

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Linguistic sexism as religious offense among the Oromo

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**Linguistic sexism is an act of patronizing one sex in a discourteous way, usually female. Studies show that human languages exhibit some form of linguistic sexism. However, the current discourses about its source and its sociopolitical purposes lack universality. To indicate this gap, as a case in point, this paper tried to unravel the cultural experiences of the Oromo regarding the matter which contradicted with the contemporary discourses of linguistic sexism. The data for this study were collected through interview, discussion, and exploration of secondary sources. As unraveled by this study, traditionally the Oromo women were sacred. They were considered as the vital part of the society without whose participation the whole system of human existence collapsed. So, sexual insults against them were considered as offenses against *Waaqa*, 'Oromo deity'. Consequently, as part of their religious duties they had the mandate to carry out legal actions against men who involved in these offences. This practices question the universality of the contemporary theories of linguistic sexism. Thus, acknowledging and documenting these cultural experiences of the Oromo would become vital for the current global struggle for gender equality.**

**Key words:** Sexist language, women's rights, siiqqee, feminism, traditional Oromo.

## INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are believed to be interrelated and vital in societal life (Hymes, 1964). Regarding the relationship between language and culture, Wardhaugh (2002) presents different views of scholars engaged in researching the matter. Among these, the major ones are: language determines thought and culture; language influences thought and culture; culture influences people's language; language and culture influence each other; and language and culture are not related to each other.

All but the last aforementioned views state that language and culture correlate with each other in one way or another. For scholars in the fields of linguistics or culture, this signals the need for taking up integrated investigation when addressing the issues of one of the two fields. Cognizant of this, an ardent advocate of this view, Witherspoon (1980) stresses that neither language nor culture can be studied separately. Different linguistic studies carried out especially in the area of linguistic sexism substantiate this argument too.

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For instance, Amanuel and Hirut's (2011) '*Gender bias ideology in the grammar of Afan Oromo*' and Roza's (2008) '*Gender ideology of Tigrigna speakers*' show that linguistic gender bias or linguistic sexism correlates with the contemporary cultural gender ideologies of the language speakers.

As the findings of Amanuel and Hirut's (2011) assert, linguistic sexism gets into language structure through daily cultural practices and becomes convention that helps the perpetuation of the latter. In this regard, the relation between language and culture can be viewed as one of interdependence.

Sexist language is language which, consciously or unconsciously, patronizes one sex in a scornful way (Trask, 2004). Concerning which sex is more affected by practice, Gibbon (1999), argues that it is the female. As Gibbon contends, linguistic sexism is the habit of patriarchal society and it tries to marginalize women and help continue their subjugation. Scholars like Spender (1980, 1985), and West and Zimmerman (1983) also have the same opinion.

Indeed, as scholars like Amanuel and Hirut (2011), Roza (2008), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), Bonvillian (2000), Gibbon (1999), Spender (1985), Martyna, (1978), Lakoff (1975), Harrison (1975), and Schneider and Hacker, (1973) show, human languages exhibit some form of linguistic sexism. Nonetheless, the contemporary discourses about its sources and its sociopolitical purposes seem to be hastily generalized Eurocentric theories. According to these assumptions, linguistic sexism is a 'legitimate' social habit of patriarchal societies which is purposely created and consciously used by male to denigrate female for the purpose of maintaining social, political, economic, and cultural advantages (Gibbon, 1999; Spender, 1980, 1985; West and Zimmerman 1983). This entails that in all patriarchal cultures, women are subordinate beings with no human rights and collectively disrespected by male for material and psychological benefits.

Nevertheless, these assumptions seem to contradict with the realities in the socio-cultural lives of some African societies like the Oromo (Østebø, 2007; Kuwe, 1997) and the Sidama (Dilu, 2001) of Ethiopia, and the Orma (Kelly, 1992) of Kenya. Though these four studies are valuable, they lack specificity on linguistic sexism as they dealt with it as part of other issues of women's rights. Hence, in order to indicate the epistemological gap between the contemporary theories of linguistics sexism and African's cultural realities, as a case in point, this paper tried to show the traditional experiences of the Oromo with regards to sexual insult and its customary punishments. Thus, the paper tied to answer the following research questions.

