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Women empowerment through 'Abegar' in South Wollo: A critical ethnography

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It is the objective of this study to describe, explain and critically analyze the role of the traditional social practice of 'Abegar' to empower women in South Wollo, Ethiopia. Data were collected through participant observation, record of social events and in-depth interview. The study was conducted from April to June 2014 E.C. Five social events known as 'Wodaja' were recorded. The result of the study showed that females were empowered through the practice of 'Abegar' in Wodaja sessions. During female group prayer sessions, females assume the position of leadership which empowers them. Being 'abegar', they are able to do many things which were impossible otherwise. Through their discourse, the females express their power as mothers, spirit possessors, and smart personnel who are empowered to do many things which even men couldn't. The discourse of 'Abbëgarness' (leadership) is used as an expression of power in the community. Females became leaders or 'Abbëgars' and are empowered through 'dua' (prayers).

Key words: Women, 'abegar', wodaja, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

South Wollo is the study site. Wollo is bounded by Tigray in the North, Gojjam in the West, Shewa in the South and Afar in the East. The capital city, Dessie, is 400 km away to the North of Addis Ababa. In Wollo, Muslims and Christians live together peacefully (Amsalu and Habtemariam, 1969).

The community has a unique history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. This community consists of a large number of Muslims and Christians. There is a thick historical record that this community exhibits a harmonious and peaceful contact and an intense sense of belongingness. The Wollo community is far more than mixed. There is a strong blood tie as there is

intermarriage among Muslims and Christians. There is also cultural diffusion, and a strong sense of togetherness that has been held for generations. Many significant cultural and historical contexts tie the Muslim-Christian Community to a great extent.

Wollo is one of the sub regions of Amhara Regional State which is also known as Region Three. Wollo is bounded by Tigray in the North, Gojjam and Gonder in the West, Shewa in the South and Afar in the East. The central town, Dessie, is 400 km away from Addis Ababa.

Topographically, the region is mountainous and cold in the Western and Northern part. In the East, it is very hot. In the population senses of 2007, the population of Wollo

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is 4, 022, 733 and more than 62% of this live in South Wollo Zone. This in figure is 2, 519, 450. In South Wollo, the Muslim-Christian mix is high and there are considerable Muslims in this zone as compared to the rest of the Zones of the Amhara Region. From the 20 Weredas of South Wollo, the researcher conducted the study in Tehuledere (Sulula, Gishen), Dessie Zuria (Bilen, Kelem, Boru, Gerado), Kutaber (Alasha and Kutaber), and Dessie.

Moreover, the researcher had co-researchers who helped collect data from Ambasel, Kelala, Jama, and Debat. Particularly, the areas where large data were collected are Alasha (Kutaber Wereda), Sulula (Tehuledere Wereda), Boru (Dessie Zuria Wereda), Bilen (Dessie Zuria Wereda), Gerado (Dessie Zuria Wereda), Kelem (Dessie Zuria Wereda), and Gishen (around Hitecha, Tehuledere Wereda). Wollo is a place with rich historical and cultural assets. The area is claimed to be the origin of the Amhara ethnic group (Getachew, 1984). According to Getachew (1984), the first original home of the Amhara is Amhara Saynt (Ibid: 12). He claimed that Amhara means 'agrarian' and Saynt 'a place where harvest is collected' in Arabic. He further states:

Though the Agew people is mixed and so it is named as Agew Midr Begemidir, and though because of Oromo it was named Wollo later; Bete Amhara includes the areas bounded by Tigray in the North, Begemdir and Gojjam in the West, Shewa in the south. In the middle was all the area of Bete Amhara (Wollo) (Getachew, 1984).

The Amhara ethnic group lives in Lasta, Wadla Delanta, Woreilu, in large numbers, and in Dessie area, Yeju, Ambasel, Raya, Kobo, Borena and Worehimeno mixed with other ethnic groups (Kidān, 1981). Ethnic groups that reside in Wollo are Amhara, Agaw, Argobba, Oromo, Warra Sheikh and Mamadoch (Edris, 2007). Wollo was known as "Bete Amhara" (house of Amhara) before it was named Wollo (G/Kidan, 1981; Edris, 2007).

