


2018

## Reviving Aspects of Ateetee: An Arsi Oromo Women's Musical Ritual to Empower Women to Protect Their Human Rights and Participate in Society's Social and Religious Life

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

REVIVING ASPECTS OF ATEETEE:  
AN ARSI OROMO WOMEN'S MUSICAL RITUAL TO EMPOWER WOMEN  
TO PROTECT THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATE  
IN SOCIETY'S SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

TALIILEE B. FIQRUU

PORTLAND, OREGON

MARCH 2018

Portland Seminary  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by  
the Dissertation Committee on February 13, 2018  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Global Perspectives.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Almighty God for giving me the strength and opportunity to undertake this research. Without Him, I would not have had the wisdom or ability to finish this dissertation.

I am deeply grateful for the support of my colleagues at Light of Hope Ministry. Thank you Harbe Tuke, Nagesso Kurke, and Rukiya Gure for traveling with me and helping me connect with women in Kokossa, Kofele and Arsi Nagele districts during my fieldwork in summer 2014. I owe a great debt to my informants and the women who made themselves available for hours to share their knowledge about *ateetee* practices. Their active cooperation helped me collect the original data for this dissertation.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my friends and family for their love and support throughout this dissertation process. In particular, I am thankful to my parents, Fikru and Dabale, and my siblings, for their love and prayers. A special thank you goes to my friends Loretta Davis, M.A. and Gilbert George, M.A. for taking the time to read and comment on my work. I also want to express my thanks to my friend Jean Nevills and Elise Prayzich, for your support and unending encouragement throughout my study.

Special thanks to my wonderful husband, Urgessa Biru, Ph.D., for encouraging me and pushing me to complete this study. In fact, revitalizing and preserving Arsi Oromo cultural institutions such as *ateetee* is the vision we share. We both desire to see the Gospel shared in culturally honorable ways among Arsi Oromo people. Thank you for being inspirational to me.

Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my adviser MaryKate Morse, Ph.D. for her continuous encouragement, enduring support, and valuable comments on



my work. Thank you to Jason Clark, DMin, Loren Kerns, Ph.D., and Clifford Berger, DMin, for your insights, guidance, and encouragement through this incredible academic journey.

## ABSTRACT

In the Arsi Oromo society, prior to the introduction of organized religions and subsequent colonization by Abyssinian rulers, women had been leading a cultural musical institution called *ateetee*.<sup>1</sup> It is organized and performed by married women for the purposes of empowering and protecting their interests and the interests of their community. For instance, if a husband violates her well-being, other women would gather in front of the man's house, confront him to admit his fault, and require of him forgiveness. Women also play a great role in bringing peace and reconciliation between warring clans in a non-threatening way, simply by holding their ceremonial stick, *siinqee*, and singing their *ateetee* songs.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, *ateetee* began to decline due to the growing opposition from mosque leaders. Christians have always rejected this ritual and do not realize the implication of cultural identity loss for the sharing the Good News of Jesus. Although Ethiopia's constitution recognizes the importance of customary laws and institutions in conflict management and resolution among local communities, the current autocratic government is destroying Oromo culture by forcing *ateetee* women to organize to support their political agenda. Hence, this dissertation unfolds the importance of revitalizing aspects of the *ateetee* institution<sup>3</sup> and seeks to answer the main research question: How can Arsi women today be empowered to protect their human rights and participate in society's social and religious life?

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<sup>1</sup> Tsega Endalew, *Inter-ethnic Relations on a Frontier: Mätakkäl (Ethiopia), 1898-1991*. (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2006), 115.

<sup>2</sup> Ayalew Getachew Assefa, *A Customary Laws in Ethiopia: A Need for Better Recognition: A Women's Rights Perspective* (Danish Institute for Human Rights [DIHR], 2012), 45.

<sup>3</sup> In literature, *ateetee* is referred to both as a ritual and institution. I use these words interchangeably in this dissertation.

This dissertation is an ethnographic<sup>4</sup> study dealing with primary sources and exploring a solution in an oral culture. Section one explores the development of Christianity and Islam among the traditional Arsi Oromo people of Oromia, Ethiopia. It specifically addresses the Christian Abyssinian king and priests' colonial approaches that forced the Arsi Oromos to embrace Islam, which in its early period served as an escape religion, but is now imposing its religious values on the Arsi Oromo culture. Section two examines scholarly discussions and solutions offered to empower women's leadership and protect their rights through the *ateetee* institution. Section three explores ways churches can empower Arsi Oromo Christian mothers to participate in *ateetee* rituals to give voice to women in society. It also explores contextualization of the *ateetee* ritual for fostering understanding and narrowing the social and cultural gap between Christian and non-Christian Arsi Oromo people. This dissertation also includes the description of my artifact that contains video of *ateetee* rituals and interviews with village mothers in the three regions of Oromia State: Arsi Nagele, Kofale, and Kokossa, Ethiopia.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007).

## SECTION 1: CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Long before there was an organized governing system in Ethiopia, women in the Arsi Oromo culture had been leading a musical ritual called *ateetee*. The *ateetee* ritual gave women in the Oromo culture a voice at home and in their community. At home, most Arsi husbands tend to abuse their wives verbally and physically. In select circumstances such as pregnancy or childbirth, however, men in the Oromo culture are expected to refrain from physical abuse. If a man does abuse his wife in those select circumstances, any woman in the neighborhood who saw should intervene and make a noise (elelele) for help. When other women in the village hear that noise, they grab their *siinqee*—a stick mothers give their daughters upon their wedding day—and run toward the sound immediately. Anyone responding would continue to make the same noise until everyone arrives. The women would stand or sit in a circle and sing of the incident, telling of how the man violated his wife’s rights and hurt her well-being. The women would not return to their homes until the husband admitted his faults and asked for forgiveness. In most cases, the reconciliation process requires the killing of a sheep or cow to celebrate the reconciliation and bless the family.<sup>5</sup> In a culture that allows men to abuse their wives, Arsi women need the *ateetee* institution to protect themselves and keep their families from falling apart.

Arsi women also play a great role in resolving conflicts between warring individuals or clans in a non-threatening way, simply by holding their *siinqee* and making

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<sup>5</sup> Leila Qashu, “Toward an Understanding of Justice, Belief, and Women’s Rights: Ateetee, an Arsi Oromo Women’s Sung Dispute Resolution Process in Ethiopia” (PhD diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2016), 27.

a sound (elelele). When women with *siinqee* intervene, conflicting parties are culturally required to stop fighting because they are seen as *woyyuu*<sup>6</sup> (as sacred or having high esteem) and respected in the society.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, when drought strikes, women collectively intercede on behalf of their community. They would leave their homes and stay under a tree day and night and persistently pray to God until they received rain. Men would take care of the family so that women could focus on their prayers.

### **The Problem**

Unfortunately, religious leaders disregarded the importance of women's leadership through *ateetee* as they introduced Christianity and Islam. Similar to the Orthodox Church, Protestant churches in Arsi blindly reject *ateetee*, or, for that matter, anything about the Oromo culture. Islam has been relatively tolerant toward the Arsi Oromo culture. In recent years, however, some Muslim leaders have become very critical of *ateetee* rituals. Arsi women have been discouraged from getting together and making their voices heard, but men have not been stopped from abusing women either physically or verbally. The story below is indicative of the growing rejection of women's public leadership through *ateetee* by some radical Muslims.

In the Kore village of southeast Oromia Ethiopia, a group of Arsi Oromo mothers gathered under a tree. They were sitting in a circle, holding their *siinqee*, a sacred marriage stick, and praying to Waaqa (God) for rain. While they were performing their

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<sup>6</sup> For more discussion on the concept of *woyyuu*, see section 3.

<sup>7</sup> Amanuel Raga and Hirut Woldemariam, "Linguistic Sexism as Religious Offense Among the Oromo," *Academic Journals* 5, no. 1 (July 2014): 5, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.academicjournals.org/journal/JLC/article-full-text-pdf/37E50CD43730>.

prayers to God, they saw in the distance two men walking toward them. When the men arrived, the women expected the men to approach them in a culturally respectful manner. Instead the men had much anger in their faces and with loud voices began to command the women to stop praying and return to their homes immediately. The men said that the mothers' prayer through *ateetee* rituals was a remnant pagan practice, which contradicts the teachings of Islam. Dismayed and shocked by the incident, the women screamed to get help from the villagers. Sadly, the men, instead of apologizing, which is what men are supposed to do when they violate *ateetee* rituals, began to fight with the women, taking the women's sacred sticks and breaking them in front of the mothers' eyes. Soon, with the help of villagers and police from the local district, the women were rescued. The men were taken to prison for endangering women and violating their human rights.

As demonstrated above, the *ateetee* ritual is facing criticism by those who see it as incompatible with their religion. The emergence of a new reform movement within Islam presents a greater threat for Arsi women to freely exercise their leadership in public. Mosque leaders are not only teaching against the ritual in their worship places but also attacking those who practice the institution. In the same way, Christians have also been against *ateetee* because of their fear of syncretism. Currently, as a result of sociocultural and religious group interferences, the tradition that protected women's rights appears to be declining in Arsi.<sup>8</sup> Evidently, without their traditions, women feel powerless to resolve conflicts, to resist gender abuse, to gather and pray freely when natural calamities strike.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research*. 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007).

Thus, this dissertation employs an ethnographic approach dealing with primary sources and exploring a solution to answer how Arsi women today can be empowered to protect their human rights and participate in society's social and religious life. It is pivotal to begin by exploring the shifts in social change to accurately analyze Arsi Oromo experiences with Christianity and Islam throughout history. The perspective on historical settings will certainly offer clues for understanding how the Arsi women are negotiating public space amidst rampant social change.

### **The Arsi Oromo People Perspective**

The Oromo are the single largest people group both in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa.<sup>10</sup> In Ethiopia, Oromo people constitute more than 40% of the total population. According to Asmarom Legesse, "The total area of the Oromo-speaking nation is 367,000 sq.km. about as large as Germany."<sup>11</sup> Afaan Oromo, the language of the Oromo people, is the "third most widely spoken language in Africa, after Arabic and Hausa."<sup>12</sup> The Oromo live largely in the regional state of Oromia, "the largest and the most populous of the nine regional states formed following the downfall of the Dergue [communist] regime in May 1991."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Asmarom Legesse, *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People* (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Jeylan Wolyie Hussein, "A Critical Review of the Political and Stereotypical Portrayals of the Oromo in the Ethiopian Historiography," *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Alemaya University, Ethiopia, 2006.

Oral tradition says that the Oromo people have grown from two major clans, Borana and Barentu. From these two major clans several more clans spread to different parts of the Oromo lands.<sup>14</sup> Arsi Oromo is descended from the Barentu family.<sup>15</sup> Afaan Oromo, or Oromiffa, the native language of Oromo people, is part of the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family.<sup>16</sup> Although the Oromo are in the majority, their language was silenced in schools and public centers until recently.<sup>17</sup> As Edmond J. Keller succinctly describes,

The destruction of Oromo culture, as that of other non-Amhara groups, was systematic. Oromo culture was degraded. It was illegal to write, preach, or broadcast in any Oromo dialect. In elementary school the language of instruction was Amharic. At the upper levels English became the medium of instruction. Over the brief period of Italian Occupation, the Oromo language was promoted, but on reassuming power, Haile Selassie again banned the Oromo language from public use.<sup>18</sup>

Ethiopia's Amharic-only language policies were intended to create one ethnic hegemonic state. The one-language policy undermined the diversity and plurality on which the country stands.<sup>19</sup> Language as a key component in human development is the only means "through which any human society could produce, develop, exchange and disseminate knowledge and information for self-actualization, economic and social

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<sup>14</sup> Assafa Jalata, "Oromo Peoplehood: Historical and Cultural Overview," *Sociology Publications and Other Works*, March 2, 2010, [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_socopubs/6](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_socopubs/6).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People* (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Asafa Jalata, *Oromo Nationalism and The Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, Inc, 1998), 187.

<sup>18</sup> Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Birhanemeskel Abebe Segni, "10 Reasons Why Afaan Oromo Should be a Federal Working Language," *Horn Affairs*, March 1, 2015, accessed January 9, 2018, <https://hornaffairs.com/2015/03/01/afaan-oromoo-be-federal-working-language/>.



development.”<sup>20</sup> The Ethiopian government’s denial of the Afaan-Oromo-speaking population their basic human rights through its Amharic-only policies “left the Oromo people outside all economic, social, and religious and educational institution framework.”<sup>21</sup> The historical injustice that the Oromo people have gone through and are going through right now is a result of Ethiopia’s failure to accept and respect the equality of various nations, nationalities, languages, and ethnic identities within its borders. Thereby, the *ateetee* institution is one great example of women’s contribution to the survival of Oromo language, cultural values, and identity. The next sections are devoted specifically to an analysis of the approaches used to introduce Christianity and Islam to the Arsi Oromo people.

### *Traditional Religion*

Before the coming of Christianity and Islam, the Arsi Oromo people believed in *Waaqa* or *Rabbi* (God).<sup>22</sup> For Arsi, *Waaqa* and *Rabbi* are “identical and these terms are employed interchangeably in daily life and prayers.”<sup>23</sup> Both *Waaqa* and *Rabbi* approximate what is meant by the English word “God.” *Waaqa*’s other meaning is “sky, that is the vault of the sky as we see it.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike Christianity and Islam, which have a formalized form of religion, written doctrines, and religious books, the Oromo traditional

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ulrich Braukamper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays* (Munster: Lit, 2002), 164.

<sup>23</sup> Abas H Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 174.

<sup>24</sup> Lambert Bartels, *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia, an Attempt to Understand* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1983), 89.

religion is passed down orally. We do not know how often they formally worship or if they have a definite day to worship. The Oromos worship under trees, beside *huraa* (a mineral spring water), and in the *gammoo* (a place of worship), though many of the *gammoo*s were destroyed by the Orthodox Church and replaced with churches.<sup>25</sup>

The Oromo concept of God seems similar to that found in the Old Testament and perhaps in the Qur'an. God is a Supreme Being, "the creator of everything, source of all life, omnipresent, infinite, incomprehensible, he can do and undo anything, he is pure, intolerant of injustice, crime, sin and all falsehood."<sup>26</sup> The Oromo refer to God as the one who has many names in various languages, as they often say: "Waaqa afaan dhibbaa, God with hundreds of languages; Waaqa maqaa dhibbaa, God with hundreds of names."<sup>27</sup> Community is very central in the Arsi Oromo religious practices. Most of the rituals and festivals are practiced as a family or community. Living in the community requires both keeping virtues and abhorring sin.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, the Oromo ancestors and dead family members are remembered and celebrated for their great deeds and the good inheritance they left behind. Some Oromo writers caution others not to misunderstand the Oromo traditional religion followers' connection with ancestors, as if they are worshipping them. According to oral tradition, some Oromo did practice ancestral worship by offering the first fruit of their farm to receive the ancestors' blessings. This kind of ritual is often practiced within the family

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<sup>25</sup> Negasso Gidada, *History of the Sayyoo Oromo of Southwestern Wallaga, Ethiopia from about 1730 to 1886* (Ethiopia: Mega Printing Press, 2001), 147.

<sup>26</sup> Melba, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Fayyis Oromia, "Waaqeffannaa, the African Traditional Faith System," September 2011, accessed November 19, 2013, <http://gadaa.com/oduu/11044/2011/09/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

setting, which cautions researchers not to generalize about the practice, since the practice of each family differs. Unlike Christians and Muslims, who believe in life after death, the Oromo religion followers do not believe in suffering after death. Therefore, Oromos believe that when one dies he or she “exists in the form of a spirit called the *ekeraa*.”<sup>29</sup> If one sins, he or she will be punished for their sins while still alive. Also, if they do good works, they will receive their rewards here on earth.

