiovelar (ከ፡ ኸ፡ ቈ፡ ጐ፡ ኻ፡) and prepalatal (ጠ፡ ጺ፡ ሸ፡ ጠ፡ ቸ፡ ኘ፡) phones (Leslau 1945, Appleyard 2012). Labiovelar phones are common in Cushitic languages whereas, they are absent in Semitic languages. Nowadays, labiovelar phones are common among the ES languages, which is an evidence of substratum effect of Cushitic on the ES languages. Similarly, prepalatal phone are also borrowed from the Omotic languages to the ES.

² See Amha (2010) and Meyer (2016) for more information about the origin of Geez scripts.

Lexicon

As the Agaw people are at the heartland of the present Ethio-Eritrean societies, there is obvious lexical borrowing from Cushitic languages to the ES languages (Leslau 1945; Ehret, 2010, 2011; Appleyard 2011, 2015). The lexical influence of Agaw language is apparent in agricultural, domestic and natural environmental terms (Leslau 1945). It is indicated that there is high percentage of Geez loanwords from Agaw languages, 32% borrowed and 24% with common root (Gragg 1991), which makes up about 56% similarity between Agaw and Geez languages. Comparative vocabulary list of Geez and Blin languages is documented by Ghebre (2005, 2013) although no description of word origin is provided.

According to Ehret (2010), Agaw loanwords occur throughout the vocabulary of proto-ethiopic and there are number of Agaw loanwords that entered the core vocabulary of the proto-Ethiopic. Core vocabulary is a small set of simple and commonly used words, referred to as Swadesh list, which are used in any language and facilitate communication and language learning. They are used frequently and across contexts (Baker et al 1997). Core vocabulary is not easily borrowed from other languages, i.e it is resistant to borrowing. Only one to three words per century enter the core vocabulary list of a language (Ehret 2010). ES languages show an intensive borrowing of Agaw vocabularies, where ES languages have about six loanwords in the core vocabulary that are borrowed from Agaw language as shown in Table-1.

Table-1. Agaw core vocabulary loanwords in proto Ethiopic language (Source: Ehret 2010)

Ethiopic root	Source of borrowing	English
ጥስ (t'əs)	Proto-Agaw – ጠዘ (t'əza)	Smoke
ጸጉር (s'äg ^w är)	Proto-Cushitic – ጠጻር (t'ag ^w ar) Proto-East Cushitic – ጦጎር (t'ogor) Blin – ሸጎር (šəg ^w ər)	Hair
እንቃቅህ (Vnk'ak'vh)	Proto-Cushitic - እንካካንህ (ʔink'ok'anh) Proto-Agaw – Possibly እንቃቅህ (ʔənk'ak'ah) Proto-Somali - ኡቃህ (ukah) Proto-Southern Cushitic – ቆቅንህ (k'ok'aanh)	Egg
ደመና (dämmäna)	Proto-Agaw – ደመን (dəmmən / dämmän)	Cloud
ዓስ (ʕas)	Proto-Agaw – ʕas Blin - ዓሳ (ʕas) ³	Fish
በረራ (bärärä)	Agaw: Kemant – በረር (bärär)	To fly

^{3, 4} These words in Blin language are not in Ehret's word list.

	Blin - ብረር (bärär) ⁴ Proto-East Cushitic – ብረር (barar)	
ጾቕ (ፍቅ)	Proto-Agaw - አቕ (ak ^w)	To know

According to Ehret (2010), this kind of borrowing has chronological and demographic implications. The borrowing of six words in core vocabulary implies that the proto-ES period lasted from two to six centuries. Demographically, it indicates that the borrowing language, PES speaking community, was a minority enclave within the majority Agaw speaking population for a long period where PES speaking community were fluent both in the donor language i.e. Agaw and their own for a long time. Finally, the language of the majority population (Agaw) was dropped from use in favor of the original minority population (PES).

Agaw loanwords in ES languages are not only limited to core vocabulary. They are ubiquitous, particularly in the words of natural environment, such as names of nature, fauna, flora...etc; domestic environment, such as the names of domestic animals, agricultural instruments, activities, crops, food and its preparation, and the realm of the house (Appleyard 2006, 2015; Ehret 2010; Crass and Meyer 2012; Edzard 2014) as listed in table-2 below.