After Gragn, according to Getachew, because of the Oromo's movement to the area of Bete Amhara, the name was changed to Wollo after the name of the governor of Bete Amhara who came from the south and central part of Ethiopia (Ibid). He was the son of Kereyu and the grandson of Berentuma. Wollo had children by the names Bukon, Woregura, Worellu, Wore Kereyu, WoreAlu (Ibid). Because of him, the name of "Bete Amhara" 'the house or homeland of Amhara' was changed to Wollo and the sub regions were also named after his children.

Historically, both Christianity and Islam have lived for long in Wollo. Of all the Amhara region, Wollo is where a large number of Muslims live. Islam faced difficulties in the reign of Tewodros II (1855 to 1868 E.C.) and Yohannes IV (1872 to 1889 E.C.). Wollo Muslims became victims of power and suppression especially during the latter's reign (Getachew, 1984).

According to Getachew (1984), of the four schools of thoughts in Islam (Mezhabs) known throughout the world, two are found in Wollo. These are Shafi which was established by Abu Abdela Muhamed Ibn Idris (767 to 870 G.C.) and Hanefiya established by Abu Hanifa Al Nueman Ibn Sabit (699 to 767 G.C.). The former school has great followers in Dewoy and Yifat. The second school that is Hanefiya is common in Kalu, Borena, Worehimeno, Worebabo and Yeju. Wollo is also a place where great Muslim scholars who have done a lot to teach and sustain Islam in Ethiopia originated (Ibid). There are many places of pilgrimage among which Jema Nigus, Geta, Dana, Deger, and Chale are most known (Ibid).

Wollo is a place where people of different ethnic groups, beliefs and cultures are believed to have coexisted peacefully. The languages spoken in the region are Amharic, Agew, Oromo, Tigray, Afar and Argoba (G/Kidan, 1981; Getachew, 1984). The people are known as 'Wolloyye'. The people do not want to identify themselves by their ethnic groups but by the place, 'wolloyye' (the Wollo person) (Ibid: 18).

The four musical melodies of Ethiopia, Anchihoyle, Tizita, Bati, and Ambasel, are found in Wollo. Tizita was known as Wollo before it was renamed as such (Ibid). The melodies are named after the names of places of Wollo. This shows that the people are accustomed to expressing their culture, history, love, and overall lives through their music (Getachew, 1984).

Menzuma is a major artistic work performed by Wollo 'Ulemas' (Muslim religious scholars). The people of Wollo have used Menzuma for many years for different purposes. They use it for prayer, and for teaching their religion. Among the well-known Menzuma performers are Sheikh Husen Jibril, the Arsi Emebet (Yejuye), the Mersa Aba Getye, the Guna Nigus (Yejuye), the Dessie's Tengego Sheikh and the recent Sheikh Mohammed Awol. These people are known even outside of Wollo by their Menzuma chants.

Wollo is rich in natural resources. There are many rivers, lakes and minerals in the region. In Wollo, Awash, Mile, Miowa, Chireti, Ala, Hormat, Tiratina Zamra, Tekeze, Borkena, Abay, Becho, Wayeta and Gerado rivers flow (Getachew, 1984). These rivers flow all year long. The lakes are Loga Hayk, Ardibo, Abi Gurgura, Afanbo, Ashenge and Maybar (Ibid; 53).

Among the minerals are iron soil, marble, green soil, salt, red sand, coal, and others that can be used for production of cement, paintings, and jewelries (Ibid; 58-59). There are different archaeological findings in Wollo that provide valuable information for genealogical studies of human beings (Ibid). There are scriptures of Christian and Muslim traditions that reveal the spirituality of the people. The one significant history of Wollo that the people are not proud of but legendarily stereotyped is drought and famine.

The description of Wollo barely completes without the

description of the effect of famine that has affected the people. In fact, Ethiopia is known for the same mainly because of its impact on the people of Wollo. Wollo is a place where many times famine has had its bad effects on the people. The drought has had unforgiving effect to the extent that the image of Ethiopia has remained a symbol of famine until now (Getachew, 1984).

