

## 2. Cultural Values of Customary Handicraft: *Cloth weaving in the Case of Macca Oromo Ethnic group in Western Ethiopia*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper provides the role of weaving activity in socio-cultural life of Oromo society in general and Macca Oromo in particular. Data were collected through. Qualitative data collection tools like interview, focus group discussion and observation. Interviews were conducted to establish the cultural, social, tourism, ecological and aesthetic value. Apart from interviews, scheduled observations were administered so as to collect in-depth information and data. Lastly focused group discussion was also carried out with selective key informant. The paper addresses contribution of weaving activity in Oromo cultural life. The local inhabitant prefer products of indigenous weavers, they like and respect it. It viewed as holy and used in ritual celebration. Similarly the skill reveals creative ability, identity, culture and history of weavers and users. Furthermore it plays great role in perseveration of cultural heritage, employment creation, tourist attraction and environmental protection.*

### **Keywords**

*Weaving; culture; value; Oromo*

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### 1. Introduction

The craft designs in traditional society are consist of three dimensional elements such as the object form and the two dimensional features such as patterns, lines and colors (kashim 2013). The visual designs on material artefacts have consistently infused culture-oriented aesthetics, thus adding to their local identity and commercial value (Lam et al. 2006).

Indigenous artefacts which are accomplished with technical expertise and covering wide areas of applied art and design, such as jewelry, interior design, ceramics, household wares, architecture, textile designs, leisure goods and woodwork. The Nigerian concept of industrial design embraces the creation of functional designs with intrinsic aesthetic satisfaction.

Artefacts, as made-made objects, are a material medium for the communication of cultural values. The research questions were adopted to test the research aim. Qualitative approach was used as tool of investigation in order to establish the relationship between weaving and its values. Interviews were conducted to establish the cultural, social, tourism, ecological and aesthetic value. They take the form of structured, semi-structured and unstructured questionnaires designed for a census of creative activities using purposive sampling techniques. Apart from interviews, scheduled observation were administered so as to collect in-depth information and data. Lastly focused group discussion was also cried out with selective key informant.

It includes objects, processes, services and their systems. Since visual and material objects are part and parcel of such communication which gives rise to social forms, visual and material culture has emerged from the interaction between man and artefacts. Today, design artefacts have become an inseparable component of human society, a totem of cultural identity and an important source of reference for modern society. These artefacts are instrumental to aesthetic expression and socio-cultural interaction within a local context (Moalosi and Hudson, 2007).

Behind every man-made object is a valuable concept, beliefs, customs, rituals, habits and ideas that shape its perception within a socio-cultural environment. Visual culture has been described as the artistic tastes and interpretation of what is aesthetically pleasing to an individual depending upon the surroundings and the environment. However, it is not just artistic differences that are influenced by environmental differences. In addition, there is the practicality of the visual statement (Lee, 2004).

Based on the separate goals and purposes that need to be met by aesthetics and the way in which they are interpreted within a specific locale, visual rhetoric widely varies based on classical cultural differences. There are innate differences in the way people view images because our interpretations of aesthetics and practicality stem directly from our localized cultural experiences. The interpretation of design as visual and material culture enables a broad understanding and critical awareness of its meanings as material objects, images and cultural practices that position human beings in time and space (Oladokun, 2009).

Thus the relation between artifacts and society is intractable relationship. This is also true for Oromo society. Numbers of researches like (Bartles 1983, Bula 2000, Negaso 2001, Waktole 2014) are studied Oromo indigenous artifacts. Their study is mainly focus on social status and economy of artisans. However the relationship between material culture and society was addressed in a fairly limited way. Additionally cultural values of handicraft in general and weaving in particular among Maccaa Oromo did not studied in detail. Thus, this paper aims to fill the existing literature gap from Maccaa Oromo perspective.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptual definitions of visual and material culture**

Culture is that which defines the way of life of a group of people and their interactions with the environment over a period of time. Moving from the abstract to the concrete and from the material realm to the immaterial domain, culture could be described as a thread that holds what a society finds valuable, meaningful and appreciable. Following the models of previous studies (Moalosi, Popovic & Hickling-Hudson, 2007), culture is firmly observed as being dynamic and multi-layered. From the perspective of the intangible elements, (Kashim 2013) described culture as a set of values (conscious and unconscious) evolved by a group of people living in a society so as to shape that society with specific characteristics, identities, attitudes and behaviours. However, within the tangible layer, culture could also be understood in the social context of artefacts used within a particular environment.

