



## INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS OF WOMEN: THE CASE OF *WIJJOO* AMONG ARSII OROMOO, ETHIOPIA

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### *Abstract*

*This article aimed at investigating Wjjoo, an indigenous socio economic and political institution of Oromo women. Qualitative research methodology was employed in both data collection and analysis. Accordingly, data was collected through interview and focus group discussions from actual social context in 2014. This study has shown that Wjjoo is an exclusive assembly of Oromo women on which social, economic and political problems are discussed. Any injustice action against women is presented and further measures against such bigotry planned on its gathering. Butter which is considered as women property of women in Oromo culture also collected on Wjjoo meeting. The collected butter used by women's for different purposes like household consumption, for marriage ceremony and other cultural rituals. Passing through different steps, Wjjoo gathering is concluded by smearing butter as a symbol of wetness, fertility and prosperity of human beings and cattle. Overall, the study concluded that Wjjoo plays a prominent role in ensuring the empowerment and autonomy of Oromo women as well as in nurturing their political, social and economic status. Therefore, recognizing and using this indigenous institution is vital in future policy formulation in the country for the fact that gender issues are central to the realization of sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** *Wjjoo, Women, Indigenous institution.*

### INTRODUCTION

In indigenous communities, men and women have different gender roles and responsibilities, and for that reason they also often have different needs, desires and interests. Traditionally, indigenous women were generally respected by indigenous men and had equal access to and control over collective land and natural resources (Ayittey, 2006; Beall & Ngonyama, 2009; Watson, 2003). However, with the gradual loss of collective ownership of lands and other natural resources and the introduction by dominant outsiders of institutions of private property, indigenous women progressively lost their traditional rights to lands and natural resources

(Bergesen & Boswell, 2000; J. A. Green & Green, 2007; Hall & Patrinos, 2004; Norman, 2000; Smith, 2013).

Similarly, according to Sirika (2008), discrimination of women became harsher after the decline of the egalitarian social institutions of pre-colonial African societies. The problems have been largely credited to the far-reaching colonial conquests, religious expansions, appearance of statehood and economic crisis. With the same move, colonialism and political incorporations into nation-states in Africa have strengthened gender gap, and it destroyed women's traditional organization, replacing it with a hierarchical system that undermined the traditional bases of women's authority

generally in Africa (Debsu, 2009; K. Kumsa, 1997).

In pre-colonial, the Oromo women had their own institutions that worked towards securing their socio-political privileges they deserved. Women were also participating in political life through songs by praising the character of political and military leaders. The Gadaa egalitarian system accorded women status and a venue to perform their roles. These roles were discharged through an organization that ran parallel to Gadaa known as Siiqqee. Gadaa effectively enforced a gender-based division of labour in Oromo society although it allowed two equally important separate and interdependent economic domains (Edossa, Awulachew, Namara, Babel, & Gupta, 2007; Guyo, 2017; Jalata, 2012; Levine, 2007; Melbaa, 1999).

In Oromo Gadaa system, there are also indigenous women institutions like *Wijjoo*, *Ateetee*, and *wayyuu* by which women safeguard and secure their interest both in the family and in the community. Thus, indigenous women socio economic institution of Arsii Oromo has been embedded and manifested in *Wijjoo* which in turn is entrenched in Gadaa System. Therefore, this work deals with *Wijjoo* institution which is very vital in authorising women in relation to the social, economic and political orders of Arsii Oromo.

There are studies on women based institutions of the Oromo. Among others, the *Socio-economic Status of Handicraft Women among Macca Oromo* (Sirika, 2008); *cultural representation of women in the Oromo society* (Hussein, 2004); *Siiqqee institution of Oromo women* (Gebregeorgis, 2015); *The Siinqee-Women's Institution for Conflict Resolution in Arsii* (Gutema & Chala, 2016); *Wayyuu-Women's Respect and Rights among the Arsi-Oromo* (Østebø, 2009) and *Ateetee, a sung Arsi Oromo women's indigenous dispute resolution in*

*Ethiopia* (Qashu, 2016) are worth mentioning.