According to the Oromo tradition:

1. What are considered as sexual insults?

2. Why are sexual insults regarded as religious offences?
3. What are the procedures and punishments of offences of sexual insult?
4. How often are the offences of sexual insults punished?

Bounded by its objectives, this study did not involve detailed structural analyses of sexual insults. Yet, apart from scholars and gender equality activists who may benefit from the informative cultural practices presented by the study, any scholar interested in studying the structural analyse of the matter may benefit from the delimitations of the current paper.

To give some light to the major concern of this paper, in the following subsequent paragraphs of this section, we would describe the Oromo, their language, their traditional respects for women, and the cultural roles and rights of women in this society.

The Oromo belong to the Cushitic stock of people. They live in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (Gragg, 1982; Clamons, 1992; Greiferow-Mewis, 2001). In Ethiopia the Oromo are estimated to be 25,363756, which accounts for about 34% of the whole population of Ethiopia (CSA, 2007) According to Tesema (2006), they are the largest ethnic group in the horn of Africa.

The Ethiopian Oromo occupy an area stretching from the Western end of the country to the Eastern end and form Southern end to up in the Northern part (Gragg, 1982; Baye, 1986). Depending on their geographical location, the Oromo are engaged in different economic activities like pastoralism, crop cultivation and animal husbandry (Clamons, 1992). In the past the Oromo mainly followed a cultural belief of their own. However, today they may follow Christian, Muslim or Oromo belief (ibid).

The Oromo speak Afan Oromo (Oromo Language) which belongs to the East Cushitic branch of Afroasiatic language family (Bender, 1976; Gragg, 1982; Clamons, 1992; Griefenow-Mewis, 2001). In relation to the other Ethiopian languages, Afan Oromo is a fairly studied language. However, the number of its dialects is not yet established. Many scholars, who studied the language, roughly classify Afan Oromo into different groups of dialects. For instance, Cerulli (1922) spots three groups, Macca (Limmu, Goma, Lieqa and Jimma), Tulama (dialects of Shoa) and Eastern dialects. Bryan (1948) recognizes four groups of dialects, the Western (Macca) the Central (Tulama), the Northern (Wollo and Raya), the Eastern (Arsi, Guji and Borana). Heine (1981) distinguishes as far as six groups of dialects, the Northern dialects (Macca, Tulama, Raya, Wollo), the Eastern (Nole, Babilie, [J]arso, Ala, Ittu, Odorra, Anniya, and Karayyu), and ... [Arsi]..., Guji, Borana, and Gabra. And Gragg (1982) distinguishes five groups of dialects, the Western (consisting Wallaga and North Ilubabor and Kaffa), the Eastern (Hararge), the southern (consisting of Borana, Bale and perhaps with Oromo of North Kenya), the Central (comprising large part of Shewa and possibly

will extend to... [Arsi]...).

Afan Oromo is spoken as mother tongue and as second language mainly in Ethiopia and the horn of Africa.

...as mother tongue it is spoken in southern Ethiopia, in western highlands between Blue Nile and Gojeb rivers, throughout much of Shoa, as far east as Harar and south into Kenya and also in communities in Wollo, Northern Ethiopia. [Afan] Oromo is also spoken as a mother tongue in northern Kenya in communities that extend south throughout the Tana river valley to the coast of Indian ocean and in communities along the coast as far south as Kilifi (Clamons, 1992).