### **2.2. Artifacts and its meaning**

The term "material culture" is often used by archaeologists as a non-specific way of referring to artefacts or other concrete things left by past cultures. Material culture means something else to art historians. Interestingly enough, when they speak of material culture they look at an object within its environmental and cultural context as things left by past cultures. The organization of cultural

activities such as business or economic activities led to cultural industries. The idea of 'creative industries' originated from a concern with the cultural industries. The core of the cultural industry is its creativity (Okoi & Oladokun, 2009)

According to Robertson (1961) historically, the earliest stage of every creation was a piece of handicraft since every object was made with hands, using physical human skills. This is due to the absence of automation or technology available to make anything mechanically. The writer argues that, after development of technology handicrafts improved and adapted according to environmental conditions, eventually becoming customary and accepted as an art that reflects the artistic sense, feelings and cultural characteristics of a society.

Creativity is unique to every society, and involves originality, imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, and inventiveness and in this setting traditions as well. This is a strong aspect of every culture. Creativity represents a stock of 'intangible culture' of a particular community which articulates people's identity, traditions and values. Craft products connect people with their past traditions and portraits of a great culture. They also convey the embedded meanings, traditions, knowledge and values of society and its people (C. D. Daskon 2010).

Compared to ordinary commercial products, the products of these communities differ in quality and representation. Their products are ultimate representations of both cultural and aesthetic values and these views explain how villagers perceive culture through their everyday experiences and livelihood practices.

### **2.3 Cultural values of artifacts in Oromo culture**

There are different types and numbers of artifacts in Oromo culture. Among these the most well-known are Blacksmiths, weavers, tanners and Potters. Among Oromo, producers are called *ogeeyyii* meaning expert. These artisans play basic role in both personal and social life of Oromo society (Bula 2006).

Blacksmiths has significant role in different rituals and have better respect in the society. Because of their handicraft works that are used in everyday life such as *haaduu*, (knife) *waraana* (spears), clothes etc. they were not left in total neglect. All of these low status groups have constant interactions with Borana Oromo in everyday life. They participate in cattle or herd management, watering and other social activity Ayalew (2002: 97). Blacksmiths play great role in Oromo culture in general and Limmu Oromo in particular. They produce materials from metals which are used in ritual, domestic, and agricultural.

Shamanees are artisans those have skill of making clothes. As Bartles (1983) clearly put the term shamane comes from Amharic term 'shama' clothe making. They provide ritual clothes for Oromo people from local raw material by their indigenous knowledge. Ritual cloths are also serving as symbol of power. According to oral source obtained from elder of Limmu district the products of weavers are used in political and ritual practices. When Gada system was in practiced *rufa* has been serving as symbol of Abbaa Gadaa. This cloth distinguishes the *Abbaa Gada* from other people. Thus it is a symbol of authority. In addition to this, the weavers also provide women cloth that they use in *Ateetee* and other ritual event.

Among Limmu Oromo potters are women artisan whereas weavers are men. According to the potters, the division of skill, weaving for men and pottery for women has no justification except tradition. Potters make domestic material like coffee pots, cooking pots, bowls, vases, dishes, and incense burners, baking plate, water container and decorative items such as figurines. These products are used both in household and in ritual activity which is performed at societal level.

Pottery simple household items, all made by traditional potters from local raw materials and local skill. The procedure of production includes preparing the clay and other components like straw, shaping the clay, decorating and polishing the pot, and firing. The firing temperature gives pottery its finished appearance and its strength. Then they supply to market and sell and earn income in which they support themselves and family.

Tanners are expert of skin materials. They produced domestic material like mat (*Jandee* made from cow skin), pillow, whip, sack (qalqala) belt, and milk materials. These materials are used in both household and social life. On wedding day, the couple seat on the *Jande* and blessed by their parent.

Whip also produced by tanner. It has material aspect and symbolic aspect in Oromo culture. In marriage the groom grasp whip and spear on wedding ceremony. Whip indicate wise ness and spear symbolizes heroic /strength. *Abbaa Gadaa* holds *alangaa* and *Bokkuu* and announced law. Whip also used in different social event Gumaa, Jaarsummaa and in other peacemaking activity. In this case whip symbolizes correction of wrong doer through enforcement. It also used to beat horse while move on horseback either in wedding or war. Among the Limmu Oromo social status of individual can be determined by different activity. Killer deserves respect view as strong by society. His wife and the killer deserve respect from non-killers.