Most of the above mentioned works provide general overview of indigenous institutions of Oromo women in some parts of Oromia. Details of practices and functions of Siiqqee institution have been discussed in the work of Kuwee, and the role of women and their institutions (*Siinqee* and *Ateetee*) in conflict resolution was portrayed by Tolosa and Qashu. None of these researches discusses *Wijjoo* in general and its socio economic and cultural values, processes and procedures involved in this customary institution in particular. Most of the discussions regarding *Ateetee*, *Siiqqee* and *wayyuu* mentioned above are overwhelmed by ritual roles of the institutions by overlooking their economic, political and social dimension. No attention was given to *Wijjoo* and its implication for women's socio economic position, right and their respect in the society. Hence, this paper tried to bridge these gaps by discussing and analysing *Wijjoo* from socio economic and political perspectives.

## **GENDER: CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS**

Gender is determined socially; it is the societal meaning assigned to male and female. Each society emphasizes particular roles that each sex should play, although, there is wide latitude in acceptable behaviours for each gender. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities, beliefs and expectations assigned to men and women. While gender differences arise from the socially constructed relationship between women and men, sex differences, on the other hand, are biological and instinctive (Carroll, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2000). Similarly, Qashu states that, gender refers to a set of characteristics and behavioral patterns that a society (or a culture) assigns to each sex. Gender also lead to differential access to resources, thus forming the foundation of the power

dynamics between men and women. Thus, gender is among the attributes that affect access to resources, power, and prestige and is an aspect of the inequality between men and women (Qashu, 2016). With the same token, according to (Jackson, 1993), one feature of a gender ideology is that “men and women are relational, socially constructed, culturally specific and negotiated categories.” A large body of literature reveals that this situation is a real fact of life, cutting across all cultural and socio-economic structures of every nation.

In the continuing study of women's status in a society, conceptualizing gender as an analytical category has increased and gradually replaced the focus on women. This is because gender appeared to provide the key for talking about differences between men and women (Peterson & Runyan, 2009). An equally important debate regarding gender constructed [status] is the public/domestic dichotomy. For Shevelov (2015) women confined to the domestic sphere do not have access to the sort of authority, prestige and cultural values which are prerogatives of men. Hence, they conclude that women's status and prestige are shaped by their association with the domestic world.

Feminist folklorists strongly emphasize the importance of examining how a genre of oral literature operates within a society to ensure conformity and continuity to the accepted cultural values and norms underlying a gender system. Ideology is chiefly perpetuated in symbols and rituals, patterns of verbal expressions and gender-based role assignments (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011; Kray, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2002).

According to Fredericks (2008), it is not non-indigenous people who can tell the story of Aboriginal women from the lived experience, from the personal or from within the knowledge base of aboriginality,

but aboriginal women themselves. Similarly, according to Green (1997; Lindahl, McNamara, & Lindow (2002), gender is identification of a person as male or female. Gender denotes that much larger body of behaviors, roles, and expectations, although regarded by members of a society as appropriate only for members of one biological sex or the other, vary considerably across cultures and historical periods and hence must be culturally conditioned rather than biologically determined.

## **INSTITUTIONS OF OROMO WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW**

According to Ruda (1993), division of labor based on sexual differentiation, divided the family into male and female working members. In Oromo, however, this original distinction is not made strictly according to biological criteria. Gender is socially and culturally constructed, and it determines the roles and status of male and female in the society. Traditional Oromo law, thus, placed women, children under eight years of age and old men above eighty into the female category, and this group of people was addressed by the female pronoun in the Oromo language. Similarly, all men between the age of eight and eighty belonged to the male category and were addressed using the male pronoun. The logical explanation for this distinction is one obviously based on physical strength. Women are referred to as the weaker ‘tree’ (*muka laaftuu*), in opposition to men. Therefore all those who belonged to the female category, women, children and retired elders, required the protection of the physically stronger male group. In every day practical life, this classification into male and female at the conceptual level, could be modified to suit changing circumstances or reflect the dominant penchant of men and women alike. Although, the division into male and female may sound a sort of polarity with

positive and negative attributes, the attributes are never fixed.