According to Mohammed and Hayward (1980) and Mohammed (1990), "the Oromo people... [expanded]... toward the central highlands and adjacent areas in southern Ethiopia to occupy the area they inhabited now". During the time of their expansion, other Cushitic, Semitic and Omotic people were absorbed into the Oromo. Afan Oromo became the most essential lingua franca in the whole area and continued to be the most important language for common communication in southern Ethiopia and neighboring areas in the horn of Africa (Hodson and Crawen (1922) cited in Clamons, 1992). According to Heine (1981), Afan Oromo is replacing Burji, a Cushitic language spoken in the highland area of northern Kenya.

At present, Afan Oromo is the official language of Oromia Region (one of the regions of Ethiopia). It is used as a medium of instruction in schools (grade 1-8) and in the region's Teachers Training Colleges. In addition, from grade 9-12 it is taught as a subject and it is given in Ethiopian School Leaving Exam. It is taught as major a course in different Ethiopian Universities at BA and MA levels. There are three newspapers printed in Afan Oromo. They are: *Bariisaa* 'dawn' *Kallacha* 'fore head' and *Oromyyaa*. There are also services in Afan Oromo on Oromia Radio and Television, Radio Ethiopia and Radio Fana (Amanuel 2012).

The Oromo are patriarchal and patrelineal people. They are known for their traditional democratic political, social and, religious system called *Gada* (Asmarom, 1973; Mohammed, 1990; Kuwe, 1997; Negaso, 2000). Though the *Gada* system excluded women from taking part in most political and military activities (Kuwe, 1997), unlike other patriarchal political systems, it at least provided them the basic human dignity and safeguarded their rights.

During the *Gada* period, the Oromo women had an institution called *Siiqqee* by which they fought any form of subjugation or injustice caused by the male (Gemetch, 1993; Kuwe, 1997; Østebø, 2007). Traditionally, upon marriage, the bride and the bride-groom were given special sticks which signified the basic human rights to which they were entitled for as long as they lived. The stick given to the bride is called *Siiqqee* while that of the

bride-groom is called *horooroo*. These sticks were symbolic regulators of a healthy and balanced relationship of power between the female and the male (Gemetch, 1993).

Married women carried their *siiqqee* sticks with them on occasions like: protest against violations of their rights and during social, religious, and political events that were considered as parts of their gender roles. As Østebø (2007) writes, *siiqqee* is specifically carried during: (1) *ateete*, 'woman-only religious ceremony' which involved praying to the deity on the occurrence of lack of rain, infertility, disease among human and livestock and political instability and war; (2) protest against insult, intimidation or sexual abuse from men; (3) protest against husbands beating or insulting their wives during pregnancy or child birth; (4) reconciliations of conflicting clans; and (5) marriage ceremonies. So, the carrying of the *siiqqee* stick signified sociopolitical or religious mobilizations. The institution under which the mobilization process took place was also called *siiqqee*. It was exclusively women's institution which helped in safeguarding their human rights and dignity.

Under the *Siiqqee* institution, punishable offenses against women were: sexual insults, intimidation or sexual abuse, beating, interfering into their private extra marital sexual activities, crossing into their sacred territories, and denying them the right to attend religious and social ceremonies that *Gada* provided them as their exclusive gender roles and rights (Gemetch, 1993; Kuwe, 1997; Østebø, 2007). Any of these offenses were considered as the violation of *Safuu*, the law of *Waaqa*, Oromo deity. Consequently, as part of their religious duty, women protested against this sin/crime and punished the offender males (Kuwe, 1997). Among these offences, this paper dealt with sexual insult.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study falls under qualitative research paradigm. Language and women's rights being the central point of the study, anthropological methods were used to collect and analyze or describe the data.

### Sources of data

The primary sources of information for this study were two purposively selected male Oromo. The criteria for their selection were possessions of rich cultural and research experiences related to the topic under investigation.