### 3. Research methodology

The research questions were adopted to test the research aim. Qualitative approach was used as tool of investigation in order to establish the relationship between weaving and its values. Interviews

were conducted to establish the cultural, social, tourism, ecological and aesthetic value. They take the form of structured, semi-structured and unstructured questionnaires designed for a census of creative activities using purposive sampling techniques. Apart from interviews, scheduled observations were administered so as to collect in-depth information and data. Lastly focused group discussion was also carried out with selective key informant.

## 4. Results

The local textile industry is diverse, with such branches as spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing, dyeing, embroidery and printing, all of which are significant for clothing, a material culture that is a part and parcel of human life. Common woven cloths in Oromo society are used for different purposes ranging from day-to-day and ceremonial use, as in for religious purposes. The woven cloths are done on traditional machine called *Arbi* (loom). They are woven materials produced in attractive designs with rich colours and made for male and females. Various designs are folded into the material before dyeing and the fabric is often beaten to achieve its shiny, attractive appearance. The techniques employed to obtain this look are unmatched around the world. Moreover, although the methods adopted are ancient, these lush works of art on fabric always remain extremely popular and continue to be in great demand.

### 4.1. Weaving and its cultural implication

Weaving is not simply a particular way of making cloth but is inextricably bound up with structure value history and identity of the community in which it practiced.

#### 4.1.1. Socio cultural roles

Weavers told that their products are significant in individual and social life of Limmu Oromo. Just like other clothes their products protect cold from the skin. The interviewed weavers said that their customers view their products in especial way by separating from normal clothes. Apart from being clothes their products are inextricably linked with Oromo philosophy and identity. In social event like burial, market, wedding ceremony adult men and women wear bale and *bullukkoo*. Bale is dressed by women whereas *bullukkoo* is worn by adult men (*see figure 3*).

One of my informants said on marriage ceremony family prepares different cultural clothes. Especially *bullukkoo* and bale are things that do not left. Even if girl's family is very poor one *bullukkoo* for father in law and one *balee* and *sabbata* for mother in law are mandatory. On this day family relative and friend give her *bullukkoo* or *bale* which are called *gumaata* (*gift*).

Weavers reports that for groom and bride cultural cloth prepared before wedding day. The boy prepared white trouser known as *kittaa* with its coat. In addition to *kittaa*, *bullukkoo* is mandatory. If he could not do that he borrows from his friend for that day unless participating on the ceremony with other cloth impossible. The bride groom also wears *kuula* with other jewelry. The cloth identifies them from other who travels with them. Unless it is consider as loss of *safuu* and bad luck for their future life. On that wedding ceremony at least bride, groom and *miinjee* (best friend) must wear cultural cloth.

The girl family should prepare *bullukkoo* for husband and father in law (*abiyuu*) and *kulaa* and *sabbataa* for Mather in law (*amaatii*). Number of *bullukko* and bale given for girl on wedding day indicate her parent status and strength .On wedding day relative bring cloth and other as gift which is called *gonfa* (gift). Five days after marriage there is ritual ceremony performs at boy house. This ritual ceremony is called *gadbaasaa*. On this ritual ceremony different food and drink are prepared and people invited. On this ritual ceremony her *qarree* is shaving by her husband. *Qarree* is hair which symbolize unmarried girl. Shaving of *Qarree* marks the transformation of girl from child hood to motherhood.

Then the girl gift cloth for his mother and father from her material she get from here parent and relative on wedding day. In response to her gift the parent of the give cows. She brought to cows and give here chance to strike one from cows with *hiddii* fruit (solanaceous fruit) given to her. From that time onward the cow she strikes is belongs to her. It is forbidden to tell here which she should strike perhaps before that secretly in sign by color, size of the cow.

The weavers argue that their products are not only used in wedding ceremony but also in different social occasion. While they beg *Waaqaa*, on thanks giving on blessing ritual they wear cultural cloth. Although it is not for all participants the one who performs it is mandatory. While slaughtering *buttaa*, while sawing *atetee*, on *Jaarii loonii*, on *warajoo* the participant wear cultural clothes. Thus in spiritual event, cultural cloth is viewed as symbol of purity. According my informant participating in religious event without cultural cloth is considered as violation *safuu*. *Safuu* is the law of creator. As Limmu Oromo view, Begging and blessing God by breaking law of creator nonsense. Instead he or she may meet other bad fate.

