

A CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE OROMO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT In a society, gender ideology is created and reflected in multiple ways. Among the myriad ways, language and culture play great role in creating and reflecting gendered culture in a society. This paper examines the representation of women in Oromo folk-proverbs and folk-religion, and analyses the position of women in the traditional Oromo cultural practices. Despite all the barriers of patriarchal power, Oromo women had an influential position in the past although this has now declined following the decline in the people's indigenous cultural practices. Oromo proverbs about womanhood were categorized into cultural stereotypes. Although the majority of the sample proverbs were basically disparaging, the semantics were shown to depend to a large extent on the complex whole of their context of use. The implications were also presented and discussed.

Key Words: Oromo; Gender ideology; Proverbs; *Atete*; Masculinity; Femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Gender issue has long been an important theme in the fields of sociology, social psychology, economics, literature, education and political science. Side by side with these mainstream fields of study, sociolinguistics and language teaching have equally analysed the dynamics of gender (Bolinger, 1987; Freeman & McElhinny, 1996; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; O'Barr & Atkins, 1987; Oha, 1998; Sunderland, 1994). As a concept, gender is the multiple ways in which maleness and femaleness are perceived, evaluated and stratified in a society (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1995; Ferraro, 1995; Harris, 1995; Kramer, 1991; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Wahlstrom, 1992). Gayle Rubin, a feminist anthropologist who brought the term 'gender' into contemporary use defines it as "a socially imposed division of the sexes" and as a deliberate transformation of "males and females into 'men and women'" (qtd. in Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1995: 139). This social construction of masculinity and femininity has later come to be known as gendered culture (Holmes, 1995). James & Saville-Smith (1989: 6-7) stated that in gendered culture, "masculinity and femininity are central to the formation of the society as a whole."

According to Jackson (1993: 660), one feature of a gender ideology is that "men and women are relational, socially constructed, culturally specific and negotiated categories." A large body of literature reveals that this situation is a real fact of life, cutting across all cultural and socio-economic structures of every nation (Ferraro, 1995; Harris, 1995). Despite the passage of time, there are still strong cultural supports that perpetuate gender ideology. Among other things, gender

ideology is chiefly perpetuated in symbols and rituals, patterns of verbal expressions and gender-based role assignments (Baron & Byrne, 1997; Holmes, 1995; Kramer, 1991; Sapiro, 1994; Schaefer & Lamm, 1995; Sen & Grown, 1987).

Even though gender ideology is a real fact of life, the way it is constructed varies from one culture to the other (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1995). For example, in some parts of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, one example of gender ideology is that male children were and still are nutritionally more privileged as compared to their female counterparts. In these countries, anti-female prejudices are often associated with high rate of mal-nutrition, illness and death among female children and women (Ferraro, 1995; Harris, 1995; Hazarika, 2000).

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE OROMO PEOPLE'S CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The Oromo are the largest single ethnation in Eastern Africa (Appiah & Gates, 1999; Hassen, 1990, 1996; Legesse, 1973), constituting at least 40% of the Ethiopian population (Baxter, 1994; Burckhardt, 2000; Tareke, 1991). They speak *Afaan* Oromo (the language of Oromo), which belongs to the Eastern Kshitic family of Afro-Asiatic phylum. *Afaan* Oromo is one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa, surpassed only by Arabic and Housa Fulani (Hordofa, 2001; Muudee, 1995). Outside Ethiopia, the language is spoken by thousands of other Oromo tribes in Kenya (Aguilar, 1995; Stroomer, 1985).

The Oromo have vast and rich oral tradition. Historical records show that they were practicing agricultural and herding economy for quite a long period of time around Walabu proper (Baxter, 1978; Hassen, 1990; Lewis, 1965). Now, some branches of the Oromo are sedentary and live primarily by agriculture whereas the rest of them practice herding. Mixed farming culture is the other dominant structure of the Oromo agricultural economy. The Oromo oral literature shows that for the pastoralists as well as the sedentary farmers, cattle economy is still the most valued possession. As Sumner (1997: 224) clearly stated, among the Oromo "the best cattlemen are equally respected together with those who have distinguished themselves on the battle field or a big game hunting."

Before the expansion of Islam and Christianity, the Oromo had their own traditional African religion called *Waaqeffannaa*, the belief in *Waaq* (the supreme God). Currently, the major religions are Islam and Christianity. Following their influential socio-political movement in the area, the Oromo had some contact with Islam before the 19th century. Later on, when the expansionist pressure from the Christian Ethiopia became strong, they adopted the religion as an ideology of resistance against the anticipated disintegration of their social structure and identity (Hassen, 1990; Trimmingham, 1965).

But in places such as Borana, Guji, Warqa and Kokosa, where the Gada System, an age-based social organization, escaped demise, thousands of people are still *Waaqeffattootaa*, followers of the traditional religion. As in the rest of Africa, religious and cultural syncretism of blending Islamic elements with those

from traditional religion (Lewis, 1980) is also evident among the Oromo. The other aspect of cultural syncretism is that the overwhelming majority of Shoa Oromo, who have long accepted Orthodox religion, are also still amalgamating the Christian religious practices with their own indigenous creed (Baxter, 1994; Lewis, 1984). One example of this is the periodic observance of *muuda* (anointment) by both men and women, and *Atete* (female divinity) by women (Baxter, 1979, 1996; Hassen, 1990; Lewis, 1984).

The *Muuda* and *Atete* observances among the Oromo are typical examples of how the one and the many are made to integrate in traditional religious thoughts. Just as the other African traditional religious practices (Horton, 1998), the Oromo religious thoughts coalesce ideas about a multiplicity of spirits and those about a single supreme being. In addition, the Oromo have their own unique worldviews founded on three conceptual bases: *Ayaana* (spiritual connection), *Uuma* or *Uumee* (nature) and *Safuu* (ethical and moral code). They use these concepts integrally “to explain the organization and interconnection of human, spiritual and physical worlds” (Jalata, 1996: 111). Integrated as they are, the concepts guide the Oromo people’s view of the world at large.

Similar to the tribal pastoralists of East Africa, such as the Karimojong, the Masai, the Nuer, the Pokot, the Samburu, and the Sebei (Scupin & DeCorse, 1995), the Oromo had a well-developed age-based system grouping up on which the religious, political, economic and social life of the people were formed.⁽¹⁾ That is Gada System. Gada is the most complex word of Oromo social organization with multiple meaning. Legesse (1973: 81) stated that, the word gada “stands for several related ideas. It is, first of all, the concept standing for the whole way of life. More specifically however, it refers to any period of eight years during which a class stays in power.”

The African age set, as Hoebel (1958: 411) stated, is a “segmentation that promotes specialization of function along effective lines. It harnesses the energies of the youth to the ends of the society and gives to each age group a strong awareness of its own status.” As an age-based social organization, the Gada System must have also been developed as a mechanism of motivating and fitting members of the society (particularly men) into social structure. In the Gada System, there are five groups or parties called gada. Various socio-political functions and responsibilities are associated with each part. Initiation into and promotion from one gada to the next is done after eight years. The structural elevation follows an established procedure. For example, a son is initiated into the first gada only after his father has completed a cycle of forty years and passed through all other classes. This means, membership in the gada is not according to the age of a person (Abir, 1968; Legesse, 1973). Members of an age set are initiated into the next higher set with elaborated ceremony. The initiation obviously confers a culturally bestowed identity and imposes responsibilities on the elevated groups.

The Oromo age set system provides clear structural reference for members of the society so that they may develop a consistent and stable sense of self and others. Identity confusion, which is one typical problem of the technologically

sophisticated societies of the current world (Shaffer, 1994; Westen, 1996), is, therefore, unthinkable in the Gada System since any age set strictly provides its members with values and motives with which they should guide their lives. In order to decipher the structure of the Gada System, one needs to identify two different, but interrelating systems of peer group structure. According to Legesse (1973: 50-51), one of these is:

---- a system in which the members of each class are recruited strictly on the basis of chronological age. The other is a system in which the members are recruited equally strictly on the basis of genealogical generations. The first has nothing to do with genealogical ties. The second has little to do with age. Both types of social organizations are formed every eight years. Both sets of groups pass from one stage of development to the next every eight years. All Borana males have a position in both systems.

The Gada System contains ten sequential grades that occur in eight years interval and correlate with chronological ages. Each of the ten age sets run into hemicycle of five gada called *Birmaji*, *Horata*, *Michile*, *Dulo* and *Robale*. In the Borana version, the ten gada grades are subsequently *dabballe* (the grade of the uninitiated boys)⁽²⁾, *gammee didiko* (junior Gamme), *gammee gugurdu* (senior Gamme), *cusa* (junior warriors), *raba* (senior warriors), *gada* (the stage of political and ritual leadership), *yuba* (the largest category and stage of partial retirement that subsumes four sub-classes that together cover a period of twenty seven years) and *gada moji* (the terminal sacred grade).⁽³⁾ Members of one age set undergo a series of elaborate rites of passage to enter a new age set (Legesse, 1973).

The unilineal movement in the Gada System begins at birth. The concern of each grade was vividly and elaborately stated by Legesse (1973). Hamer (1996: 546-547) summarizes the socio-political function of men in each stage in the following way.

---- the first three grades concern with movement from non-male status with apprenticeship in military and economic roles; at the fourth and fifth levels that attainment of adult status correlates with the right to contract marriage, participate in the selection of a council and officers, and the responsibility of continued service; a sixth climatic stage involves circumcision and full elderhood rank; and in three remaining stages elders serve as consultants, gradually retiring from the gada.

In the Oromo Gada System, there existed also a distinct distribution of political authority among men in leadership. The well-known Gada officers were *Abbaa Bokkuu* (carrier of the scepter holding a position similar to that of a magistrate), *Abbaa Caffee* (father of legislative assembly), *Abbaa Alangee* (attor-

ney general), *Abbaa Sa'aa* (ministry of economy/finance), *Abbaa Seeraa* (a parliamentarian), and *Abbaa Duulaa* (war leader).

As women in other East African age set societies (Bernardi, 1985; Prins, 1953), the Oromo women lack comparable age-based social organization. However, there are socially recognized ways of categorizing the role and status of women that are associated with youth, adulthood and old age. Women may also enjoy different rights and privileges according to their seniority. The difference in rights and privileges is evident even between co-wives of a polygynous household. In the case of Borana polygynous household, Legesse (1973: 23-24) identified three categories of women. These are senior wives, junior wives, and mistresses. He stated that: "The senior wife enjoys many privileges. In general she gets more cows than her juniors." The Arsi Oromo had an exclusively non-kin women's social organization called *saddeetoo* or *saddeettan hanfalaa*. This is a kind of sodality (Harris, 1995) that provides the women with the impetus to participate in village councils and the cultural vehicle to mobilize *en masse* against mistreatment by men. However, only married and postmenopausal women were allowed to be the members of this village sphere association.

GENDER RELATION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN AS CONSTRUCTED IN THE OROMO INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND CULTURE

A gendered culture of a society is part and parcel of the society's complex socio-economic structure. Then, it is only when one sees it within this broader perspective that one may build a clear understanding of gender construction (Giroux, 1997). Within the Oromo cultural practices, there are laws or legalities and various other manifestations of gender stereotypes that directly or indirectly reinforce gendered culture. In areas where the Gada System is active or a powerful socio-political institution, as in Borana and Guji (Hassen, 1990; Hinant, 1978; Jalata, 1996), there have been forces of law governing gender and other relationships between members of the society. In areas where the Gada System has collapsed, on the other hand, there are ample tacit social value systems that still enforce gender ideology.