Table-2. Some Agaw loanwords in proto-Ethiopic language used in Agricultural and food production (Source: Appleyard 2006, 2015 and Ehret 2010)

Ethiopic root	Source of borrowing	English
ሰርጎ (sərnä)	Proto-Agaw - ሰ.ጎራ (sinra)	Wheat
ተልባ (tälbä)	Proto-North Agaw - ተርባ (tərba)	Flax
ዳጉሳ (dagusa)	Proto-Cushitic - ዲጎጋውስ (dingaws) Proto-Agaw – ዳጉስ (dagus) Proto-East Cushitic – ዲጎጋውስ (dingaws) Blin - ዳጉስ (dagus)	Finger millet
ሰክ (säk)	Proto Agaw – ሰክም (säkum) Blin – ሰክም (sikm)	Barley
ጣፍ (t’äf)	Proto-Agaw – taf Proto-North Agaw – tab Blin - ጣፍ (t’äf)	Teff
ነው (näw)	Proto-North Agaw – ኑው (nuw) Blin - ንው (niw)	Plow

	Beja - ኒዩ (niu)	
ዓርፍ (ʔärf)	Proto-North Agaw – ኣርባን (ärbän) Proto-Agaw – ዓርፍ (ʔärf) Blin - ኣርባና (ʔirbana)	Plowshare
ቦግ (bəgg)	Proto-Agaw – ቦጋ (bəga) Blin - ቦጋ (bägga)	Sheep
ደሮ (däro)	Proto-Agaw - ደርዋ (dirwa) Beja - ኣንደርዋ (ʔandiirho) Afar - ደራሂ (dorrahi) Saho – ደርዋ (därho) Blin - ደርዋ (dirwa)	Hen/ chicken
ሲጋ (siga)	Proto-Agaw – ሲኻ (sixa) Proto-East Cushitic - ሶ (so) Beja – ሻ (ša) Blin - ስኻ (sixa)	Meat

Munro-Hays (1991) confirms that most of the ES language vocabularies used in the agricultural and food production techniques are of Agaw origin. Whereas vocabularies of writing and iron working are of ES origin. On the contrary Ehret (2010, 2011) argues that, in spite of iron being possibly introduced by South Arabian migrants, the root of the word “Biret” (iron) is of Cushitic origin. He asserts that the intrusion of ES speaking people in the western off shores of the Red Sea have brought no civilization except the offshoot dialect of the Sabean language. This contradicts the belief of several scholars and majority of the Ethio-Eritrean people’s perceptions. Ehret described it succinctly as follows:

“The first Ethiosemitic speakers did not come as technologically advantaged conquerors. It may perhaps be possible that the South Arabian settlers introduced iron to the Horn. But what little as has yet been investigated of northeastern African iron working terminology suggests that metallurgy in some form was already known and that the root bir-t- used for “iron” throughout the Horn today was borrowed into early Ethiosemitic from a Cushitic source. Nor did the early Ethiosemitic settlers apparently introduce any significantly different agricultural knowledge or practice to the region of their settlement.”

Moreover, the similarity of names of the human body parts between Geez (ES) and Blin (Agaw) as shown by some examples in table-3 is remarkable. (For more Geez and Blin languages word similarity, see Ghebre 2005 and 2013).

Table-3. Word similarities in the names of the human body parts between Blin and Geez languages (Source: Ghebre 2005, 2013)

Blin	Geez	English	Blin	Geez	English
ዕል	ዓይን	Eye	አነዳ	አነዳ	skin
ላኝቺ	ልሳን	Tongue	ሕምስ	ሕምስ	pubic
ምልቲሕ	መልታሕት	Cheek	እትብ	ዕቲብ	navel
ጉርጉማ	ጉርዔ	Throat	ጭፍር	ጽፍር	nail
አብ	አፍ	Mouth	ጓሽ	ጓቋ	lymph
ተዓንጊ	ትንሐግ	Palate	ከዓስ	ካዕሴ	chime
ዓንቐር	ዓንቀር	pharynx	ሕለላ	ሕለት	penis

Syntax

Syntax is one of the features of ES languages that depict the substratum influence of Cushitic language in ES languages. This influence is apparent in the word order, the position of copula, position of auxiliary verb and the position of subordinate clause.