In Oromo, the most powerful institution through which women's rights are duly respected is known as *Siiqqee*. *Siiqqee* is an institution in which women organize themselves in group to stand up for their rights. Every married woman carry a thin stick known as *Siiqqee* which is given to every girl by her mother up on her wedding day. Women control every movement in the society through this *Siiqqee*. Therefore, the role of women in Gadaa system is based on *Siiqqee* institution where women formed a parallel organization of their own excluding men, and this *Siiqqee* stands for women's ritual, political and social power in the society (K. Kumsa, 1997; Mamo, 2017). Kumsa (1997) also portrayed that, *Siiqqee* institution serves as a symbol that organizes Oromo women to claim their rights such as political, social, fertility, and others. *Siiqqee* institution is a parallel institution to the Gadaa system functioning hands, in hand with Gadaa system as one of its built-in mechanisms of checks and balances. Thus, the two institutions (Gadaa and *Siiqqee*) helped to maintain *Safuu* (moral and ethical order) in Oromo society by enabling Oromo women to have control over resources and private spaces, preserve social status and respect for women, and promotes sisterhood and solidarity by deterring men from infringing upon their individual and collective rights.

People respect and revere a woman because *Waaqa* made her to be respected and revered. So, interference in a woman's sacred authority is regarded as violating *Seera Waaqaa*. These rights are also represented by *siinqee* the violation of which is a cause for trouble. Women in general are symbolically and politically liminal and correspondingly enjoy a special sacred power as a class (Daniel, 2002; Kelly, 1992). According to Østebø (2009), women among the Arsi have had a crucial religious role. The religious

superiority of women compared to men where explained by their closeness to God. Women are closer to God because she is more humble and weak; soft, she is innocent and she does not fight. "Their spirits are with God" (*Hafuura Waaqa wajjiin qaban*). These are qualities which contribute to the fact that God listens more to women than to men and was among others articulated in the following belief: "What a woman blesses will be blessed, what she curses will be cursed."

*Ateetee* is another important institution of Oromo women. *Ateetee* is deity or divinity which women worship with the belief that it makes them fecund, happy, wealthy and prosperous. *Ateetee* gatherings and its success are celebrated by singing, praying, blessing and receiving gifts; it is gathering of women for praying to *Waaqa* and *Ayole*, female spirit, for general well-being of their families (Berhane-Selassie & M Müller, 2015; M. K. Kumsa, 2008).

Similarly, according to (Kelbessa, 2001) *Ateetee* is the mother of cattle and the spirit of *baksaa* (melted or processed butter). The Oromo also identified *Ateetee* as *Aayyoo Baar* (the Mother of Ocean) and as *Haadha Dambal* (the mother of overflow, full). The purpose of the *Ateetee* ritual is to help cattle breed well, and to help oxen plough well. There are *Ateetee* cattle in Oromo culture. When a heifer drops a calf, her butter will be stored and used during the *Ateetee* ceremony. Yogurt is also required to be kept for two weeks before the *Ateetee* ritual. Jeylan (2004) also gives a comprehensive explanation of *Ateetee* rituals, practiced only by women. According to him, whenever natural disasters occur, women gather and perform the ritual. Oromo women used to practice *Ateetee* as a way of strengthening their solidarity and as a tool to counter atrocities staged against them by men. The *Ateetee* practiced by women is one part of a belief system that women are intermediary figures between *Waaqa* (God) that

represents nature and the physical world or humans. On the other hand, Ahmed (2002); Edossa et al., (2007) depicted that, the *Ateetee* ritual shows that in the traditional Oromo society, men are functionally dependent on *women* in many ways.

Østebø (2015) on the other hand, investigated the concept of *wayyuu* in relation to women's rights in the context of Arsii Oromo. According to the author, *wayyuu* is a complex concept that generally expresses the notion of the sacred. It is particularly associated with women and with material objects that are central to dairy production and reproduction. This includes material items such as milk pots and other household utensils, but also the fertility belt (*hanfalaa laafaa*) worn by married women, the *qanafaa*, an adornment used by post-partum women, and the *siinqee*, a stick which a woman receives on her wedding day as a symbol of her respect and rights. These items are symbolic representations of institutions that are closely linked to women's fertility and central to their religious role institutions that have secured women power and certain rights and that have protected women from violence.