In Oromo areas where the Gada System is weak, Koranic and biblical concepts of modesty are also used to check or control the behavior of women. In the south and southeastern parts of Ethiopia, where the majority of the Oromo people are followers of Islam, the Shari'a law concerned with the role and conduct of women is fervently applied. Women are required to veil or cover from top down to toe. A number of married and unmarried women in major towns and rural areas of Oromia wear cloak-like garments, usually black, to veil themselves. As some writers convincingly state, there is a subtle relationship between religious socialization and female subjectivity (Crumbley, 1992; Rapoport *et al.*, 1995).

I start the discussion on the gender-based relationship between men and women in the Oromo society by taking as an example the customary law

among the Borana Oromo that is observed to govern and control the modesty of women in the society. One of the twelve cardinal laws of the Borana Oromo is the Law of Feminine Modesty that checks the indecently dressed woman. According to this law: "Women have taken to wearing cloth so thin as to leave them virtually nude. Henceforth, they must wear *gorfo* (ceremonial leather dress) at all times. Should a woman be improperly dressed, the husband is responsible and shall be punished" (Legesse, 1973: 97). It is obvious that the reason why the husband is enjoined with the responsibility of controlling the modesty of his wife is that a wife does not have an existence separate from her husband or that she is under his full protection. The same belief is equally distinctly communicated in a number of Oromo folk-proverbs, as shown later in this paper.

In Oromo, there are various other cultural attitudes and practices that reflect gender construction. The first is the differential treatment of boys and girls from the moment of their birth. At birth, parents are asked whether they have a *gurbaa* (baby son) or *intala* (baby daughter). Indoctrinating boys into masculinity and girls into femininity is conscientiously practiced, for example, by selecting gender-appropriate clothing and hairstyle. However, among the Borana Oromo, who are still practicing the Gada System closer to the original, unless they leave their *dabbale* grade, boys are never indoctrinated into masculinity.⁽⁴⁾

Among the Arsi, after a child is born, the midwives declare the sex of the child, usually by ululating five times for the baby son and four times for the baby daughter. See Africio (1973) for similar cultural practice among the Hadiya people, who are geographically culturally and historically related to the Arsi Oromo. At a very early stage, the Oromo boys and girls engage in cognitive self-categorization.⁽⁵⁾ This is later enhanced by other intensive process of socialization in the society.

The way the Oromo establish marital relationship also reveals gendered culture. For instance, a man requests (active) the hand of a girl for marriage, while a girl is requested (passive). Again, a man is deemed *fuudhe* (married) by virtue of his taking a woman to his homestead while the woman is deemed *heerumte* (been wedded) since she is taken away from her parental home. This simply shows that men are possessors while women are the possessed (Sapiro, 1994). Bartels' (1970) and Holcomb's (1973) ethnographic descriptions of marriage among the Wallaga Oromo reveal this fact. Similarly, the language of sexuality in Oromo emphasizes the importance of masculine potency or virility. Thus, the word *ulfaayuu* (becoming pregnant, passive) is used for women, while *ulfeessuu* (impregnating, active) is used for men.

Regarding the position of the Oromo women in the egalitarian Gada System both oral traditions and historical records show a glimpse of women's better socio-political position although there were obvious spatial division of labor.⁽⁶⁾ Taking the case of Borana Oromo, Legesse (1973: 19-20) stated the following gender relationship between men and women:

Men are in control of military and political activities. Only men can engage in warfare. Only men take part in the elections of leaders of camps or of age-sets and Gada classes. Men lead and participate in ritual activities. However, ritual is not an exclusively masculine domain: there are several rituals performed for women. In these and a few other instances women do take an important part. Women are actively excluded from age-sets. They are therefore heavily dependent on men for most political-ritual services and for all activities connected with the defense of Borana camps, wells, herds, and shrines.

Based on his observation, Legesse (1973) stated that although they did not directly participate in major assemblies, the Borana women indirectly reacted to men's assemblies through folk songs, which they primarily used to alleviate drudgery. He wrote:

Wherever the meetings are held, women can always make their feelings known about the subject of the deliberations indirectly. They sing work songs (*karrile*) that are intended to lighten the burden of their chores. These work songs often contain some pointed commentary on some infelicitous expression heard in the men's meetings or a direct criticism of some unjust or unwise decision the men are contemplating (Legesse, 1973: 20-21).

Unfortunately, Legesse (1973) left this part of his discussion incomplete. He did not provide readers with the detail of this indirect political voicing regarding the reasons to and the consequence of the phenomenon. What is more, he did not look deeper into the oral tradition nor draw inference regarding the moral and spiritual influences that the Oromo women wielded in the remote past. Although it requires a separate study, I speculate that there must be something behind the use of drudgery songs which the Oromo women use to criticize the infelicitous expressions heard in the male-only meetings and unwise decision made or contemplated there. It is my inference that such expressions are reminders of the prestigious condition of women in the collapsed Oromo egalitarianism. What is known of the oral tradition seems to support this inference. For example, according to Oromo elders, the symbolic value of womanhood has now declined in significance when compared to the time of Gada System.⁽⁷⁾

Historical, anthropological and feminist records alike show that gender inequality was hardened after the fall of the egalitarian social institutions in pre-colonial African societies. The problems have been largely attributed to the sweeping colonial conquests, religious expansions, emergence of statehood and economic crisis. Prior to these internal and external pressures, African women had relatively prestigious positions (Appiah & Gates, 1999; Steady, 1987). For instance, in Western Africa, among the Yuruba, Ibo, and Dahomey (Fer-

raro, 1995; Harris, 1995), and in Eastern Africa, among Tanzanians (Swantz, 1985), women had a highly favorable socio-economic position. Swantz (1985: 17) stated that the pre-colonial and pre-capitalist cultures of the African people “represented traditions with adherent value systems which awarded women recognized cultural roles.” Taking the Tanzanian case as an example, Swantz (1985: 19) wrote that: “There are indications that women had not been silent little creatures hidden in enclosed yards and kitchens in the kin and neighborhood communities before the differentiating influences of the slave trade, mercantilism, inter-marriage or subjugation by Muslim immigrants and the colonial economy came to be felt.”

The case of the Oromo women is similar to that of women in the rest of Africa. The incorporation of the Oromoland into Emperor Menelik’s Empire during late 19th century, and the expansion of Islam and Christianity disintegrated the overall socio-political structure of the Oromo (Baxter, 1978; Hassen, 1990, 1996; Jalata, 1996). The pressure that followed religious conversion and territorial unification dilapidated the Gada System, the hallmark of the Oromo democracy (Bernardi, 1985; Hassen, 1990; Hinant, 1978; Jalata, 1996; Legesse, 1973; Lewis, 1965). Unfortunately, the ruining of the Gada System created a widespread socio-political imbalance, one of which could be the wearing away of socio-political leverage granted women in the Gada System.⁽⁸⁾ The other reminder of gender relationship between men and women in the Oromo society is the patriarchal view of *Waaq*, and the matriarchal view of women’s divinities such as *Atete* and *Marama*.

As in other developing countries of Africa and Asia (Clark, 1998; Estudillo *et al.*, 2001; Simsa’a, 1998), in Oromia, gender is the fundamental element underlying the structure of male and female power, access to property, participation in social activities and the generalized ideology of role assumption. For example, there is a spatial stratification and differentiation of the social sphere, and economic activities between men and women in Oromo. The spatial patterns of the division of labor among the Borana Oromo, for instance, assign women and men to monitor two large, but different economic domains of the family. As an example, hut-building is exclusively a prerogative of women, while men’s responsibility is to build kraals and to defend camps, wells, herds and shrines (Legesse, 1973). This shows that men had overtaken the responsibility of controlling heavy and mobile economic resources at distant locations.

As is among the Gimi (Gillison, 1980), the Borana Oromo women had *de facto* power over the stationary or semi-mobile resources located close to the domestic sphere. This does not, however, mean that men and women do not know about each other’s sphere. As one Oromo folk-proverb indicates: *Dhiirti re’een elmitu, garuu waan baatu hin wallaaltu* (males do not milk goats, but still are not ignorant of how much milk the goats afford). But, in traditional Oromo society, as in any other indigenous African culture (Steady, 1987), the gender division of labor along productive and reproductive lines was insignificant since the economy was ultimately based on communal exchange and symbolic representation rather than on economic bonanza or materialistic accumulation.

THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL VALUES OF THE *ATETE* RITUAL FOR THE OROMO WOMEN

All of the previous works on *Atete* ritual knowingly or unknowingly undermined its socio-political role in the Oromo society by considering *Atete* as a simple neighborhood meeting of women, designed to discipline anti-social neighbors (Baxter, 1979). Captain Harris, one of the 19th century British travelers, defined *Atete* as goddess of fecundity appeased annually (see in Ahmed, 2002). As I very well know its practice in southern Oromia now, the timing of the festival is not fixed as such. Whenever natural disasters fall, women gather and perform the ritual. Without any fixed timing the Oromo women used to practice *Atete* as a way of strengthening their solidarity and as a tool to counter atrocities staged against them by men.

The *Atete* ritual shows that in the traditional Oromo society, men are functionally dependent on women in many ways (Legesse, 1973). It is a vivid indication of the place women had in the religious and cultural philosophy of the people. Although there is limited empirical evidence showing the closeness of women to nature (McCormack, 1980; Jackson, 1993), the Oromo people believe in the existence of woman/nature link (Legesse, 1973). The *Atete* practice by women is one part of a belief system that women are intermediary figures between *Waaq* that represents nature and the physical world or human. The myth has it that *Waaq* listens to women's desire and instantly responds to it. This is a part of the belief system that women are closer to nature in their nurturing and life-sustaining activities. My direct observation of the *Atete* ceremony among Arsi women in Kokosa, and related interview with oral historians in Adaba District of Bale Administrative Region from December 1994 to January 1995 partially confirmed this reality.

In Kokosa and Adaba, women's prayer was used in the past as a powerful means of terminating harsh ecological disruptions (e.g. crop failure, drought, endemic diseases) and other social crises such as protracted warfare. When such problems were detected, the men never puzzled over them, but urged the womenfolk in their core band to gather around a sacred *Qiltu* (sycamore tree), distinguished ford or high ground, or any renowned *ujubaa* (tree shrine). The women gathered and prayed to revert the affliction.

The following rainmaking *Atete* hymns of the Arsi Oromo women are said to win the benevolence of *Waaq*. The hymns also reveal the society's awareness that *Waaq*'s wrath is provoked when people violate the normal, prescribed way of life. It is thus directed towards maintaining the welfare of the community.

<i>Malkaa Katiyyoo ta irreesaa</i>	The ford of Katiyyo (river) where the ritual is done
<i>Waan jabaatellee Goofta</i>	O, Lord, I take refuge in You
<i>Sitti dheessaa na dandeettaa.</i>	When the hard comes
<i>Malkaa Katiyyoo irri goodaa</i>	And (I know) You admit me.

<i>Homaa hin taatanii</i>	The ford of Katiyyo has high ground
<i>Baatani jedhe Gooftaan.</i>	And Lord has confirmed our safety.
<i>Siinqee tiyya jiituu</i>	My wet and lustrous stick
<i>Calaliituu</i>	O God, You harm me not
<i>Safuu tiyya ilaaltee</i>	By just considering
<i>Atuu ana hin miituu.</i>	My (silly) sin.
<i>Uummata dillin dhibbaa</i>	The folk's sin is hundred (immense)
<i>Rabbiyyoon dilii jibbaa</i>	But Lord objects to sin
<i>Gooftaa dila nuu dogi!</i> ⁽⁹⁾	O Lord, admonish us with mercy!