Accordingly, the first informant was Fekadu Tolessa, 27 and instructor in the Department of Governance at Jimma University. He has earned his BA in Political Science and international relations and his MA in development studies, both from Addis Ababa University. He was born and raised in Gasara Woreda of Bale Zone where according to Østebø (2007) the practice of traditional respects for women is not totally forgotten yet. He has rich oral information about sexual insults and their punishments among the Oromo of his area. In addition, Fekadu has a deep knowledge about women's rights in the traditional socio-political system of the Oromo which he gained through research activities.

The other informant was Lenin Kuto, 25 and instructor in the department of Oromo Folklore and Literature at Jimma University. He was born and raised in Ziway Dugda Bora Woreda of West Arsi Zone. He grew up witnessing the practice of males' violations of women's rights and their cultural punishments. Lenin has earned his BA in Oromo Folklore and Literature from Jimma University and he is currently doing his MA in the same field at the same university. In addition to his professional skills, his chanceful practical observation of the crimes and punishments of sexual insults among his community has helped him to acquire deeper knowledge of the subject matter.

As secondary sources, we have used some published articles whose primary concerns were not linguistic sexism but slightly touched up on it as part of the general respects and rights of traditional Oromo women. Two of which worth mentioning are: Østebø (2007), 'Wayyuu - Women's Respect and Rights among the Arsi-Oromo' and Kuwe (1997), "The Siiqqee institution of Oromo women".

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The primary data for this study were collected through interviews and discussions. To this end, each of the informants was made to narrate about the rights and respects of Oromo women, how they fought against sexual insults in the community, what those insults are, and the procedures of reporting and punishments of such insults. In addition, they were asked to tell us any account they witnessed in their communities in this regard. The narrations were recorded with digital audio recorder, transcribed and translated into English. Based on their relevance, the data were presented and discussed together with the information gathered from the secondary sources.

## RESULTS

### Punishable sexual insults among the Oromo

In the Traditional lives of the Oromo, any interaction between people and people, people and nature, and people and the deity was checked by safuu 'moral and religious codes'. For instance, to make an effective and 'safe' communication among people of various ages, sexes, and social status, one needed to constantly refer to safuu, which dictated the whole communication process. In addition to guiding one's non verbal communication strategies, safuu dictated his/her diction based on the milieu of communication.

Among the Oromo, one was either praised or reprimanded based on his/her language use. So, children were taught what to say or what not to say based on safuu. As part of this process, they get acquainted with the practice of avoiding offensive words during their daily interaction with the different groups of people in the society. So, whatsoever, insults were not welcome among the society for the sake of respect. Nevertheless, the degree of respect one got in this society was determined by his/her age, social status, and sex. In this regard, elderly people, women, and *qaalluu*, 'religious leader' were generally among the most respected parts of the society. Even among these, the last two were

considered as sacred (Kuwe, 1997; Asmarom, 1973). Therefore, verbal offences against them had resulted in serious punishments.

According to the Oromo culture, punishable sexual insults against women were words and phrases that were believed to collectively dehumanize them or damage their self esteems. For instance, regard the following:

- a) *tan fagaara baqaqaa* 'of split vagina'
- b) *tan fagarri ajaa'u* 'of stinky vagina'
- c) *tan teessee fincooftu* 'who squats to pee'
- d) *konkaa* 'empty/hollow'
- e) *gaangee* 'mule/sterile'

The above data show that sexual insults against women consist of words that denote the female reproductive organ, metaphorical references to their biological differences from men, and specific reproductive inability.

Accordingly, the insults under examples (a) and (c) obviously denote the natural shape of the female reproductive organ and the physiological phenomenon that differentiates them from the male correspondingly. Similarly, the one under (b) also is denotative by nature but it is less direct because it gets its meaning from the biological phenomenon related to women's menstrual period. These insults were regarded as offensive because they psychologically demean women.