## METHODS

In studying folklore through the lens of gender or studying gender by means of its expression in folklore, a constant tension exists between constructivist and essentialist tendencies. The role of ethnographic and empirical work in the social sciences is to document actual cultural, racial, and class variation in gender roles, practices, and expectations (Green, 1997). Therefore, in this research, different kinds of ethnographic data collection techniques were employed. These include interviews and focus group discussions. The interview was conducted by taking into consideration different criteria such as age, sex, social status, occupation and residence. Accordingly, 18

selected key informants were interviewed. Researchers consulted proper individuals including the *Gadaa* and *wijjoo* leaders, the district Culture and Tourism office experts. Focus group discussions were also carried out with informants. Accordingly, researchers gathered and discussed with eight married women and seven men elders at *Wiiddanaa* and *Garbii* villages respectively. These informants are known for their knowledge, past experience, degree of participation in the topic under discussion. Finally, the ethnographic method (interpretative and descriptive approach) was utilized in analyzing data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The meaning of *Wijjoo*

*Wijjoo* literally means 'to come together'. It also refers to the union of women in the clan (sub-clan). Butter is accumulated on this gathering so as to offer their members when they are in need of large amount for ritual and ceremonial events. Institutionally, however, it goes beyond gathering. Accordingly, it is an assembly on which women come together periodically and discuss about their life freely. Women who can support each other should be from similar *balbala* (sub-clan). Even when they are far from each other, they can be under one *Wijjoo* institution. The Women who lead *Wijjoo* institution is called *haadha gabata*. Most of the time, *Wijjoo* institution is active in *Arfaasaa* (season of small rains, from March to May), *Gannaa* (the season of the big rains) and *Birraa* (autumn). When women start *Wijjoo*, there is no preparation of feasts up to one round of *Wijjoo* turn. The first round is known as *agabuu* (state of being hungry). After one round of *Wijjoo*, they start preparing feasts like porridge for the participant women and anoint *Wijjoo* butter.

According to our informants, *Wijjoo* is an exclusive institution by which women get freedom to discuss all aspects of their life without fear. All social, economic and

political issues are thoroughly discussed there. All members are asked to present any challenge they have individually faced. Based on the seriousness of the problem raised, they decide whether joint interference is needed or not to solve the problem. They discuss any problem related with their family, husband, children and other internal affairs. It is unethical for men to participate on *Wijjoo*.

Whether they have cattle or not every married woman can be member of *Wijjoo* institution and is eligible to participate in *Wijjoo* ceremony regardless of their wealth. Woman who have many *ameessa* (cattle in milk) give loan to someone who has not cattle as *dabaree*, temporary loan of cattle in milk that is only used for the milk and milk products. The *dabaree* is given freely by the person's own will; there is no coercion by the clan or lineage as there is for *hirpha*, an institution of restocking a household who lost his cattle due to natural disaster, raid or war. When *dabaree* cattle stop giving milk, it is returned to the owner. If the *ameessa* given for *dabaree* dies, the beneficiary is not forced to return anything. Therefore, every married women should be the member of *Wijjoo* institution through *dabaree* institution. Women encourage one another to be a member of the institution to buy cow for milk by *Wijjoo* butter that simultaneously sustains their membership and solidarity. As a result, lack of butter cannot be a reason to deny the union for the fact that women force each other to come to *Wijjoo*. If possible, they try to give *ameessa* (cow in milk) for one another by *dabaree* mechanism. If *dabaree* is not possible, other participants come to *Wijjoo* observance by having excess butter that is collected to be offered to such women at the end of the ceremony so that she can contribute her own.

The porridge prepared for *Wijjoo* ceremony can only be eaten by women. However, children can eat the food at the

end of the ceremony. Every *Wijjoo* participant should be anointed butter as a symbol of wetness. Going to *Wijjoo* ceremony and coming back home in dry hair is believed to be not good for women and their cattle.

### Procedures in *Wijjoo* Gathering

*Wijjoo* gathering has also different steps to pass through which are performed by gathering women. On the day of *Wijjoo* gathering, *haadha gabataa* should prepare all necessary materials in her house. Firstly, *haadha gabataa* stretch *itillee* (cowhide used as a sleeping mat) on the ground between *gulanta* and *utubaa*. Then, she put down *coqorsa* (a strong grass that grows in strong bundles) especially where the *gabataa* of *Wijjoo* is put down. This grass, which symbolizes strong relationship between women, is one of the valued and favoured grasses in Oromo culture. After that, she puts *gabataa* on that *coqorsa* which is laid on *itillee*. Then she adds some butter onto *gabataa*. This little amount of butter is known as *jalabuufata* or *afata* which means the base to start something. After that, members of *Wijjoo* start to come and sit down in semi-circle by surrounding the *gabataa*. *Haadha gabataa* sits nearby *gabataa* by stretching her legs on *itillee*. After all members presented, they discuss different issues with regard to their life presided by *haadha gabataa*.