It has been said that the traditional Oromo never worshipped false gods or carved statues as substitutes. Melba Gadaa quotes M. de Almeida (1628-1646) who says, “the [Oromos] are neither Christians, moors nor heathens, for they have no idols to worship.”<sup>30</sup> However, the Oromo people believed in *Qaallu* (a religious leader), a person who was said to have “a special relationship with one of the *ayyaana* [spirit], which possesses him at regular intervals.”<sup>31</sup> The *ayyaana* in this context seems an evil spirit because of its possessing character, which is very common among the people who practice *qaallu* ritual. However, many Oromo nationalists (such as Asafa Jalata, Mohammed Hassesn) disagree with this idea because they believe in *ayyaana* as a medium connector of the world with God. According to Jalata, *Waaqa* [God] through *ayyaana* created everything and “through *ayaana* these worlds are also connected to their creator.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Melba, “Oromia,” 27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jalata, “Oromo,” 34

## Gadaa System

Before and during the Amhara conquests in the sixteenth century, the Oromo people had their own centralized, autonomous, self-governing social system called *Gadaa*, which they used to govern their socio-political and religious life in entirety.<sup>33</sup> *Gadaa* is a unique democratic social organization where power shifts into new hands every eight years. “The male members of the society would join *Gadaa* classes and pass through a number of age-grades that lasted for a period of eight years.”<sup>34</sup> The word *Gadaa* means “age or period during which particular natural events took place.”<sup>35</sup> Each *Gadaa* period followed each other and lasted for eight years. The community celebrates the beginning of each *Gadaa* year with great rituals and feasts, usually by the *huraa* (the mineral spring).<sup>36</sup> There are ample scholarly works, especially of Asmarom Legesse, which emphasize the relevance of *Gadaa* to a modern democratic constitutional system.

As Gnamo quotes:

Oromo Democracy is one those remarkable creations of the human mind that evolved into to a full-fledged system of government, as a result of five centuries of evolution and deliberate rational legislative transformation. It contains genuinely African solutions for some of the problems that democracies have had to face...Institutions that reached maturity in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries... cannot be transplanted wholesale into the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the Oromo nation faces a different set of challenges. Nevertheless, we can derive some of the principles critical to the democratic philosophy of the Oromo and present as source material for contemporary African constitutional thought.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hassen, *The Oromo*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Teshome Amenu, “The Rise and Expansion of Islam in Bale of Ethiopia: Socio-cultural and Political Factors and Inter-religious Relations” (MA diss., Norsk Lærarakademi, 2008), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Gidada, *History of the Sayyoo*, 154.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>37</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 196.

After the sixteenth century, each group was forced to develop their own autonomous *Gadaa* system because of an internal increase in population and territories, and also because of external forces such as the war with Christian Abyssinians, which endangered their continued existence<sup>38</sup> and the expansion of Islam that hastened the decline of *Gadaa* system.

In Arsi, there are five *Gadaa* periods, known as *Birmaji*, *Bultuma*, *Horaataa*, *Baharaa*, and *Roballe*. All the names were given with specific symbols—negative or positive. “They represent, therefore, peace, prosperity, fecundity, long life, and rain in the order above.”<sup>39</sup> Each Arsi Oromo clan is organized under one of the five groups. As Teshome Amenu explains, a unique characteristic of Arsi *Gadaa* is that “each clan was autonomous and independent and had its own *Gadaa* area and a community form of the *Gadaa* government under *Abbaa Boku*,”<sup>40</sup> [father of the scepter] one of the leaders in the *Gadaa* with no political power but mainly concerned for the well-being of the society.

The main limitation of the *Gadaa* system is that it excludes women from direct involvement with men in dispute resolution. However, women, using *ateetee* rituals, intersect the social, religious, and political spheres.

### **The Introduction of Christianity**

Christianity and Islam are two major religions which have a long running history and enduring impacts on the diverse communities of Ethiopia. Both religions each

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<sup>38</sup> Assafa Jalata, “Oromo Peoplehood: Historical and Cultural Overview,” *Sociology Publications and Other Works*, March 2, 2010, [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_socopubs/6](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_socopubs/6).

<sup>39</sup> Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 36.

<sup>40</sup> Amenu, “The Rise,” 25.

constitute approximately half of the total population. The coming of Orthodox Christianity was dated to the first half of the fourth century.<sup>41</sup> First it was spread to the holders of power—the kings and royal families—securing the help of the upper class from the very beginning. The subjects of the kings “would embrace the faith in a way that did not depend on personal conversion or choice.”<sup>42</sup> It was with this mindset that the Shoan king Menelik II marched against the Arsi Oromo in the late 1880s. Menelik desired to create a unified country and his zeal to expand the Christian Abyssinian territory led him to hold extensive military campaigns into non-Christianized regions.

The Arsi Oromos, having a wide demography, internal peace, and unity, successfully resisted Menelik for more than six years, who was the one who defeated Italy in a single battle. As Abbas Haji Gnamo describes, “The [Oromo] of Galan and the Abichn fought for seven years and every time the Galan were the victors...”<sup>43</sup> Although the Arsi managed to resist for such a long period, they lost the war against their enemy because of “internal political circumstances and international relations favorable to colonial conquest and particularly by his monopoly of modern firearms.”<sup>44</sup> Otherwise, Menelik would not have colonized the Arsi Oromo.

Menelik and the Amhara priests did all they could to wipe out the Arsi from the face of the earth, but they could not. At the end, they realized the Arsi Oromos “were too

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<sup>41</sup> Fekadu Gurmesa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia: Origins and Establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press), 26.

<sup>42</sup> Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>43</sup> Abas Haji Gnamo, “Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism,” accessed August 11, 2013, <http://www.romiannationalacademy.com/Articles.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Bichaka Fayissa, ed. “The Journal of Oromo Studies,” Middle Tennessee State University. *The Journal of Oromo Studies*. Murfreesboro, TN: Oromo Studies Association, 1993.

numerous to be exterminated or expelled, they had to be incorporated.”<sup>45</sup> Menelik’s legacy reflects an immeasurable loss of resources and human lives. The colonized Arsi were denied their identity, lost most of their culture, and their stories were told from the perspectives of the oppressors. The following quote captures the political, economic, and ethno-religious grievances of Arsi Oromo against their colonizers as summarized by General Waqo Gutu, the leader of the Bale uprising of the 1960s:

Notice, when the Amhara occupied our country with the help of European imperialists in 1885-1889 many of our people were massacred. Then the survivors were allotted like slaves to the settlers who partitioned our lands amongst themselves. Remember that they plundered and distorted our historical legacy that is widely known; that they violated our dignity, calling us the filthy Galla. Do you realize how many times you have been denied justice in the courts of law? You, Muslims, your religion has been denigrated and you do not share equality with Christians. Innumerable crimes that have not been committed by European colonialists on the African peoples have been perpetrated upon you. You have been crushed for eighty years now.<sup>46</sup>

Forceful conversion is another method that the Orthodox Church used to incorporate the conquered people into Christianity. Military generals and conquered local people were commanded “to do their best to convert their people to Christianity. Their conversion was seen by Menelik as an important means of integrating them into his Christian empire.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, he ordered “the eradication of the local cults and the destruction of ‘pagan’ temples and replaced them with Orthodox churches and monasteries.”<sup>48</sup> To escape this forceful conversion to their enemies’ religion, the Oromo

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<sup>45</sup> Gnamo, “Islam.”

<sup>46</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 191.

<sup>47</sup> Bartels, *Oromo Religion*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 17.

converted to Islam, which was tolerant to their traditional religion in its early expansion.<sup>49</sup>

### *Church and State Hand in Hand*

Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity is rooted in the Amhara culture. Their desire was to completely eradicate the Arsi Oromo and replace them. As Abbas Haji Gnamo states, the Orthodox church “justified imperial conquest and alienation of the subject peoples including its own followers whom it plundered and reduced to serfdom—the Church was allocated up to 30% of the land in the country, most of which was expropriated from the newly incorporated Oromo regions.”<sup>50</sup> It appears that the driving force for the Amhara priests was not evangelization but control over the land and natural resources. If Arsi Oromo had political ambition, they must convert to Orthodox Christianity, learn Amharic, and accept other imperial codes in order to insure their social mobility and acceptance.<sup>51</sup> Despite their efforts to gain acceptance, the Oromos felt alienated and were treated as second-class citizens by the Orthodox Church. The following reflection asserts the Oromo perception of the mission of Ethiopian Orthodox church and the priests:

The Orthodox Church can hardly be proud of its past relations with the Oromo people. Abyssinian priests never came to Oromia as the messenger of God and peace. They came as conquerors with Menelik’s generals, “blessing” the massacre that the latter and their soldiers inflicted upon the Oromo people. They shared with the emperor, his generals and soldiers booties plundered from the Oromo. The clergy were given land that was confiscated from the Oromo peasants and

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<sup>49</sup> Patrick Desplat and Terje Ostebo, *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics and Islamic Reforms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 97.

<sup>50</sup> Ganamo, “Islamm,”

<sup>51</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 183.



became landlords; they owned Oromo peasants as *Gabbars* (serfs) and thrived upon their labor.<sup>52</sup>

It was due to the Orthodox church's oppression that the Arsi Oromo adopted Islam to resist Christian domination. Unfortunately, "it was not only the Orthodox church that the Arsi Oromo rejected but also Christian Missionaries of all denominations."<sup>53</sup> Today, Arsi Oromos are predominantly followers of Islam and followers of their traditional religion, with a small percentage of Protestant and Orthodox Christians.

### *Enduring Consequences*

Christianity, for the Arsi Oromo, is synonymous with Amhara due to the church's failure "to transcend cultural barriers and connect with the people of the south [such as the Arsi Oromo] in a meaningful way."<sup>54</sup> The biggest challenge for Christianity in Ethiopia is the hatred and disharmony that exists between the Ethiopian Orthodox and Protestant Christians. Internal Christian hatred is the main barrier preventing Muslim and traditional religion followers from knowing Jesus. Although there are many commonalities, the Christian focus is on doctrinal differences and religious rituals. They both claim to have the right religion but choose not to respect one another's differences and others around them.

Another problem with Orthodox Christians is that they presume their religion is indigenous, though it is not, and they label Protestant Christianity as a religion imported with aid and Islam as a religion of invaders. In some regions where Orthodox Christianity

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<sup>52</sup> Gnamo, "Islamm."

<sup>53</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Girma, *The In-between People*, 179.

and Islam are the dominant religion, Protestants suffer “exclusion from iddirs [community credit union], families, and funerals...”<sup>55</sup> Protestants often are hindered by Orthodox believers from using public spaces for worship. Property destruction, assaults and killings have also been typical of the Orthodox Christians toward Protestants.<sup>56</sup> In order to bring about peace and a healthy relationship between these two groups, “opening the door for dialogue [to learning and sharing about one another faith journey] for peaceful coexistence, developing mutual trust, and love instead of employing force”<sup>57</sup> can heal past wounds.

### **Islam and the Arsi Oromo**

#### *Historical Setting*

Contrary to Christianity, which came to Arsiland through colonialism, Islam was introduced through peaceful expansion of missionary activities.<sup>58</sup> As Gnamo describes, Islam in Arsi was introduced by

the Muslim scholars (Ulama’a) coming from the missionary center of Harar, from Somali areas and even from Wollo. Teachers like Sheikh Ahmed of Wollo and Sheike Abbas of Argobba were pioneers who came to Arsi at the end of the 19th century. However, The Islam’s history goes back to the 7th century when the first Muslims sought refuge in Ethiopia to escape religious persecution in Arabia. By the 9th and 10th century the Muslim immigrants were already established on the

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<sup>55</sup> Mersha Alehegne, “The Orthodox-Protestant Relationship in Ethiopia: A Glimpse on Interaction, Attitude, Causes of Disharmony, Consequences, and Some Solutions,” in *Ethiopia and Missions*, eds. Verena Boll, Steven Kaplan, Andreu Martinze d’Alos-Moner, and Evgenia Sokolinskaia. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 205.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>58</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 185.

coasts of Eritrea and the Somali peninsula which is the hinterlands of the Bale, one of the areas where Muslim Arsi Oromo predominantly live.<sup>59</sup>

Starting from this period on, the relations between Christians and Muslims began to become increasingly tense.

According to Ulrich Braukamper, the settlement of Bale between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries was heterogeneous: the majority were Hadiyya-Sidama stock who were the ruling minority from the north Amhara.<sup>60</sup> The “holy war” between the Christian Ethiopian Empire and the Muslims of Adal, under their leader Ahmad B. Ibrahim (Ahmed Gran by Ethiopian), in 1531, contributed to the Islamization of inhabitants in Bale. When the Arsi Oromo conquered the Bale between 1540 and 1560, the inhabitants were already Muslims, which provided potential Islamization of the Arsi.<sup>61</sup>

Another factor for the Islamization of the Arsi Oromo is “the sanctuary of Shaikh Husayn and Oromo-Somali connections in Bale.”<sup>62</sup> From the eighteenth through the second half of the nineteenth century, the Somalis occupied the Bale state and most of the areas formerly occupied by Arsi Oromo. As Ulrich says, “they were mostly on warlike terms with the Arsi Oromo and forced them to retreat steadily.”<sup>63</sup> But the Somalis also began to intermarry with Oromo, which started a process of assimilation.

The Christian-Muslim relationship in Arsi regions has gone through many confrontations and wars. Due to the unjust historical, social, religious, and political factors, Christian Amharas and Arsi Oromo incurred a deep-rooted hatred toward one

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<sup>59</sup> Braukamper, *Islamic History*, 135.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 135.

another.<sup>64</sup> The fact that Ethiopia is known to be the first country to host Muslim refugees made some Christians perceive Muslims as second-class citizens. Evidently, religious discrimination and oppression have always been the root cause of discontent and grievance narratives among the Arsi Oromo.<sup>65</sup> In spite of their religious sensitivity and insecurity, Christians and Muslims currently manage to co-exist relatively peacefully.

The biggest concern that the Christian community has toward Muslims is not with their allegedly fast growth in members, but with their intolerance toward Christians, especially Protestants. Muslims are doing their best in converting others to their faith, but they become intolerant when Christians share their faith with them. For instance, if a Muslim person converts to Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, he or she is more likely to face rejection. There is religious freedom in the Ethiopian constitution; however, the law is not enforced to protect civilian rights. There is a deep-rooted misperception between these groups that can only be resolved if they are willing to dialogue respectfully and appreciate their differences.

### *Current Developments*

To the majority of Arsi Oromo Muslims today, Islam is more than just a religion; it is part of their Oromo identity. Islam defines their worldviews and guides Oromo Muslims' daily lives. Despite the inability of most Islamic Oromos to read and understand the Quran in Arabic, they trust their leaders and believe what they hear about

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<sup>64</sup> Desplat and Ostebo, *Muslim Ethiopia*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 191.

their faith.<sup>66</sup> Oromo Muslims proudly identify themselves with Islam because the Islam that was presented to them was specifically adapted to their culture. Today, however, Islam in Ethiopia has shown a great deal of cultural shift in missions and strategies. Their leaders do not tolerate any of principles or the customary institutions that are related to the *Gadaa* system or *Ateetee/Siinqee* rituals.<sup>67</sup> Looking back ten or fifteen years, there was no such pressure on the Arsi Muslim women to cover themselves from head to toe. Obviously, to the eyes of the Sheiks and Imams, the Arsi culture is incompatible with Islamic teachings, and now they feel the need to teach the Arsi people how to bury their dead and how to marry their children. It is heartbreaking to see the Arsi culture slowly fading and being replaced by the Arab culture in the name of religion. Now it makes sense when Haggai says, “The Saudi religious establishment targeted the Oromos as a main vehicle for the Islamization, and indeed for the Arabization, of Ethiopia.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, the changing of the indigenous culture is happening across the country among Muslim communities.

Since I grew up in Arsiland and have first-hand experience of the cultural shifts, the majority of Oromos are not happy with the influence of the Arab culture; however, they do not know how to argue. Islam as a religion that spread throughout the world by adapting to the culture of the people is no longer true among the Arsi Oromo. The Islamic approach to the indigenous culture has changed dramatically in negative ways.<sup>69</sup> Muslim religious leaders are branding Oromo cultural practices such as *ateetee* as a cult that

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<sup>66</sup> Braukamper, *The Islamization*, 152.