Sadly, the damage of the famine had been known first to the rest of the world before it was known by Ethiopians. This is because the ruling elites of the time wanted to keep it secret to safeguard their interest. Many blame the government for this and it became a case for its downfall. Apart from this, there are many things that place Wollo in historical times among which are its historical places such as Lalibela which is one of the wonders of the world. It is one of the things that identify Wollo as a unique area (Ibid; 21).

Beauty, love, kindness and innocence are traditionally associated with Wollo people. The following appreciations are often heard about Wollo and Wolloye.

battinna kombolēčča kāmisenña härbu
yänäššäggä 'äggär yännayt' t'äggäbu
Bati Kombolcha Kemisie and Harbu, (names of Wollo places)

The country of the beautiful and the ever-wanted,

Also, Wollo is known for love. This is explicated in many traditional Wollo songs.

yäfəqqr 'əngočča yāmiqqwaddäsübš
yähullu 'äggär 'əkul yāwbät 'äddarāš
A place where people share love,
A place for all equally, a parlor for beauty,

It is generalized that the men and women of Wollo are love addicts. The Wollo people are also known to be kind and innocent. This is also indicated by the popular saying 'Wollo the barley'. The Wollo people are also known to be not trust worthy as the proverbial saying 'an empty neighbor house is better than a Wolloye neighbor/käwälo goräbet yšalal bado bet' has it. Wolloyes, however, do not accept this stereotype.

Like any traditional society, in the target community women are disadvantaged groups. Although it is not mentioned as such, there are some social practices that empower women in this particular community. This study focuses on this traditional social practice.

The objective of this study is to critically analyze the role of the traditional practice of 'Abegar' to empower female in South Wollo Zone, Tehuledere Woreda, Ethiopia.

METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and critical ethnography (CE)

In order to critically analyze the role of the traditional practice of

'Abegar' to empower female in the target group, CDA and Critical ethnography were employed.

Critical ethnography developed from critical social theory that resists hegemonic ideas that impose suppressive power over the world. Critical ethnography studies issues of power, empowerment, inequality, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization (Creswell, 2007). Critical discourse analysis and critical ethnography are both methods of part of critical social theories that employ theory at different stages of analysis. Madison, (2005:13) explains critical ethnography as follows:

The purpose of this (Critical Ethnography) is to single out and analyze the hidden forces and ambiguities that are behind the real practices; to help examination and judgment of discontent; to focus our attention to the critical expressions of different communities in their different systems and languages; to demystify the inequality and magnitude of power; to initiate and inspiring just; to name and analyze what the people feel about it.

In critical analysis, theory funds the foundations of analyses but there is no single prescribed theory that fits to all research issues. Wodak stated that "...there is no one CDA approach. All CDA approaches have their own theoretical position combined with a specific methodology and methods..." (2007:5). Rogers claims that 'CDA is both a theory and a method.' Discourse analysis is both a theoretical and empirical endeavor. CDA is used as a method of investigation in social science research (Fairclough, 2001a,b,c). Wodak (2005) says,

CDA might be defined as fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized etc. by language use (or in discourse).

Hence, CDA is a method of describing, interpreting, and explaining the discursive relationship between language and other social factors. It is different from other discourse analysis methods because it provides not only a description and interpretation of discourse, but also explains the why and how of discourses in societies (Rogers, 2004). The major objective of CDA is critique. "To be a critical social scientific method, CDA needs to reflexively demonstrate the changing relationship between social theory and linguistic structures and how this fits into evolving social and linguistic theories and methodologies" (Rogers, 2004).

Of all the different research approaches of CDA proposed by different scholars, this study uses a combination of the three distinguished scholars in CDA: Fairclough and Wodak (1997). The most widely used analytical framework in CDA is Fairclough's (O'Halloran, 2011). Fairclough, after Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, established that discourse contributes to the construction of social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning (Wodak, 2002; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Blommaert, 2005).

Hence, discourse has three functions: an identity function, a 'relational' function and an 'ideational' function. This three dimensional discourse which Fairclough (1995) has constructed is a useful framework for the analysis of discourse as social practice (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002).