After thorough discussions, *haadha gabataa* starts pouring butter from members' material to *buqqee* (dried and decorated gourd used to collect butter) of *Wijjoo* to measure. After filling and measuring it, she says, '*kun kan ebaleetii laalaa*' to mean look at this, it belongs to so and so. If butter is full of the measurement material, she pours out butter to *gabataa*. All butter is measured and poured onto *gabataa* in the same manner. If the butter excesses from the measurement material, they throw onto *gabataa*. Throwing the excess butter to

*gabataa* is known as *darbata* (throwing). They say ‘*darbata malee namaa hin darbantu*’ meaning there is no multiplicity without throwing the excess butter onto the *gabataa*. *Darbata* is also considered as blessing of cattle. The women who always come with excess butter for *darbataa* is respected and considered as blessed women in the society and do not lack milk for family and butter for *Wijjoo*. After all the butter is poured onto *gabataa*, all members ululate by touching the edge of *gabataa* by saying, *guuttami, guuttami* which means be filled. Then *haadha gabataa* scrape up the collected butter in *gabataa* by saying:

### **Afaan Oromoo English**

*Mirgaanis ol nubaasi*, Mount us by right direction *Bitaanis ol nu baasi* Mount us by left direction *Bahaanis ol nubaasi*, Mount us by east direction *Lixaanis ol nubaas*, Mount us by west direction *Gama hundaanuu ol nubaasi* Mount us by all directions During this prayer, she scrapes up the butter and makes a little round of butter at the top of the collected butter. This round of butter which is called *tulla* (the top of hill) symbolizes the authority of women to make *Wijjoo* gathering. Then, *haadha gabataa* picks up *tulla* (the little rounded butter on the top of *gabataa*) and shares it with another elder woman. Then, one of them anoints *gulantaa* while the other anoints *utubaa* by blessing the community. Anointing *utubaa* is symbolized as anointing of husband who is very important to support a family. On the other hand, the woman is represented by *gulantaa*. The preferred trees for *gulantaa* are the one which are straight and not thorny like *mi’eessaa* (*Ilex mitis* (L.) Radlk). *Mi’eessaa* is a symbol of peace and union as its name came from Oromo word *mi’aawaa*, which means sweet. Therefore, anointing *gulantaa* is a symbol of anointing mother of the household.

After this, the collected *Wijjoo* butter is poured to *ottee* (pot) of the *Wijjoo* taker

by *haadha gabataa*. On the course of pouring *Wijjoo* butter from *gabataa* to *ottee* (pot), it is *safuu* (unethical) to finish butter from *gabataa*. Therefore, *haadha gabataa* should leave a little butter at the bottom of *gabataa*. Then the left butter is smeared on the hair of *haadha gabataa* and children around that *Wijjoo* gathering. If there are male and female children, they anoint male at first because males are considered as *abbaa loonii* (the owner of cattle). Elder women also can be smeared the butter by *haadha gabataa*. The day of *Wijjoo* is considered as the day of fertility and prosperity. All participants of *Wijjoo* ceremony anoint their hair by butter. Anointment of *Wijjoo* butter symbolizes fertility of cattle and women because *Arsii* Oromo women believe that if there are cattle, there is *Wijjoo*, and if there is *Wijjoo*, there are cattle. They also believe that when *Wijjoo* is not celebrated, cows do not give enough milk; there is no butter and multiplicity of cattle and human being. Lastly, after the butter is poured from *gabataa* to *ottee* (pot), the owner of the present *Wijjoo* requests one of her neighbour woman to take the pot of butter to her house. When they reach her house, the owner of butter anoint some butter on the hair of woman who took butter for her.