According to the legend, after the women have prayed, *Waaq*, in whose honor the prayer has been uttered, would immediately provide the community members with as much rain as they wanted. The significance of this mythology is that it demonstrates the leadership role of women in defense of the community. It also indicates the subtle interconnection between *ayyaana* (spirituality), *uumaa* (nature) and *saffuu* (ethical and moral code).

Similar to other communal rites (Ferraro, 1995; Harris, 1995), the *Atete* ceremony is used also to enhance group solidarity. One occasion that triggers group solidarity among the Oromo women is fecundity needs. In Borana, couples that lack children come to the mother of *dabballe*⁽¹⁰⁾ to seek her blessing (Legesse, 1973). Among the Arsi Oromo, on the other hand, the couples usually appeal for the *saddeetoo* or *saddeettan hanfalaa* (committee of senior mothers) so that the latter would arrange for them the *Atete* ritual (Baxter, 1979). Up on the appeal, the women in the village gather and perform fertility rituals so that the would-be parents' appetency for children would be satiated. The formal blessing takes this pattern:

The Senior Mothers	The celebrant (child-seeking woman) with other attendants
<i>Lafa tana nu dhagayi!</i> (O listen this Earth!)	<i>Dhagayi</i> (Listen)!
<i>Waaqa kana nu dhagayi!</i> (O listen God!)	<i>Dhagayi</i> (Listen)!
<i>Malkaa tana nu dhagayi!</i> (O listen this ford!)	<i>Dhagayi</i> (Listen)!
<i>Waaqa dachiif Samii uumte nu dhagayi!</i> (O listen God who created the Earth and the Sky!)	<i>Dhagayi</i> (Listen)!
<i>Waggaa dhufu ilma ardaa dhaalu haa baattu!</i>	<i>Ee, haa baattu</i>
(May she next year bear a baby son who inherits the homestead!)	(yes, may she bear)!
<i>Toni toltuu</i> (This is well!) ⁽¹¹⁾	<i>Toltuu</i> (Well)!

It is not whether the blessing is effective that matters, but how the society uses it to provide psychological solace (therapy) for the grief that was caused by the failure to have children. The heart-felt blessing in the rituals provides the child-seeking woman with a great psychological and emotional gratification, as it is true of any religion (Ferraro, 1995).

The other function of *Atete* was political; it was used by the Oromo women

to counter male atrocities and to enforce religious sanctions against related misbehaviors. According to oral tradition, the Oromo women had been granted a protection in the Gada System. According to oral tradition, the *lallaba* (investiture) of the Qallu Goda in Dallo (the spiritual leader of the sub-moiety of Dallo) gave Abba Gada (the Gada Ruler) *bokku* (scraper) and *halange* (whip). The Qallu gave Abba Gada the scraper as a symbol of authority, and the whip as a symbol of *dubbataa* (adjudicator). The Abba Gada was also given a *sinqe* (ritual stick) and a *qanafa* (sacred piece of wood) to take home for his wife. The ritual stick was granted her to use when she performs anointment (and other important ritualistic performances) as well as to symbolize her *hanfala* (feminine) *mirga* (rights) and *wayyoomaa* (respect). The *qanafa*, also an insignia of honor, was granted her to tie along her forehead during and after childbirth. The postpartum rest period for a woman who is called *Ulmaa* and extends from four to five months. The Oromo mothers celebrate the event by tying a *qanafa* on their forehead to symbolize the highest dignity they have assumed by virtue of childbirth.

The customary law has it that during this *qanafa* phase, the family members, including the husband, are expected to please the mother and avoid annoying her (Kedir, 2000). The husband in particular should observe many postpartum taboos, one of which is to avoid mistreating his wife. Failure to observe the ritual prohibition, to use Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) expression, provokes the village women into agitation and protest. For example, if a husband beats his wife or verbally embitters her while she is observing this ritual, the wife throws off any responsibility at hand and heads straight to communicate the matter to the *saddeettan hanfalaa* (council of senior mothers). Even when the wife conceals the indignities that she has experienced by her husband and prefers to see them "locked inside" her home, to use Zanden's (1987: 330) expression, other women in the neighborhood may learn of the secret and disclose it to the council of senior mothers. Then, the senior mothers mobilize *en masse* against the atrocity committed by the husband. As a result of this, all of the women in the village abandon their individual houses, and protest against the offense.

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" (Wahlstrom, 1992: 163). After abandoning their houses, the women gather in the compound of the misbehaving husband and sing songs of resentment. They may also imprecate the husband for the offense he has inflicted on them.

Once they are in *Atete* ceremony, the women are observing a ritual and many taboos come into full force. For instance, any free communication with them immediately turns into formal estrangement. While these women go to

and from the ritual place, one has to avoid crossing their path. The custom has it that one has to stop with a respectful silence and wait until the women pass off. If one just overlooks and steps into their path, they start to curse the person.

The imprecation of the *Atete* women is believed to affect the offender in myriad ways. The serious inflections are the *dhukkuba* (incurable ailment), *deega* (economic death) and *namaa bayuu* (complete madness).⁽¹²⁾ Actually, before the imprecation brings about any bad infliction on the husband as well as on the entire society, the local men approach the women and investigate why they have protested. If the council of male elders does not intervene instantly, the women take *bidhaa* (shelter) in the next clan. Men and women of the clan wherein the women took shelter receive them with due respect, for example, by providing them lodging and smearing butter on their head. The council of male elders in the host clan would also communicate the matter back to the council of male elders of the clan in boycott. The council of elders in the boycotted clan would receive their women by compensating them for the affront on their part, and by promising to investigate the matters seriously.

The conflict resolution involves many significant rituals. It starts with approaching the women and apologizing them for having invaded their territory. This is called *dhiltee dhinnaa* (seeking apology for dareful eye contact).⁽¹³⁾ As a prerequisite, the male elders, therefore, take some lush grass to recite the *dhiltee dhinnaa* and to show veneration for the gathering. It is only when this rule is observed that the conflict resolution process begins. As they hand over the grass to the senior mothers, the male elders utter in unison, *Dhiltee dhinnaa* (save us from your eyes). As they receive the grass, the women on their part recite in unison, *Hoffola Hobbaya* (be save!) *Ijarraa haffaa!* (survive our eyes!).

If they are approached in this ceremonial order, the women do not normally repudiate a compromise. This sets the stage open for the male elders to ask of the women the cause of their protest. Without the slightest fear, one of the senior mothers brings out the full details of the atrocities committed against them. If need be, she reminds the male elders the *lallaba* of the good old days, when they were granted honour.⁽¹⁴⁾

The conflict resolution usually ends by compensating the group and appeasing their divinity. This is usually done by forcing the "miscreant" to sacrifice one of his cows or calves for the women to eat. If the offender does not confess his mistake in person or in absentia, the women impose a more serious curse called *abaarsa sinqee* (the curse of *sinqe*). This is the stage when all of the women rest their *sinqe* (ritual sticks) on the ground and pray to *Waaq* for the offender to be ruined. Both *abaarsa sinqee* and *bidhaa* are aspects of what Wahlstrom (1992: 171) termed as coercive compliance-gaining through threat aversion. The difference between the two is that *abaarsa sinqee* is a sanction imposed on one individual (the husband) while *bidhaa* is against a group (council of male elders).

One interesting aspect is that if the women are satisfied by the man's admission of his arrogance and expression of regret, they may agree to exonerate

him from any punishment. It should, however, be accentuated here that it is only when the man confesses to atrocity he has committed that he is pardoned and allowed to resume a normal life.

There are two important implied theories in the *Atete* ceremony. The first one is the regulatory function of religion. The *Atete* ritual functions as a prime source and guardian of the female individuals' morality (Gbadegesin, 1998; Grčić, 1989; Mbiti, 1970, 1988; Rappaport, 1999). The second one is that women can exert pressure on male domination when they struggle in group rather than in isolation, what Wahlstrom (1992: 163) terms as "a condition of positive synergy."

Due to various internal and external factors, the *Atete* ceremony and other beautiful Oromo cultural heritage are now seriously endangered. Among the factors, Islam and Christianity are really a tragic encounter for the Oromo culture in general and the *Atete* ritual in particular. They have caused a breakdown to valuable Oromo indigenous creeds as the *Atete* ritual. When compared to Christianity, Islam is more fanatical towards 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. As elsewhere in Islamic Africa, the influence of Islamic laws and codes was very limited, and was always subordinate to and combined with the local customs (Hassen, 1990; Trimmingham, 1965). Starting from the 1980s, a new wave of Islamic scholarship and *dawa* (Islamic awakening) has flourished. For example, among the Arsi Oromo (who are largely Muslims), the fervency at which Islamic revivalism has been moving is high. Among the Arsi and other Oromo who are followers of Islam, the *dawa* people are espousing the literal inerrancy of *Shari'a* Islamic Law as a comprehensive way of life and the words of the Holy Koran as enunciated and practiced by the prophet Mohammed.

The mainstream of the Islamic movement in Oromia is *Wahabiyya*. In the region, the preachers of this movement indignify those who cling to indigenous creeds by calling them *Awaama* or *Jahila* (ignorant). They condemn the traditional religious practices in its entirety as *shirk* (heretical) to the oneness of God. Instead, they intensely amplify the Hadith and the religious precepts of the Holy Koran. As a result, presently the Muslim Oromo women rarely conduct the *Atete* rituals once observed for their social well-being and to protect themselves against male atrocities. The religious resurgence has nearly inhibited the thinking of *Atete* ritual, let alone the practice of it. Kedir (2000) stated that the valuable leverage, which the Oromo women were granted in the Gada System, has been attacked under the cover of "eradicating harmful cultural practices." One can conclude that the religion, which was primarily adopted in the earlier times to prevent socio-cultural disintegration, has now become the cause for the disintegration of a cultural identity itself. This comment is unexaggerated if it is seen in light of the overall influence of Islam in contemporary Africa (Appiah & Gates, 1999; Kebede, 1999; Mazrui, 1988).

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF RESEARCH ON OROMO PROVERBS

Among the works I had access to with regard to the study of Oromo folk-proverbs, those of Sumner (1995, 1996, 1997) are important scholarly contributions. In these works, Sumner, a Canadian professor in Addis Ababa University, analyzed the cultural and philosophical values of the Oromo proverbs, setting off their thematic structure, moral concerns, literary beauties, semantic relational rhetoric and dualism. Sumner's works show that the Oromo oral literature is the custodian of the people's philosophy and worldview. The other work of great importance is Korram (1972). In this work, Korram categorized 263 Oromo proverbs collected from Eastern Oromia (Harar region) along various thematic units. Following similar pattern, Rikitu (1992) collected and analyzed a large number of Oromo proverbs and sayings.

An immense work of collecting the Oromo proverbs and nuances of folk literature throughout the region was, however, accomplished by the Culture and Information Bureau of the Regional State of Oromia. Between 1993 and 1997, the Oromo Language Study and Standardization Team of the bureau collected various types of Oromo oral literature. This project, which I participated in between 1994 and 1997, was successful, particularly as it managed to collect a quite many Oromo proverbs that have now been published in five volumes. The five volumes contain about 44,380 proverbs and sayings, including redundancies (since the same proverb sometimes appear in more than one region with only just little lexical or grammatical change). But, the volumes are a simple collection of the raw data of proverbs and sayings in their alphabetical order. A valuable work of studying the social, economic, psychological and philosophical meanings underlying the proverbs remains to be done.