On the other hand, the insults under (d) and (e) are metaphorical references with connotations of un-conformities with the cultural expectations of the society. Specifically, the word *konkaa*, 'empty' (d) has the meaning, 'penetrated before marriage' which was disgraceful for women because of the society prohibited sex before marriage. In the same token, the term *gaangee*, 'mule/sterile' under (e) which refers to 'women's inability to reproduce' was also regarded as highly offensive for women because of the cultural values of children in the society. Among the society a woman who produced children had a higher status than the sterile one. However, the society did not allow the acts of demeaning women because of their sterility.

As we tried to show above, generally, punishable sexual insults according to the Oromo tradition were terms that refer to women's biological differences from men or natural phenomena related to their reproductive characters. These terms were believed to damage their self-esteem. So, the uses of such insults against women were punishable according to the traditional law of the society. Before we proceed to the procedures of reporting and punishing the matter, first we would present the sociocultural motives behind punishing sexual insults below.

### The motives behind punishing sexual insults among the Oromo

The practice of punishing sexual insults against women

had emanated from their higher socio-religious status among the society. In the Gada system, women were considered as the essential part of the society without whose participation the whole system of human existence collapsed (Gemetch, 1993). They were seen as genuine, compassionate, peaceful, and innocent beings. As part of their gender roles, they mediated between *Waaqa*, the Oromo deity and people during disaster, and between clans during conflicts. It was their duty to pray for the peace and prosperity of the society during war or natural disasters. It was also their duty to reconcile conflicting clans. Above all, they were the guardians of *Safuu*, the law of *Waaqa*. This included fighting for their rights and respects (Kuwe, 1997).

Conventionally, Oromo women's rights and respects were bound by *Safuu*. As Gemetchu (1998) defines, *Safuu* is "a moral category, based on Oromo notions of distance and respect for all things.... [which]...constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded".

Oromo women were considered as innocent and peace loving. So, they were respected and sacred in the society. Threatening their rights and respects were considered as violations of *Safuu*, the law of *Waaqa*, the Oromo deity. It was believed that violating *Safuu* resulted in creating disorder and chaos in the society (Kuwe, 1997). Consequently, men had refrained from subjugating women or involving in any immoral act that physically or psychologically harmed them. However, if this line was crossed, it resulted in facing customary punishments. Below, we would present procedures of reporting and punishing the offence of sexual insults against women.

### Procedures of reporting and punishing sexual insults

According to the Oromo tradition, it was the duty of every woman in the community to report the offence of sexual insult and protest against it in collaboration with the other women. Generally, as our informant Lenin says, the reporting and investigation process took place on women's social gathering called *wijjuu*, 'a kind of women's traditional saving association in which butter was collected from each members periodically and given to one on rolling bases'. In addition to its economic function, *wijjuu* helped women to meet regularly and discuss their social problems. Thus, any injustice including sexual insult from men was reported, investigated for seriousness and/or persistence, and decided for further legal action against it on this gathering.

In view of that, if it was discovered that a man had sexually insulted a woman, she was advised to make *iiillee siiqqee*, 'ululation which signaled a call for other women's collaboration to protest against injustices'. Thus, on a secretly planned day, the offended woman grabbed her *siiqqee* stick and got out of her house ululating. Then

all women who heard this call immediately joined her holding their *siiqqee* sticks. Since the injustice was considered as the common issue of all the women in the community, they were obliged to join the protest leaving aside anything they were doing. As soon as they started forming a group, they marched through the village chanting: *Iyya siiqqee dhageettee? Oduun si geettee?* 'Did you hear the call of the Siiqqee? Did you hear the news?' Then as they passed chanting by each house in the village, they were joined by more women and together they marched towards the nearby river where they usually carried out ritual ceremonies and prayers.

If the women reached at the river the punishment of the offender was very harsh because the crime was considered as manslaughter. So, the offender had to go quickly to anyone of the respected elderly men in the community and begged him to stop the marching woman and ask them for reconciliation.

Thus, to resolve the matter peacefully, the elderly man had to approach the women with humiliation and humbleness. As part of the process, he had to: take off his shoes, put down his knife, pull out his belt and fasten his trousers with *quncee*, 'a string made of a tree trunk'. Then he negotiated and took them back to the house of the convict for reconciliation which had to begin by ordering the convict to brew mead and the reconciliation process was adjourned until the mead fermented.