### **Socio Economic and Political Values of *Wijjoo***

*Wijjoo* have many roles for *Arsii* Oromo women. Firstly, it has many economic values. Women use *Wijjoo* butter for different economic purposes. They use on marriage ceremony of their daughter; mothers give butter to their daughters as a gift on her wedding. On their daughter’s wedding, mothers give more than two big pots of butter for bride as important gift. People most of the time ask, *dhadhaa ottee meeqaan heerumsiifte?* Which means how many pots of butter are given to bride by her mother on her marriage day? Giving many pots of butter is considered as famousness for the bride mother. Therefore, women compete each

other to give more butter for their daughter on their wedding day. They also try to save huge amount of *shameessa* (a butter which is getting rancid) by *Wijjoo* institution.

On the other hand, when mothers give butter as a gift for bride, fathers give cattle which are known as *geegayoo* (the cattle that are paid as part of bride wealth) for his daughter. The bride uses these cattle in future to be the member of *Wijjoo* institution. As women of clan and sub-clan collect butter for bride mother, men of the clan and sub-clan collect cattle for bride's father. Even mothers and fathers compete each other to give large amount of wealth to their daughters. Their daughters also see who is more important from their mothers and fathers on their marriage day. If they see a problem on their wedding, especially concerning cattle gift, they can versify and weep by oral poetry i.e. crying songs. If there are cattle which they expect from their fathers and fathers refuse knowingly or unknowingly, the bride versify and cry by calling the colour or the name of that cattle. Then their fathers give cattle after their melody verse and cry.

In addition, the bride mother prepare Oromo cultural food known as *surree*, which is prepared from mixture of butter, honey and flour of barley. To prepare this food, bride mother should collect and save butter by *Wijjoo* two to three years before wedding. Giving *surree* to bride on wedding day make bride mother renowned and respectful in their society because *surree* is durable food and eaten by respected people. *Surree* is also considered as cattle; if mothers give *surree* for their daughter on wedding day, it is regarded as if she offered a cow. If one of them is unable to do so, it is said *Haadhaaf hin hafne* (her mother did what expected from her for daughter) or *Abbaaf hin hafne* (father contributed on his own part). Therefore, mother and father try to avail every important thing for their daughter on their wedding.

Oromo cultural diets like porridge, *caccabsaa miccirraa*, and *marmaaree* are among the important foods for wedding ceremony which are prepared by *Wijjoo* butter. If foods for wedding ceremony is prepared by *addaannuu* (fresh butter), mothers of bride might be insulted while foods prepared by *shameessaa* (rancid butter) give reverence for them. *Wijjoo* butter also has a great significance when respected man or woman dies. On such occasion, foods like *micciiraa* and porridge are prepared. Especially, it is used when *ajjeesaa* (hero men) and when a women who took cattle from their concubine are dead. For such women, if they do not have rancid butter for this ceremony they may be criticized. They are labelled as *booseettii* (untidy or slattern housewife). Women who collected and saved *Wijjoo* butter are known as *kaameettii* (tidy housewife).

On the other hand, *Wijjoo* is the institution under which women discuss their social problems. *Wijjoo* have a vital role in resolving conflict between women for the fact that such disagreement is resolved on *Wijjoo*. Accordingly, on the day of *Wijjoo* when they get together to collect butter of *Wijjoo*, they investigate if there is conflict among members and settle amicably. If they found a conflict, they resolve on *Wijjoo* stage without intervention of men. In general, women discuss about their family, right, and life in relation to men. Even, they discuss about their *sanyoo* (concubine) without any fear of men. Therefore, *Wijjoo* is exclusive institution for Oromo women which can even assure their control over sexual matters. Butter of *Wijjoo* can also be used for household consumption especially for husbands when they drink a traditional medicine called *heexoo* (*Hagenia abyssinica*). Women prepare foods like porridge, *marmaaree* and *caccabsaa* on such day for their husbands. In addition to this, they prepare foods for *sanyoo* (concubine). According to our informants, most of the time, butter of *Wijjoo* is