<sup>67</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 185.

<sup>68</sup> Erlich, Haggai. *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 21.

<sup>69</sup> Braukamper, *The Islamization*, 163.

needs to be invalidated in the name of Islam. Although, some scholars assert that “there is no political Islam among the Oromo,”<sup>70</sup> the Islamic faith and its impact on the Arsi Oromo socio-cultural life is evident. What the Muslim leaders fail to remember is that the Arsi converted to Islam even without fully understanding the Quran due to a relatively less aggressive approach by their Muslim Somali neighbors, Arab traders, and other Muslim settlers in Arsiland.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the Muslim rejection of Oromo culture and identity seems to negate the Oromo’s quest to revive national identity. As Gnamo explains, for the Oromo, their “objectives of decades-long struggle and resistance against the successive imperial governments have never been to build a religious state or to empower any specific religious groups, but to win religious equality and collective political rights for the Oromo people.”<sup>72</sup> It is important that the Arsi Muslims evaluate how these cultural shifts in their faith are affecting or benefiting their social and religious lives.

### Summary

What happened in the Christian-Muslim relationship centuries ago, though it seems far away from our twenty-first-century generation, still continues to impact and shape today’s worldview in the Oromo culture. Orthodox Christians among the Arsi Oromo continue to identify with the Amhara culture and choose not to be relevant to

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<sup>70</sup> Gnamo *Conquest and Resistance*, 203.

<sup>71</sup> Braukamper, *The Islamization*, 152.

<sup>72</sup> Gnamo *Conquest and Resistance*, 203.

others within their culture.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the majority of Protestant churches perceive worshipping in the Oromo language and culture as a barrier to the unity of the church, encouraging believers to abandon their culture and embrace the church's culture. It is always a challenge for new believers to know how to relate to their family members or communities since they are extracted from their culture. Christian leaders need to develop a healthy attitude toward Oromo people and their culture so that they will know how to make the Good News relevant to them. Instead of dismissing blindly, it is crucial that we study the Oromo culture and understand it and engage it, and then, if need be, oppose it on matters of principle.<sup>74</sup>

In the same way, Islam's approach has changed in recent years. Current leaders are introducing Arab culture in the name of Islam and telling the Arsi Oromo to adapt. For instance, in the Arsi culture when someone dies, it is customary for a family and relatives to mourn for their dead for a couple of days. Now the radical sheiks are telling Arsi Muslims not to cry or serve meals to the guests who come to comfort the family.

Culturally, Arsi do not require girls to cover their heads, but the new Islamic teachings require all women to cover from head to toe; otherwise, they are tempting men to sin. The growing numbers of Arsi Muslim women do not see this as a problem, since they are told they are doing it for God, not men. It is important for Arsi Muslims and Christians to pay attention to the things that affect their culture and remember that their culture is also created by God, who does not have any favorite culture since all cultures belong to Him.

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<sup>73</sup> Bekele Girma, *The In-between People: A Reading of David Bosch Through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 178.

<sup>74</sup> Martha Kuwee Kumsa, *Songs of Exile* (Ontario: Duudhaa, 2013).

## SECTION 2:

### ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY

Arsi Oromo, an indigenous society with a unique history and culture, has its own traditional methods of resolving family and community conflicts. Section two is a preliminary attempt to review alternative solutions on reviving aspects of the *ateetee* institution for Arsi Oromo women to have a voice in their community. There is not much data from which one can draw information for the purpose of comparative analysis. Considerable attentions have been given to the study of the *Gadaa* system, a male-only socio-political cultural institution; however, the study of the *ateetee* institution is in its initial stage. In this section, other scholarly perspectives of *ateetee* will be examined and critiqued.

#### ***Ateetee* and the Human Rights Discourse**

Generally speaking, theorists and policymakers often portray ethno-cultural traditions as a source of patriarchy and inequality to women's rights. Cultural traditions, such as the *ateetee* that Arsi Oromo communities have been utilizing for centuries to ensure equality, including women's rights, tend to be disdained. Instead, Western-inspired liberal individualistic rights were promoted to improve gender equality at the international level. In the following sections, I will discuss evidence of emerging scholarly studies recognizing the need to undertake serious investigation of indigenous conflict resolution systems and incorporate them into present human rights discourses.



*Ateetee Institution for Peacemaking*

In his article “The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution: Perspectives from an Indigenous System,” Hamdesa Tusso discusses the need to incorporate and balance indigenous institutions and Western conflict resolution systems. Tusso begins by highlighting the limitations of the emergence of ‘Conflict Resolution’ as a new paradigm from the Western world. The Western world paradigm lacks a “serious exploration” and “incorporation of conflict resolution systems which have been created and practiced by indigenous people in various cultural, social, and historical settings.”<sup>75</sup> The Western resolution model is a third-party mediation that is predicated on bringing externality and neutrality, whereas in indigenous cultures, like Oromo, internality and familiarity are highly valued.

Another limitation for stern mediation models is that they require professionalism to legitimize the external intervener. Hence, Tusso contends that “While social conflict is a universal experience in human communities, culture defines the social ethos, the ‘enemy,’ rules of engagement, taboos, sanctions of conflicts, and the frame of reference for their resolution.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, the subject of conflict resolution should not limit the scope for the analysis of peacemaking only to a “rational” dimension (e.g., negotiation and mediation).<sup>77</sup> Instead, the peacemaking effort should encompass “a variety of rich activities which various segments undertake in order to ensure peace and justice in

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<sup>75</sup> Hamdesa Tusso, “The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution: Perspectives from an Indigenous System,” *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership—Sharing the Vision* 2, no. 2. (Spring 1998): 29.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

societies.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, Tusso emphasizes the importance of including perspectives from Oromo indigenous conflict resolution systems such as *ateetee*, which is rooted in Oromo cosmology that links all “the creatures, human and nature, that are the creation of *Waaqa* (the supernatural), and, therefore, all have the right to have a fair treatment on this earth.”<sup>79</sup>

*Ateetee*, as described by Tusso, is an institution found in the Oromo society with considerable variations.<sup>80</sup> *Ateetee* is the institution run and organized by women for the purpose of empowering and protecting their interests. Women use *ateetee* to resolve conflicts between various groups: (1) female-female conflict; (2) male-female conflict; (3) intra-Oromo conflict; and (4) intra-ethnic group conflict. Furthermore,

In addition to playing a critical role in peacemaking, women play important role in serving as intermediaries between the divine and the human. In particular, women organize themselves and pray for mercy and forgiveness in case of drought. Typically, they march, singing “arrarro Rabio” (oh our God have mercy on us and give us rain) to the nearest river and plead with the Creator for rain.<sup>81</sup>

Tusso makes a great case, showing “the extent many indigenous cultural systems have invested in resolution of social conflict through mediation than the Western ever has,” and the importance of including perspectives from indigenous systems, such as *ateetee*. In conclusion, Tusso returns to his argument explaining why it is critical for Western conflict resolution models to incorporate indigenous systems. He says, based on past experiences, “paradigms [e.g., Marxist-Leninist model and Modernization theory] which have not been rooted in cultures which are owned by the grass-roots populace have

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 40.

failed dismally.” Thus, Tuso explains his concern that “conflict resolution” as a new paradigm emerging from the post-Cold War West might face the same fate. For these reasons, Tuso challenges scholars, policy makers, activists, and leaders for social change to embark on the exploration of such indigenous systems to narrow the gaps and enhance human equality and dignity.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, Tuso’s article is persuasive and displays mastery of his subject matter. Tuso’s purpose, to challenge scholars and policy makers to investigate such indigenous cultures, does not cover what can be done to maintain this tradition at the grassroots level. Though no evidence is available showing that all Oromo groups practice *ateetee*, Tuso’s article looks and reads as if *ateetee* is actively practiced among all. Tuso does not indicate the status of the *ateetee* institution at the time of his investigation, nor does he include the religious and socio-political contributions to the decline of Oromo indigenous systems of conflict resolution such as *ateetee*.

#### *Ateetee Institution’s Religious and Political Values*

Jeylan W. Hussein’s goal in “A Cultural Representation of Women in the Oromo Society”<sup>83</sup> is to explain to his readers the representation of women in Oromo folk-proverbs, folk-religion, and their position in the traditional Oromo cultural practices. The article is divided into ten sections.<sup>84</sup> In the first three sections, Hussein presents a brief

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Jeylan W. Hussein, “A Cultural Representation of Women in the Oromo Society” in *African Study Monographs*, 25, no. 3 (October 2004): 103-147, 103.

<sup>84</sup> The ten sections: A brief description of the Oromo People’s Culture and Language, Gender Relation Between Men and Women as constructed in the Oromo Indigenous Religion and Culture, The Religious and Political Values of The Ate[e]tee Ritual for Oromo Women, The Historiography of Research on Oromo Proverbs, Gendered Culture as Reinforced Through The Cultural Medium of Oromo Folk-

description of the Oromo people's culture, language, and gender relations between men and women as constructed in the Oromo Indigenous Region and culture. In the remaining seven sections, Hussein discusses the images of women as represented in Oromo proverbs that trivialize women and support their subordination, and proverbs that communicate men's dominance and women's character either in positive or negative ways.

Hussein devotes a single section to explain "the religious and political values of the [*ateetee*] ritual for Oromo Women."<sup>85</sup> Hussein writes to address the misperception and generalized interpretation of the *ateetee* ritual. He says, "All of the previous works on [*ateetee*] ritual knowingly or unknowingly undermined its socio-political role in the Oromo society by considering [*ateetee*] as simple neighborhood meeting of women, designed to discipline anti-social neighbors."<sup>86</sup> Hussein depicts *ateetee* as a matriarchal figure of women's divinity,<sup>87</sup> with a generalized description of *ateetee* as a "goddess of fecundity appeased annually."<sup>88</sup> According Hussein's observations among the Arsi Oromos in the Kokossa and Adaba areas, the timing of the *ateetee* ritual is not fixed as such. "Whenever natural disasters fall, women gather and perform the ritual. Without any

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Proverbs, Proverbs that Trivialize Women and Reinforce Their Subordinate Position in the Society, Proverbs that Communicate Male Dominance in the Culture, Proverbs that communicate the Values Women Are Accorded in The Oromo Society, Proverbs that Communicate The Society's Fear of Women's Character, The Overall Semantic Structure of The Sample Proverbs.

<sup>85</sup> Hussein, 111.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>88</sup> The author cities to Ahmed, 2002.

fixed timing the [Arsi] Oromo women used to practice *ate[e]tee* as a way to strengthen their solidarity and as a tool to counter atrocities staged against them by men.”<sup>89</sup>

The political aspect of *ateetee* is in reference to the way women collectively encounter male atrocities and enforce religious sanctions against related misbehaviors.<sup>90</sup>

As Hussien succinctly describes,

The village women consider the offense committed against a single woman as violation committed against them as a group. Hence, no woman in the village is excused from the protest unless and otherwise she has an absolute inconvenience she has no control over. A woman who disregards the request for protest is considered as one who has weakened the group solidarity, and is usually punished in various ways, including being cursed. It shows that the women know very well that the weaknesses of individuals are concentrated, and they overwhelm the group members’ positive synergies.<sup>91</sup>

Hussein’s concern is that this valuable cultural heritage that gives women the power to exert pressure on male domination when they struggle in a group is now seriously endangered. “Among the factors, Islam and Christianity are really a tragic encounter for the Oromo culture in general and the *[ateetee]* ritual in particular... When compared to Christianity, Islam is more fanatical toward the Oromo traditional values. In its long history, the religion had never been as intolerant to indigenous creeds and communal practices as it presently is.”<sup>92</sup> Though Hussein does well pointing to the relatively better position women had in the past, he does not propose any creative solution on how to revitalize the *ateetee* institution today.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>91</sup> Jeylan Hussien, “A Cultural Representation,” 113.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 115.

## Ethiopia's Constitution on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

### *Rights of Women in the Ethiopian Constitution*<sup>93</sup>

As a diverse and divided society with the constitutional objectives to fully and freely exercise their rights “to self-determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of the law and capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order,” the constitution asserts that “full respect for individual and people’s fundamental freedoms and rights, to live together on the basis of equality and without any sexual, religious or cultural discrimination.”<sup>94</sup>

Further, under Article 35, Rights of Women, the constitution contains not only equal rights, privileges, and protection but takes into account the “historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women.”<sup>95</sup> In order to remedy this legacy of inequality, the constitution entitles women with affirmative measures. Thus, “the purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social, and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.”<sup>96</sup> In spite of the provisions in the constitution for full equality between women and men in terms of rights and protection, property ownership, the same rights in marriage, family planning and childbearing, equal employment, promotion, and pay,<sup>97</sup> in practice, these rights have

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<sup>93</sup> “Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Proclamation No.1/1995”, 2, pdf.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>97</sup> International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, “Culture and Change,” 57.

never been translated as the constitution and laws would imply. Women do not enjoy the rights and protection the constitution promises in the family and society. The reason is not only because the rules are adapted from Western individuality, but also its top-down approach has no interest in engaging the grassroots voices in the creation of the constitution. Unfortunately, the government offices are the principal places that exclude women from acquiring equal opportunity in employment and political offices.

To address the issues of gender inequality and empower women to have roles and voices in both private and public sectors, there needs to be more creative and comprehensive holistic approaches that incorporate both constitutional and ethno-cultural provisions for women's rights.

#### *Customary Laws in the Constitution*

Ethiopia, as a country with more than 80 ethnic groups of diverse languages, religions, and cultures, has its own customary and traditional laws to guide their communal lives. For instance, the Oromo nation is very rich in culture and history. They follow their centuries-old customary laws passed from one generation to the next through narrative, proverbs, songs, and dance. Their famous *Gadaa* system, *Jaarsa Biyyaa* (elders of community), the *Qaalu* Institution, and the *ateetee* institution are examples of customary laws that guide and regulate the religious and socio-political aspects of lives across Oromia with slight regional differences. The customary law is unwritten and unorganized in the ways formal constitutions are, but are kept in the memory of the people or elders. "In some respects, customary laws are much more practical and more

powerful than the state laws,”<sup>98</sup> because they are based on deeply held religious and social values effectively recognized as creating rights and duties in the community.<sup>99</sup> The limited aspect of formal laws in a rather complex reality requires the inclusion of customary laws in the constitution.

On the basis of the above discussion, the 1994 Ethiopian Constitution pledges to recognize ethnic groups’ rights to language and culture. As described on Article 39 (2), “every nation, nationality and people has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.”<sup>100</sup> As Solomon Dersso succinctly interprets,

The right to express one’s culture involves, among other things, the performance of the rituals and cultural practices and the use of the cultural symbols, jewelry, cosmetics and dress of one’s group. Development may consist in the adoption and production by members of a group of the various aspects of its culture in new and modified forms, adapted to changing circumstances and needs. Promotion involves the recording, reproduction and communication of the way of life and the cultural norms and values of the community concerned.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, the constitution asserts under Article 91 (1), the government’s “duty to support, on the basis of equality, the growth and enrichment of cultures and traditions that are compatible with fundamental rights, human dignity, democratic norms and ideals, and the provisions Constitution.”<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, the Ethiopian Constitution, under Articles

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<sup>98</sup> Muradu Abdo and Gebreyesus Abegaz, *Customary Law: Teaching Material* (Justice and Legal System Research Institute: Addis Ababa, 2009) 2.

<sup>99</sup> Ayalew Getachew Assefa, *Customary Laws in Ethiopia: A Need for Better Recognition: A Women’s Rights Perspective* (The Danish Institute for Human Rights Denmark’s National Human Rights Institution, 2012), 8.

<sup>100</sup> Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994.

<sup>101</sup> Solomon Dersso, *Taking Ethno-Cultural Diversity Seriously in Constitutional Design: A Theory of Minority Rights for Addressing Africa’s Multiethnic Challenge* (Dordrecht: Brill, 2012), 211.