Word order is one of the typical features of Semitic languages that is of Cushitic origin. Generally, the word order of Semitic languages is verb-subject-object (VSO) or subject-verb-object (SVO), whereas, the word order of Cushitic languages is subject-object-verb (SOV). Accordingly, the ES languages should have followed the semitic language word order. However, the word order of ES languages is SOV like the Cushitic languages in its surrounding in contrast to other Semitic languages spoken across the Red Sea (Leslau 1945, Appleyard 2015). On the other hand, Geez retains the VSO of the Semitic language. Let's see the translation of "My father killed a snake" in Blin, Tigrigna, Tigrarit, Amharic, Geez and Arabic languages. As seen in this example, all ES languages but Geez follow the Cushitic structure.

- Blin - ይኸር ምራቅ ከውሽ።
- Tigrigna - አባይ ተመን ቀቲሉ።
- Tigrarit - አቡየ አርወ ቀትላ።
- Amharigna - አባቴ እባብ ገደለ።

- Geez - አቡዮ ቀተለ አርዌ-ምድር።
- Arabic - قتل ابي ثعبان.

Position of copula is also one of the features that ES languages borrowed from Cushitic languages. It is a word used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate. In Cushitic languages, the copula is at the end of the sentence. In contrast, Semitic languages do not express copula, and if expressed, it is not put at the end (Leslau 1945). On the other hand, ES languages, except in Geez, copula is expressed as in the Cushitic language pattern. For instance, in the sentence “This girl is pretty”, “is” is a copula that links the subject “this girl” with the predicate “pretty”.

- Blin - እና ዓንቂ ሸካርዲ ግን።
- Tigrigna - እዛ ጓል ምልክዕቲ እያ።
- Tigrarit - እላ ወለት ግርም ታ።
- Amharigna - ልጅቷ ቁንጆ ናት።
- Geez - ወለትሂ ግርምት።
- Arabic - جميلة البنت

Position of the auxiliary verb is also another feature that shows the substratum influence of Agaw language on ES languages. In Semitic languages across the Red Sea and in Geez, the auxiliary verb precedes the principal verb, whereas in ES languages the principal verb precedes the auxiliary verb like in the Cushitic languages of the region (Leslau 1945). Look the sentence “He is playing” in the example below in Cushitic and Semitic languages⁵.

- Blin - መዓበኩ እንኩኹ።
- Tigrigna - ይጻወት አሎ።
- Tigrarit - ልተልሀ ሀላ።
- Amharigna - እየተጫወተ ነው።
- Geez - ይትላሀይ
- Arabic - يلعب

Position of the subordinate clause (Head final structure) is also another feature of ES languages that is borrowed from Cushitic languages. Semitic languages have head first structure. However, ES languages use head final structure. That is, the subordinate clause precedes the principal clause which is the structure of Cushitic languages (Leslau 1945, Appleyard 2004, 2015). For instance, let’s see the translation of the sentence “I went to downtown to buy clothes” in some of the languages of the region.

⁵ The expression of subject is not such important in Cushitic and Semitic languages, and gender is expressed by the verb itself. Thus, the subject can be omitted.

- Blin - ሰረን ጅብያ፡ ሱቕ ፈረኸን፡፡
- Tigrigna - ክዳን ክገዝእ፡ ከተማ ከይደ፡፡
- Tigrarit - ልባስ እግልዛበ፡ ሱግ ግስኮ፡፡
- Amharigna - ልብስ ለመግዛት፡ ወደ ገበያ ሄድኩ፡፡
- Geez - ሐርኩ ሃበ ምስያጣት፡ ከመ እሳዩጥ ኣራዝ/ልብስ፡፡
- Arabic - ذهبت إلى وسط المدينة لشراء الملابس

Furthermore, the position of modifying elements like adjective, relative clause and determinants of the state of appurtenance (Leslau 1945) and Light Verb Construction (LVC) (Darmon 2012) are considered other features of Cushitic language origin that were introduced into the ES languages. In general, as it is summarized in table-4 below, ES languages particularly Tigrigna, Tigrarit and Amharic follow more of Cushitic languages structure than the structure of ancient ES language Geez and other Semitic languages across the Red-sea.

