

Contesting Images of Womanhood: The Narrative Construction of Gender Relations in Ethiopia

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Abstract: This article deals with continuities and changes in the conceptualization of womanhood among the Guji-Oromo of Ethiopia. Drawing on adults' and children's interpretation of gendered folk narratives, the article discusses the traditional conceptualization of womanhood and the emerging voices that disapprove of it. It argues that adults and children construct contesting images of womanhood through interpreting gendered folk narratives. In explicating the interplay between gender, folk narratives, and intergenerational difference, it looks into the dynamics driving the conceptualization of womanhood in Ethiopia. It shows how individuals' and groups' socio-cultural orientation plays a crucial role in the understanding of gender to which children are introducing new perspectives. It also argues that the role of cultural expression is not only to validate customary perceptions but also reflects the present and emerging changes in the construction of gender. This scenario echoes an emerging resistance that the present generation of children has imposed on the established gender stereotypical views of adults. The article is based on data collected through ethnographic fieldworks done among the Guji-Oromo for ten months in 2015.

Key words: gender, folk narratives, continuity and change, Guji-Oromo, Ethiopia

Introduction

This article discusses how adults and children uphold and subvert gender relations through the narrative processes of folktales. The discussion follows the notion of “narrative construction” with a focus on the interplay between African narrative discourses about womanhood and intergenerational perspectives on gender relations.¹ Studies from the perspective of “narrative construction” in African contexts present that it is through cultural narratives that people make sense of gender identities and relations. Accordingly, African cultural narratives and the socio-cultural contexts of performance are understood as meaningful discourses of gender relations and the participants in the performance considered creative actors who have dynamic perceptions of gender values.² This means that in the process of enacting cultural expressions as narratives of social and historical actions, individuals uphold or subvert the gender identities and values. Thus, the interplay between cultural narratives and gender construction is supported by an actor's ability to connect a narrative account to social practices artistically and, through it, supplement or subvert existing discourses.³ Connecting cultural narratives and gender construction may result in a new perspective in the understanding of gender relations. Such cultural expressions are widely observable among the Oromo society to which the Guji belong. The Oromo have a

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rich repository of cultural expressions that adults and children perform in multiple social and cultural occasions and use to make meanings of their social practices, values, and relationships.⁴ This article analyzes how people's generational identity, rooted in their socio-cultural orientations, plays crucial roles in their construction of gender. Informed by the narrative constructionist perspective, the article presents the dynamic connection between cultural expressions and gender construction as well as discusses how contextual interpretation of folk narratives manifests the intergenerational change in the understanding of gender. Furthermore, through discussing how adults and children use gendered folk narratives to validate their perceptions of womanhood, the article demonstrates how adults try to uphold highly patriarchal gender relations while children attempt to subvert these. The article shows the role of children in resisting the dominant patriarchal ideology and ensuring equality between men and women.

Literature Review

Several studies show that folk narratives are the popular forms of cultural expressions in Oromo society that connect the past to the present, articulate social stratification and regulate the dynamics of intergenerational relationships.⁵ Gameda asserts that folk narratives are part of everyday life and embody the roles that men and women, as well as adults and children, should play as members of society.⁶ Emphasizing the role of cultural expressions in reflecting women's positions in Ethiopia, Alemu and Hussein also argue that oral narratives, proverbs, and folk songs both create and reflect gendered values and images.⁷

Alemu presents how a folk narrative puts women in subordinate positions through the messages it contains.⁸ Alemu's study observes folk narratives as fixed cultural discourses that perpetuate beliefs and attitudes about women as persons unable to shoulder public responsibilities. Similarly, Hussein states that the Oromo society "uses proverbs to depict women in general as a group of people with inherent weakness, lacking wisdom, confidence, self-assurance and good character."⁹ Dedo discusses how Oromo folk narratives, proverbs and songs have portrayed women as cruel, foolish, and shameless when they violate the norms of society which directs them to be quiet and submissive.¹⁰ Debsu (2009) also shows that cultural expressions are not only used as tools to subordinate women but also as means to perpetuate values that keep them in a safe position.¹¹ With a focus on Guji-Oromo society in southern Ethiopia, Debsu argues that the change from pastoralism to settled farming resulted in the loss of cultural expressions and values that embody women's customary rights.