<sup>102</sup> Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994.



34(5) and 78 (5), gives recognition to the application of customary and religious laws in family and personal matters provided the full consent of the parties to the dispute. These legal codes affirm the recognition given to customary laws in some senses.

Critics of federalism in Ethiopia raise divergent opinions about the inclusion of traditional institutions in the constitution. Some argue that the constitutional provisions for ethnic communities contradict the individual's rights, especially women's rights. One example is the Areba Abdella and Berhanu Amenew study on *Jaarsa Biyya*, an institution used by the Oromo community to resolve most of the collective or individual disputes in the civil, criminal, and commercial fields. This institution is gender-biased and excludes women from taking part. The fact that customary law rules do not exist in written form makes it difficult to regulate and speak authoritatively about its place in the formal law. Thus, they suggest a detailed regulatory legal system to work out its relations with the formal justice system.<sup>103</sup>

Others take into consideration the constitution's affirmative and radical provisions for ethnic communities as rich resources for gender equalities. In her book *Making Citizens in Africa: Ethnicity, Gender, and National Identity in Ethiopia*, Smith asks two pivotal questions: "Is gender inequality in Ethiopia to be addressed through the institutional structures of federalism? Have the strong constitutional and legal provisions for ethnic communities impacted Ethiopian women, as a group, in positive ways?" She argues that

although the contradictions of cultural rights for ethnic groups and substantive protections for women are myriad, they are not incompatible in the ways that

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<sup>103</sup> Areba Abdella and Berhanu Amenew, "Customary Dispute Resolution Institutions in Oromia Region: The Case of Jaarsa Biyyaa." *Grass-roots Justice in Ethiopia; The Contribution of Customary Dispute Resolution*, eds. Alula Pankhurst and Getachew Assefa (Addis Ababa, 2008), 169-184.

liberal scholars or critics of federalism in Ethiopia have suggested. Rather, there are compelling examples of cultural traditions within ethnic communities that actually do a better job of protecting and supporting the rights of women in Ethiopia than western-inspired liberal principles of individual rights.<sup>104</sup>

To support her argument for the compatibility of cultural rights and the constitution's protection, she cites Marit Tolo Qstebo's work on "the concept of [*woyyuu*]"<sup>105</sup> among the Arsi-Oromo in Bale, Ethiopia, and the types of practices traditionally associated with it."<sup>106</sup> Smith asserts "Constitutional protections for ethnic groups in Ethiopia are a rich resource for gender-equality activists, although they will have to engage with cultural traditions in creative and multifocal ways."<sup>107</sup> Though she provides no specific examples of how to engage the cultural traditions in creative and multifaceted ways, Smith contends that cultural norms and practices (such as *woyyuu*) are "better designed and equipped to manage the concerns of women and their families than western-style interventions."<sup>108</sup> Further, Smith adds, "Feminist activists will be more successful at challenging [some cultural traditions that are antithetical to constitutionally protected rights] through ethno-cultural traditions than by trying to banish the latter from the public sphere."<sup>109</sup> Similar to Tusso, she recognizes "the missing of theoretically informed and detailed inventory of cultural traditions regulating gender and women's rights." Part of the problem is that "such possibilities for cultural—and gendered rights—promotion

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<sup>104</sup> Lahra Smith, *Making Citizens in Africa: Ethnicity, Gender, and National Identity in Ethiopia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171.

<sup>105</sup> In Arsi Oromo culture, women are considered *woyyuu* (sacred) perhaps because of their roles as mothers and peacemakers.

<sup>106</sup> Smith, *Making Citizens in Africa*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

require a political climate of open and substantive—as well as respectful—debate, which is unfortunately missing in some of the contexts under consideration,” as Smith rightly recognizes.

### **Iraqw Women’s Protest March Model for Understanding Social Change in Arsi Oromo**

Iraqw is one of the peoples among more than 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania. Their main language is Iraqw, and it belongs to the Southern Cushitic branches of the Afro-Asiatic language family.<sup>110</sup> Their livelihood is based on agriculture and livestock. “It is believed the Iraqw came into Tanzania from Ethiopia centuries ago.”<sup>111</sup> The Iraqw people are described as peaceful and as “a society of equals.”<sup>112</sup> They are also described as a very reserved and secretive people, particularly to outsiders.<sup>113</sup> Although Iraqw have cultural diversity, they prefer to be separate.<sup>114</sup> They are very hesitant, or cautious, to accept any kind of development that would make their territory accessible to outsiders. Rituals are very important to Iraqws to protect their community and territories.

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<sup>110</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, “Iraqw people,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed December 14, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Iraqw\\_people&oldid=626945609](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Iraqw_people&oldid=626945609).

<sup>111</sup> Katherine A. Snyder, *The Iraqw of Tanzania: Negotiating Rural Development* (Cambridge, MA: Westview, 2005), 17.

<sup>112</sup> Robert J Thornton, *Space, Time, and Culture among the Iraqw of Tanzania* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 21.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

*Women in the Iraqw Society*

Scholarly research of the pre-colonial Iraqw life depict the presence of gender as the social organization. As Snyder describes, “In the precolonial Iraqw life elder men held fairly frequent meetings to discuss community affairs, decide on punishments for infractions of rules, deliberate about land allocations, and plan the *masay* ritual, an event deemed crucial for the community’s welfare and fertility.”<sup>115</sup> However, women and youth have not participated in elder men’s meetings, “and thus the male elders were said to be acting as fathers in the community, and thus on behalf of all community members.”<sup>116</sup> Today, some researchers interpret the dynamic between elders and youth (including young girls) in Iraqw as power politics.

In the household, although men are the ones who make decisions about the household’s resources, it was deemed that “women, as wives and mothers, could influence these decisions.”<sup>117</sup> This indicates that gender is not the only social organization, but also “age, space, and descent were [and are] crucial in Iraqw society.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, it also shows that the Iraqws’ domestic and public lives are not opposed to each other but are viewed as complementary.

Conversely, several scholars have highlighted how women’s roles declined under colonial rule. They believe that colonizers differentiated between male and female bodies

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<sup>115</sup> Katherine A. Snyder, “Mothers on the March: Iraqw Women Negotiating the Public Sphere in Tanzania,” *Africa Today* 53, no. 1 (2006): 84.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

and acted accordingly.<sup>119</sup> They brought their culture and gender stereotypes that influenced their policies and actions. Even more, “[women’s] role as mothers, and the status that conferred, was devalued.”<sup>120</sup> The colonizers introduced hierarchies through the organizational, economic, and cultural structures they formed. Men were their primary target to fulfill their policy, but they excluded women from the political sphere.<sup>121</sup> Christianity is also blamed for introducing colonial cultural values along with the gospel message, as it did in so many African cultures.

In the postcolonial state, the administrative structure of Tanzania was redefined and a central government was formed. That means national issues would take precedence over local concerns. Most women were presented with opportunities to form groups to take “advantage of government and donors for women’s development projects.”<sup>122</sup> However, “Most of these projects involved activities linked to the domestic sphere: mat and pot making, vegetable growing and marketing, milk marketing, and so on. Each group complained about the lack of economic opportunities for women and the workloads they faced.”<sup>123</sup> On top of all these workloads, women have to care for their children and husbands and also work in the farm. Despite all these challenges, Iraqw women find time and ways to influence the public sphere through their mothers’ protest march.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

*Women's Socially and Traditionally Accepted Roles and Identities*

Mothers' marches are a very important traditional female mobilization supported by men, and they have the power to enforce change in the community. As Snyder describes in her article "Mothers on the March," Iraqw women march to get their leaders' attention when they see "lack of sufficient food for people and livestock, disease, lack of harmony and violations of pollution rules that had angered the earth spirits and led to the drought."<sup>124</sup> Similar to many African countries, Iraqws depend on rainfall to grow their crops. When rain fails to come, Iraqw believe that some kind of pollution might have angered the earth spirit, or some diviners are holding back the rain. Thus, an elder woman leader would discuss the matter with other women leaders of the community. When all the women leaders agree on the necessity of protest, then the women leaders choose a meeting place and send out word for all the women to gather there.<sup>125</sup> Snyder inserts the following line from an English language newspaper, the Daily News,

Some 150 women from Rhotia and Mbulumbulu ward in Mbulu District have gathered at their traditional meeting place in Kambi ya Simba village to discuss their society's problems as well as pray for rain. The women will stay there for over a week. They will sleep outside and food will be brought to them only by younger women.<sup>126</sup>

Their goal in meeting in a public space is to get male leaders' attention so that they can do something about the matters they are marching against. Elders are responsible for arranging the rituals as soon as possible; otherwise women would blame them for failing to take care of their community and would threaten them, saying they "would sleep in the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>125</sup> Snyder, "Like Water and Honey," 248.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

‘bush’ and refuse to return to their homes until something was done,”<sup>127</sup> a huge threat for Iraqw men who know nothing about the household chores. Also, sleeping in the bush is dangerous to women’s safety.

Similarly, when Arsi women perform *ateetee*, they sleep outside and men come during the night to protect them. The Iraqw women’s prayer is similar to the Arsi Oromos’ in the ways they pray collectively on behalf of their nations. Through their institutions, women exercise power collectively on their own. The difference between an Iraqw mothers’ protest march and an Arsi *ateetee* is that the Iraqw pray to *Looaa*, the female deity, whereas the Arsi women pray to God. Participants in both the mothers’ march and *ateetee* are all mothers.

### **Mothers**

Perceptions regarding motherhood vary in every culture. According to some Western feminists’ perspectives, “motherhood contributes in large part to women’s subordination in society.”<sup>128</sup> However, as Marit Østebø argues, “A strong focus on maternal rights and social policies aimed at supporting and strengthening motherhood and women’s role as care-givers is indeed reflected in the early [eighteenth-century] history of Norwegian gender policies.”<sup>129</sup> Similar notions were prevalent in the late-nineteenth-century history of America where economically advantaged white women became more overtly active in the public sphere.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Snyder, “Mothers on the March,” 82.

<sup>129</sup> Marit Østebø, “Gender Equality in International Aid: What has Norwegian Gender Politics got to Do with It?” pdf.

<sup>130</sup> Cynthia Stavrianos, *The Political Uses of Motherhood in America* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

In African cultures, motherhood is highly valued. It is a role most young girls expect to cherish. As Snyder asserts, “For women, one of the most important aspects of personhood and gender is giving birth. Having children confers status and respect and mothers are viewed as morally superior in Iraqw society.”<sup>131</sup> A similar perception of motherhood is evident in the Pogoro communities of Tanzania. Maia Green notes, “Motherhood is premised on a particular experience of one’s own body as a nurturer and carrier of the bodies of others, of children in the womb and on one’s back, and later a shroud representing of the body of a loved one.”<sup>132</sup> For Iraqws, these responsibilities begin at their birth with their gender pronouncement. “[W]hen a child is born, an announcement is made to the community that conveys information about gender. Rather than draw attention to the body of the child, however, the pronouncement focuses on the social identity that the child will have. A female is called *hheekuuso ’oo* ‘child who will fetch water,’ and a male is called *hee sla/a* or *muk sla/a*, ‘child of the bush.’”<sup>133</sup> Thus, the difference in female and male roles is crucial for the construction of gender identity and participation in the public sphere. For Iraqw girls, growing up learning sensitivity to the problems found in their community carries on into their later life as they experience motherhood.

### **Moral Guardians**

The position of mothers as moral guardians of their household and community is evident in many cultures. Whether their purpose is to enforce social justice or pray for

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<sup>131</sup> Snyder, “Mothers on the March,” 84.

<sup>132</sup> Maia Green, “Women’s Work is Weeping: Constructions of Gender in a Catholic Community,” in *Those Who Play with Fire: Gender, Fertility and Transformation in East and Southern Africa*, eds. Henrietta L. Moore, Todd Sanders, and Bwire Kaare (New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 1999), 274.

<sup>133</sup> Snyder, “Mothers on the March,” 85.



lack of rain, women use their moral stands as mothers and act collectively for the good of their society. For instance, Iraqw mothers go on protest marches when they see men's laxity to perform rituals that would appease the earth spirits or diviners, so that their well-being is protected. Iraqw women's concern is not only to "their own fertility, but the fertility of the land and livestock on which their own, and their family's to a degree depends."<sup>134</sup> Snyder quotes Peter Rigby, who observes similar concerns among the Gogo of Tanzania where "women reverse their normal position within the community and speak with vehemence and often obscenity against the authority of men."<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, Astrid Blystad's accounts of women protest marches among Datooga, neighbors of the Iraqw, remarks how women through their roles as mothers act collectively to restore moral norms in their community.<sup>136</sup>

In 1992, Kenyan mothers marched "to secure the release of their sons who were detained as political prisoners, and to pressure the Kenyan government into upholding democratic principles by allowing fair, multi-party elections and freedom of speech."<sup>137</sup> Although the Kenyan government responded with violence to the mothers' campaign, eventually, the mothers were successful in securing the release of their sons, and their demand for democratic government and free speech and fair multi-party elections.

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<sup>134</sup> Snyder, "Like Water and Honey," 248.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Astrid Blystad, "Dealing with Men's Spears: Datooga Pastoralists Combating Male Intrusion on Female Fertility," in *Those Who Play with Fire: Gender Fertility and Transformation in East and Southern Africa*, eds. Henrietta L Moore, Todd Sanders, and Bwire Kaaare (New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 1999), 187.

<sup>137</sup> "Kenyan Mothers win Release of Political Prisoners and Press for Democratic Reform, 1992-1993," Global Nonviolent Action Database, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>.

These stories indicate how women using maternal justification play a crucial role in securing moral reforms and social justice in east African cultures. Through their motherhood, they are tackling a wide range of social and political causes in a non-violent fashion. In this regard, the case of Iraqw women is unique because their protest marches are not confined to socially contracted roles, but extend to other local and national issues. They were able to win their men's support, have an effect on their government's actions, and bring about moral reform because of their accepted role as mothers and moral guardians.

### *Challenges Confronting Iraqw Women's Leadership Roles*

#### **Tanzanian State Perceptions**

The ideology of the current Tanzanian state has been insensitive to the Iraqw precolonial culture and traditional practices. As Snyder remarks, the Tanzanian state "views precolonial religious beliefs and practices as being opposed to modern thinking and behavior."<sup>138</sup> Thornton observes the same concern: "government officials speak Swahili and have always been 'insensitive or hostile to Iraqw concerns.'"<sup>139</sup> The issues Iraqw mothers seek justice for are not only confined to their "traditional" roles, such as praying for rain, but includes all kinds of social problems which were not addressed by either the Tanzania government or the men's elders' councils.

In one instance, mothers marched against the *gongo* business. *Gongo* is a local liquor, "widely viewed as a major problem in communities throughout Tanzania...Both men and women complained that men use up all their money on the brew and do less

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<sup>138</sup> Snyder, *The Iraqw of Tanzania*, 140.

<sup>139</sup> Thornton, *Space, Time, and Culture*, 6.

productive work.”<sup>140</sup> As Snyder notes, women decided to take the matter into their hands and marched to get the *gongo* business shut down. It is important that these mothers have the support of their men, so “they secured the agreement of the men’s elders’ council, and curses were put on the establishments, threatening anyone who bought or sold the brew.”<sup>141</sup> It is fascinating how cursing is used in many African cultures as a powerful weapon to secure the desired moral behavior in the community. In Arsi Oromo, *ateetee* women would issue curses if men did not do as requested or respect them. In the Arsi family, children are taught to obey their parents; if they do not, they will have bad fortune as a result of the parents’ disappointment or curses.