Among the Oromo, proverbs are strong components of the general discourse. Since they have high rhetorical significance, speakers use them to add beauty and strength to their points of view. They are also guardians and bearers of the people's philosophical wisdom. There is no wonder, then, that the absence of proverbs in the middle of speech is believed to make speech unsavory or flavorless. The following Oromo proverb about proverbs succinctly reveals this fact: *Dubbiin mammaaksa hinqabne, ittoo sooqidda hinqabne* (a speech with out proverb is a stew without salt).

Among the Oromo, the skills and ability of using proverbs is weighted according to how one has selected a proverb that suits the point(s) of discourse. As one Oromo proverb goes: *Dibichi korma baya, mammaaksi dubbii baya* (A calf has the look of a bull, its genitor; likewise, a proverb is a replica of the point being made).

In Oromo, there are multiple causal paths between a proverb and the point of discourse. The practical use of proverbs in Oromo shows that effective speakers use proverbs to tell their listeners what they are going to tell them, and to tell them what they have told them. Thus, a proverb can come prior to the idea, in the middle of idea or immediately after it. For example, before I directly go to my point, I may use a proverb as an advance organizer to provide my listeners

a preparatory structure as well as curiosity for better listening. I may say: *Manguddoon dur waan jette dhageettanii? Bilooyni abbaan qare, abbaa qale* (have you heard what our forefathers said? The knife has butchered the one who has sharpened it). In Oromo, we use this proverb to reveal how the self becomes the cause for self's own destruction. We also use proverbs to tie our points together, and to give it a note of finality.

Since the Oromo had no written literature in the long past, the Oromo folk-proverbs served as guardians of cultural heritage. The problem is that while we romanticize the colorful imagery of proverbs and their value-carrying roles, we usually ignore the prejudiced ideology they are used to produce and reproduce (Oha, 1998). In Oromo, proverbs are used as a cultural medium to perpetuate gender ideology; that is, there are substantial portion of proverbs that encode the social and cultural construction of gender. Looking into them reveals that the Oromo have long been stratified along the gender line. In short, the Oromo proverbs symbolize the trajectories of the society's attitudes towards masculinity and femininity. Unfortunately, none of the works on Oromo have considered the use of proverbs to reinforce gendered culture. This paper was thus designed to fill this research gap. The paper assumes that making explicit the gender ideology would provide for the gradual avoidance of its deleterious effects.

GENDERED CULTURE AS REINFORCED THROUGH THE CULTURAL MEDIUM OF OROMO FOLK-PROVERBS

Language is used to produce and reproduce cultural experiences. As a social and cultural phenomenon, it is used to communicate about every aspect of cultural experience in a society. This means that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramersch, 1998). One function of language is to communicate a society's gender ideology. It is a tool that reinforces "the boundary lines among genders and ensure that what is demanded, what is permitted, and what is tabooed for the people in each gender is well known and followed by most" (Lorber, 1996: 193). Particularly, the literary heritage of a people mirrors as well as creates gendered culture (Stratton, 1994; Obiechina, 1997). As one element of oral literature, proverbs are also used to channel gender ideology in the society (Mbiti, 1988; Oha, 1998).

The review of literature generally shows that, in patriarchal societies, language is openly used to disparage women (Cameron, 1994; Sapiro, 1994; Sen & Grown, 1987). According to Sen & Grown (1987), proverbs and other nuances of oral literature have been predominantly used by males to denigrate women's physical, mental and social weaknesses. While it is true that groups that hold the secondary position in a society predictably suffer from linguistic disparagement imposed by the other groups that hold a relatively better position (Leith, 1987), studies have shown that sexist proverbs are not used exclusively to denigrate women (Mbiti, 1988; Oha, 1998). It is, therefore, naive to rate a proverb about womanhood as disparaging just by looking at its surface meaning.

Insights from theories of communication and discourse analysis are important to make the above viewpoint clear. As Dell Hymes (1972) convincingly stated: "The key to understanding language in context is to start not with language, but with the context" (qtd. in Kramsch, 1993: 34). Particularly, the importance of the context of situation in order to interpret the meaning of a text has long been emphasized. There are three interrelated aspects of context of situation that help one interpret the meaning of a text. These are: the external physical circumstance, the social context of interaction, and the nature of discourse (Brown, 1998). Therefore, it is difficult if not impossible to classify the semantics of proverbial units about women into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories such as favoring (positive valence), disfavoring (negative valence) or neutral. More to the point, the semantics of a proverb is not a pastiche of individual words, but the result of the context in which it is used. There is, therefore, a possibility for double meaning in a single proverb. According to Finnegan (1970: 399), "...the same proverb may often be used, according to the context, to suggest a variety of different truths, or different facts of the same truth, or even its opposite." Therefore, the production and interpretation of a proverb is a function of a complex interaction between macro aspects of social context (the broader societal and institutional background) and micro aspects of social context (the immediate contexts of utterance).

RESEARCH PROCEDURES AND METHODOLOGY

1. Methods

In order to examine the semantics of the sample proverbs, I combined two well known textual analysis methods: content analysis procedures and the hermeneutics approach. The application of content analysis procedure to identify and examine messages contained in proverbs about womanhood involved the steps shown in Table 1 below.

Underlying hermeneutic interpretative orientation is the view that the meaning of a text is primarily determined by the complex whole that constitutes the context of use. Among the advocates of the hermeneutic approach, Grossberg (1991: 134) states that "...texts reveal their significance, not on the surface of images and representations, but rather, in the complex ways that they produce, transform and shape meaning-structure... Thus, the interpretation of a text requires an appreciation of the specific rules of its formal existence as a signifying practice." In analyzing and interpreting the proverbs the author considered the three inherent processes of the hermeneutic approach (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). These are:

- (1) interpreting the individual concepts embedded within the proverbs,
- (2) accommodating the social and cultural contexts through which the various concepts are related to a particular proverb, and

Table 1.

No.	Content analysis procedure	Activities involved
1	Selecting texts	Selecting proverbs communicating about gendered culture (content domain of the proverbs)
2	Determining the unit of analysis	Identifying proverbs that directly or indirectly communicate about womanhood, to select specific attributes of the above content domain
3	Developing content categories	Stereotyping the sample proverbs with four independent informants, to develop main themes
4	Coding units	Coding by two Oromo females to categorize the sample proverbs under the identified stereotypes (See Appendix A for the categories)
5	Analyzing the data	Analyzing the semantics of the proverbs based on the above categorizations to interpret the proverbs

Adapted from: Frey *et al.* (1991: 212-215).

(3) drawing conclusion about the overall meaning of the proverb.

Another importance of hermeneutic approach is that it helps one to consider the two semiotic planes on which proverbs operate: “the allusive plane, which correlates with the remote situation, and the interpretative plane, which correlates with the (f) actual plane” (Oha, 1998: 90).

2. Research Participants

At the third step in the content analysis procedure, four teaching and research colleagues who speak very good Oromiffa and know the people’s culture were given the sample proverbs to express in writing their overall understanding of the meaning embodied in the sexist proverbs. Clusters of thematic units emerged from the participants’ written reflections when I content-analyzed them. Before moving on to the subsequent step, I gave the thematic units back to the participants for them to check if the summary accurately represented the content of the elicited reflections. This second work with the participants narrowed down the clusters into four central themes. These main themes were identified as the attitudes the Oromo society holds towards women. I call these thematic clusters the stereotypes the sample proverbs are meant to reflect.

Later on, at the fourth step of the content analysis procedure, I selected two Oromo women to categorize the proverbs along the four identified themes. The two Oromo female coders were given the proverbs randomly (Table 1 and Appendix A). To protect their anonymity, the coders were designated STEF and WSHT.

STEF, 25, is married. Before she was married, STEF lived in a family of 7-10 members. In her family, only two members (one male and one female) completed high school education and none had tertiary education. Her father was a member of council of elders and had some lower grade education, while her mother had no schooling and no job. STEF indicated that the income cate-

gory of her parents was poor. Although she completed high school, STEF could not have her own job, due to the inconvenience that followed her marriage and childbirth. Her husband has completed tertiary education and earns high salary. She also indicated that as far as decision on the family income was concerned it was she who held the purse strings.

WSHT, 20, is single. She is studying in a secondary school. She is one of the girls in a family that comprised more than 10 members. In her family, all of the brothers and sisters completed their high school education, and of whom two (both males) studied tertiary education. Her father was a farmer and had little education from a literacy campaign while, her mother had no background in basic modern education nor a job outside her home. WSHT revealed that the income category of her parents was medium.

Both STEF and WSHT pointed out that they observed that there were various patterns of creating and reflecting gender ideology in their culture. They also pointed out that they were aware that in their society, language was used among other things to create and reinforce gender ideology.

After this brainstorming session, STEF and WSHT coded the sample proverbs. Training the coders involved three activities: clarifying the purpose of the research, explaining the essence of the thematic categories and defining some words (expressions) in the proverbs that were not in their dialects.

After they separately read the original Oromiffa version of the questionnaire, the coders coded the proverbs based on the instructions provided in a questionnaire. Finally, they sat together and settled some differences of interpretation observed between them. The repeated individual and joint codings were entered and tested for inter-observer reliability. The reliability test yielded the correlation $r = +.86$.

The categories running through A to D in the analysis and the discussion section are the stereotypes the sample proverbs are meant to reflect. Within these categories, there are proverbs that directly denigrate women, their body and mind. There are also proverbs that positively represent womanhood. There are again proverbs that vacillate between positive and negative representation of womanhood depending on context. Whether a proverb is expressive (positive or negative) or neutral in representing womanhood is to a large extent determined by the complex nature of the context of use.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION

By combining elements of content analysis and the hermeneutic approaches, the paper thus systematically combined the emic and etic approaches to data analysis (Ferraro, 1995; Harris, 1995). I start this section with a group of proverbs that are used to trivialize women and reinforce their subordinate position in the society.

PROVERBS THAT TRIVIALIZE WOMEN AND REINFORCE THEIR SUBORDINATE POSITION IN THE SOCIETY

On the surface, all of the proverbs in this section inferiorize the personality of women and reinforce their subordinate position in the society. They portray women as less mature, less important, irrational, and subjected group of people. I start this discussion with a proverb that shows a relationship of dominance and subordination between men and women in the Oromo society.

A: *Harreen moonaan qabdu moonaa loonii galti, beerti da'oon qabdu da'oo dhiiraa gali*

(just as donkeys do not have their own kraal and thus sleep in the that of cattle, women do not have their own abode and thus dwell in that of men.)

(Appendix # 17)

This proverb deviates from neutrality, and potentially dissuades women from claiming equal access to economic resources and other household rights. It inherently bears the tone of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996; Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1995; Kramer, 1991; Sapiro, 1994), since it disenfranchises women from their entitlement to of household decision-making. More to the point, the proverb shows how in a society where one group is dominant and the other is subordinate, language is used to perpetuate subordination. It is the nature of prolonged domination that, most of the time, if one has accepted the domination, one may stop complaining about situations that hurt one's human subjectivity (Collins, 1996).

B: *Beeraafii harreen ba'aa hin dadhabdu*

(women and donkeys do not complain about burden) (Appendix # 13)

This proverb, similar to Proverb A, compares women with donkeys, reflects the condition of women in Africa, a condition where they invest much of their energy and time on tedious and exhausting daily routines. In light of the productive and reproductive roles women play in Africa, there is nothing bad in the message of the current proverb simply because women are likened to donkeys, the most industrious of domestic animals, one may not code rate this proverb as disparaging.