"I see discourse as a complex of three elements: social practice, discursive practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and text, and the analysis of a specific discourse calls for analysis in each of these three dimensions and their interrelations" (Fairclough, 1995).

Van Dijk offers a more thorough-going theoretical base for socio-

cognitive analysis (O'Halloran, 2011). Van Dijk gives special attention to the role of cognition to understand and interpret texts and discourse.

Macrostructure and microstructure of Van Dijk is also an important framework for discourse analysis. Macrostructure "is used to account for the various notions of global meaning, such as topic, theme, or gist. This implies that macrostructures in discourse are semantic objects" (Van Dijk and Teun, 1980). Related to Macro and Micro structure of Van Dijk is what Gee calls "discourse" and "Discourse" (1999): the former refers to instances of language in use, actual speech events; the latter to (far more abstract) ways of using language.

The discourse-historical approach is associated with Ruth Wodak. Wodak emphasises on considering the wider context of discourse (Wooffitt, 2005). She gives importance on the contextualizing and historicizing of texts (O'Halloran, 2011).

An eclectic approach from each of the aforementioned three CDA researchers were used to analyze the complex construction of discourse as social practice along with the discursive elements of language, ideology, power, identity, solidarity and other elements.

RESULTS

Female empowerment through 'Dua'

In this study, the word 'dua' means prayer and 'wodaja' means a gathering to pray in groups using 'chat' – a substance leaf chewed in Wollo for prayer. Through group prayers or 'Wodaja dua', the females in the target group exercise power empowering themselves which they wouldn't get elsewhere. In such social events as 'wodaja', the females express their power through discourse. As Van Dijk stated, through discourses, how power is reproduced, resisted, legitimized and so on is revealed.

We typically study the many forms of (the abuse of) power in relations of gender, ethnicity and class, such as sexism and racism. We want to know how discourse enacts, expresses, condones or contributes to the reproduction of inequality (Van Dijk and Teun, 2004).

Women in developing countries are still disadvantaged in getting power since secular power is controlled by men (Zubair, 2001). Women's language is believed to be powerless, indirect and polite (Wodak and Benke, 1998; Mills, 2003). This is according to research outcome based on speech acts elsewhere. The women's discourse in the speech event of 'Abbëgar' (leadership) proves this otherwise.

Abbëgar is a leader of č'at session. Both females and males could assume this position. Females could be leaders for females only. Males could be leaders for both males and females. Often times, males and females chew č'at separately. When they have to chew together, there is a veil that separates the two. The abbëgar is responsible for leading the 'č'at dua'. S/he leads blessing and č'at to everyone. S/he can chant the Menzuma. Speech or the ability to articulate oneself stands for power (Zubair, 2001). When there is a chorus, the attendants become choirs. It can be said that becoming

an abbëgar empowers women.

Females enjoy leadership position in Menzuma chanting. In the prayers of wodaja (prayer), show their authority. In the group prayers, women show their power in different ways. The disadvantaged group hold power by access to domination through genres (Street, 2001).

One of the mechanisms the females use to show their power is cursing. In the following poem, females express their power to cause harm on anybody they want to. They show their ability to harm males who are not in order. The following extract shows how they show their power.

'äläččəñ tənnəš 'ägäləgl	I have a small
basket, (50)	
'äzayän hullu 'əmtəgäləgl.	That helps me avoid
troubles,	
bäyw bāwle bäyw bāwle	Hit him by 'wule'
'stick',	
yanən yagär 'äza yanən käläle.	That problem of the
world,	
bäyw bāšama bäyw bāšama	Hit him with candle,
kähägär gara 'əndaysmama.	So, he cannot live
with people,	
bäyw balānga bäyw balānga	Hit him with stick,
yan yagär 'äza 'əndizänaga.	So that he will not
be strong.	

In extract (50) aforementioned, the females curse those who do not obey them. Such is how they show their power through cursing. People believe that women have power and their curse causes serious harm.