Another critical mothers’ march happened in Bashanet in the Babati District in 1996. This time, mothers marched to protest the high pregnancy rate in primary-school girls. Mothers accused teachers of impregnating their daughters. Here is how Snyder recorded the incident:

...mothers set out to seek an audience in Babati District Commissioner...however, when the D.C. received word that these women were en route to meet with him, he sent police armed with tear gas to turn them back. Panic ensued when the police confronted the women; one woman, pregnant at the time, miscarried. Refusing to be deterred, the women turned their march to the home village of the prime minister (himself Iraqw), in neighboring Hanang District, to put their complaints to him directly and to describe the ill-treatment they had received from the D.C. of Babati. The prime minister, who was attending parliament, phoned to tell his aides to receive the women, feed them, and give them shelter, but to instruct them to return to Bashanet as soon as possible. He promised to visit the village and see to their complaints. He eventually visited Bashanet, called for the removal and relocation of the suspected teachers, and had the Babati District Commissioner reassigned to a new location.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Snyder, “Mothers on the March,” 81.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

The above stories describe how challenging it has been for Iraqw mothers to address their social problems publicly. As Blystad says of Datooga female mobilizations, Iraqw mothers, in an increasingly politically marginal public domain, are managing “to make themselves heard in a large variety of political settings both within and outside ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ contexts.”<sup>143</sup> Their courage to address the male leaders in the government directly is countercultural to the states’ ideology that divides private and public matters. These mothers are going beyond merely making their concerns known to bringing justice without delay. Contrary to the Iraqw mothers’ protest march, the practice of Arsi Oromo *ateetee* is confined to the public sphere based on precolonial parameters, such as prayers for drought, interference between warring individuals or groups, etc. There is a lot Arsi mothers can learn from Iraqw women’s courage and concern to address their individual and communal matters as a whole. I believe the Iraqw mothers’ protest march is a beautiful cultural expression the Tanzanian state should help preserve.

### **Christians’ Views**

Christianity, though divided, is the newest and fastest growing religion in Tanzania.<sup>144</sup> The Iraqw community’s challenge with Christian churches is their rejection of Iraqw culture all together. Churches, especially Catholicism, with their intimate link with the state and dominance, have been mentioned in several researches for strictly teaching against traditional beliefs. Local parish priests preach against the mothers’ protest marches, stating, “Married Christian women should not sleep in the bush and

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<sup>143</sup> Blystad, “Dealing with Men’s Spears,” 188.

<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Baker and Hege Wallevik, “Changing Life Worlds and Contested Space: Seclusion Practices among the Iraqw of Northern Tanzania” (Bulletin de l’APAD, 27-28, 2008), accessed December 20, 2014, <http://apad.revues.org/3083>, 28.

abandon their families and responsibilities at home.”<sup>145</sup> Still it’s commendable that Christian Iraqw women would participate in the marches that do not have rituals diviners as their focus.<sup>146</sup> In contrast with Iraqw women, Arsi Christian women do not participate in any *ateetee* rituals. They presume *ateetee* is a religious practice associated with traditional beliefs.

### Summary

The above alternative solutions underscore that the *ateetee* institution is undervalued and understudied; historical analyses are just beginning to account for their contributions. Compelling examples of the practices associated with the *ateetee* institution proves that *ateetee* will undoubtedly be a great resource to supporting constitutionally protected women’s rights. A better recognition of this institution is suggested to expand women’s political and economic participation in addition to their roles as active social and moral agents.

Similar to Arsi Oromos, the Iraqw women are increasingly marginalized in public spheres. In the face of opposition by the Tanzanian government and Christian churches, “[women] are making the statement that the ultimate welfare of the community and the land still rests with the elders and with the maintenance of their traditions.”<sup>147</sup> They are attempting to assert themselves and reenter the public sphere as mothers and moral guardians. Unlike the Arsi Oromo women’s *ateetee*, Iraqw women’s protest march is supported by their men, as the women’s role also legitimizes elders’ authority to carry out

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<sup>145</sup> Snyder, “Mothers on the March,” 82.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>147</sup> Snyder, “Like Water and Honey,” 282.

the ritual for the land and community. Similar to Arsi Oromos, young Iraqw do not tend to support the traditional beliefs on which rituals, such as the mothers' protest march, are founded; women's voices in the public sphere are declining. Christians in both communities have a window of opportunity to sensitively and respectfully address these rituals and discern ways to participate in their mobilizations.

## SECTION 3:

### THE THESIS

#### **Introduction**

The Arsi Oromo, located in southeast Ethiopia, may constitute the single largest branch of the Oromo nation, “which constitutes according to the various data available about 40% of the Ethiopian population estimated at close to 90 million.”<sup>148</sup> The Oromo have settled over a large territory in Ethiopia and neighboring countries, such as northern Kenya. Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Oromo people practiced their indigenous religion. However, after their conversion to Christianity and Islam, they began to lose their traditions. Dismayed by the impact of external religions, Kuwee Kumsa relates her feelings in the following ways:

Conversion meant that Oromo values were replaced by Christian or Moslem values. Oromo women were robbed of their ritual power and moral authority because their religion was denounced as “paganism” and those who practiced it were labeled “heathen” and subjected to persecution. Also, women lost control over their sexuality and fertility under the newly labeled “sin” of adultery.<sup>149</sup>

Thus, Arsi and other Oromo women have struggled for over a century to maintain the *ateetee* ritual. Through collective struggle, Arsi women have formed solidarity. In the Arsi region, *ateetee*, though declining, is still practiced to enforce a socially sanctioned set of rights. Thus, this research focuses on ways evangelical churches in Arsi can empower women to participate in *ateetee* rituals to reclaim their roles and status in society. It also explores contextualization of the *ateetee* ritual for fostering understanding

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<sup>148</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 25.

<sup>149</sup> Kuwee Kumsa, “The Siiqqee Institution of Oromo Women,” *The Journal of Oromo Studies* (1997): 135.

and narrowing the social and cultural gap between Christian and non-Christian Arsi Oromo people. Through broad readings, it researches the common grounds found between *Waaqeffannaa*, an indigenous Oromo religion, and Christianity.

### **Fostering Understanding of *Ateetee* Ritual**

Efforts to enhance the roles and status of women in Arsi society without reviving and revitalizing elements of *ateetee* institution cannot fully ensure gender equality. It is necessary to study institutions of Arsi culture and understand the essence of the whole society to creatively revive *ateetee*, which restores women's voice and social identity. To provide a deep understanding of the essence of the *ateetee* institution, I will explore the traditional values and social changes, Christianity's presuppositions about *ateetee*, and rituals in the Arsi Oromo context.

#### *Traditional Values and Social Changes*

In Arsi, as in other Oromo regions, there has been evidence of change. These changes are apparent socially, politically, and religiously. These changes, which started a century ago, have contributed greatly toward the weakening of Oromo society's traditional institutional mechanisms, such as the *Gadaa* system, and the *ateetee* institution on which the society's socio-cultural, religious, and political culture is founded. Politically, the Oromo people used to administer under *Gadaa* an egalitarian system that comprised their socio-economic, religious, and political institutions together. "Each *Gadaa* class remains in power during a specific term (*Gadaa*), which begins and



ends with a formal transfer ceremony.”<sup>150</sup> *Gadaa* is exclusively based on male age-grade set that actively excludes women’s direct participation in political leadership.

In this patriarchal pastoralist society, females are seen as inferior to men. In the family, parents prefer boys to girls. Boys get to take all of their family property when the parents pass away, but girls do not. There are lots of reasons why the society regards boys highly. One of the reasons is boys are the ones who continue the family lines; girls are given away in marriage to someone from another clan. Martha Kuwee Kumsa writes, “...in the exogamous Oromo culture, girls cannot be married within their lineages.”<sup>151</sup> For this reason, girls are seen as strangers (*alagaa*) because they will be separated from the family and clan they have known and taken to a strange land to live among her husband’s clan. A woman is still seen as a stranger (*alagaa*) among her husband’s clan because she does not belong there either.

As Kumsa succinctly describes, the irony is that although girls and women do not belong to any one place, “they are also the ones who belong everywhere.”<sup>152</sup> In addition, “girls who are considered strangers [*alagaa*] in their own communities are also the very ones connecting communities that are strangers [*alagaa*] to each other.”<sup>153</sup> They bring together two strange families and clans. They are the ones who go between warring parties holding their sacred stick to maintain the peace of the communities. Therefore, in this patriarchal pastoralist society, the identity of women and their importance is rooted in the recognition of the roles and responsibilities that women could accomplish in their

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<sup>150</sup> Asmarom Legesse, *Gadaa: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 8.

<sup>151</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 53.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

family and society. It is thought natural that women's place is at home, defining her primary roles as caring for the entire family, bearing and bringing up children.

However, women play pivotal leadership roles in every cultural ceremony, such as the celebration of the new *Gadaa* leader (butta), which includes women. Describing women's participation in a butta ceremony he had participated in Arsi region, Gemachu Rafiso describes as follows:

I have attended the Butaa ritual ceremony which was guided by the Abba Gada, Qomica and Shanacaa. The Ritual ceremony started about midday. The elders and the women came to the ritual place, the women on one side carrying marriage sticks (sinqee), head rest (boratii) and milk container (bare'e). The women with their respected ornaments took their place. They respond to the elders with ululating songs. The elders carried "kallacaa", and "shabena" also called "allanga". The two elders, Abba Gada, have "Kallacaa" on their foreheads.<sup>154</sup>

Therefore, women's exclusion from direct involvement in the male leadership creates a functional necessity for women to create solely female institutions, such as *ateetee*. However, these cultural institutions, as stated by Abbas H. Gnamo, "if not all, ceased to exist following colonization [of Arsi by Christian Abyssinian kings in the late eighteenth century] and the subsequent Islamization and Christianization as well as other forms of cultural contacts and internal socio-cultural mutations."<sup>155</sup> Even today, Islam and Christianity continue to oppose *ateetee* rituals. Consequently, gender inequality is hardened; women's voice from the public is lost.<sup>156</sup>

In addition, the emergence of modernity and education are contributing to the heightened social change in Arsi culture. Today's generation, especially the young and

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<sup>154</sup> Gemachu Rafiso, "Gadaan Maali?: What is Gadaa?" pdf.

<sup>155</sup> Abas H Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 23.

<sup>156</sup> Jeylan W. Hussein, "A Cultural Representation of Women in the Oromo Society," *African Study Monographs*, 25, no. 3 (October 2004): 103-147, 103.

educated ones, are viewing cultural institutions as a tradition of the past, not present. Their lack of interest, in part, is due to the adults' failure to include the youth in their meetings. The Toronto Oromo youth's frustration for the adults' failure to listen to them is summed up by Iddosan Urfo as follows, "They [adults] say youth are the future of our nation but they are hurting our future! They never even ask young people what they think. They talk *Gadaa* democracy but they don't do it."<sup>157</sup> These rapid changes that the Arsi Oromo have been undergoing for a century grieves the Arsi mothers who believe in *ateetee* rituals.

#### *Christian Presuppositions about Ateetee Rituals*

Christians have different perceptions about the *ateetee* ritual. Their opinion varies depending on where they come from and their religious background. I learned this from my two field researches that I conducted on *ateetee* among the Oromo people in Ethiopia and in Portland, Oregon. I had opportunities to interview a number of Oromo women and men mainly from Arsi and other parts of Oromo land. For instance, some of my informants, who are Arsi Christians, explained that *ateetee* is an evil spirit located in Arsi land. Those who hold *ateetee* rituals are praying to *ateetee* spirit. Christians have nothing to do with *ateetee*. While this is a common opinion among Christians in my home country, there are others who believe *ateetee* has nothing to do with evil spirits, but is a cultural prayer that Arsi women lead in times of natural calamities.

My other informants who come from other Oromo subgroups described *ateetee* as a religious performance to a female deity called *ateetee*. For them, *ateetee* is a worship of

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<sup>157</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 25.

an evil spirit and, as Christians, they have nothing to do with it. Hence, they have no desire to learn about this primitive heathen practice.

On the contrary, some Arsi Oromo mothers who participated in *ateetee* rituals explain it simply as “*aadaa dubartoota*,” meaning women culture. According to these Christian mothers, *ateetee* has nothing to do with spirits. For these mothers, it saddens them to see the *ateetee* ritual disappear due to continued religious impact and modern culture that views *ateetee* tradition as irrelevant. It is my contention, however, that part of the reason for the vanishing of the *ateetee* institution is due to misinterpretation, especially on the Christian community’s part, which can be addressed by providing detailed contextualized study. I will now turn to the women-only institution of *ateetee* and *siinqee*.

#### *Ateetee Ritual in Context*

Studies on Oromo history unanimously confirm *ateetee* as a largely gender-specific institution among the Oromo society. Oromo women play important roles, though with considerable variations. For instance, Martha Kuwee Kumsa, who comes from the Macca Oromo Sayyoo clan, describes *ateetee* as an exclusively female deity; only women pray to her.<sup>158</sup> Maaram is another female deity used interchangeably with *ateetee*. According to Kumsa, “Maaram is evoked both by men and women, although she too is a female deity”<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, for Kumsa, the *ulee siinqee* or *siiqqee*,<sup>160</sup> a special

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> In the literature, both *siinqee* and *siiqqee* are used interchangeably.

stick held by women who get culturally married, “represents the spirit of Ateetee.”<sup>161</sup>

However, Lambert Bartels, a missionary and an anthropologist among the Macca Oromo people in 1967 describes *ateetee* as not a deity but a ritual, at which Maaram is invoked, that “was performed by every woman in a neighborhood who wishes to be pregnant.”<sup>162</sup>

However, Bartels records from his field interviews indicate that the Macca Oromos do not even say Maaram is a “divinity of motherhood” (the author’s definition), but simply “Maaram.” Macca Oromo believe “Waq [God] approves of Maaram and that he trusts her and leaves everything to her.”<sup>163</sup> Thus, Maaram can ask God whatever she wants.

Women are happy to have Maaram as their mother, a mother with whom they share the secrets of motherhood: menstruation, pregnancy, diseases which prevents them from bearing healthy children (thus leaving them childless), and particularly the pains of labour...Maaram surpasses all ayana. She is not, however, to be seen as a lesser Waqa [God] or a kind of ‘female Waqa.’ She is Maaram.<sup>164</sup>

Men cannot directly pray to Maaram but they can ask the women to pray to her on their behalf.<sup>165</sup>

Tsega Etefa, who studied the history of Oromo nations, agrees with Bartels’ analysis of *ateetee*. Etefa also argues that *ateetee* is an indigenous ritual practiced by women in honor of Ayyoo (mother; also interchangeably, Maaram, St. Mary) and (God), for the general well-being of their families, as well as to give thanks.<sup>166</sup> In addition, Etefa

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<sup>161</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 57.

<sup>162</sup> Lambert Bartels, *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia, an Attempt to Understand* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1983), 127.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Tsega Etefa, *Integration and Peace in East Africa: A History of the Oromo Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 130.

also asserts, “Among the western Shawa Oromo *ateetee* is also believed to be the mother of cattle—the ritual is held to ensure that cattle breed well and that oxen remain healthy and fit enough to plough well.”<sup>167</sup> This indicates the variations in interpretation and in performance from place to place.

Among the Arsi Oromo people, as among others, *ateetee* is exclusively a women-only institution. It is a system organized and run by women for the purpose of empowering themselves and protecting their own and their communities’ interests.<sup>168</sup> For instance, if a husband beats his wife during her pregnancy or during childbirth (*qanafa*), women would gather to discipline the erring husband. The *ateetee* ritual is also performed when the society faces problems, such as lack of rain or a new disease, and when there is conflict between individuals or *gosa* (clans). Professor Paul Baxter, a British anthropologist in 1979, rendered the following description relative to *ateetee*, as he observed it in the Arsi Oromo region:

*[Ateetee]* is a meeting of women who assemble in order to discipline an erring male or female neighbor and later to celebrate their success in doing so in song, dance, prayer, blessings, and sacrifice is itself called *[Ateetee]*. The women at such meetings reiterate in their words and gestures the importance of both domestic and neighborhood concord and of fecundity—the former being, in part, a prerequisite for the latter because female fertility, like that of earth and the fertilizing rain, depends on a flow of prayers and blessings.<sup>169</sup>

Thus, from Baxter’s observations we see that Arsi women use their status as mothers to protest male domination. Through *ateetee* ceremonies, women create their own social space to support their solidarity as a group as they care for their families and neighbors. It

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<sup>167</sup> Etefa, *Integration and Peace*, 131.