Table-4. Syntax structures of Cushitic and Semitic languages

Language	Classification	Word order	Position of copula	Position of auxiliary verb	Position of subordinate clause
Blin	Cushitic	SOV	End of the sentence	After principal verb	Precedes principal clause
Tigrigna	Semitic	SOV	End of the sentence	After principal verb	Precedes principal clause
Tigrarit	Semitic	SOV	End of the sentence	After principal verb	Precedes principal clause
Amharigna	Semitic	SOV	End of the sentence	After principal verb	Precedes principal clause
Geez	Semitic	SVO	Doesn't express	Before principal verb	After principal clause
Arabic	Semitic	VSO	Doesn't express	Before principal verb	After principal clause

Morphology

Morphology is one of the crucial, at the same time complex subject, that helps to understand the origin of a word. The important parts of morphology in deciphering origin of a word are derivation and compounding. Derivation is addition of affixes (prefix and suffix) to the root word, whereas compounding is a combination of words to form a new word. Semitic morphological loanwords or structures from Cushitic are several and are expressed in all linguistic levels (Lesau 1945, Appleyard 2015). Some of the ES languages' morphological expressions that are apparently of Cushitic origin According to Leslau (1945) are listed below:

1. Expression of masculine and feminine. The ES languages use a sex specifying word to distinguish a gender, which is typical of Cushitic languages. For example, ተባዕታይ-ብቕሊ፡

አንስተይቲ-በቕሊ፣ ወንድ-ልጅ፣ ሴት-ልጅ. This type of morphological change is not used in other Semitic languages outside the ES region.

2. Formation of plural by repetition of one of the letters is also other morphological changes that are seen in ES languages. For example, ሹም-ሹማምንቲ፣ ወይዘሪት - ወይዘራዝር፣ ተመን - ተማምን፣ ድገ - ደገጊ፣ ልባስ - ለቡብስ. This type of morphological change is probably borrowed by ES languages from the Cushitic languages.
3. Addition of suffix in abstract nouns in ES languages is probably borrowed from Cushitic languages of the region. These include the suffix:
 - -ና (nna) like in ትሕትና፣ ሕክምና፣ ሰንፍና፣ ዝምድና
 - -ነት (nnät) like in እብድነት፣ ልዩነት፣ ማዕርነት፣ ሐተነት፣
 - -ታ (ta) like in ደስታ፣ ይቕረታ፣ እምቢታ፣ ዝግታ፣ ሱቕታ፣ ሃረርታ
 - -ና/ኛ (gna) like in ፈረሰኛ፣ መንገደኛ፣ ጥበበኛ፣
 - -አ (a) like in ህንጻ፣ ውርሻ፣ ቀረባ፣ፈረቆ፣ ሸፍታ፣ ተራራ፣ ፍለጋ
 - -ኦ (o) like in ንቕሎ፣ ምህሮ፣ ስፍሮ፣ ሕድጎ፣ ለቕሶ፣ በቕሎ፣ ዘንዶ
4. Verbs with frequentative stem. ES languages can form a frequentative from verbs, i.e by repetition of the penultimate letters of the verb. For instance, ቀተለ -ቀታቲሉ፣ ሓጸበ -ሓጸጸቡ፣

These morphological expressions are borrowed from Cushitic languages in general and particularly from Agaw language according to Leslau (1945). However, the expressions are modified or distorted within the recipient language. Thus, it is not easy to identify the borrowed features without deep knowledge and understanding of Cushitic and ES languages.

Conclusion

Indigenous inhabitants of the Ethio-Eritrean plateau were Agaw speaking people and are the progenitors of the current ES language speaking population. Majority of the current ES language speaking people can be seen as Semitic-Agaw people⁶. Today, Agaw language is nonexistent and is metamorphosed to about five language clusters. However, despite the Agaw language being extinct, its influence on ES languages is ubiquitous and is at every level of linguistic feature of these languages. This can be seen in the phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics and morphology of the ES languages. Although the existing literature on this subject is limited, based on the available literature, traditions and history of the region, it is possible to infer that the Agaw language is the main linguistic substratum to the ES languages. Furthermore, the evidence presented shows that the Agaw language has deep roots in the culture and language of today's Ethio-Eritrean societies.

⁶ Majority of the ES speaking population are considered of Cushitic origin. For more information on genealogy of today's Eritrean population, see Kolmodin 1914, Pollera 1935, Raka 1986, Tesfamariam 2009. Moreover, genetic studies have shown no significant difference between Cushitic and ES languages speaking population of the region (Lovell et al 2005).

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