The other manifestation of power is maleness. The belief among females that males have greater power is expressed in the phrase 'etye wondit' in the next poem. Females believe that their power can actually destroy males. They say that they can cause harm to men who actually doubt what women can do. Females express their power through their poem when they are in 'dua' with č'at as shown in the coming example.

etyä wändit 'ətyä wändit bäy t'äna t'äna
mən tadärgiyaläš bəlošalləna.
Madam male madam male be strong be strong,
Since he said what can she do? (51)

In the poem, the females are calling themselves male. They say be strong, be a man since the man said a woman cannot do a thing. By so saying, the females are admitting that males are more powerful. When females are powerful too, they could become like men. This, however, does not always hold true. Like in the following poem (52), the females say being chosen is a source of power; Maleness is not power!

wändənnät 'äyt'äqm setənnät 'äygoda
'ädəllän näw nəg tarifočču gwada.
täč'atum 'ädällä wäys täbunu

fit yalaw 'älänġ 'əzaw bākawənu.
 'äynnäggärm säw bäsawnaw
 tänaġär bay mätto kalannaggäräw. (52)
 It will not benefit being male and it will not harm being female,
 It is good to ask for luck from the house of the chosen,
 It is not from the č'at nor from the coffee,
 There is what is decided before by God,
 Humans cannot speak by themselves,
 Unless the spirit comes and makes him speak.

The females assert that there is no benefit in being a male and there is no harm in being a female. What matters most is not the sex but being chosen by the spirit. This is expressed in the above poem. Related to this is spiritual guidance as a source of power. The following explains this.

yännännäyā färäs səmu näw hämär
 'ähun tänaġro 'ähun yämmiyamär.
 härä t'riw 'əte härä t'riw bät'am
 hid kalalut 'äyhed talt'arut 'äymät'am
 The name of the mothers' horse is 'Hamer',
 He speaks now and he means it right away,
 My sister call him, oh call him louder,
 He does not leave nor come unless told to. (53)

In the aforementioned poems that are recited during supplication, women call on spirit because it does not come unless it is called and does not go unless told to do so. The women say that the spirit support them when called for.

The following (54) is a female Menzuma. In the Menzuma, women state that their prayers through males have not been heard. Now finally, they have asked a female spirit to help them. They believe that the female spirit will respond to their needs.

rabbol duyallähu
 libän lababbəyā rabbol duyallähu
 goġam mar zännäb lay rabbol duyallähu
 nəġus lababbəyā rabbol duyallähu
 'adal lababbəyā rabbol duyallähu
 gänät lababbəyā rabol duyallähu
 hämza lababbəyā rabol duyallähu
 ġarado lababbəyā rabol duyallähu
 läkutabäru šäh rabol duyallähu
 lädawdo qut'əbitu yəġbañ bəyāwallähu
 'əsəki 'əmibalawn qurt'un 'ädämt'allähu.
 I have submitted a report / an appeal,
 I have submitted a report to the Liben father,
 I have submitted a report to Gojam where honey rains,
 I have submitted a report to the Nigus father,
 I have submitted a report to the Adal father,
 I have submitted a report to the Genet father,
 I have submitted a report to the Hamza father,
 I have submitted a report to the Gerado father,

I have submitted a report to the Kutaber Sheikh,
 Now I have appealed to the Dawdo female spirit,
 I am eager to hear what the result will be. (54)

Intercession is also another source of power. There is an established belief that great sheikhs intercede. The following verse (55) states that the females are dealing with bad people by telling to male great sheikhs on Fridays and to female great duberties (ladies) on Mondays.

yämwartäññan näġär 'əñam 'äwäqəñəbbät
 ġmät labbabəyā säño lännännäyā 'əyänäġärnəbbät
 goġowm 'əndaydol ġäläba dolnəbbät.
 We have known the evil man's intention,
 We tell about him to fathers on Fridays and to mothers on Mondays,
 We have made his home worthless. (55)

Motherhood is also considered as a source of power. The mother is considered to be preferred by God as expressed in the subsequent poem.