<sup>168</sup> Hamdesa Tuso, “The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution: Perspectives from an Indigenous System,” *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership—Sharing the Vision* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 35.

<sup>169</sup> Paul Baxter, “Atete in a Highland Arssi Neighborhood,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1 & 2, 4-5.

reveals women's awareness of God as the source of their fertility as well as fertilizing rain. Childbearing seems to provide respect and protection from the demands the culture places on them.

Contrary to Baxter's remarks, some recent researches among the Arsi Oromos describe *ateetee* as a "female deity." For instance, in a brief note from field research among the Arsi people in Kokkos district, Leila Qashu, describes *ateetee* as "the female deity."<sup>170</sup> Also, Daniel Dressa, who studied the status of women among Arsi Oromo in the Dodola district identifies *ateetee* as "deity or divinity."<sup>171</sup> However, according to my informants in the Kofele and Nagele districts, *ateetee* is not "the female divinity," but, as Baxter explains, *ateetee* "is the only public ritual in which women are the principal organizer, the active participants, and the congregation and of which the timing and staging is determined by them and at which they may decide a case that they have laid against a man."<sup>172</sup>

In addition, the Arsi Oromo *ateetee* ritual is not performed for a "spirit of *ateetee*," as some religions purportedly claim. My informants strongly assert that it is a prayer to God, in my understanding, the same God that Christians and Muslims worship. As I know very well, among the Arsi Oromo, the *ateetee* ritual has no fixed date. Whenever famine or other social issues arise, women would gather to address the problem through the *ateetee* institution. Their goal is, and always has been, to maintain

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<sup>170</sup> Leila Qashu, "Notes From The Field" *MMAP Newsletter*, January 2010, accessed April 25, 2015, [http://www.mun.ca/mmap/about\\_newsletter/about\\_archives/jan\\_10\\_newsletter.pdf](http://www.mun.ca/mmap/about_newsletter/about_archives/jan_10_newsletter.pdf)

<sup>171</sup> Daniel Deressa, "Continuity and Changes in The Status of Women: The Case of Arsi Oromo Living Adjacent to Upper Wabe Valley, Dodola," (pdf. p,31).

<sup>172</sup> Baxter, "Atete in a Highland Arssi Neighborhood."

the peace and welfare of their families and community. Understanding the various forms of *ateetee* is the first step toward reviving some of its elements.

*Siinqee: A Symbol of Power, Peace, and Justice*

*Siinqee* is a sacred stick a girl receives as a gift from her mother on her wedding day. In Arsi, *siinqee* is given along “with a chocho, a specially decorated woven pot for milk, which she holds in her hand”<sup>173</sup> at her wedding. It shows that she is married and also depicts her transition from girlhood to womanhood.<sup>174</sup> The woman takes her *siinqee* with her to special social events, or whenever she needs it.<sup>175</sup> *Siinqee* embodies the power and influence a woman needs to protect herself and stand for peace and justice in a non-threatening way. In fact, “it is a powerful symbol of authority and justice within Oromo society.”<sup>176</sup> In Arsi, women can carry their *siinqee* to enforce their human rights. If their husbands abuse them physically during pregnancy or childbirth, they quickly grab their *siinqee* and stand at the front of their house and ululate. When other women in the village hear her ululate, they stop what they were doing and grab their *siinqee* and rush to her house. It is their cultural duty to protect and stand for one another’s human rights when injustice is done.

A woman also can use her *siinqee* to intervene in conflicts between individuals or a group of people. “If she sees a group of people fighting, for example, some women carrying their *siinqee* will intervene, ululating to stop the fight and attract other villagers’

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<sup>173</sup> International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRC), “Culture and Change: Ethiopian Women Challenging the Future,” (Nairobi, Kenya: International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, 2003), 62.

<sup>174</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 57.

<sup>175</sup> IIRC “Culture and Change,” 62.

<sup>176</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 57.



attention.”<sup>177</sup> The fighting parties should stop fighting and they are traditionally and culturally bound to respect the decision that is made.

Prayer to God is central among the Oromo society. Arsi women use their *siinqees* to pray to God on behalf of their community to intercede in the case of calamities such as drought, flood, disease, and famine.<sup>178</sup> However, among other Oromos, such as Matcha and Tulama, *siinqee* represents the spirit of *Ateetee*, the female deity.<sup>179</sup> This is not a commonly held concept among the Arsi Oromos to the best of my knowledge. In Arsi, *siinqee* is a sacred symbolic ceremonial stick that women use to protect, pray, resolve conflicts, and use at special occasions like weddings. I will return to narrowing the cultural gap between non-Christians and Christians.

### **Narrowing the Cultural Gap between Christians and non-Christians**

In the present Arsi Oromo region, Christianity is one of the major religions next to Islam. This includes Ethiopian Orthodox and Protestant Christians. There are also Oromo traditional religion followers known as Waaqeffata, especially in the Kokkosa region. Islam, though it is the dominant religion for the majority of the Arsi, is largely an identity marker. Thus, the majority of Arsi Oromos practice Islam and some elements of Oromo traditional religion side by side. This is also the case among Tuulamma Oromos, who converted to Orthodox Christianity but still maintain traditional Oromo institutions such as *ateetee*.<sup>180</sup> This is why, despite the religious communities’ rejection, elements of

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Hussein, “A Cultural Representation,” 103.

*ateetee* rituals have survived and are still practiced among Arsi and other Oromo subgroups.

Unfortunately, religious communities, including Christians, continue to blindly reject the elements of traditional Oromo cultures. For them, it is clearly the tradition to which their foremothers ignorantly adhered. In today's Arsi society, where there are organized religions and a modern legal system, the traditional ways of prayer and peacemaking for some religious people seems irrelevant. In the face of a clear divide between these major faith groups, who also unanimously reject the practice of *ateetee*, the task of narrowing the gap between them is absolutely challenging, but not utterly impossible. If Christians and also Muslims are willing to step outside their cultural wall to listen and engage, there is hope in narrowing the socio-cultural divide.

#### *Overcoming Social and Cultural Divides*

The Arsi Oromo, though one people, similar to other Oromos, have been more divided than united socially and culturally for decades. In their everyday life, we can trace conspicuous divergences depending on their being “farmers or pastoralists, Christians or Muslims and on the extent to which they have come under the impact of the central government, western education and other factors.”<sup>181</sup> As a result, attitudes toward Oromo cultures, like *ateetee* rituals, marriage customs, relations between gosaa (clan) and forms have changed. Women's leadership through *ateetee* is on the verge of vanishing mainly as result of religions communities' rejection.

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<sup>181</sup> Bartels, *Oromo Religion*, 16.

In the face of Christians and Muslims rejecting the practice of *ateetee*, the task of narrowing the socio-cultural gap between them is utterly challenging, but not impossible. Hence, there are two things I wish to propose to overcome the social and cultural divides we see in Arsi today. First, Christians need to rethink their mission approach. The mission approach Churches in Arsiland have utilized over years is a “hunter model.” They go out to the public and find an individual or a group with whom they would share the Gospel. If the individual shows willingness to convert, they invite her or him to the church. In the church, she will learn not only the Gospel but also to abandon her culture, her language, and her identity and get a new church family. Thus, evangelism, as it has always been in Arsi, is extracting people from their community and integrating them into Christian culture and identity. However, evangelism, in the words of Vincent J. Donovan, “is a process of bringing the gospel to people where they are, not where you would like them to be.”<sup>182</sup>

Second, the church needs to get acquainted with the history of Arsi Oromo and change their negative attitude toward its traditional institutions, such as *ateetee*. In my work among the Arsi Oromos for over the decade, one of the challenges is churches’ unwillingness to learn about Oromo culture so that they know how to engage with the very people they want reach. Instead, Christians blindly demonize Oromo culture, simply out of fear of syncretism. The irony is that churches consciously incorporated both Amhara and European culture in their worship and everything they do, but reject the Oromo culture. This attitude of the Church has been an inhibiting factor for so many Arsi Oromos to come to know Jesus. How can a church possibly attract Arsi people to the

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<sup>182</sup> Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), xii.

Gospel if they refuse to learn the ways Arsi relate to and understand God and His creation? In fact, this is typical of some Oromo Wahhabists who reject everything about Oromo culture.<sup>183</sup> Describing the growing Islamic impact on *ateetee*, Jeylan Hussein asserts, “In its long history, the religion had never been as intolerant to indigenous creeds and communal practices as it presently is.”<sup>184</sup> I contend that empowering Christian women to learn about and engage with *ateetee* is a practical approach to overcome the socio-religious gap. Recognizing that Oromo cultural identities are an expression of Oromo people is a necessary step for restoring the trust of Arsi Oromo people.

*Empowering Christian Mothers to Engage in Ateetee Rituals*

In Arsi, as in many cultures in Ethiopia, beliefs and attitudes that women’s activities are primarily domestic and secondary are prevalent. Acceptance of women is based on the cultural definition of womanhood, which is crucially dependent on the activities and association which the concept draws to itself. These are true in church communities as well. According to two women from my church whom I informally interviewed, most Arsi women’s views of their roles and rights are not so much different from the ways society perceives them. The reason is that women who are socialized to believe their roles are as caretakers, mothers, etc., from their childhood lack confidence in their own capacities to take public leadership roles.

The two women I interviewed shared with me similar stores of how they view their roles and rights in the church. One of these women said that that although she has a

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<sup>183</sup> Patrick Desplat and Terje Ostebo, *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 174.

<sup>184</sup> Hussein, “A Cultural Representation,” 115.

great desire to be engaged in a preaching ministry, she lacks confidence because she does not have formal Bible training to serve in preaching and teaching ministries. The other woman pointed out that the church leadership does not encourage women to be involved in leadership.

When I asked them how they view their roles and rights in the Oromo community, one of them said she and her family used to participate in the Oromo community meetings and participate in events, but not anymore. Their church does not encourage them to participate in the community events and they did not want to be the only ones socializing with non-Christian Oromos. Now, for these Christian women, their community is only the people in their church.

The question I wish to address in this section is, why do we have to empower Christian mothers to engage in *ateetee* rituals? When doing my field research in March 2015, I asked Christian mothers and men if it is ok for Christian mothers to participate in *ateetee* rituals. Some said yes, and others said no. The reasons given for “no” were: first, the *ateetee* women and Christians do not share the same religious beliefs, and it is impossible to pray with someone if you do not share the same religion. Second, the *ateetee* women’s prayer style is so different from that of Christians. They sit under the tree day and night, praying in *ateetee* songs to their God, but Christians are taught to pray privately in homes or in the church.

I also asked those who believe in empowering Christians mother to join *ateetee*. They said they would participate, not necessarily to support the culture, but to evangelize those mothers on *ateetee* duty. These Christians do not care whether the *ateetee* ritual survives or dies, but they think *ateetee* can be useful to sharing the Gospel. Their

response did not surprise me or discourage me because I used to think the same way my informants did. My work among the Arsi Oromos, along with many years of seminary education, changed my view about my own culture. Thus, it is my contention that empowering the Arsi Christian mothers to better acquainted with and find ways to engage in *ateetee* rituals is still possible, but Christians need a changed attitude toward *ateetee* rituals. It is my contention that Christians need to understand that the *ateetee* ritual deserves to be protected as a valued culture. Its value resides not in the distant past but in its present possibilities to revitalize the position of Arsi women in their society. In addition, empowering Christian mothers to participate in *ateetee* is an opportunity to take part in issues that matter to the whole community. The unique characteristic of the *ateetee* ritual is its inclusiveness despite religious and social background, an attitude one would expect from Christians.<sup>185</sup>

Also, any effort to evangelize the Arsi people must bear in mind Donovan's words, "Dress, food, music, ritual, language, values—these are the things that make up a tribe, or a sub-culture as they have been called. It is to that tribe, as they are, that the gospel must be brought."<sup>186</sup> Hence, when Arsi Oromo Christians go to learn about *ateetee*, they must go with sincere and learning spirits. I wish to challenge church leaders in my community to rethink their preconceived ideas about Arsi women's roles as passive peacemakers and mediators between divine and human. Churches must ask why their Christianity has not been appealing to the majority of non-Christian Arsi Oromos. Revitalizing aspects of the *ateetee* ritual, which is pivotal to promote women's voices in society, in return blurs the social and cultural divides across religious and cultural lines. It

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<sup>185</sup> Etefa, *Integration and Peace*, 133.

<sup>186</sup> Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, xiii.

is my goal to challenge evangelical churches in Arsiland to find the common ground they have with Oromo traditional religion.

### **Searching for Common Ground**

In my understanding, Muslims, Christians, and Waaqeffanna worship one God. In fact, they have much in common. Although the history of the Arsi Oromo people with Christianity and Islam has been strained at best, it does not have to be that way. In the following section, I will discuss four areas of common ground found in Waaqeffanna, the Oromo traditional religion.

#### *Belief in Rabbi Tokkicha (One God)*

Prior to the introduction and expansion of two of the world's monotheistic religions, the Arsi Oromo people were neither Christians nor Muslims. They believed in one God (Rabbi tokkicha). Since their belief in one God “antedates their conversion to Islam and Christianity, and as such, the Oromo are qualified by some observers as African monotheists.”<sup>187</sup> They are now known as Waaqeffattootaa, which literally means worshipers.

The Oromo is the supreme God, the Creator of the universe and the source of all life. “Starting with water and rocks, going on through the vegetable and animal world to man, [God] had appointed to every being its own place in a cosmic order which he is also the guardian.”<sup>188</sup> Thus, for Oromos, God directs the world from above and regulates

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<sup>187</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 29.

<sup>188</sup> Bartels, *Oromo Religion*, 14.

everything within to function in balanced ways. For Oromos, their indigenous religion and worldview are interconnected and influence one another.<sup>189</sup>

Also, Oromo indigenous religion followers believe in the presence of ayyaana (spirits). Describing the Oromos' understanding of ayyaana, Gammachu Magarsa asserts, "Everything has twofold nature: one part we see with our eyes, the other part we do not see with our eyes but by our hearts. This invisible part of them we call 'ayyaana'. You will never understand us unless you realize that we see everything in this way."<sup>190</sup> Hence, the indigenous Oromo concept of God and spirits has many similarities with the beliefs found in Christianity. These beliefs and many others can be a starting point to build bridges between these faith communities.

### *Prayers for Social Issues*

Prayer is a central concept in the daily lives of the Oromo people. In everyday life, the Oromos say, "prayers call for peace in all aspects of their lives, from their own families to the community and the government, along with prayers for fertility for themselves and for their means of livelihood and sustenance."<sup>191</sup> Their prayer is directed to God, not another created being. The following *ateetee* song provides a great example:

Siinqee tiyya lootii qabadhee [I hold my beautiful siinqee]

Rabbi kiyya mootii kadhadhe [I pray to my king/almighty God]

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<sup>189</sup> Asafa Jalata and Harwood Schaffer, "The Oromo Gadaa/Siqqee Democracy and the Liberation of Ethiopian Colonial Subjects," 284.

<sup>190</sup> Bartels, *Oromo Religion*, 127.

<sup>191</sup> Etefa, *Integration and Peace*, 61.



In the above prayer women cling to their *siinqee*, a special stick a girl receives when culturally married, symbolizing their trust in God as their Mootii (King and Almighty). Thus, for Arsi mothers, prayer for social justice issues gives them a mediation role between the divine and the human. *Ateetee* prayers are always done as a group in a public space, under a tree. Tusso records as follows, “women organize themselves and pray for mercy and forgiveness in case of drought. Typically, they march, singing ‘arrarro Rabio’ (oh our God have mercy on us and give us rain) to the nearest river and plead with their Creator for rain.”<sup>192</sup>

Prayers are important in Christianity and Islam too. However, women in both of these religious communities are being discouraged due to misconceptions about *ateetee* rituals’ role in social justice issues. I wish the religious communities would reexamine their position about the *ateetee* ritual so that women would revive their pivotal social justice roles in society. Now I return to discuss elements of *ateetee* rituals that influence and shape the activity of peace making.