However, if someone who allots less value to donkeys than other animals uses the proverb, it could be denigrating, since it echoes the society's view that women are "objects lacking full human subjectivity" (Collins, 1996: 40). The proverb may also be used to state how the burden of social and economic tragedy often falls unevenly on the culturally, politically and psychologically victimized. But, if one who sympathizes the workload of women or admires the physical strength of women uses the proverb, there is again nothing disparaging. In the latter sense, the proverb may be employed to paradoxically suggest that in a traditional male-dominated society, women contribute a great deal towards protecting the social and economic systems of their families.

The following proverb shows that proverbs are used also to enforce dichoto-

mous or polarized thinking about the personality of women.

C: *Beerti furdoo malee guddoo hin qabdu*

(women are bulky, but not great).

On the whole, the proverb encodes the irreverence held by the society towards women. The society uses the proverb to depict women in general as a group of people with inherent weakness, lacking wisdom, confidence, self-assurance and good character. In this proverb, women as a group are simply criticized for failing “to follow the normative path laid out by men.” (Griffin, 1997: 471). As Gilligan (1982: 18) viewed, in a patriarchal society “the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with women,” when they fail to meet the standards set by men. The prejudice loaded in the proverb can also be captured by the phrase ‘blaming the victim’, which psychologist William Ryan (1976) coined “to describe how some people essentially justify inequality by finding defects in the victims rather than examining the social and economic factors that contribute to” their defects (qtd. in Schaefer & Lamm, 1995: 227). The debilitating effect of such portraiture is that women may internalize the negative attitudes held against them and convince themselves that they are really incapable of doing worthwhile things.

The following proverb is equally too categorical about the place and worth of women in the Oromo society.

D: *Beerti daakkaa malee daangaa hin beeytu*

(women know grinding, but not when to stop) (Appendix # 16)

This proverb is primarily used to comment on women’s dimension of self-disclosure during inter-personal communication. It encodes the society’s belief that women talk (usually to each other) broadly and deeply, and therefore take longer time before they wind up. It is used with a piercing connotative tone that during self-disclosure women cannot strike a balance between what Canary & Cody (1994) called expressiveness and protectiveness. Like Proverb C above, this proverb contrasts two immutable attributes of women: physical engagement and mental involvement. It mainly relegates women to the physical engagement over their mental involvement. It is employed to stress the view that women do not know how to use the self to limit one’s own vulnerability or protect others at the time of expressing thoughts and feelings. Because of this, the proverb is unquestionably a misnomer as it portrays women as simpletons.

When it is used in a slightly different context, the same proverb could be used to pity a condition of a woman who, with her child strapped on her back, grinds a large amount of corn on a traditional, “palm roughening” flour mill. In this sense, the proverb seems to convey ironical sympathy about the woman’s servility. However, if the same proverb is used by a husband to his wife against her draining the family grain, the proverb still bears a negative valence. It should be noted that the sharpness of the message of such a proverb could also vary according to whether it is used by a woman against another woman or a man against another woman, and why.

The inferiorization of women is portrayed in many other ways. The following proverb, for example, is used to signal the passivity, submissiveness, infirmity or dependent nature of women.

E: *Dhalaan akkuma harmaati ayyiin rarraati*

(women, their hearts swing just like their breasts). (Appendix # 15)

In this proverb, analogy is set between the personality of women (assumed infirmity & indecisiveness), and the pendulous nature of females' breasts. The proverb portrays women as a weak-willed and lacking a sense of direction and independence. Because of this, it may seem to have a negative valence. But, if it is used to emphasize women's quality of responding to someone's troubles by giving comfort with the empathic fuss they make for the security of their family members, the proverb is about women's general kindness and their "overdeveloped capacity to connect empathically with others" (Kramer, 1991: 79). In this sense, the proverb depicts women as a group of people who are concerned for the well being of other members of the society.

The same denigration is subtly repeated in the following proverb, which sets causal relationships between 'kindness' and 'self-destruction.'

F: *Intalti garaa laaftu garaa qullaa hin baatu*

(a kind-hearted daughter does not marry without a fetus). (Appendix # 19)

Underlying the proverb is the use of language to encode the opprobrium which pre-marital sexual relation arouses in the indigenous Oromo culture. It is a reflection of Oromo sexuality in which pre-marital intercourse is inherently discouraged for the females. With the proverb, somebody may comment that a kind-hearted girl is foolishly over-sexed and risks pregnancy before she is officially married. There is also an aspect of discourse on sexuality that assumes "subject positions for women," who easily become submissive to the "male initiatives or demands" (Gavey, 1997: 209). In this sense, the proverb indicates the general belief in the society that due to their own silliness, females themselves jeopardize their dignity. In relation to this, Bartky (1996: 269) stated that when a woman simply shows compliance to the interest of males, she "may be tempted to collude in her own ill-treatment." In all of these possibilities, the proverb is disparaging mainly because it encodes the doubt the society has, concerning the self-control of females. The proverb could thus be used to advise parents to be more apprehensive and protective to their daughters than to their boys.

One explanation for gender-based oppression within a society is the disempowering discourse role of women (Kerekes, 1994). The following proverb reinforces this problem.

G: *Beerti qoonqoo tolchiti malee dubbii hintolchitu*

(women make good dish, but not good speech). (Appendix # 20)

Underlying this proverb is the most documented assumption that men and women follow different patterns of discourse and language pragmatics (Cam-

eron, 1994; Holmes, 1995; Kerekes, 1994; O'Barr & Atkins, 1987; Sapiro, 1994; Wareing, 1994). It should be stressed here that the proverb does not deny the excellent verbal dexterity possessed by women, but only declares women temperamentally unsuited to customary speech. By implication, the proverb suggests that males alone are entitled to substantial speech culture in Oromo society. Because of this, the proverb echoes how women's speech has been deprived of what Kumah (2000: 3) terms as "*canonical status*."⁽¹⁵⁾ Therefore, the proverb lends support to the view that the inferiorization of the subordinate group by the dominant one is usually associated with significant deprivation and disadvantages (Harris, 1995).

Cheris Kramarae (1981: 1) strongly believes that in a male-dominated society, language renders women subordinate and inarticulate. She argues: "Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men." The stereotypic conclusion embodied in Proverb G can also be captured by the phrase blaming the victim. The impact of such differential patterns of language use is that it does not only reflect differences in power, but creates the difference (Kramer & Freed, 1991).

H: A woman said to her husband: "*Ati heefaa, ani beeraa* (you are weak and shaky; I am a woman) *Eennutu laga wal baasaa?* (how do we cross the river?)" (Appendix # 22)

The proverb reflects not only the self-debasement in the consciousness of women, but also the social assumption of infirmity; it thus identifies women as speaking against themselves. The proverb strengthens the argument by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1984) that one of the serious problems of African women is their own self-perception. She states that: "Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the inferiorization of ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling" (qtd. in Davies, 1986: 8). The fact that self-image is challenging and crippling is problematic because what we say is usually what we think we are (Infante *et al.*, 1993). Paulo Freire (1998) viewed self-blaming by the oppressed groups often as stemming from the internalization of the negative attitude the oppressors hold of them. It is believed that being repeatedly told that they are worthless or unproductive, in the end, the oppressed groups become persuaded of their own incompetence. A number of writers believe that feminine traits such as the weak personality, lack of self-reliance and excessive subordination to men during setbacks are unwelcome effects of a prolonged hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996, 1998; Disch, 1997; Sapiro, 1994).

PROVERBS THAT COMMUNICATE MALE DOMINANCE IN THE CULTURE

The purpose of this section is to reveal how proverbs are used to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. The majority of the proverbs below encode patterns of household socialization that reflect an institutionalized masculinization and feminization of roles in the society.

I: *Dhiirti eebooyyuu hin obsiti*

(males endure even the pains of spear). (Appendix # 8)

The proverb implies that males are competitive, dominant, forceful, confrontational, self-reliant, and willing to take risks. Hence, it is indicative of the society's view that for men, "Life is an odyssey, a journey through many trials and tests, which the hero must surmount alone through courage, endurance, cunning and moral strength" (Conway, 1998 qtd. in Parlenko, 2001: 219). It is possible to argue that while it indirectly praises male self-fulfillment, the proverb indirectly reinforces female self-debasement.

Among other functions, proverbs readily provide also ideological rationale for the continuation of differential treatment of children based on gender.

J: *Dhiirti utubaa sibiilaati, intalti karra ambaati*

(males are an iron pole of a house, while females are the outside gate that belongs to others). (Appendix # 10)

This proverb primarily states that in the Oromo social structure, femininity is associated with liminality (Legesse, 1973). It is also one aspect of dichotomous thinking in which differences are set in oppositional terms (Collins, 1998). Thus, it embodies a society's belief that sons are more permanent members of the family, and are the ones who would ultimately inherit the heritage of their family, while females are destined to go out of the lineage through marriage. It suggests a pan-African cultural belief where a newly born baby son is considered the bearer of the family name in general, and the extension of the father's masculinity, in particular (Ufomata, 1998). Because of this, the proverb is used to indoctrinate boys into masculinity and girls into femininity so that each would adapt personality traits, behaviors, and preferences that are culturally considered appropriate to each sex (Westen, 1996). Like Proverb J, the following Oromo *geerarsaa* (warrior boast song) also implants the attitude that a baby son is the embodiment of the family line.

Dinnicha maalif qotu

Birraa ittiin ba'uuf malee?

Why does one farm potato?

Is that not just to help live through the dry time?

Ilma maaliif dhalchu

Maqaa abbaa dhahuuf malee?⁽¹⁶⁾

Why does one bear a son?

Is that not just to extend the father's name?

On the whole, Proverb J signals how the Oromo parents find empowerment in their sons. Just as in some other third world countries (Caplan, 1989; Jejeebhoy, 1995), the Oromo parents need sons not only for maintaining their lineage,

but also for economic or social survival. Among the Oromo parents, *ilmaa* (son) is considered as the prime source of economic and physical support. As an *ilmaa*, one is supposed to fulfill the social responsibilities of supporting the parents, particularly in their old age. Hence, the Oromo parents' common prayer is: *Waaq, ilma malee nan ajjeesin* (*Waaq*, don't destine me to die without a son). The following *geerarsaa* communicates the importance of a son's presence at his own mother's funeral.

<i>Bara boqqoolloon bade</i>	When the maize has failed
<i>Ijoolleefii saretu bade</i>	Children and dogs have ruined
<i>Bara caamni dheerate</i>	When drought has prolonged
<i>Dullootaaf jabbitu badee</i>	The herds have ruined
<i>Bara waraanni hammaate</i>	When war has become rampant
<i>Hadha ilma tokkootu badee</i>	The mother of a single son has ruined
<i>Haati mucaa tokkittii</i>	Alas! The mother of a single son
<i>Gaafa du'aa fokkifti.</i> ⁽¹⁷⁾	Becomes ill-looking on the day of her death.

Among the Oromo, when parents die in care of their male children, their death is called *death with dignity*, since they will entomb them in an honorable way. Although it seems bizarre, the situation suggests how meaning is derived from death, which is actually something beyond meaning (Abasi, 1995).

Proverb J, revolves with the metaphoric use of the phrases *utubaa sibiilaa* (iron pillar) and *karra ambaa* (the gate that belongs to others), sons are likened to iron pillars to show that they uphold their fathers' genealogical structure. Daughters, on the other hand, are tokenized as the gate that belongs to others to indicate that they are ultimately taken out of their paternal clan when they marry. The proverb, then, reveals the society's belief that the allegiance of female children is more to the genealogical structure of their husbands' and only secondarily to that of their fathers on marriage.