consumed with their concubines. Their concubines love women more when they prepare food by *Wijjoo* butter for them. A man making love in secret with a woman without the knowledge of her husband and caught red-handed is punished. He is also forced to go back to his home with that woman or the woman goes to his house to take the cattle from him. Wrongdoer goes to the elders to confess what he has done. The elders instruct him to prepare honey mead, horse and cattle for reconciliation. The bull is also slaughtered and its meat is hanged on her horse saddle. Then the caught woman with man come back to her home by riding horse and driving the cattle. Such women are considered as a man who killed trophy animals like lion, tiger and buffalo and are eligible to perform *geerarsa* (heroic song) and tell their heroic deeds to other women especially to those who have not *sanyoo*. Women, who have not *sanyoo*, escape when courageous woman come back to her home; those who have *sanyoo* and did the same thing run to her by telling their heroic deed to eat meat which is hanged on her horse saddle. From that day on, the woman is considered as *ajjeesaa* (hero man). This symbolizes the powerfulness of that woman who deserves respect among the society. Her cattle are called *loon dhiiraa* (cattle of brave man). Women do not walk in front of them and they are respected women throughout their life. They use these cattle and its product like milk and butter for *Wijjoo*.

After this reconciliation, both lovers continue their friendship, and it is approved as *mana walii kennuu* (literally exchanging the house). People those who exchange their house enter the house of their lover by putting their stick or spear as a sign on the entrance of their lover. The owners of house go back to the house of exchanged women when witnessing the stick or spear. Overall, *Wijjoo* plays a prominent role in ensuring the autonomy of women and the nurturing

of their political, social and economic status.

According to Fatuma (2017), roles played by men and women complement one another, and their importance was not based on power differences between the female domestic sphere and the male public sphere but rather on the balance between male and female expectations in Oromo society. This balance must be maintained since the absence of which is equated with disharmony and in response, women must stage what is called a *Siiqqee* rebellion to restore back social harmony within the society. This study also confirms Fatuma's assertion. Any injustice from men are reported, examined for seriousness and or persistence, and decided for additional legal action against it on *wijjoo* assembly. They discuss the issue secretly at *Wijjoo* and prepare themselves for *itti deemsisuu* (*siinqee* rebellion) without the awareness of men. It is the method to rebel against the men who mistreats their family. They also decide the day of *itti deemsisuu* (gathering of *siinqee* rebellion against misbehave men) secretly.

Among the Oromo, butter is considered to be *wayyuu* (sacred/respected); it is also what makes everything *wayyuu* (sacred). It is used as a substance of anointment in various blessing ceremonies. Butter is also a decisive part of the customary law system as it is used, together with honey, to settle disputes. Production and management of butter is a completely exclusive female task, it is shameful for men to carry out. Women's control over butter and other milk products, along with the taboos that regulate men's involvement in the domestic domain, are mechanisms that have secured women economic autonomy and indirect political influence. Women store the butter in their houses, together with other valuable items, in a special place called the *minjalee* (Dahl 1990; Østebø, 2015). The authors also portrayed that, butter is a central and highly valued

ingredient in the Arsii Oromo diet, of cosmetic value and a source of income for many women, butter is a product which is strongly symbolically loaded. This research also confirms these assertions. Our data from field shows that, men neither allowed eating and drinking *Wijjoo* feasts nor appropriating to ask the amount of the butter collected through *Wijjoo*. Men cannot ask issues pertinent to *Wijjoo* including the butter. If men ask women about milk and milk products like *Wijjoo*, he is said to be *qorqortuu*, the men who interfere in internal affairs of women. Therefore, men do not impede what their wives do for such act label them as meddler man. Such person could also be insulted and disrespected in the community.

According to Qashu (2009), butter plays a fundamental role in Arsii on rite of passage ceremonies and different religious rituals. According to the author, a large quantity of butter is poured onto the heads of the groom, his father and his witness on wedding ceremony. The butter with coffee and barley grains are symbol of fertility, peace and prosperity. In this case, it serves as a benediction between the groom and the bride and the two clans. Butter is produced from milk, and thus symbolizes the fertility of the cow and more generally, that of women in Oromo culture.