### *Peacemaking Initiatives*

In addition to playing a critical role in prayer for social issues, women play important roles in peacemaking initiatives. In the Oromo culture, peace (*nagaa*) is expressed in daily greetings, “in the songs they sing, in the prayers and blessings they offer, in the ritual and ceremonial activities they undertake, in the speeches and narrations they deliver, in the administrative and legal actions they perform and in the proverbs,

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<sup>192</sup> Tusso, “The Role of Women,” 40.

folktales and stories they cite or tell.”<sup>193</sup> These concepts of peacemaking are based on the indigenous values and beliefs enshrined in the *ateetee* and *gadaa* institutions. Through *ateetee* ceremonies, Arsi women undertake their roles as mediators between groups and clans. Explaining how Arsi women interfere when Oromos of different families or clans engage in a conflict, Hamdesa Tuso discusses in this way: “The women’s role is very pivotal in halting the conflict immediately. They make distress call (uuu—uuu—uuu) to all the neighborhoods in the surrounding area, organize themselves in the form of a human chain, physically enter between the conflicting parties, and lie on the ground.”<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, Tuso adds, “Women are the only group in the entire society who have such a status of being woyyu (sacred) with the authority to prevent violence and potential death.”<sup>195</sup>

For Arsi women, any injustice committed against a single woman is considered an offence committed against them as a group. Hence, “no woman in the village is excused from the protest unless and otherwise she has an absolute inconvenience she has no control over. A woman who disregards the request for protest is considered as one who has weakened the group solidarity, and is usually punished in various ways, including being cursed.”<sup>196</sup> In my interview with Arsi mothers in all three districts of the Arsi region (Kofele, Kokossa, Arsi Nagele), I found the assertion to be true.

However, Christian mothers do not participate in *ateetee* rituals because of their religious convictions. Peacemaking is a central concept in Christianity. Our Master, Jesus

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<sup>193</sup> Etefa, *Integration and Peace*, 61.

<sup>194</sup> Tuso, “The Role of Women,” 38.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Hussein, “A Cultural Representation,” 103.

said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Just as Jesus is the Son of God and is the Peacemaker, so those who follow Him and imitate His model of peacemaking with others will be called sons of God. If Christian communities in Arsiland are serious about narrowing the growing social divide, they should consider helping revive aspects of *ateetee* rituals. I am convinced that the peacemaking aspect of the *ateetee* ritual can serve as a great common ground between Christians and Waaqeffattootaa.

The concept of peacemaking is evident in Islam as well. According to Wahiduddin Khan, an Islamic scholar and peace activist, the “very first verse of the Quran reads: In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the most Compassionate. This verse, which is repeated in the Quran 114 times, clearly shows that the God of Islam is the God of mercy and compassion, and the book of Islam too is the book of mercy. The people of Islam must also possess the quality of mercy and compassion; otherwise they could not be true believers.”<sup>197</sup> Khan’s peacemaking outlook can encourage Muslim leaders in the Arsi area to revise their interpretation and consider being respectful to Arsi Oromo women’s peace initiatives.

*The Concept of Woyyuu (High Esteem, Holy, Respect)*

The term woyyuu is difficult to easily translate to English. People I interview described woyyuu as someone or something sacred, holy, not to be touched, or someone to be feared or respected. For instance, God is woyyuu, the Creator and sustainer of every creature. Heaven is woyyuu, since it is the dwelling place of God. The earth/land is

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<sup>197</sup> Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, “The Concept of Peace in Islam” January 11, 2005, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://cpsglobal.org/content/concept-peace-islam>.

woyyuu, since we live on earth and depend on her for farming. Also, the Arsi believe when they die, they return to earth. A male in-law (sodda) is woyyuu and a female in-law (soddati) is woyyuu. This respect is very special; it means they are to address one another respectfully, care for one another, and do things that build up their relationship. A mother, who gave birth to you, is also woyyuu.

Marit Tolo Qstebo, who researched woyyuu among Arsi Oromo in Bale, asserts, “Siinqee [woyyuu] – Siinqee, a stick (ulee) a woman will receive on her wedding day is [woyyuu]. It is used during religious ceremonies (ateetee), as well as during collective female-only marches mobilized when a woman’s [woyyuu] or her rights have been violated.”<sup>198</sup> As much as it is difficult to define the term, the description given of woyyuu clearly includes every aspect of Arsi Oromos’ everyday life. The religious dimension is also evident, although my informants do not necessarily articulate woyyuu in a religious sense. Their traditional institutions such as *ateetee* rituals is centered on woyyuu, which implies harmony in society and respect for all people. However, the decline in *ateetee* rituals indicates the vanishing of some Oromo concept of woyyuu. The challenging religious changes and modern culture continue to impact the concept of woyyuu, though some elements of it are still practiced by Muslim and Christian Arsi Oromos alike.

The concept of sacredness or holiness is presented in the Bible with great significance and a wide range of categories. God is holy. God is to be obeyed. The place of worship is considered holy. The people of God are set apart for God (Exodus 19:3-6; 1 Peter 2:5-12). Christians are to love God, love their neighbors, and live in harmony with everyone. Caring for and cohabiting in the planet earth in a responsible way is God’s

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<sup>198</sup> Marit Tolo Østebø, “Wayyuu – Women’s Respect and Rights among the Arsi-Oromo,” (Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 2009), 1052 .

command to believers; therefore, the notion of sacredness (*woyyuu*) is a pivotal common ground between Christians and other Arsi Oromos that needs our attention due to the many pressing social justice issues, including women's rights and the protection of planet earth, in Arsi society.

### Summary

My main objective in this section has been to foster an understanding of the *ateetee* ritual in order to empower evangelical Christian mothers to engage in *ateetee* ceremonies. In the contemporary male-dominated Arsi society, women are impeded from taking leadership roles outside homes, and turn to important institutions like *ateetee*, which women use to fight for their rights within socially defined domains of segregated gender roles. Arsi women's prayer for society in times of natural calamities is argued in literature as a ritual to the Ateetee divinity, though my informants say it is for God.

In addition, the unique peacemaking roles women, through their status as mother, play to mediate between warring groups or clans are declining. Even though rejection of women's leadership through *ateetee* rituals has been an ongoing process, the women have been fiercely resistant to challenging the changing social system as they are being challenged by it. I also examined, though not in detail, the *ateetee* ritual in Arsi context to demonstrate its unique features as opposed to the sweeping generalized definition known in literature. Studying *ateetee* in context is also helpful for Christian communities who blindly demonize *ateetee* ceremonies. It is my contention that to narrow the cultural gap Christians need to search for common ground with the indigenous Oromo culture. Christian and Muslim rejection of *ateetee* has greatly contributed to the subjugation of women both at home and in public.

Finally, I also explored the common ground that the indigenous Oromo religion and Christianity have to narrow the cultural divide in the society. It is my conviction that, in order to successfully transform women's role and status in Arsi society, the *ateetee* ritual should be revived. Christian communities need to reexamine their preconceived notions about *ateetee* and get necessary training to help revitalize women to have a voice in Arsi society. Missional communities have responsibilities to help restore the *ateetee* institution to protect the culture, which they can use to make Jesus known.

## SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

In this section, you will find various beautiful lyrics of Arsi Oromo *ateetee* songs that the Arsi Oromo women perform in different situations, including defending the abused woman and confronting the abusive man, intersecting the warring individuals or clans, in prayers for childless women, in interceding for rain, and in celebration of an answered prayer. The goal of these songs is to provide an example of my dissertation research on *ateetee* musical rituals which I recorded during my fieldwork in three districts in the West Arsi Zone, namely, Arsi Nagele, Kofale, and Kokosa, Ethiopia during summer 2014. These locations were intentionally chosen to cover the vast area of the Arsiland, which is helpful to indicate the status of the *ateetee* institution.

My informants explained to me that the *ateetee* rituals typically take place at the location where the incident occurred. In a situation like drought, women would go to a nearby riverbank or gather under a sacred prayer tree to intercede on behalf of their community. Only married women can participate in *ateetee* rituals. Women would sit or stand in a circle to pray in songs. Men would assist as needed. The lyrics and melody of the songs are in traditional tunes that I recorded during my research. The songs are incredibly rich and their distinct musical traditions reflect the Arsi Oromo culture and issues pertaining to their communities. This ritual is valued in particular for its capacity to empower women to play their social constructed roles as intercessors, peacemakers, defenders, and protectors of *woyyuu* (sacredness) within the cultural boundaries.

The style of *ateetee* song-dance uses a “call and response” framework: a fundamentally interactive form in which one group calls upon or sings the short sentence

and the other answers or repeats through performance. Call and response is a common cultural framework used for emphasis and to foster lively dialogue in religious ceremonies, music, public discussions, and so on. Distinct about *ateetee* songs is that they are rooted in storytelling; they become ingrained in the minds of people and never leave. Intertwined songs and dances are extremely important forms of communication in the Oromo tradition. The Arsi women use songs for various purposes, including praying for rain, for children, and for thanksgiving, which in return helps preserve the history, culture, and values associated with it.

These songs are well known in the three districts where I conducted interviews and video recordings for this artifact. They are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next. There is no oral or written reference for who composed them first. Arsi women know these traditional songs and are able to improvise songs about current events. The songs reflect the women's worldview including how they relate to their creator, to creation and to each other. One of the challenges in translating the lyrics is that Oromo words do not exactly translate into English. Therefore, I had to find equivalent words or explain the context, which often weakens the meaning. Below are examples of *ateetee* songs translated into English.

### ***Kadhaa Roobaa*<sup>199</sup>: Rain Songs**

As a farming community, Arsi Oromos' livelihood is dependent on rain to grow crops and raise livestock. When severe drought hits, and the dry season extends for several months, it affects both the people and their livestock. Natural calamities are often

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<sup>199</sup> Kadhaa Rooba is a prayer made for rain when drought strikes.



perceived as a consequence of the failure of humans to live according to God's order. As Kelbessa Workineh describes, "The Oromo believe that humans can influence [God]'s actions. Individuals who live and act in accordance with [God]'s order will be happy, and be respected members of their society. On the contrary, when a person fails to act in accordance with [God]'s order, [God] will punish him/her."<sup>200</sup> In the next three prayer songs, women collectively confess on behalf of their nation and ask God to give them rain. Their intimate dependence on God and their self-understanding as *Woyyuu* created to live in accordance with God's order comes out very clearly in these prayer songs.

### Diree Maraaroo

Diree maraaroo <sup>201</sup> Dilli dubbannaa Rabbi araaroo	We insert <i>maraaroo</i> [make headbeads from maraaroo, likewise we speak sinful, God have mercy on us
Ani haadha abdii diree maraaroo	I'm Abdi <sup>202</sup> 's mother, we insert <i>maraaroo</i>
Dilli dubbannaa Rabbi araaroo	We speak sinful, God have mercy on us
Woyyuu na umee, diree maraaroo	He created me <i>woyyuu</i> <sup>203</sup> , I insert <i>maraaroo</i>
Dillil dubbannaa Rabbi araaroo	But we speak sinful, God have mercy on us
Guddaan Rabbi diree maraaroo	Great is God, we insert <i>maraaroo</i>
Dilli dubbannaa Rabbi araaroo	We speak sinful, God have mercy on us

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<sup>200</sup> Workineh Kelbessa, *Traditional Oromo Attitudes Towards the Environment: An Argument for Environmentally Sound Development* (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> *Maraaroo* is a plant that produces small round red seeds. Women collect the maraaroo seeds and make holes through its middle and use *sumaaroo*, a thin long grass as a string to make head beads from *maraaroo*.

<sup>202</sup> Hadhaa Abdi, - can be metaphorical here indicating mothers' strong hope and faith in Rabbi for their prayer to receive rain.

<sup>203</sup> *Woyyuu*- means sacred, holy, high esteem

Harka irraa ceekuu diree maraaroo

Our shoulder in on our, we  
insert maraaroo

Dilli dubbannaa Rabbi araaroo

We speak sinfully God have  
mercy on us

### **Laaftuu Ayyaantuu**

Laaftuu ayyaantuu aseena

I am soft fortunate  
entering[traveling]

Iltaama Rabbi adeema

I am going to pray to God

Teephaan hidhadhaa aseena

I wore leather belt<sup>204</sup>

Iltaama Rabbi adeema

I am going to pray to God

Hanfalaa sorsaa aseena

My belt strongly tight. I am  
traveling

Iltaama Rabbi adeema

I am going to pray to God

Teephee ejadhaa aseena

I walk carefully slowly  
entering.

Iltaama Rabbi adeema

I am going to pray to God

Malkaa irreensa aseena

I am going to a river-bank  
where I offer my prayers

Iltaama Rabbii adeema

I am going to pray to God

Dumeessaa guuree aseena

There is cloud rising ...

Iltaama Rabbi adeema

I am going to pray to God

### **Qilxxuu Shiniyyoo**

Qilxxuu shiniyyoo jali gooda

The Qilxxuu tree in Shiniyyo  
is on hills

womaa hin taatani Banats jede gooftaan

The Lord said, “you will be  
alright; I will see you  
through.”

dumeessaa guree jalli gooda

the clouds are rising...there is  
hill beneath it

Womaa hin taatanii batanii jede gooftaan

the Lord said, “you will be  
alright; I will see you  
through.”

sittu nu umme jalli gooda

you created me...there is hill  
beneath it

womaa hin tatanii baatanii jedhee gooftaan

the Lord said, “you will be  
alright; I will see you  
through.”

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<sup>204</sup> Belt indicates women’s strength and commitment to plead with God.

Waa sodaanan rabbitti theefa bayee	I was so afraid and run to God
Dheessee bayee oolchee gale	I escaped. I came home safely.
Duumessaa guure Rabbitti dheefa bayee	I see the clouds rising, then I run to God
Dheessee bayee oolchee gale	I escaped. I arrived home safely.

### Thanksgiving Song

This is a thanksgiving song to God for answering their prayers for rain. The objects and figurative language used in songs describe the society's view of the God as a Creator and Sustainer, their intimate relationship with God, and the interconnectedness with creation and others. I have heard these songs from women in all three districts. Without any written documents, the songs are incredibly widespread and deeply ingrained in the whole Arsi culture.

Killaan <sup>205</sup> bayee sirraa dayee Rabbiyyoo	I carried my killaa I gave birth from you my God ( You gave me rain)
Killa feese sitti dheessee Rabbiyyoo	I carried my killa run to you my God
illilililiii	Elelelele (ululating... a joyful sound)
Ka hindheeyyii labba'a Ka maraafuu abba'a Rabbiyyoo	Like a tree on high ground A Father for all, oh you God
Killaan bayee sirraa dayee Rabbiyyoo	I carried my killa I gave birth from you my God

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<sup>205</sup> *Killa* is a small beaded wooden container. It is used to hold melted butter with roasted coffee, commonly called "buna qalaa." It is a special treat often given to special guests. When ateetee women gather to pray for rain, they bring their killa filled with butter and coffee to share with the group and also use in their prayer ceremonies.

Killa feessee sitti dheessee Rabbiyyoo  
 Killa faata situ waadaa Rabbiyyoo

I carried my killa I run to you  
 my God  
 Holding the prayer killa to  
 you the God who keeps  
 promise

### Birth Song

A woman in childbirth is called *deetuu*. In the traditional Arsi culture, a woman in childbirth is considered *woyyuu* [sacred] because giving birth is *woyyuu*. She wears *qanafaa*<sup>206</sup> on her forehead, which indicates she recently gave birth. She is supposed to rest and get the best care a husband or family member can give her. Her husband must restrain from any form physical or verbal abuse during this season. If he abused her verbally or physically, he would be seen as breaking the *woyyuu*. When the neighborhood women hear about the abuse, they would fight for her right in songs saying:

Tumtichi tumee ituu worraa Baale

The (the abuser) abused, oh  
 Ituu of the Baale

hin oollee dhufe Situu ana waame

I came because you called me  
 to come

Boramaan margaa.  
 gurbaa borama amma si argaa

Boramaa is a grass  
 You trouble-maker I will face  
 you off

Ateete siinqee gogeettii  
 Siinqee gogeettii lolaaf bobeeeti

Ateete, an angry siinqee  
 An angry siinqee is ready to  
 fight.