One should, however, be careful in the interpretation of this proverb. If it is used just to remind the existence of exogamous marriage among the Oromo, there is nothing insolent in the proverb since it may only mean that females are taken away by marriage while males stay in their fathers' family home. For instance, someone (a male person) may use Proverb J to the father of a girl to persuade him that it is inevitable for his daughter to be married outside her close family or clan. But, if the perceived difference between boys and girls by the standard of how long they stay in the family results in the differential upbringing, the message of the proverb could be disfavoring, particularly for girls.

Proverbs show direct dominance and subordination between a husband and wife in the Oromo family. For an example, see Proverb K below.

K: *Ka dandeettu dhaani jennaan dhiirsi galee niitii dhaane*

(when he was allowed to whip whomever he can, the husband returned home

and whipped his wife). (Appendix # 4)

This proverb implicitly masculinizes power. That is, it encodes our society's belief that a husband can use force to exert dominance on his wife. It entails the society's belief that males should dominate at least their wives. The view entailed in this proverb is significantly repeated in the following proverb.

L: *Dhalaafii ijoolleef uletu qoricha*

(for women and children, the stick is matchless treatment). (Appendix # 2)

In this proverb, the society derogates women as children, "who are incapable of independent thought" (Oha, 1998: 91) and holds the assumption that they cannot guide or direct themselves, and thus should be punished to correct their faulty behaviors. The following proverb equally encodes the right that a husband claims on the overall personality of his wife.

M: *Niitiif fi farda abbatu leenjifata*

(It is the possessor who should tame his horse and his wife as he wants).

(Appendix # 5)

The meaning of this proverb lies in the figurative use of the word *leenjisuu* (taming), which is used here to mean taking virginity. The proverb encodes the Oromo people's traditional attitude that marriage is primarily a private ownership. By the Oromo cultural standard the husband has rights of sexual access to his wife and not vice versa. The proverb, therefore, reveals that among the Oromo, sexual intercourse plays a significant role in the conception of marriage. In the traditional Oromo society, a woman who had made sexual intercourse through premarital cohabitation is considered to have cut the association between sex and marriage. The proverb, therefore, enforces the men's right to keep out "all others from erotic access to the conjugal partner" (McMurtry, 1972: 282). By and large, the proverb expresses the belief that a husband has an overall prerogative over his wife. It thus directly echoes the relation of dominance and subordination between husband and wife in a patriarchal society. Moreover, it points out the traditional virility cult of the Oromo people, who hold the view that one predictor of a successful marriage is for the husband to take the virginity of his wife.⁽¹⁸⁾ In the latter sense, the proverb resonates with the harmony between dominance and exhibitionism (Coulthard, 1985; Scollon & Scollon, 1983) in discourse analysis, since the husband is entitled as well as expected to exhibit his virility. Unfortunately, it is hard to find an Oromo proverb that correspondingly reinforces the right of the wife to exclude others (other wives) from her husband. See the following proverb, which seemingly bears the same tone with Proverb M.

N: *Niitiii fi farda abbatu eeggata*

(It is the man, the possessor, who should manage his horse as well as his wife). (Appendix # 11)

The proverb is about the Oromo marriage system that entitles a husband to a full claim on his wife. Due to the prerogative a husband claims on his wife,

a socially legitimate sexual union is possible only between the two. The proverb indicates that an Oromo husband is not like the “ritual husband” of Nayar caste of Southern India, who allows his wife to have “sex with a series of men to whom she was not married and who visited her at her home”(Harris, 1995: 109). The proverb could mean something different from above, for example, to highlight that a mishandled horse cannot become of good service and the same applies to the wife. In this sense, the proverb may point out that only when the husband fosters his wife’s humanity that the same will happen to him.

For a fresh look at this second semantic dimension, it is important to mention here why the characteristics of the horse (figurative) is transferred to the wife (literal). Among the Oromo, the horse is the most honored domestic animal (Simoons, 1960). According to the Oromo indemnity institution, if one kills somebody else’s horse, one is obliged to pay five heads of cattle (Ejjetaa, 2001). The reasons why the Oromo indemnity institution accords the horse a high value are:

1. It takes you to a place where you cannot get to on your own.
2. It takes you home where you may not do so on your own.
3. It helps you kill that which you cannot kill on your own.
4. It helps you escape from someone whom you cannot escape on your own.
5. It safeguards a nation.
6. It helps you transport heavy load from place to place.
7. Perhaps most importantly, it carries your life, and
8. When you fall off it or even die, your horse does not run away from you (Ejjetaa, 2001: 160).

The analogy between the horse and the wife reveals two paradoxical views about women in Africa. Firstly, it reveals that women are adorable possessions of men. I know that writers like Davies (1986), Mbiti (1988), Steady (1987) and Eboh (1998) oppose my view. Secondly, it indicates that women are fragile and thus are vulnerable to damage or misappropriation. Therefore, they seek protection from men.

Despite their context-based semantic extension or alteration, all of the above proverbs have two things in common. First of all, they communicate the secondary roles and status women are meant to assume in the patriarchal society, merely on the basis of their gender. Thus, the proverbs subsume the pan-cultural logic that associates masculinity with traits that suggest authority and mastery, and femininity with those that suggest passivity and subordination. Secondly, they show that masculinity and femininity are the products of traditionally prescribed gender stratification, whose violation subsequently causes disruption of sex-role socialization and conformity.

PROVERBS THAT COMMUNICATE THE VALUES WOMEN ARE ACCORDED IN THE OROMO SOCIETY

Proverbs are used to ignore, trivialize and distort the image of women. On the surface, all of the following sample proverbs have one thing in common. The Oromo society uses them to recognize the strong role and personality of women. Regarding the degree of accrediting, however, the proverbs of course considerably contrast. While Proverb O & Proverb R imply the society's grudging acceptance of women's qualities, Proverb P & Proverb Q suggest the society's unreserved acceptance of the irreplaceable contribution women provide for the society.

O: *Cidha beerti feete aanan qodaa hin hanqatu*

(When a woman has decided to go to wedding, her milk does not fall short of her milk holder).⁽¹⁹⁾ (Appendix # 6)

Literally, the proverb is used to suggest that if a woman is determined to go to a wedding, she will do whatever it takes to collect as much milk as is required for the wedding feast. But, the proverb is often employed to suggest the women's determination to reach some objectives. It is thus an indirect way of pointing out women's strength in achieving self-fulfillment. Its meaning may still depend on circumstantial context. The same proverb is sometimes used to express the fear the society has of challenges women can make. It is used, for example, to comment that women are sometimes decidedly adamant and difficult to divert them from their course of action.

The following proverb, on the other hand, directly depicts the positive attitude the Oromo society holds towards women.

P: *Haadha dhabuu mannaa haadha dhabduu wayyaa*

(having a destitute mother is better for one than not having a mother at all). (Appendix # 1)

Defined in structural terms, this proverb is an ideal example of proverbs based on formula that "A is less than B" (Birruu, 1999: 120). It is used to reflect on the natural mother-infant emotional attachment. As a result, it contradicts with ideas of radical feminists who negatively interpret the strong maternal-infant bonding and state that: "Women's child-bearing abilities limit their participation in public sphere activities and allow men the freedom to participate in and control the public sphere" (Zinn, 1991: 129). For me, the proverb expresses one overwhelming truth, that is, the existence of the unique capability, which each sex has to contribute in a better way than the other sex in a family (Kipnis & Herron, 1995). It is also a direct refutation of the apprehension of motherhood, which stems from the conclusion that mothering leads to domesticity and submissiveness.

Both social and clinical psychologists have provided insights to the life-enhancing quality of mothers for their children as emphasized in the proverb. The tenderness and feelings of love between a mother and her child, which

starts usually long before the mother becomes pregnant, is everlasting (Maratos, 1996). It does not desist even when the mother is no longer tied to the domesticity. As the proverb also implies, the departure of a mother either by divorce or death usually victimizes her children since it causes the deprivation of their healthy and normal growth (Baron & Byrne, 1997).

The other divisions of Oromo oral literature show that in Africa the mother-child attachment is reciprocal. Children on their part are required to fulfill many obligations of comforting their mothers. The message of a mother in the following Oromo lullaby expresses the reciprocity.

<i>Haati ilma qabdu baddu</i>	A mother who has born a son
<i>Barbaada qabdi</i>	Is looked for, when she is lost
<i>Dhibamtu badada qabdi</i>	Treated well, when she gets sick
<i>Dulloomtu soorama qabdi</i>	Sustained well, when she gets old
<i>Duutu awwaala qabd</i>	Her mortal remains is rested when she dies
<i>Awwaalli soodduu qaba</i>	Then her burial has a monument
<i>Soodduum dhibaayyuu qaba</i>	The monument also has sacrifice
<i>Soodduumu walii lama</i>	The monument is of two types
<i>Kan haadha boonaa galma.</i> ⁽²⁰⁾	And that of proud man's mother is temple.

Unlike Western feminists, who view childbearing as a cause of suppression, African women find empowerment in their children (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). The lullaby shows that a mother is supported while alive, and her death is also memorialized by continued *dhibaayyuu* (sacrifice). As the *Atete*-based protest of the Oromo women equally revealed, African women “use their status as mothers to challenge some of the demands their cultures place on them. They even use this status to make demands and obtain tangible concessions for themselves” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 24).

Q: *Hadhaa fi bishaan hamaa hin qaban*

(mother and water have no evil). (Appendix # 21)

In this proverb, mother is likened to water, “the giver of life,” without which life is unthinkable on earth (Egejuru, 1997: 12). The analogy is set between mother and water to communicate the care orientation (Harding, 1998) African women are usually assumed to take. Implied in the proverb is the belief that disturbances in mother-child bond results in the emotional, mental and physical suffering of the child (Maratos, 1996: 42-53). The proverb relates motherhood to life-enhancing and comforting quality and selflessness. Figuratively, it may be used to trigger specific feeling in the mind of the hearer: if someone says the proverb to a mother who is enraged and unkindly beating her child, the immediate function of the proverb may be to appeal to the mother's pathos and to restore her motherly warmth and compassion.

R. *Mana onaa mannaa, mana niitii ontuu wayya*

(better a hollow wife than a desolate house). (Appendix # 24)

Structurally speaking, this proverb is an ideal example of proverbs based on the formula “A is less than B.” Semantically, it shows how important it is to have. As some writers think, esteeming a wife’s nurturing quality in such a way could be one way of integrating women into the patriarchal structure (Bartky, 1996; Sarhrouny, 2001). Bartky (1996) holds the view that the puzzle of women’s subordination and marginalization lies in their own good service to men. It should, however, be known that if a wife has accepted her husband’s influence and conforms to his demands or expectations, that is not really because the husband is special, but because she simply agrees with the patriarchal principles involved (Hayes & Orrell, 1993). Neutrally viewed, the proverb reflects conditions peculiar to Africa that make a separate life hard to live for men as well as women, and thus necessitate “male-female complementarity in ensuring the totality of human existence within a balanced ecosystem” (Steady, 1987: 20).

PROVERBS THAT COMMUNICATE THE SOCIETY’S FEAR OF WOMEN’S CHARACTER

The following proverbs encode how a society communicates its fear of unleashing control on women. They are, therefore, used to indoctrinate the idea that one predictor of males’ sustained dominance in the patriarchal society is to overpower women. A wife should accord status and homage to her husband, somebody who stands “higher in the hierarchy of gender” (Bartky, 1996: 268). There is an assumption that women have no self-controlling mechanism and thus behave faultily when left to themselves.