Together, these studies, present different forms of cultural narratives as instruments that keep women in inferior positions and perpetuate patriarchy among the Oromo society. The authors present narratives as static cultural embodiments that fix historical and social meanings of gender relations across different contexts. Informed by the functionalist approach in which cultural expressions are viewed as mechanisms to maintain the stability of cultural values, the studies use folk narratives, proverbs and folk songs as lenses through which one can observe women's position in any culture.

Although the interplay between folk narratives and gender construction has not been reflected in studies of other Ethiopian cultures, other accounts on womanhood in Africa—e.g., Dupire, Bülow, and Caplan—how that cultural expressions and practices shape gendered roles of women.¹² However, the relationship between gender, generation, and folk narratives has not been documented adequately. The existing body of literature has not

captured the role of expressive culture in transforming human perceptions and critiquing the status quo.

The Guji-Oromo

The Guji are part of Oromo society and speak the Oromo language - one of the most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia.¹³ They are a confederation of three culturally interrelated clans (*Huraga, Maatti* and *Hokku*) collectively known as *Hagana*.¹⁴ The three clans occupy different areas with free inter-clan movements and residences. This article examines Guji culture through three cultural phenomena: the *Gada* system; elaborate and profound cultural expressions; and hierarchical social relationships.

The *Gada* system is a complex scheme of ranking, authority and decision-making consisting of a successive generational structure that rotates every eight years. This social hierarchy categorizes members into seniors and juniors as well as leaders and followers. The seniors in the social hierarchy have the responsibility to perform rituals, dictate values, and reinforce orders. The *Gada* is a patriarchal system in which men take the superior social position in performing cultural practices and making decisions in public spaces. Men have the right to inherit parental properties. According to *Gada* rules and regulations, a family is headed by the husband but all domestic activities are managed by the wife. Although women are excluded from public political and leadership activities, they play central roles in reproductive activities and home-based decision making. As a result, the hierarchical power relationship between husbands and wives is a central feature of the Guji-Oromo culture. Wives are always expected to honor their husbands. As a mark of the honor, a husband and wife do not sit side by side, do not eat together, and do not joke with each other, even inside their homes.

Cultural expressions such as oral narratives, riddles, proverbs, folksongs and sayings play central roles in interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communications among the Guji-Oromo in a similar way to many ethnic groups in Africa.¹⁵ As the Guji-Oromo are predominantly unlettered, oral communication of cultural expressions is integral. Only 27 percent of the Guji population is literate.¹⁶ The remaining 73 percent of the population relies on oral communication in which various forms of cultural expressions provide recurrent forms of knowledge transmission and information sharing.¹⁷ For the majority of the Guji-Oromo, it is cultural expressions that make possible the passage of knowledge from r

The cultural expressions of the Guji-Oromo, similar to the wider Oromo ethnic branches, consist of six popular forms of oral arts: *wedduu* (folk songs), *oduu-duri/ duriduri* (oral narratives), *mammaksa* (proverbs), *ibboo* (riddles), *jecha* (sayings) and *xapha* (oral games).¹⁸ These cultural expressions are performed on different cultural occasions such as rituals, festivals, neighborhood social events, everyday interpersonal discussions, group-work times, and family social events. These forms of cultural expression share some similarities with what Lindfors outlined as forms of folklore in Africa.¹⁹

These forms of cultural expression are performed by adults and children in different social and cultural contexts.²⁰ In some contexts, children participate with adults and, in the other contexts, they share the practices with each other. For instance, in the performances of riddles, cattle songs, and games, children participate without the involvement of adults. However, they collaborate with adults in the performance and interpretation of the folk narratives. Both adults and children perform folk narratives as arts of speech and wisdom of

communication when they deliberate on social issues. They use folk narratives in group discussions to draw listeners' attention and elaborate on their viewpoints in a discussion. This article focuses on how adults and children among the Guji-Oromo use folk narratives in substantiating gendered positions and articulating perceptions of womanhood.

Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted among the Guji-Oromo for ten months in 2015. Methods of data collection included focus group discussions and participant observations. Focus group discussions of three groups of adults and three groups of children with participants from both sexes. The focus group discussions included twenty-eight adults (eighteen men and ten women) and thirty children (eighteen boys and twelve girls). The adults were selected on the basis of their knowledge and acceptability in their village communities (key informants). They ranged in age from thirty-five to sixty-seven. The children derived from the families of the selected adults. The children were ages ten to fifteen. Selection of the children and adults from the same extended family aimed to assess the impact of home social contexts on participants' intergenerational differences in perception of gendered values.

Members in both categories were eager and active in the discussions on how they understand gender difference and perceive meanings of womanhood. Even though the skill of substantiating one's ideas through a folk narrative is more developed among the adults, children were also clever in using folk narratives to elaborate their points. The focus group discussion with children, began with a re-telling of the folk narratives from the discussion with adult groups. This scenario allowed the children to remember the narratives and take over the telling and discussing. This provided a comparison of children's perspectives of gender with those of adults. Similar to the adult groups, the children used the narratives as instances to justify their point of view. In other words, both adults and children used the popular gendered folk narratives to validate their ideas and communicate their viewpoints of womanhood among the Guji-Oromo. Of the folk narratives performed and interpreted by adults and children in the focus group discussions, eight were selected and included in this article.

The second method of data collection, the participant observation, aimed at generating data on the gender-related realities such as the social roles of women and men, gender-based discrimination, and the state of gender equality among the Guji-Oromo. Participant observation occurred across different spaces including homes, workplaces, schools, ritual/ceremonial places, and public gatherings.

Continuities and Changes in the Narrative Conceptualization of Womanhood

In Ethiopia, gender inequality has continued as a process of social stratification embedded in cultural institutions of which the Oromo Gada system is one. The Gada system is a prominent generational grade-based system: of leadership that symbolizes the established patriarchal yet egalitarian pattern of governance among Oromo society in general and the Guji-Oromo, in particular.²¹ Gada is a system of stratification and generational structuring that categorizes all Guji males into thirteen generational grades in which each grade has a hierarchical social position and is identified with roles that members are expected to play.

Furthermore, it is based on a social hierarchy in which men have power over women and exclude them from participation in public affairs. Therefore, in the past and present,

women are assumed not have direct participation in the system but rather are affiliated to it through their husbands or fathers. Loko (age forty-five) asserted: "As a woman, I do not go to Gada ritual and do not participate in decision making in the Gada assembly. Before marriage, my father used to speak on behalf of me. After marriage, my husband has represented me." The Gada system empowers men to have multiple political and administrative roles in accordance with their generational grades. But Gada excludes women from public leadership and limits their participation. In each Gada period (eight years) there are several public events in which different social and cultural rules are reinforced and problems are resolved. In those social events, women play marginal roles and are restricted to preparing ritual materials. This position of women is contested by young men and women who advocate that the Gada system should be gender inclusive. Members of the young generation claim that women have the right to go to the sacred ritual sites of the Gada institution and participate in *qexala* (ritual songs).

Focus group discussions with adults raised the issue about participation of women in Gada leadership practices. Men and women both asserted that Gada embodies the values and norms of gender relations which all members of their society should respect. They voiced that the exclusion of women from participation in the Gada system goes back to the time of the powerful woman Akko Manoye, the last queen of the Oromo before the establishment of the Gada system. They used folk narratives and proverbs as a means to validate their points. For instance, Hirpo (56 year old man) provided the following folk narrative to illustrate the reason behind marginalization of women in the Gada system of leadership:

Once upon a time, there was a woman whose name was Akko Manoye. She ruled the Oromo society in an absolute dictatorship. During her rule, every task including caring for a family was performed by husbands, and every decision was made by women. She always ordered men to accomplish things that were impossible for them. The Oromo people tolerated such acts of the woman for several years. One day, Akko Manoye gathered all the men and ordered them to build for her a house between the earth and the sky. Frustrated by the order, the men went to a wise man and asked for a solution. The wise man told them to ask her to put up the poles, which according to Guji culture was done by the owner of the house. When the men asked her to put up poles for the house between the earth and the sky, she could not respond. Then, the men went back to the wise man and told him of her failure to respond. The wise man, again, told them to dig a deep hole in the ground, cover it with cattle skin, and invite her to sit on it with respect. The men did as the wise man told them. When she sat on the skin, she went down the hole, during which she uttered a message to all women: "pretend that you are loyal in order to live with men." From then onwards, men took the power, established a Gada system and declared that women should not take part in it.

This instance shows how the Gada system and related narratives perpetuate gender stereotypes as part of the Guji-Oromo culture. The informant articulated gendered values and perceptions through performing and interpreting the folk narrative. The folk narrative describes a matriarchal system of leadership in which women had absolute power in leading the Oromo society. Women lost that power as a result of the acts of Akko Manoye. Guji

adults accept that this narrative portrays Akko Manoye as a historical figure who led the Oromo before establishment of the Gada system. The narrative validates the downfall of Akko Manoye and emergence of the Gada system in a transition from matriarchal to a patriarchal system of leadership. For the adult informants, this transition is attributed to the failure of the woman. She ordered the men to build for her a house between the earth and the sky which showed that she was irresponsible and cruel. Adults see the narrative as relevant because it advises women to be submissive and subordinate to the authority of men so that they can survive in life.

A subsequent focus group discussion, in which all participants were children, also raised the role of women in the Gada system. Participants contested stereotyped views of adults by stating that both men and women have their roles in the Gada system, although these roles are dynamic and take place in different locations. All children in the group indicated that they were familiar with the narrative about Akko Manoye but do not accept that it portrays women's incompetence in leadership. For instance, Uddessa (twelve-year-old boy) said: "What I can understand from the tale is that Akko Manoye was a strong leader and that women are more capable than men in leadership." In contrast to adults' chauvinistic interpretation, for children the narrative reflects women as wise leaders who are more competent than men in discharging their social responsibilities. The children view the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal system a result of the dishonesty of men towards women and explain its continuation as "backward tradition." So, while adults' understanding of this narrative upholds patriarchal gender relations as the acceptable norm of society, the children's interpretation subverts the dominant patriarchal ideology and challenges the established conceptualization of womanhood.

Similarly, adults and children have contrasting views on the participation of women in warfare. Adults believe that the values and norms of their society do not allow women to participate in warfare as they are not capable of making decisions and defending themselves from enemies. Women are believed incapable of handling responsibilities in critical situations. Barite (woman, age forty-five) provided the following folk narrative to illuminate this point:

Long time ago, a group of ten women went for war against Sidama people. They attacked the people and robbed their cattle and *wato* (perfume). While the women were travelling back to home with the cattle and *wato*, a group of armed fighters came from their behind and started attacking them. Then, the leader of the women ordered, "Leave the cattle and save the *wato*." The women left the cattle to the Sidama fighters, held the *wato* and escaped. After they reached their village, they wanted to check who was lost. Each of them counted nine members. They again counted and they were nine. They tried to remember each other and could not find any person lost. They were confused and called a man to count them. However, the man counted ten women. Then, they realized that when they counted others each of them forgot to include themselves. Finally, the village elders came together and decided that women should not go to war. They said, "These women did two mistakes. First, they left cattle to the enemy and saved *wato*. They could not differentiate the valuable from the valueless. Second, they could not count and know their members correctly. Therefore, they were not effective in leadership."²²

This folk narrative is often told among the Oromo as a discourse to validate and perpetuate excluding women from participation in warfare. Strengthening the content of this narrative, Jilo (man, age forty-three) stated: "According to Guji culture, women do not go for hunting and war but help their husbands with the necessary preparations. A wife anoints her husband with butter when he goes to war, blesses him, and hands a spear and shield over to him." As a result of these gendered values, responsibilities that involve public services and entail leadership practices exclude women.