Ta Rabbi lafaa sheetii fixadhee

I did my part to do right  
 before God and reconcile you  
 with other.

Goggossii jiisii

Make him dry and fall  
 (meaning dig the matter  
 seriously)

yoo didee lolle hofolchii dhisi'I

If he refused to reconcile let  
 him go

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<sup>206</sup> *Qanafaa* is a piece of curved wood beaded that a woman in childbirth wears on her forehead. It is a symbol of women's *woyyooma* (sacredness), respect, and rights in the Oromo culture.

Ateetee Asabii baanee  
mucaan ani dayee qanafaa dhaane jette ateeteen

Woraana hin qabuu Asabii baanee

Mucaan ani dayee qanafaa dhaane jette ateeteen

*Ateetee* we are from Asabii  
The son I gave birth (my  
son), hit his wife on *Qanafaa*,  
*say ateetee mothers*

I (we) have no weapon, we  
are from Asabii

The son I gave birth (my  
son), hit *Qanafaa*, *say*  
*ateetee mothers*

In the following protest song, women threaten men, telling them that they will not return home unless the person abused *qanafaa* rule admits his faults and pays necessary fines. They assert power collectively demanding justice for the abused women.

Burqituu lama lachuu wol ilaalti  
yoo dhiisee gale boruu natti faanti jette jaartiin

Two streams side by side  
If I return home without  
justice served, it will happen  
to me also, as the older lady  
says

Ateetee hindaatu dhalee  
ee noora aayyoo- *Ateetee*,  
tun baatu male hin daaku galee

*I will not grind for meal* ,  
*yes, we agree*  
unless the justice is served, I  
will not return home to grind  
(prepare meals for family)

yaatee wolgeete hindaatu dhale

They (women) are gathered, *I*  
*will not grind*

tun baut Male hin Dakar galee

unless the justice is served, I  
will not return home to grind  
(prepare meals for family)

haadha Hofillee hindaatu dhalee

I'm the mother of Hofillee, *I*  
*will not grind*

tun baatu male hin daaku galee

unless the justice is served, I  
will not return home to grind  
(prepare meals for family)

### Peace Songs

When a fierce conflict occurs between individuals or clans, women would carry their siinqee and tie the edges of their belt creating a division between fighters. They sing the song below as they interfere and divide the conflict.

Ateetee hanfalaa rogaa  
Narra looyinni hanfalaan bofaa

Yaatee woligeetee hanfalaa rogaa

Ee nooraa aayyoo  
narra hin looyinni hinfallen bofaa

*Ateetee my belt is respected*  
Do not cross over me my belt  
is snake (meaning it will  
harm you)  
They (Ateetee women) are  
gathered...my belt is  
respected  
welcome dear mothers  
Do not by pass me my belt is  
snake.

### Celebratory Songs

This is the most joyful and playful celebratory song. Women sing this song to celebrate the reconciliation achieved as a result of their efforts resolving a conflict between individuals or groups of people. The ritual is often concluded with the ceremony where the offender offers an animal for (*falaa*) ceremony and receives blessings for respecting women's decision. The killing of an animal has a great significance since blood is seen as cleansing.

Noora ee achii sii sar godhaa moona ee

Baaji ee achi sii sar godhaa maatii ee

worii saayyaan qabuu  
ebbaa saayyaa hin dhabu sheephisii eebbisi

Welcome... I will open wide  
the barn for you  
[I will give you] a cow with  
wide horn [welcome you]  
with my family

those who have cows  
Never lack the cows blessing  
let us dance let us bless

Gabbataa nuu kenne	He gave us the good looking cow
gabbadhuu siin jenne sheephisii eebbisi	We say, you may prosper let us dance...let us bless him
ulfaata nu kenne ulfaadhu siin jenne sheephisii ebbisi	He gave us the best one We say, you may prosper
Anaa duula galuu	for me who is returning from war
Anaa deetu faluu	and offering a celebration feast for a woman on childbirth
sheephisi ebbis	for me who is blessing the women on birth
Anaa haadha Guyyoo Anaa guyyaa adhaa	I am Guyyoo's mother who is privileged to see this day
sheephisii ebbisi	let us dance...let us bless him ( the family)

### Summary

These beautiful *ateetee* songs describe the guiding principles in the Oromo worldview embedded in their indigenous belief system. The women vividly portray their trust in *Rabbi* (God) as creator and sustainer of all life, recognize their failure to live according to God's requirements, and ask God for forgiveness. For instance, when natural calamities, such as droughts, are perceived to be a result of a human failure to live according to God's requirements, God is seen as merciful and kind in response to their prayer. Thus, when confronted with drought, women assume a mediation role between their people and God to collectively confess their sins and the sins of their society. The women patiently wait upon God until they receive rain, then offer prayers of thanks after receiving rain.

Another crucial point is the Arsi women's self-understanding as *woyyuu* indicates the ethical basis from which they draw their respect and spiritual authority to intervene in conflict and “spend an inordinate amount of time and energy in peacemaking in their communities.”<sup>207</sup> When their rights are violated, Arsi women collectively demand their rights to equal treatment in most aspects relating to life and basic rights.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Hamdesa Tusso and Maureen P. Flaherty, *Creating the Third Force: Indigenous Processes of Peacemaking*. Peace and Conflict Studies (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 82.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*



## SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

For the production of my dissertation artifact, I produced a thirty-seven minute video documentary containing interviews, cultural play, and important *ateetee* song and dance with mothers in their homes and in open green fields. I spent six weeks researching the Arsi Oromo *ateetee* rituals in the districts of Arsi Nagele, Kofele, and Kokossa. Quickly after my arrival I learned that I had to acquire official permission from the local government to gather with women practicing *ateetee* rituals. The reason for such restrictions was the heightened political instability in the country. Because of anti-government protests, the officials were very suspicious of people gathering without prior notification to districts. Thus, the first week of my time in the country was spent traveling to the district offices to request permission and identify the people I needed to interview and the places in which I would be conducting my field research.

In all three districts, there are women representatives appointed by the government to directly work with village women. These representatives are responsible for women's affairs, which includes organizing *ateetee* rituals. When I shared my research project, the women leaders quickly understood my research project and took initiatives to help me connect with *ateetee* women practitioners. I spent about two weeks in each region working with these women conducting face-to-face interviews, leading formal and informal discussions, and video recording *ateetee* rituals.

In this visual presentation of *ateetee* rituals, the focus is on the workings of the *ateetee* traditions in the Arsi Oromo context; more specifically, this artifact depicts the methods *ateetee* rituals use in protecting women's rights and peacemaking. The women's

resilience to preserve their indigenous peacemaking institution in the midst of an ever-changing social environment hopefully can inspire other groups and regional organizations to search for common ground with the purposes found in the cultural *ateetee* institution. It was a great privilege for me to document this valuable institution, especially in the current politically and socially heightened environment where women have little support to freely hold their rituals.

### **Artifact Goals**

My primary goal in this artifact is to portray the unique aspects of the *ateetee* institution that can be used as a symbol for a peaceful, non-violent approach to political engagement, which is highly needed in Ethiopia today. The development of this dissertation and artifact is an initial step toward the effort of revitalizing aspects of the *ateetee* rituals to empower women to protect their rights and participate in their community's social and religious life. The interviews, discussions, and songs in this artifact serve as a visual resource to initiate academic discussions emphasizing the importance of incorporating aspects of *ateetee* peacemaking approaches in the formal legal system.

It is also a goal of this artifact to challenge religious leaders who are rejecting women's leadership to reassess their perceptions and reconsider empowering their women to learn and get engaged in *ateetee* rituals. It is important for missional churches to know that authentic relationships begin with learning the culture and creatively engaging with the people we serve. This artifact will be helpful to churches and Christian ministries looking to build cross-cultural relationships.

The rituals, songs, and discussion reveal the Oromo worldview, which emphasizes the interdependence between human beings, and between human beings and the created world. Similar to Christianity's view of creation, "The Oromo believe that [God] is the creator of all things and the source of all life...God requires humans to responsibly cohabit the Earth with other creatures."<sup>209</sup> To present the common ground found between Oromo culture and Christianity and (Islam to some extent) is the objective of this effort.

### **Audience**

The primary audience for this dissertation and the accompanying artifact are missional ministries who feel the calling to cross-cultural work, such as empowering women, especially rural mothers whose voice is equally pivotal to restore peace and justice in Ethiopia's legal system. This artifact may also be used as a credible resource by social workers, human rights workers, and students of Oromo history who want to help preserve customary laws.

### **Scope and Content**

The artifact will provide a visual presentation of the *ateetee* rituals in order to communicate women's concerns to the world. The content is organized as a documentary, including footage of face-to-face interviews, songs, and *ateetee* rituals in three different Arsi Oromo districts in Ethiopia. I worked with a local professional videographer, Dawit Solomon, owner of Dawit Productions. Solomon filmed and edited

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<sup>209</sup> Workineh Kelbessa, "The Oromo Conception of Life: An Introduction" *Worldviews* Vol. 17 (Brill 2013), 60.

the video. The following interview questions were used to guide women's discussions on the *ateetee* ritual and its importance in empowering Arsi Oromo women today:

1. What is *Ateetee*? The women describe in detail the meanings of *ateetee*. Types of *ateetee* rituals and their importance for women's empowerment is discussed as well.
2. Who participates in the *ateetee* ritual? The women explain that Protestant Christians and those who are strict Muslim do not participate. They also explained the discouragement and opposition they are facing particularly from mosque leaders.
3. Does the government support *ateetee* rituals? The woman said that the government is giving them moral support. They are recognized and organized at the district and zonal level. However, the women also complained they their *ateetee* institution is manipulated by the government for political ends. They ask us to perform *ateetee* and film us merely to say they support our culture but in reality, they are hurting us in so many ways.
4. How do you want to maintain the *ateetee* ritual? Women describe their determination to continue to perform the *ateetee* ritual to protect their rights and participate in their society's social and religious life.
5. What is *siinqee*? Women say *siinqee* is a woman's weapon. It gives them respect and protection. A woman without *siinqee* has no power. It is the most important cultural symbol women use for *ateetee* rituals and important events.

### **Budget**

The organization I serve with, Light of Hope Ministry Ethiopia, provided the main financial support for the development and recording of the *ateetee* video. They also covered travel, accommodation, and other personnel expenses for my informants and staff members who assisted me when conducting field research in Ethiopia.

### **Standards of Publication**

The Turabian Standard for writing research and dissertations has been used to write this dissertation.<sup>210</sup> The accompanying artifact video will be available on YouTube publicly. There is no specific standard of publication on how to publish the videos on YouTube. The visual presentation of the *ateetee* ritual to support the revitalization of aspect of this tradition for Arsi women to have a voice in their society is the main focus of this endeavor. As an original documentary of *ateetee* rituals, it can be used as a reliable source for further academic research into the *ateetee* institution.

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<sup>210</sup> Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

## SECTION 6:

### POSTSCRIPT

Ten years ago, my choir and I began writing gospel songs using the traditional tunes, including *ateetee*. We produced audio and videos and distributed them to churches. It was the first time that the Arsi Oromo folk melodies, especially *ateetee*, were used to create Christian music. The songs were well received among the Arsi Oromo Christian community. Non-Christian Arsi Oromos were amazed that we were singing the songs they are familiar with, except the words are different. Arsi Christian mothers were especially inspired seeing our commitment to utilize cultural songs which in return emphasized women's leadership in society and religious places. Moreover, using their folk melodies opens up a dialogue about women's leadership in the community, in religious institutions, and in broader society. Nevertheless, for some who reject the *ateetee* ritual, our attempt to adopt traditional melodies was perceived as motivated by cultural tribalism to preserve the Arsi Oromo culture. Still others deemed our effort as unnecessary because they perceive women's leadership roles through the *ateetee* as the tradition of the past, which has no relevance to the current generation.

As I began the Doctor of Ministry program, I chose to use this chance to dig deep into the problem. My initial challenge was not finding relevant literary works on the *ateetee* institution. Few ethnographers and anthropologist studies focus on *Gadaa*, only male institutional practices to the detriment of female institutions.<sup>211</sup> Thereby, the documentation of the *ateetee* institution is an initial step toward the effort of

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<sup>211</sup> Kumsa, *Songs of Exile*, 55.

revitalization this valuable institution for Arsi Oromo women. The accompanying artifact gives a practical example for the written statement that is not only useful, but also provides a vital contribution to enhance the breadth of resources that could be used for the reviving process of *ateetee* rituals. More focused and detailed study is necessary since there is very limited information and research on the *ateetee* institution. For ministries engaging in a cross-cultural approach, the *ateetee* institution could serve as a symbol of inclusiveness across religious lines, a symbol of unity and non-violent resistance to enhance social justice in our present polarized and divided social and political systems.

When conducting face-to-face interviews with Arsi women in Portland, Oregon and Ethiopia, the main concern which surfaced was the cry for the loss of identity, loss of country, and loss of their voice in the community. Rumiya Osman, an Oromo mother living in Toronto, relates her feelings in this way:

Women are supposed to be the adhesive glue for our community. We are the ones who bring people together. But we have no place to gather, no place to cry for our dead, no place to grieve in our deepest sorrows, no place to sing and dance in our joyous moments. When our loved ones die, we cry in our homes; when our nation dies, where do we gather and cry?<sup>212</sup>

The lamentation above clearly indicates the Oromo women's nationalistic view and their awareness of "the role history and cultural heritage can play for present generation and for generations to come."<sup>213</sup>

Arsi Oromo mothers in Oromia are also going through difficult times. One of the reasons is because Ethiopia's one-party-led oppressive regime does not allow free speech, despite the constitutional promise to grant its provision. I have observed this firsthand when I was conducting field research in summer 2014. I needed to get permission from

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>213</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 204.

the local government authority to meet with mothers in their homes or village. The government authorities get very suspicious when communities gather without notifying them, which creates tension and fear within the community. The women were very careful when they talked about the government. This is sad! It should not be this way. The Ethiopian government should be open and tolerant toward the Oromo people and all nations, for that matter. Women should be free from government interference to talk about and perform their traditional institutions. The government should refrain from intervening in cultural and religious affairs, as it promised when assumed power in 1991 “to secure the rights of the country’s many ethnic and religious groups, both recognizing their diversity and seeking to enhance equality within that diversity.”<sup>214</sup>

To be honest, writing this dissertation has not been easy for me. The Ethiopian government’s ongoing crackdown on the Oromo people has affected me personally to the extent of almost giving up my research interest. I lost hope when I heard children were killed on the street and students were killed in the university campus. As I write these lines, there are thousands behind bars suffering in the country’s notorious prisons simply for saying no to injustice. What kind of government is operating which sets fire to a prison to kill the prisoners then lies to public, explaining they were shut while they try to escape?<sup>215</sup>

So I needed time to reflect and think what my efforts could contribute for my people. I finally decided to continue my writing, hoping that my artifact and the written

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<sup>214</sup> Gnamo, “*Conquest and Resistance*,” 203.

<sup>215</sup> Adam Withnall, “Kilinto fire: Ethiopian Government accused of Gunning Down Political Prisoners as They Flee Burning Jail,” *Independent*, September 2016, accessed February 8, 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/kilinto-fire-ethiopian-government-accused-of-gunning-down-political-prisoners-as-they-flee-burning-a7228756.html>.



statement would offer a small contribution to promote women's leadership. The extensive readings and field research with individual and groups in the rural parts of Ethiopia ignited my passion to write more songs using the traditional melodies.

Finally, I contend that our efforts to reclaim our God-given cultural identity and worship Him using our heart language and cultural melodies would contribute not only to incarnating the Gospel message to the Arsi Oromos, but also to preserve their cultural institution, such as *ateetee*, that empowers women to exercise leadership as mothers and peacemakers in their society.

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