When the mead fermented the convict prepared himself with similar physical and psychological appearances the elderly man faced the women on the day of their rally. After that he filled the mead in a jar and stood in front of the group of women while carrying it on his head. While he stood there, the women chanted the following poem.

<i>Lafa na seetee,</i>	You thought I was the earth,
<i>Narra deemuu feetee?</i>	So you wanted to walk on me?
<i>Gufuu na seetee</i>	You thought I was a tree trunk,
<i>Buculuu na feetee?</i>	So you wanted to split me into pieces?

The above poem shows that the convict had violated women's right as if they were non human entities like the earth or a dead tree. By such poems the women tried to warn the convict and teach him about their rights which he was ignorant about. Then they ululated and the offender was made to put down the jar of mead he had been carrying. Then he was made to lie down on the ground in front of the women and each woman slightly hit him by her *siiqqee* stick. Next, they pulled him by the arms to stand up while uttering, "*Namittii taatee, namatti si daballe*", 'you had become a woman, now we have made you a man'.

Subsequently, they advised him that women are mothers, wives, and sisters and they should not be insulted or disrespected in any way. To show that he was forgiven, they blessed him and ululated at the end. Finally, they slaughtered a bull that the man adored from among the cattle of the household and prepare a feast for

the group. However, if the family had few or no cattle, the slaughtering of a bull was only symbolic. To this end, they brought a bull from among the household's few cattle or borrowed from the neighbor and fed it grass by putting in its mouth. This was considered as slaughtering the bull and the process ended.

Even though the tradition is similar among Oromos who live in different geographical areas, the procedures of punishment for sexual insult or any other violations of women's rights slightly differ from place to place. As Østebø (2007) writes this sort of crime among the Arsi Oromo resulted in the payment of as many as eight cattle.

On the other hand, among the Bale Oromo, the main purpose of the punishment was to show the power of women in the society. So, the punishment had to humiliate the convict in a way that warned the other men in the society. Hence, mostly, the convict was made to stand naked on the top of a roof in a way that every passerby saw him. In addition, he was slightly hit by every woman in the community with the *Siiqqee* stick. Then, he was made to apologize to the women for his crime. (Fekadu Tolessa)

### Consistencies in punishing offences of sexual insult

Punishments of crimes against women including sexual insults were almost always successful and did not need witnesses of a third party because of the societal beliefs. If a woman reported that a man had violated her rights, it is taken highly by the society because it is believed that women do not lie (Fekadu et al., 2005 cited in Østebø, 2007).

However, in case an offender denied his crime, his punishment is disastrous according to the beliefs of the society. He is cursed by all of the women in the community and 'bears the consequences of the curses'. Look at the following data from Østebø (2007) for clarification.

Two years ago one of my male neighbours, insulted me sexually saying; 'All women are like old empty milk containers (koonka[a]) but above all you are the worst'. I found this insult to be so serious that I brought it up before our women elders. They discussed the case and concluded that it was necessary to call for *ateete*. All the women in my neighbourhood went to the man's house with our sticks (*sinqee*)/[*siiqqee*]. We confronted him with what he had done. The man refused to admit his offense and to settle the case. He did not respect our *ateete*; arguing that he did not believe in this tradition anymore, now that he had become a Muslim. All the women in our neighbourhood gathered outside his house regularly for more than two months. Outside his house we were chanting 'songs' dominated by sexual insults; (among others saying that we hoped he would be infected with HIV) in order for him to accept his wrongdoings. He weeks we saw him coming to the clinic with a serious skin infection on his face. He also lost 5 of his cattle, they were

hit by lightning. All this happened in accordance with our curse.'