'änəčw 'əmmamma hiġiw 'əfitu 'əfitu
 'ənnatu natəñna yälġ mädanitu.
 yännännäyän ləġ 'äynäkawm mäwġ
 bəyädäräsəbät dərəġġət 'ənġ. (56)
 You the mother go ahead first and up front,
 Because mother is the medicine for her child,
 Harm cannot touch mothers' child,
 Things are rather made ready for him.

The power of female is expressed as 'a mother being medicine for her child' as shown in (56). This refers to the idea that the mother's prayer for her child is so powerful that it is answered by God. So, mothers are required to lead the 'dua session' because her prayer is heard more than that of fathers. In the next poem, females assume positive thinking as source of power. They say 'let it be' as part of their prayer to express their desire that things happen in their favor.

yəhun bəy yəhun bəy dubəy yəhun bəy
 yəhun yalš gize yəhon yälläm wäy.
 Say let it be say let it be mother say let it be,
 It will be when you say it will be. (57)

This is the use of determination as source of power. The ladies are saying that let us be determined for our purpose and we will get our wishes. The next poems also reveal their belief.

'əsəti 'ämin bälü 'äminəta däg näw
 'äminta näwəñna yämmiġäläġäləw.
 mərər bəlän ġeze mərər yaln 'ənədähon
 yaräġaw yällämoy 'ənədihon 'ənədihon.
 'ädamt'an ġetaččən bämməru bämməru

baymär 'äydälämmoy dubba mäqäqälu.
Please say amen because amen is good,
It is amen that solve problems,
If we seriously pray with real intention,
He will make it as it should be,
Hear us our lord seriously,
Isn't it because it is not sour that pumpkin is eaten? (58)

As expressed in the poems, the females believe that they get what they want with determination. When people believe, their dreams come true. Real intent brings about determination. In what is to come also, the ladies refer to real intent as a source of power.

bäyāqin näw 'ənǧ 'äyädälläm bälela
näǧa yāwä t't'ubät 'ärifočču hulla.
It is with real intention not with other thing,
That the best people became best. (59)

Backlash of power or spiritual power reflexiveness is also reflected in the discourse of females. The people believe that spiritual power affects those who are in power if they do not use it properly.

'enant 'əhtoččä liqaččəhun ğäba
länem yəšalāññal badäbe bəğäba.
hära täw 'ähäle qäs bəläh yazāñ
bämälla ğəsəme lay 'ätəbbärbərañ.
You my sister, take your prayer back,
It is better for me if I get home with peace,
My desire, please hold me easy,
Do not hit me hard inside my body. (60)

In the verses, the females state that spiritual power flashes back to them and they could get hurt unless they use it properly. Females are empowered through dua. Making supplication is a major source of power for them. As religious people, the target group give great value to supplication. They admit that making supplication empower them.

hära 'änəččiyä mäqqämmät'e bəğğāñ
səntu täqqämmət'o 'enen 'əddärağğāñ.
mäqam näw masqam näw mäslo t'qur maq
yəhä säbara qän qurt'u 'əstiyastawwəq.
wäy yiqəmwäl wäy yasəqəmwäl
bämmit'äqm näğär 'əndet yəläggəmwäl.
Oh my sister, my sitting benefits me,
It set me right when others are still holding,
It is better to chew and make others chew looking like a
black mat,
Until this broken day's destination is fixed,
Either they chew or make others chew,
How can one be idle for the thing that is useful? (61)

The first verse states that prayer helps. God gives power over others through prayers. The second stanza states that there is a need to chew č'at and pray until these bad

days become well. The third verse states that supplication empowers.

Conclusions

Through 'wodaja' prayers, females who became 'abegar' reclaim, earn, legitimize and exercise power in the social structure as shown in their own discourse versed beautifully during group prayers. The 'č'at session' and 'the dua' in 'wodaja' give females power and authority so that they feel empowered to get things done in their favor. Without assuming such positions as 'abagar', they wouldn't exercise such power to do, undo, order, permit or earn the things they wish to have. The women of the target group expressed their power as mothers. Motherhood was expressed as power. They also expressed their belief as determined power. Through their discourse, they defended the belief that female is powerless and male is powerful. They legitimize their power as an ultimate one which can befall good or bad on others. They become 'abegar'- leader who is empowered to do anything.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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