However, according to Guji-Oromo adults, women have superior power in domestic issues. Domestic affairs are managed under matriarchal power as women are accepted as superior to men in running reproductive activities and household management. Elaborating this point, Erbore (man, sixty-two) voiced that, "according to our culture, women have domestic power and everything inside the home is under their control." Ayo (woman, age forty-seven), told the following folk narrative:

Once upon a time, there was a man who had two sons. When his sons grew up, he ordered each of them to build their own homes so that he can be in their homes and give them blessings. Both sons accepted the order and constructed their own house. The first son constructed a big and beautiful house and filled it with beautiful furniture. The second son constructed a small hut, married a wife and put her in it. Then, both sons invited their father to their homes. The father first visited the home of the first son. The father entered the home and called, "owners of this home." No one was there to reply. He turned his face to his son and said, "This is not home. You have not yet built a home." The father continued to visit the home of the second son. He entered the home and called, "owners of this home." Then, the woman in the home replied, "We are here. Welcome." The man turned his face to his son and said, "This is a home. You have built a good home. You deserve my blessing." The man sat down and blessed the second son.

In contrast to their position in public space, women have the power to manage domestic affairs and make decisions related to family lives at home. Using this narrative, adults articulated the irreplaceable roles women have in homes and that the concept of home and everything in it is associated with womanhood. Another informant in the adult group expressed the centrality of women in the home this way: "A woman is a pole. Without her, a home cannot stand. A woman is an earth and a man is a sky. The sky gives rain and the earth bears plants. Without the earth, even though there is rain, it is not possible to grow plants. Children are plants and grow from women. Without women, it is not possible to have children." Adults used these narratives as representations of the power of women in the home. Expressions such as "a pole that supports a home" and "the earth that bears plants" are employed as metaphors to explain the crucial roles of women in domestic and reproductive activities.

However, adults' perceptions of gender are contested by the young generation, notable from discussions among the children who asserted that the way adults interpreted the narrative promotes the message that restricts women to domestic and reproductive routines at home. Unlike adults, the children understood these folk narratives as discourses that contradict their understanding of gender as a social process in which women and men have equal positions and interchangeable roles in both public and domestic spaces. For children,

the women in the second folk narrative are clever fighters because they defeated their enemies and confiscated valuable properties. In contrast to adults' interpretation, children explained that the narrative represents clever women who evaded their enemies and saved not only their lives but also their more valuable asset, the *wato*. In their discussion of the last narratives, children emphasized that these convey the collaborative role of men and women in ensuring the existence of 'home.' The home is built by a man but gets its real meaning through the presence of a woman. Thus, children see both men and women as key subjects in the existence of the "home." According to children's perspective, both narratives present the essentiality of cooperation between men and women to establish 'home' and ensure productivity.

The children interpreted folk narratives based on the discourses of gender equality with which they are familiar through school (curricular and extra-curricular activities) and mass media. This is notable from Beka's (thirteen-year-old boy) statement: "In school, I learned that men and women are equal and there is a division between men's and women's roles. I also hear the same from the radio. Therefore, I believe that men and women are equal." However, adults' interpretation alludes to customs, values and beliefs that descended from prior generations and understood as "original culture." Such intergenerational difference is a recent development and signifies an emerging change in the conceptualization of gender. Adults' and children's interpretation of the following folk narrative further illustrate the continuities and changes in gender-related values:

Once upon a time, there were a girl and a boy who were siblings. One day, while their mother and father were at a marketplace far away from home, the siblings agreed to work at home. The girl was making coffee and cooking food. The boy observed that his sister was very busy and wanted to help her because at school he heard from his teacher that boys should help girls with domestic works. He asked his sister, "what can I help you?" She smiled and replied, "come and cook food." The boy asked, "show me how to do it." She showed him how and what he may do. He started cooking. She was happy and quickly finished making the coffee. Soon after the two finished their job, the father and the mother arrived. As the father and the mother were very hungry, the girl quickly gave them water to wash their hands and served the coffee and then the food. After drinking the coffee, the father prayed and tasted the food. The taste was unpleasant. He tasted again and felt the same. He told the mother to taste the food. She also tasted and felt that the food was bitter. She called the girl and shouted at her. She bit her on the face and the girl cried by saying. "It was not me, it was the boy who cooked the food." The father and the mother were shocked by what the girl was telling them. They called and asked the boy to confirm. He said, "She was busy making coffee and cooking food simultaneously. Therefore, I cooked to help her." The father and the mother shouted at the boy. The father said, "you did something shameful. You spoiled my name." He kicked the boy and chased him away from the home.

Among the Guji-Oromo girls and boys are socialized into their respective gender roles and crossing the line of difference violates the norms of the society. For adults, the narrative depicts the violation of norms related to gender as an act of disrespect to Oromo culture. One of the adult informants commented: "Boys should respect our culture. They should not enter the kitchen and cook food. That is not our norm. Doing women's job is shameful for men."

However, for children, the narrative reflects the “past and old norms” that draw lines between the social roles of women and men. Children’s understanding of gender contrasts the narrative with the issues equality presented in their school curriculums. Nagessa (fourteen-year-old boy) asserted that “even though there is a division of roles between women and men, it does not shame men to perform women’s roles.” The child narrated the following folk narrative to illustrate his point:

In the beginning of the world, God created a man and a woman and made them live together as a husband and a wife. The God saw that the man is physically strong and ordered him to work outside of the home, collect food materials and protect his wife. God saw that the woman is not physically strong and ordered her to work in the home, prepare food for her husband, manage home, and care for her husband. Starting from that time, men have been doing the roles of a husband and women have been growing in line with roles of wives.

Through this folk narrative, the child strengthened his perspective by asserting that the gendered division in society originated from biological differences between women and men but, through time, became a cultural phenomenon that distinguished femininity from masculinity. The children underlined that the gender-based divisions are originally not aimed at putting women in subordinate social positions but to establish gender fairness through assigning certain work and safe spaces to women. Eventually, this was misunderstood and became a cultural norm that portrayed the social activities of women as inferior. Informed by the emerging discourses of gender equality, children articulate womanhood as equivalent to manhood and express views of women as capable in leadership, public services, and home management. This is a signification of the ongoing changes in perception of gender and the position of women in Guji-Oromo society.

Socio-cultural Influences for Continuities and Changes in the Conceptualization of Womanhood

The difference between adults and children in the conceptualization of womanhood is rooted in the ongoing changes that have created contesting social worlds for members of the two generations. Adults live in the world much more connected to the past, embodying ancestral values and practices. Their everyday life is based on the beliefs, customs, and norms embedded in the indigenous culture of their society. Thus, they use folk narratives to express and continue their beliefs and values linked to the conceptualization of womanhood. Thus, obedience, respectfulness, shyness, being reserved and humbleness are the values to which girls are shaped to become proper women. Children’s social world, on the other hand, is influenced by school practices and norms as well as global narratives in media such as television, radio, movies, popular music, etc. Children interpret the folk narratives based on their information and knowledge from these contexts. Through their participation in school activities and exposure to media, children learn about and give value to gender equality, role exchanges between men and women, and believe in the competence of women in both domestic and public spheres.

The continuities and changes in the conceptualization of womanhood itself are viewed differently by both generational categories. For adults, the change signifies children’s ignorance of the indigenous values and practices of their society. Adults see that at the present time, their children are becoming alien to indigenous beliefs and norms, often

violating the long-lived taboos of their society. Adults attribute these emerging deviations to school, media, and Christianity which are rapidly expanding in the society. For children, the change symbolizes the ongoing social transformation from “backwardness in the past” to “civilization in the present.” In other words, the children believe that adults exercise the “backward” conceptualization of womanhood while children favor the “emerging and modern” understanding of gender relations to which they are linked through schools, media, and churches. This contesting debate between children and adults is part of ongoing social change among the Guji-Oromo.