S: *Niitii abbaan manaa mana hin jirre, du’a ga’ii fardaa dhaqxi*

(a wife whose husband is not at home (around) goes to condole the death of horse). (Appendix # 3)

This proverb is used not only to reinforce a husband’s control on his wife’s physical mobility or autonomy, but also to create excessive guilt in wives who violate. Critically observed, however, the proverb echoes the unpleasant effect of limitless monopoly on a person’s physical mobility. That is, even a little freedom after a long time, will encourage an excessive use of the obtained freedom.

In a like manner, the following proverb states the concern of a patriarchal society about a domineering wife.

T: *Niitiin dhiirsa mootu ollaa horn hin gootu*

(a woman that dominates her husband will not at all value her neighbors). (Appendix # 9)

The proverb resonates with the close relationship between a household and the outside world. However, the proverb may remind a husband to exert control on his wife so that she would be obedient, not insubordinate.

It is very difficult to clearly state the intensity of wife-husband domination complained or feared in the proverb. But in the eye of a person who supports hegemonic masculinity, a wife's mild confrontation may be considered violence or challenge (Disch, 1997). For example, a wife may object to her husband's idea by saying: "No, I don't agree to your idea of marrying my daughter to that old man," and may be considered domineering, due to her mild assertion. This general sentiment is subtly reinforced in the following proverb.

U: *Dhiirsi niitii sodaattu ilma hin dhalfatu*

(a husband who fears his wife can not father a child). (Appendix # 7)

It is imperative to explain here why the Oromo society sets metaphoric relationship between wife domination and childbearing. For the Oromo, producing children constitutes the fulfillment of one important social obligation. This social obligation is transmitting cultural heritage. In Oromo, a man "gets married for the purpose of raising children and for the purpose of maintaining the continuity" of his line of descent (Legesse, 1973: 18-19). The fear communicated in the proverb encodes the assumption that if he is not dominant, a husband may not have the courage to ask his wife even for as noteworthy matter as childbearing. The proverb is used, therefore, to justify the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity in the marital relationship.

V: A man had a powerful wife. One day they seriously quarreled and fought. The powerful wife defeated her husband and pressed him down on the ground. The ignominiously defeated man shouted for his rescue to the neighbors. The neighbors were completely bewildered when they found the man at his vast gasp. But the man instead of admitting his defeat only faintly whimpered:

"Wal fixnee addaan nu guuraa."

(we have tormented each other; take us apart). (Appendix # 14)

The proverb reveals how shame reaction is expressed in competitive situations. It also points out a complex reaction caused by the violation of dominance-deference relationship between a husband and wife. Since this situation shocked him, the husband lied to the other members of the community, who shared the cultural understanding that males should always dominate females. It reveals the reality of a patriarchal society in which the defeat of a husband by his wife is shameful to admit. In what he said, the man deliberately dissembled his true status of defeat since he failed to meet the standard of masculinity. It is obviously the nature of failing to meet one's own standard that it usually triggers a shame reaction (Turner & Schallert, 2001). Looked at from another angle, the man's blunt denial of his complete subjugation indicates his desire to save his face as well as the face of other members who share the same cultural and psychological outlook regarding the relationship of dominance and subordination between a husband and a wife.

W: *Namni beera koorse galgala qorsoo nyaata, namini farda koorse galgala kooraa bataa*

(one who has spoiled his wife eats roasted barley for his supper, because she does not give him a wife-like service of fine and fancy food), as one who has spoiled his horse carries saddle at night (because the unruly horse would throw the saddle as well as the ride off itself and run wild) (Appendix # 12)

This proverb likens an uncontrolled wife to an unruly horse since both are assumed to cause adversity. It is used to remind members of the society that husbands who do not seriously control their wives usually encounter difficulty. It is, therefore, essentially similar to Proverb U in meaning. It is used to advise a husband to restrain his wife so that she may not become disobedient. The proverb may also be used to justify the belief that women have no self-regulating autonomy and need the interference of men at all levels of decision-making in their life. The severity of the message in this proverb is increased if it is said to reform a husband who shared a common ground with his wife and decided to treat her as an equal partner.

X: *Niitiin dhiirsi boonse itillerraa mucucaatti*

(a wife whose husband has spoiled her slides from a tanned hide). (Appendix # 23)

In rural Oromo society, sleeping on a finely tanned cowhide is a symbol of respect and wealth. The proverb is used, therefore, to state that a wife allowed too much freedom and privilege, usually misapplies the privilege accorded her. The proverb generally conveys two themes: the belief that women are absurdity, and cannot properly use the rights and privileges granted them, and the view that with little encouragements women may become disobedient to the patriarchal structure.

THE OVERALL SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF THE SAMPLE PROVERBS

In interpersonal communication situation, one major function of language is to influence the attitude and feeling of the receivers (Canary & Cody, 1994; Infante *et al.*, 1993; Wahlstrom, 1992). Just as any piece of communication, proverbs are used to provoke diversified images in the mind of the listeners. The sample proverbs considered in this paper potentially influence the position of uncritical listeners by appealing to their various instincts.

Firstly, all of the proverbs are aspects of what Infante *et al.* (1993) termed as opinionated statements. They are, particularly, aspects of opinionated acceptance, or what is called opinion conformity. The users of these proverbs hold a favorable attitude towards those who agree to the gender stereotypes, subjectivity and expectation they intend to maintain by using the proverbs.

It is also possible to categorize the sample proverbs according to their rhetoric (Table 2), according to how the speakers appeal to and manipulate the listener's instincts. This, therefore, means that the message of a proverb may erode even women's independent thoughts and actions towards gender when one is not a deliberative listener.

Table 2. The rhetoric dimension of the sample proverbs*

No.	Categories of appeals	Proverbs	The communicative goal
1	Appeal to tradition	A, B, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, and R	Indoctrinating the dominance-submission relationships between men and women
2	Appeal to fear	S, T, Y, V, W, and X	Communicating the patriarchal society's fear of women's status, power and freedom
3	Appeal to prejudice	C, D, E, F, and G	Indoctrinating the inferiority of women
4	Appeal to more than one instincts	O, P, and Q	Appealing to more than one instinct at a time

*Note that in labeling a proverb according to what instinct of the receiver it appeals to, the judgment was based on the literal meaning of the proverb. In actual situations, however, the nuances in the rhetoric are not razor sharp. All the proverbs may potentially appeal to more than one instinct of the receiver. Proverbs O, P and Q have more than one appeal. Proverb O appeals to tradition and fear whereas proverbs P and Q appeal to tradition and pathos (emotions) simultaneously.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The paper attempted to show that the Oromo society has various cultural media that provide the ideological rationale for the continuation of gender ideology. I assume that making explicit the gender ideology would provide for the gradual avoidance of gender-based social oppression.

I have pointed out that the Oromo women had a relatively better position in the past. This status declined following the irreparable destruction of Oromo indigenous culture. The gradual expansion of the two universalistic religions, Islam and Christianity, has directly or indirectly contributed towards the decline of the value of the Oromo women's *Atete* ritual over the last century. With the recent resurgence of the competitive religions, their religious influence on the communal practices of the people has gained maximum momentum.

All of the sample proverbs discussed suggest that gender ideology has long been a preoccupation for the Oromo society. The proverbs represent a complex relationship between men and women in the Oromo society. The paper analyzed various proverbs about womanhood. Some of the sample proverbs are about the social construction of masculinity. I deliberately incorporated proverbs that convey the Oromo society's traditional construction of masculinity. As Kimmel (1987: 12) convincingly stated, in any society, "masculinity and femininity are relational constructs." Because of this it would be difficult for one "to understand the social construction of either masculinity or femininity without reference to the others."

The paper argued that although it is possible to divide proverbs about womanhood into favorable, disfavorable, or neutral to women, the actual meaning of a proverb is determined by the interweaving cluster of factors, such as the nature of source, message, and recipient. The interweaving cluster of factors is one of the reasons why a single proverb may convey two essentially opposite meanings about womanhood. For example, although Proverb O is basically used

to express women's steadfast determination, it is also used to comment that if a woman is decidedly adamant, it is difficult to divert her from her intended course of action. In the former sense, it is used to admire the personality of women, whereas it is used to communicate a patriarchal society's fear of the action of women in the latter.

The paper has two relevant points of implication. The task of transforming women would be an uphill struggle in cultures that maintain female subordination (Narayan *et al*, 2000). Particularly, in a culture where there is gender ideology, the root of sex-biased expressions entrenches itself in the society and helps the perpetuation of gendered subjectivity (Bolinger, 1987; Oha, 1998). For example, proverbs that directly or indirectly exalt male superiority may inspire men to develop a belief that they are mentally, physically and spiritually superior to women and help them gather spiritual strength when the need to exhibit ability arises. On the other hand, proverbs that express a society's degrading and demeaning portrayal of women would result in women's self-abnegation. This in turn impedes the free participation of women in the day-to-day activity of the society. A crippled participation of women in a society on its part would inhibit the meaningful growth and development of a society.

The second implication of the fact that females are seldom favored in language does not account *per se* for gender asymmetry and inequality in Africa. The socio-economic problems of Africa magnify the essential features of the problem of women in Africa. The root cause for the institutionalization of male domination on the one hand and the secondary position of women on the other hand are grounded in the structure of the society, and can be ameliorated only when the structure that makes life difficult for men and women alike is altered (Bola, 1995; Kelly, in Graham-Brown, 1991).

NOTES

- (1) For a brief comparison of the age set systems of the Oromo, the Nuer and the Nyakyusa, see Taylor (1973: 327-330).
- (2) I say that the boys in this grade are uninitiated because their hairstyle is typically feminine. It is "identical with the hair style of a class of women whom the *dabballe* call their 'grandmothers'." Legesse (1973: 52-53) found out that the Borana Oromo boys in the *dabballe* grade "are not only made to look like girls; they are also categorically identified with them. The society always addresses them as girls. He added that, "If strangers use the masculine pronoun in talking to them or about them, they are quickly corrected." The custom prohibits the parents from "ever punishing" the members of the *dabballe* physically. For the Borana Oromo, the *dabballe* grade is a kind of psychosocial moratorium, a time for children to experiment with values and beliefs before they form real sense of identity (Steinber, 1993; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1997). The Borana, it seems to me, know that the development of normal and coherent identity is hindered if children are deprived of enough period of moratorium and impulsively forced into maturity. As Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, (1997: 278) also convincingly stated, "A sense of identity is achieved only after a period of questioning, reevaluation, and experimentation."