Now days, *Wijjoo* institution is losing its originality because of environmental, political, social, cultural and economic factors. Its function is limited only to marriage ceremony because of butter shortage due to cattle decrement; livelihood of the study area is changed from pastoralism to agro pastoralism. Its name is also changed from *Wijjoo* to *guuraa* (collecting something). It is losing its cultural values; its economic value is only retained in the society and survived to this day. The institution which used to be women empowering and supporting institution is becoming loan. The government is replacing the indigenous

institutions with modern organisations like Women Credit Associations. Women started calling *Wijjoo* butter turn as *baasaa* and *baachisaa*. *Baasaa* means returning butter which is loaned by previous *Wijjoo* turn and *Bachisaa* means to give butter as loan to other women. Previously, women used to collect *Wijjoo* butter by the material known as *buqqee*, dried and decorated gourd used to collect butter. Now days, butter that is collected for a particular woman is not a gift; but is a form of credit. Each member keeps a memory of the amount of butter one might have given when any member of the association was in need, and expects return of the same amount of butter from that member when in need of it. Conversely, each women keeps memory of the amount of butter she owes any member of the association and feels forced to return it when her creditor announces that she is in need of butter. However, members expect and are eligible to take the butter saved if and only if they prepare an event requiring a lot of butter. Unless otherwise, woman is not entitled to take her part for the mere fact that she has contributed.

The butter of *Wijjoo* is also rarely consumed rather sold in market and changed to money to be used for other purpose following money economy. Previously, selling milk and milk product is *safuu* (unethical) in Oromo culture; Oromo believe that selling milk and milk product is not good for fertility and prosperity of cattle. Women are still using *Wijjoo* even though it has changed its form. They are using *Wijjoo* in different ways by modifying it. Changes and continuities observed in *Wijjoo* institution is supported by the following assertions. Globalization and economic liberalization have often destroyed indigenous subsistence, economies and displaced indigenous people from their land. Indigenous women have lost their livelihoods due to the impact of globalization on natural resources and as

their products have been replaced by manufactured goods. The gap between indigenous women and dominant group women is even wider. According to Davison, studies in Africa display that the advent of colonial administration has exacerbated women's subordination to men in a family by reshaping Africa's gender relation. Colonial governments reshaped the gender relations of Africans as a result of the introduction of cash crops as solely controlled by men. Women who previously had equally participated in production with men (even surpassing men in most cases), and who almost had equal decision-making power in production, have been relegated to the production of subsistence foods. The benefit of cash crops as exchange value and the producing technology remained to be men's monopoly (Daniel, 2002).

In line with this, according to Ayehu et al. (2016), among Arsii Oromo inhumane acts on women might be related to weakening of Gadaa system and emergence of autocratic systems. For instance, the Oromo saying "*Halaaliffoo nama nyaata; Amaariffoo nama dhaana* (he eats human like hyena and beats like the Amhara) is used to explain the cruel acts of some husbands against their wives. This indicates that declining of Gadaa governance and rising of monarchies have paved way for subordination and inhumane treatment of women. To put simply, the deterioration of Gadaa system has dynamically swayed the status of Oromo women. Dejene (2009) also confirms the above claims in the Guji Oromo case. According to him, colonialism and political incorporations into nation-states in Africa have strengthened gender gap among African societies. The Guji case shows how women lost much of their customary rights with the increasing loss of their cultural autonomy and property rights. Contrary to conventional expectations, settled farming, which has been encouraged by Ethiopian governments, has increased women's work burden and eliminated their customary

rights. In general, this research generated related findings with most of the studies conducted on indigenous women in general and that of Oromo women in particular regarding to their socio economic and political status.

## CONCLUSION

In Oromo Gadaa system, if the peace between men and women is broken, a *Siinqee* rebellion is initiated at *Wijjoo* to restore the law of God and the moral and ethical order of the society. *Wijjoo* institution enabled Oromo women to have control over resources and private spaces, social status and respect. It also sediment their sisterhood and solidarity by deterring men from infringing upon their individual and collective right. *Wijjoo* facilitate empowerment for individual woman, families, and entire communities. This gathering is a means and the method for establishing social networks, connecting with the social environment, and anchoring oneself, helping others and being helped by others in return. It also develops a sense of spiritual connectedness which in turn provides opportunities to practice some of the most sacred values such as sharing, caring, and honesty. Therefore, women need and deserve *Wijjoo* to call attention to various forms of oppression they experiences because of their *gender*. Policy makers should consider such indigenous institution in policy planning and formulation in the country regarding gender equality and women empowerment.

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