As can be observed from the above story, the convict refused to admit his offense and got cursed only. This indicates the weakening of the cultural practice because traditionally, denials of crimes against women were almost impossible among the Oromo.

During the Gada administration, denials of crimes against women involved serious sociopolitical sanctions that affected the convict's human rights. A man who denied his crime against women was ostracized from his *gosa*, 'clan' which made him lose the right to take part in any political, social, and religious activities of the society. He was demeaned by the society because his act was considered as betrayal of his clan. So, any time he appeared in public, elders cursed him, women insulted him, and children looked down on him (Fekadu, 2005).

### DISCUSSION

The Oromo are patriarchal and patrilineal people who are known by their oldest democratic sociopolitical and cultural system called *Gada*. Under this system, most political activities were controlled by men. However, women had much role in maintaining peace and order without which these activities were believed to be unthinkable among the society. Subsequently, women were considered as the most essential part of the society (Asmarom, 1973; Gemetchu, 1993).

In the traditional belief system of the Oromo, women were given the role of guarding *Safuu* 'the law of Oromo deity' (Kuwe, 1997). Since their rights were bound by this law, they were the stewards of their own rights. So, they objected the violations of their rights by men and took customary actions against it by themselves.

As reported by this study, sexual insults against women were considered as acts of violations of women's rights. Though the procedures of reporting and punishing the crime slightly varied among the Oromo inhabited in different area of the country, the purpose was the same - checking its perpetuation. Hence, mostly the punishment had to make the convict acknowledge the power of women and teach the other men in the society a moral lesson.

During the Gada administration, the customary law of the society with regard to protecting women's rights and dignities was so strong that denials of the crimes of sexual insults against women were unthinkable among the society. This was because of two reasons: (1) The traditional beliefs about women's roles in the society were so intact that it made the matter an unbreakable religious taboo; (2) the socio-political sanctions which followed from the denial were so serious that the convicts had no better chances.

Currently, as a result of the sociocultural, religious, and political interferences from the non-African societies and the neighboring ethnic groups, the tradition of punishing

sexual insults has vanished from most part of the region inhabited by the Oromo or it appears to be too weak in places where it exists (e.g. in Bale, Arsi and Borana Zones). However, the very presence of this tradition at one time in the history of humankind becomes a challenge to the contemporary theories of linguistic sexism.

As the contemporary theories depict, linguistic sexism is the product of male dominated societies and it is systematically created to degrade women for political and social benefits. For instance, Gibbon (1999), Spender (1980, 1985), and West and Zimmerman (1983) implicitly or explicitly argue in this line. However, in spite of the fact that they were patriarchal, deliberate sexual insults against women were not tolerated among the Oromo. Since women were sacred in this society, they had the mandate to fight for their rights and take legal actions against these offences by themselves.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to show the epistemological gap in the contemporary theories of linguistics sexism. To this end, it tried to present the traditional practice of punishing linguistic sexism in the Oromo society.

The contemporary assumptions about linguistic sexism are: (1) it is a 'legitimate' social habit of patriarchal societies; (2) it is purposely created and consciously used by male to denigrate female for the purpose of maintaining social, political, economic, and cultural advantages. However, as unraveled by this study, the traditional experiences of the Oromo contradict with these assumptions. Specifically:

1. Sexual insults against women among the Oromo were not collective actions of men and they did not serve any sociopolitical or economic purposes.
2. Though the Oromo were patriarchal, women were respected and given the mandate to fight for their dignity when insulted. So, the practice of linguistic sexism was not a legitimate social habit among the society.

So, the contemporary assumptions about linguistic sexism lack universality. So, the experiences of the Oromo with regards to the matter need to be investigated in depth to come up with better cross cultural theories. Besides, we believe that acknowledging and documenting these good cultural experiences would be vital to achieve better results in the current global struggle for gender equality. In this regard, the current movement started by Tolstokorova (2005) which tries to propose legal frameworks for the fight against linguistic sexism, may benefit much from considering these cultural experiences.

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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