- (3) Members of the *yuba* class serve as advisor on public affairs, tribal customs and laws (Legesse, 1973; Prins, 1953). *Gada Moji*, which Legesse (1973) identified as the eleventh and the terminal stage of classifying individuals into social categories in the Oromo Gada System, is less important functionally thinking since the members of the grade take no part in public affairs.
- (4) See note 2 above for the reason why the boys are left uninitiated or indoctrinated into masculinity.
- (5) In Oromo, boys have various ways of constructing masculinity; they have various ways of collectively developing what W. E. Schafer (1975) coined as “conditional self-worth.” One aspect of this is that in situations that would trigger anxiety, boys usually give one another a built-in motivation to become fearless. One such situation is the ritual of urine. To set the drama, one of the boys, who actually has the desire to urinate, would spring over to one side and announce: “*Fincaan dhiiraa wal biraa hin hafu, ka dhaltuu wal qabatee haarafu*. (The boys’ urine comes all at a time, but that of girls’ sleep all together.”) Even when they do not have much urine, fearing that other boys would make fun at them by calling them *dhaltuu* (girls), the rest of the members would try hard to spurt out at least a droplet of the desired urine, by exerting all the strength they have. One may find the urine ritual ridiculous, and wonder why it is important at all, but it shows one of the things males do to distinguish themselves from females. It shows that in a gendered society children, in addition to gender identity, acquire personality traits, motives, values, and behaviours considered appropriate in their culture (Shaffer, 1994; Westen, 1996; Wood & Wood, 1996).
- (6) Starting from the suppression of the Gada System at the turn of the 20th century, the position of the Oromo women had continued to decline by all standards. Currently, the cultural survival of the rights that the Oromo women were offered in the Gada System is under great threat. It was only in the middle of the year 2002 that the Ethiopian Television reported on a scandalous brutality against an Oromo woman by her own husband. The crime was committed in Koffele District of Upper Wabe Shebelle Region in the Arsiland. The woman, who was in confinement (*Qanafa phase*), repeatedly quarreled with her husband for his extravagancy. One day, provoked by her challenge, the man fastened both hands of the woman with a rope. Then he wildly bit on and cut off both of her ears. The attack does not only show the man’s barbarity, but also signals the total destruction of the culture that protected women in the past. According to oral historians, severely injuring a woman who is in *Qanafa phase* was hardly thinkable in the past when the *Atete* and other socio-cultural leverages of the Oromo women were in full force.
- (7) Two of the three informants on this matter are members of the council of elders and adjudicators of homicide through Guma (indemnity) institution in Adaba District. The third one is a senior member of Culture and Information Bureau of the Regional State of Oromia (Bale Zone Branch Office). They stated that in the traditional Oromo socio-economic structure women had strong *wayyoma* (leverage) through which they defended their humanity.
- (8) According to the above informants, the symbolic value of womanhood has declined mainly because the society gradually retreated from practicing its *aadaa* (custom) in which women primarily assumed vital roles.
- (9) Hindheessaa (2001).
- (10) *Dabballe* is the first of the eleven grades of the Gada age-sets. It is a grade always occupied by a class of men sharing the common identity of being the sons of the Gada class who are in power as leaders (Legesse, 1973: 52).
- (11) The ritual also blesses the child-seeking woman by smearing butter on her belly and

forehead. Moreover, there is sacrifice and libation (usually milk and local bear called *booka* made of honey).

- (12) Interview with Shemsudin Yusuf (5/01/03), a senior member and field researcher in Culture and Information Bureau of the Regional State of Oromia (Bale Zone).
- (13) In the context of the territoriality taboo, sustained eye contact in front of a big gathering is often considered by the audience as shameless or bold. People thus say: *Dhiltee dhinnaa!* (save us from your eyes!), meaning, one's confidence or poise does not have to result in irreverence for the gathering.
- (14) It is not surprising that among the Borana Oromo, even though men largely claim control on the knowledge of custom, there are conditions in which men are functionally dependent on women for the lore of the culture (Legesse, 1973). The fact that the Arsi women remind the solicitors the *lallaba* of the good old days also means that they directly or indirectly participated in maintaining the customary rules governing the life of their society.
- (15) I know that in the indigenous Oromo culture only the sons are usually encouraged to attend recognized public meetings where the cultural rhetoric such as *Ilaalii or Dheertuu* (long, expository speech) are delivered by known individuals so that the sons would learn oratory. Some of the cultural occasions individuals are expected to make impressive rhetoric and argumentation are the *Jaarrsummaa or Jilba* (arbitration), and *Sirna Gumaa* (indemnity rituals). It is obvious that in a society where all public mode of expressions (Griffin, 1997) are masculinized, women may lack "self-articulation and self-definition" (Mugo, 1994: 60).
- (16) Nafa (2000/2001).
- (17) *Ibid.*
- (18) Another Arsi Oromo saying which expresses the second meaning of the proverb is: *Namni nitifi inworromsa*. Baxter (1996) loosely translates the proverb as: "A person brings his wife into the family by taking her virginity." The tradition of taking virginity implies that it is the predictor of well being for the husband to show his masculinity or virility to his wife.
- (19) In traditional Oromo culture, milk is one of the rich food items taken by women to inter-community feasts including the wedding. As stated in the proverb, a woman who has decided to attend a wedding fills her milk container even by begging neighbors when she does not have enough on her own, meaning she will exert her full will to execute her determination.
- (20) Awal (2001).

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APPENDIX A

30 OCTOBER, 2002

ALEMAYA UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
QUESTIONNAIRE TO BE FILLED
BY OROMO LANGUAGE SPEAKERS

The purpose of this questionnaire is to conduct a study on the portraiture of womanhood in Oromo folk-proverbs. Please, respond to all of the items as honestly as required of you. I appreciate if you complete the instrument prior to November 25, 2002. Your responses will be held in strictest confidence.

Sincerely, Jeylan Wolyie

Thank you beforehand for your sincere cooperation!

General instructions: Please, tick (✓) the item that most identifies your belief (opinion) and respond by writing where required.

A. PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Name: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Sex: _____
4. Religion: _____
5. Background: Rural _____ Town _____
6. Marital status: Married _____ Single _____ Divorcee _____ Widow _____
7. What is your level of education?
Specify here: _____
8. Do you have your own job?
1. Yes 2. No
9. If your answer is no for item No. 8. what is the reason?
Specify your reason(s) here: _____
10. If you are married, what is the income category of your husband?
1. Low 2. Medium 3. High
11. What is the level of education of your husband?
Specify here: _____
12. If you are married, what do you think is your status in the family regarding making decision on family income?
1. I make no decision on the income
2. I sometimes make decision on the income
3. It is me who hold the purse strings
4. It does not bother me who should make the decision
5. Other (specify _____.)
13. What is the range of the family members you have come from?
1. 1-3 2. 4-6 3. 7-10 4. 10 and above
14. What is the occupation of your father?
1. Merchant 2. Farming 3. Teaching. 4. Office work
5. Other(specify _____)
15. What is the occupation of your mother?
1. Merchant 2. Farming 3. Teaching. 4. Office work
5. Other (specify _____)
16. What is the income category of your parents?
1. Poor 2. Medium 3. Rich

17. What is the level of education of your father?
Specify here: _____
18. What is the level of education of your mother?
Specify here: _____
19. How many of your brothers and sisters have completed high school education?
Specify here: _____
20. Is there anyone of them who has joined or studied higher education?
1. Yes _____ 2. No _____
21. If your answer is yes to item, how many are studying or have graduated from higher education?
Specify here: _____
22. How many of these are female?
Specify here: _____
23. In your culture, do you observe patterns of difference in the way males and females live in the society?
1. Yes _____ 2. No _____
24. Are you aware that in your society people use language to explain about the difference between males and females?
1. Yes _____ 2. No _____

APPENDIX B

CODING PROVERBS ACCORDING TO THE CULTURAL STEREOTYPES THEY ARE MEANT TO ENCODE.

Instructions: The following Oromo proverbs are about womanhood. Rate them according to whether they are PEVWAOS, PEOHM, PETWARS or PESFWC.

No	PROVERBS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	RESPONDENTS' RATING OF THE STEREOTYPES THE PROVERBS ARE MEANT TO REFLECT			
			PEVWAOS	PEOHM	PETWARS	PESFWC
1	<i>Haadha dhabuu manaa haadha dhabduu wayyaa.</i>	Having a destitute mother is better for one than not having mother at all.				
2	<i>Dhalaafii ijoolleef uletu qoricha.</i>	For women and children, stick is (the right) treatment.				
3	<i>Niitii abbaan manaa mana hin jirre, du'a ga'ii fardaa dhaqxi.</i>	A wife whose husband is not at home (around) goes to condole the death of horse.				
4	<i>Ka dandeettu dhaani jennaan dhiirsi galee niitii dhaane.</i>	When he was allowed to whip whoever he can, the husband returned home and whipped his wife.				
5	<i>Niiti fi farda abbatu leenjifata.</i> Appendix continued	It is the possessor who should tame his horse as well as his wife as he wants.				
6	<i>Cidha beerti feete aanan qodaa hin hanqatu.</i>	When a woman has decided to go to wedding, her milk does not fall short of her milk holder.				
7	<i>Dhiirsi niitii sodaatu ilma hin dhalfatu.</i>	A husband that fears his wife can not father a child.				
8	<i>Dhiirti eebooyyuu hin obsiti.</i>	Males endure even (the pains of) spear.				
9	<i>Niitiin dhiirsa mootu ollaa horn hin gootu.</i>	A woman that dominates her husband will not at all value her neighbors.				
10	<i>Dhiirti utubaa sibiilaati, intalti karra ambaati.</i>	A male is an iron pillar of a house whereas a female is the (outside) gate that belongs to others.				
11	<i>Niitii fi farda abbatu eeg-gata.</i>	It is the man (the possessor) who should manage his horse as well as his wife.				
12	<i>Namni beera koorse galgala qorsoo nyaata, namini farda koorse galgala kooraa bataa.</i> Appendix continued	One who has spoiled his wife eats <i>qorsoo</i> (roasted barley) for his supper (because she does not give him a wife-like service of fine and fancy food) as one who has spoiled his horse carries <i>koraa</i> (saddle) at night (because the unruly horse would throw the saddle as well as him off itself and run wild).				
13	<i>Beeraafii harreen ba'aa hin dadhabdu.</i>	Women and donkeys do not complain about burden.				
14	<i>'Wal fixnee addaan nu guuraa' jedhe namichhi bakka kufetti.</i>	'We have nearly tormented each other. Please, take us apart.' said a man at his defeat.				
15	<i>Dhalaan akkuma harmaati ayyiin rarraati.</i>	Women, their hearts sway just like their breasts.				
16	<i>Beerti daakkaa malee daangaa hin beeytu.</i>	Women know grinding, but not where to stop.				

17	<i>Harreen moonaan qabdu moonaa loonii gali, beerti da'oon qabdu da' oo dhiiraa gali.</i>	Just as donkeys do not have their own kraal (and thus inhabit in that of cattle), women do not have their own abode (and thus dwell in that of men).				
18	<i>Beerti firdoo malee gud- doo hin qabdu.</i>	Women are bulky, but not great.				
19	Appendix continued <i>Intalti garaa laaftu garaa qullaa hin baatu.</i>	A kind-hearted daughter does not marry without fetus.				
20	<i>Beerti qoonqoo tolchiti malee dubbii hintolchitu.</i>	Women make (good) dish, but not (good) speech.				
21	<i>Hadhaa fi bishaan hamaa hin qaban.</i>	Mother and water have no evil.				
22	<i>Ati heefaa, ani beeraa. Eennutu laga wal baas- aa?</i>	You are weak and shaky. I am woman. How do we cross the river?				
23	<i>Niitiin dhiirsi koorse itillerraa mucucaatti.</i>	A woman whom her husband has spoiled slides from a tanned leather.				
24	<i>Mana onaa mannaa, mana niitii ontuu wayya.</i>	Better a hollow wife than a desolate house.				

Note:

PEVWAOS= proverbs that encode values women are accorded in the Oromo society,

PEMDIC= proverbs that encode male dominance in the culture,

PETWARS= proverbs that encode the trivialization of women and reinforce their subordination,

PESFWC= proverbs that encode the society's fear of women's character.

Thank you again for your cooperation!