Conclusion

This article observes continuities and changes in the narrative construction of gender roles and perceptions. It discusses how adults and children use folk narratives to illustrate their values related to womanhood and the position of women among the Guji-Oromo society. Doing so, the article contributes four points. First, social groups and individuals validate their perspectives related to gender through accounts from folk narratives. Both adults and children allude to folk narratives to validate their gender-related perceptions and beliefs. Adults use folk narratives to illuminate and perpetuate an image of womanhood long established in indigenous Guji culture. On the other hand, children interpret folk narratives to subvert and change the dominant patriarchal gender relations and put forward a lack of difference between the social roles of men and woman. Thus, adults and children each use the folk narratives to illustrate the gender-related values of their generation. This reality shows that schools and the different forms of media have the power to position the young generation as actors in transforming the conceptualization of gender and ensuring gender equality in patriarchal societies.

Second, cultural expressions indicate changes in gender conceptualizations across the two generations. Participants’ interpretation of the narratives reflected the ongoing continuities and changes within the Guji-Oromo through portraying children’s understanding of womanhood as different from that of adults. Thus, it is notable that individuals’ and groups’ socio-cultural orientations play crucial roles in the interpretation of gendered roles and women’s social positions.

Third, the article challenges normative views that cultural expressions invariably serve to sustain the status quo related to gender. Most often, they are considered mirrors of ancestral gendered norms and practices and serve to keep such norms and practices stable.²³ However, from the discussions in this article, it is notable that cultural expressions do not have fixed gender related meanings and functions. Rather, their meanings and function are shaped by the values and viewpoints of the individual. Accordingly, people of different generations with different gender-related values and beliefs can draw different meanings from the same gendered cultural expressions. As observed in focus groups, a cultural expression can serve the continuity of gender discrimination in one context and promote gender equality and fairness in another context.

Fourth, notable from the discussions in this article is children’s agency in introducing changes and new perspectives about gender in a society where patriarchy is a dominant norm. Although they live in the society where indigenous beliefs still characterize the cultural meanings of womanhood, children have oriented themselves toward new gender-related values to which they are introduced through their connections to school, media and churches. In general, the article hints that progresses in conceptualization of gender are

elements of the wider social changes introduced into a society through schools, media, and modern religious institutions. It is such dynamic social change that can result in transformation of perceptions and practices related to gender among various societies in African contexts. Therefore, the use of gendered cultural expressions in school pedagogic practices can give children the space to reconstruct the traditional images of womanhood through which they can play significant roles in transformation of gender perceptions among their society. In such a way, cultural knowledge and practices can be put in use for restructuring and reshaping gender relations.

Notes

- 1 Githinnji 2008; Kiyimba 2005.
- 2 Low 2006; Poluha 2007; Torimiro & Kolawole 2006.
- 3 Currie 2007; Jackson 2005; Rasmussen 2003.
- 4 Hussein 2005; Jirata 2017
- 5 Qashu 2009.
- 6 Gameda 2008.
- 7 Alemu 2007; Hussen 2004.
- 8 Alemu 2007.
- 9 Hussein 2004, p. 122.
- 10 Dedo 2010.
- 11 Debsu 2009.
- 12 Dupire, 1963, Bülow, 1993, Caplan, 1989.
- 13 Van de Loo 1991; Belay 2011.
- 14 Kidane's, 2002; Hussein's 2005.
- 15 Gueye 2010; Soetan 2001.
- 16 FDRE 2008.
- 17 Van de Loo 1991; Belay 2011.
- 18 Kidane 2002; Hussein 2005.
- 19 Lindfors 1977.
- 20 Jirata 2017.
- 21 Debsu, 2009; Jirata, 2013.
- 22 Sidama are ethnic groups sharing border with the Guji-Oromo.
- 23 Alemu, 2007; Hussein 2004.

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