Cultural cloth is needed on these event because different reason. It makes the stage beautiful and complete. It marks identity of participants. It also indicates status and responsibility of participant on that specific stage and in society in general. For instance *Abbaa Gadaa* does not be *Abbaa Gadaa* without *bullukkoo* and *rufoo*.

Thus cultural cloth has great meaning and symbolism in economic, social, political and religious activity of Oromo society in general and Limmu Oromo community in particular. In addition weavers play great role in maintaining and promoting Oromo cultural heritage.

Weavers also tell that they are keeper and preserver of Oromo material Cultural. One of the informants said we and non-weavers get mutual benefit from the products. We produce clothes and earn income by which we support ourselves and our family live. The non-weavers buy our products and utilize in personal or social life. Weavers said “without our skill and production the cultural cloth could not be sustained which is also part of Oromo tangible cultural heritages”. Thus they view product has material aspect and symbolic aspect as well as short term and long term function.



**Figure (2)** woven cloth



**Figure (1)** cloth on weaving cloth



**Figure (3)**,cloth used in ritual

**4.1.2. Tourist attraction**

My informants describe that their products are used as input in museum. One of my informants said one day while I was stand in market beside my clothes, a white man passing on road with one black man turns to me and observed each of my clothes I took to market for sell. Finally he appreciated a lot and gave ten Ethiopian birr. On the other hand my informants told that the culture tourism office of the district bought *kuula*, *Balee*, *bullukkoo*, and *sabbata* from him and put in the office for visiting. These clothes are rent to individual on holy day and generate income for the offices.



Weaving is a particular way of making cloth. The particular design is deep rooted and associated culture. The design mark and define its members' behaviors and perceptions. Thus, it can be sources of tourism attraction for Oromo society at zonal, regional, or national level. The costume produced by weavers are also used as input for museum and provided for exhibition. Therefore their production also plays basic role in museum development which can be a source of income for country.

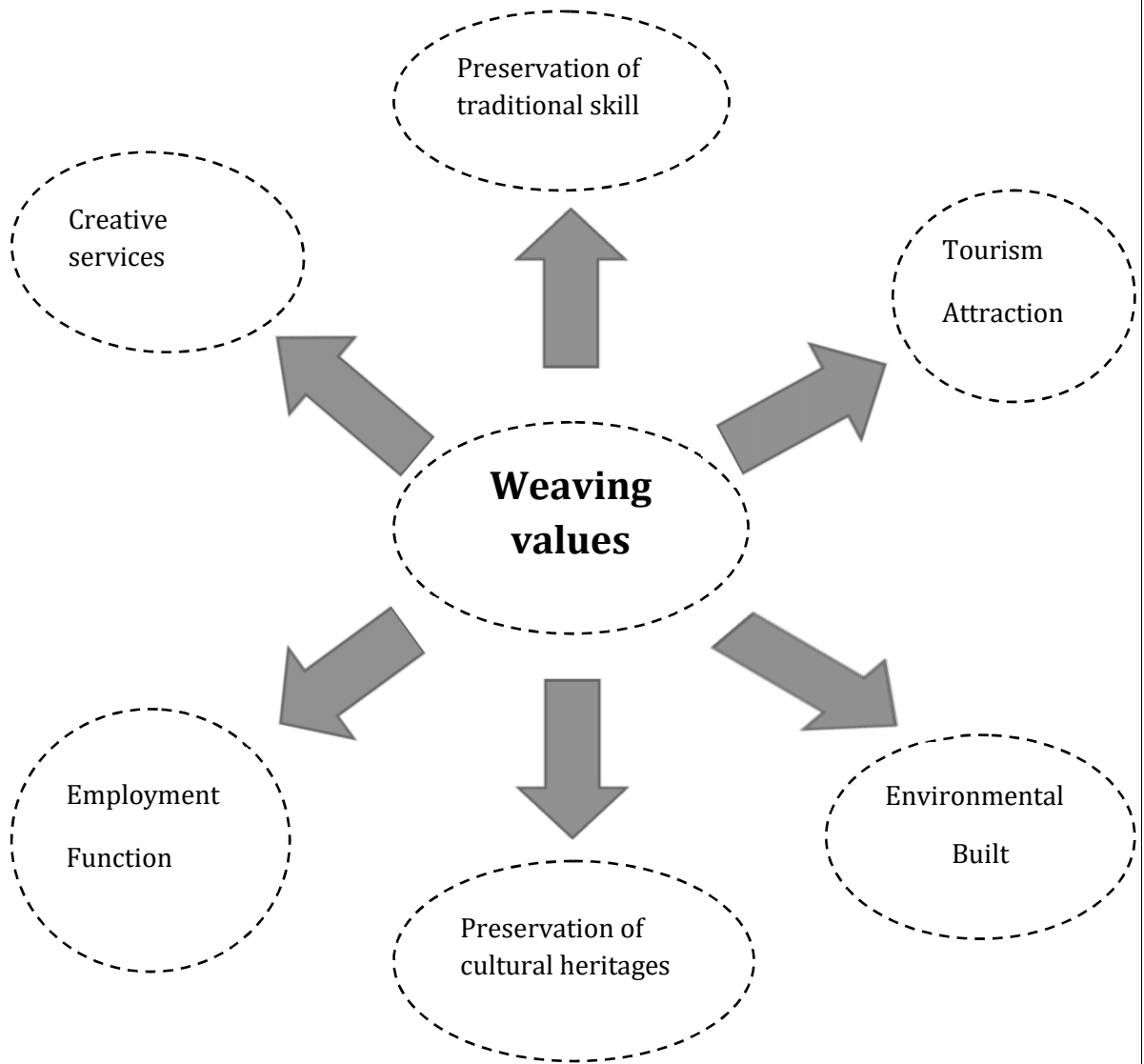
#### **4.1.3. Authenticity and creativity**

Weaving activity is form of typical knowledge. This typical knowledge has different attributes: it is productive knowledge when is referred to products and production processes. It shows ability of certain group weaver to make or create new thing. The other attribute of weaving skill is relational. The cloth produced by weaver is related to celebrations, rites, customs, popular and religious feasts and manifestations that Oromo performs in their daily life.

The other attributes of weaving is reproductive. When concerns art, music, theater and other forms of expressions are indicates the way it represent a community in immutable way, but is the result of social relations, the more it is recognized and incorporated in the collective conscience of a community is more its sense.

#### **4.1.4. Ecological values**

Weaving is a manually way of making clothes. It involves close relation with physical world and biodiversity. Weaver employs local machine called *arbi* (loom) which is made from tree. The weavers do not cut such tree from their garden instead they conserve. When they need to make *arbi* they cut in a way it can be revives. Thus they develop familiarity with such material and use in a way it can easily repair. On the other hand the production does not pollute environment or nature. Like modern industry, it does not release burnt air to the environment which negatively affects biodiversity. Therefore weaving is eco-friendly way of livelihood option.



**Diagram 1** *The role of weavers (researcher design)*

## 5. Conclusion

Traditional Weaving has various socio-cultural, economic and religious significance and values. Costumes that participant wear in ritual activity, religious, political and in different cultural event are provided by local weavers. Their products are more preferable than the modern factory production. The local products are cost effective, durable, thick, and propend as socio-cultural context of users.

In blessing and praying like for God every individual in society come to God by wearing cultural cloth. All ritual ceremony has their own cultural cloth. Without these cloths they cannot be carried out. If it is carried out it believes that the ritual is valueless, is against law of creature. The cultural clothe are mandatory on ritual and taken as pure.

Cultural cloth has great respect among the society. People prefer it to give to their relatives and girl on wedding ceremony. The girl family should prepare *bullukoo* for husband and father in law (*abiyuu*) and *kulaa* and sabbataa for Mather in law (*amaatii*). Number of *bullukko* and bale given for girl on wedding day indicate status and strength her of parent. On wedding day relative bring cloth and other as gift which is called *gonfa* (gift).for it shows respect people weaves and give cultural cloth to respected person.

On the other hand weaving the source of income for weavers and other cloth traders. Weavers produce cloth and sell to local merchant and local merchant re-sell to local market by getting profit. On the other hand the products of weavers are used as input in museum for visitors. So that it generate income for country, local or regional level. The cloth produced by weaver is related to celebrations, rites, customs, popular and religious feasts and manifestations that Oromo performs in their daily life. On the other hand the production does not pollute environment or nature. Like modern industry, it does not release burnt air to the environment which negatively affects biodiversity.

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