

# Yakka

**THE SIDAMA WOMEN'S  
CUSTOMARY INSTITUTION  
AND ITS UNTOLD POWER**

**Netsebrak Tamene**  
2022 CARD Werdwet Fellow



**CARD**  
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CENTER FOR ADVANCEMENT OF  
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## **About CARD**

The Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) is a board-led, for-not-profit organization registered in Ethiopia under the Civil Societies Law 1113/2019 with registry number 4307. CARD acquired its legal personality on 24 July 2019.

CARD aspires to see Ethiopia where democratic culture flourished on human rights values and has been working with a mission to empower citizens and groups of citizens to ensure their ability to promote and defend human rights and build democratic governance in Ethiopia.

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YOUTH AND WOMEN  
EMPOWERMENT

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# CONTENTS

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ACRONYMS	I
GLOSSARY OF LOCAL TERMS	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
FOREWORD	IV
ABSTRACT	VI
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Background of the Study: Women's Rights in Ethiopia: A Historical Perspective	2
1.2. The Research Problem	6
1.3. Research Questions	10
1.4. Objectives of the Study	11
1.4.1. General Objective	11
1.4.2. Specific Objectives	11
1.5. Significance of the Study	12
1.6. Research Approach and Methodology	13
1.6.1. Research Approach	13
1.6.2. Data Collection Techniques	13
1.6.2.1. Primary Data Collection Methods	13
1.6.2.2. Secondary Data Collection Methods	16
1.7. Method of Data Analysis	17
1.8. Research Sites and Field Experience	18

1.9.	Research Ethics	20
1.10.	Scope of the Study	21
1.11.	Limitation of the Study	22
1.12.	Organization of the Paper	23

## **LITRATURE REVIEW** **24**

2.1.	Human Rights and Women's Rights	25
2.2.	Customary Institutions in the Context of Women's Rights and Status	31
2.3.	Theoretical Framework	37
2.3.1.	Feminist Theories and Women's Rights	37
2.4.	Empirical Studies on Women's Customary Institutions in Ethiopia	41

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION** **46**

3.1.	The Sidama People and Their Settlement	47
3.2.	Social Organization and Women's Institutions	50
3.2.1.	Marriage System	50
3.3.	Religious Institutions and Practices of Women	54
3.3.1.	Social Institutions of Women	56
3.3.2.	Customary Political Institutions of the Sidama and Women's Role	58
3.3.2.1.	<i>Luwa</i> ( a Generational Class System)	58
3.3.2.2.	<i>Songo</i> (Elders' Council)	61
3.4.	Women in Sidama and Their Perspectives	63
3.5.	Important Titles of Women in Sidama	67
3.5.1.	<i>Qaricho</i>	67
3.5.2.	<i>Randicho</i>	69

**THE YAKKA INSTITUTION 70**

4.1.	The Meaning of <i>Yakka</i>	71
4.2.	Myths on the Origin of <i>Yakka</i>	72
4.3.	Functions of <i>Yakka</i>	73
4.4.	Procedures of the <i>yakka</i> Institution	78
4.5.	<i>Yakka</i> Punishments and Compensations	80
4.6.	The Role of Sidama Women in Indigenous Peace Building	82
4.6.1.	<i>Siqqo</i> as a Symbol of Peace	82
4.6.2.	Showing a Woman's Private Body Parts	83
4.6.3.	Putting Girdle ( <i>Qu'ne</i> ) on the Ground to End Conflicts	84

**CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES IN THE INSTITUTION OF YAKKA 85**

5.1.	Major Factors of Change and Continuities	86
5.2.	Challenges and Opportunities of the <i>Yakka</i> Institution	93
5.2.1.	Opportunities	93
5.2.2.	Challenges	94

**CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS OF WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS 96**

6.1.	Sidama Women's Customary Institutions vis-à-vis Women's Rights	97
6.2.	Challenges and Limitations of Customary Institutions	104

**CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS 105**

7.1.	Conclusion	106
7.2.	The Way Forward: Implications of the Research	110
	Reference	111
	Annex: Profile of Study Participant	119

# ACRONYMS

<b>AAWA</b>	Addis Ababa Women's Association
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization(s)
<b>DEVAW</b>	Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>EWLA</b>	The Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association
<b>FDRE</b>	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
<b>FGDs</b>	Focus Group Discussions
<b>FGM</b>	Female Genital Mutilation
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>IIRR</b>	International Institute of Rural Reconstruction
<b>NEWA</b>	Network of Ethiopian Women's Association
<b>REWA</b>	The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Economic, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>WAO</b>	Women's Affairs Office

## GLOSSARY OF LOCAL TERMS

<b>Ayanna</b>	A spirit through which God reveals his will or a traditional belief of good omen
<b>Ayiidu Songo</b>	The second level of the elder's council
<b>Bursame</b>	Food prepared from false banana and butter during festivals and rituals
<b>Chimessa</b>	Leaders of the elder's council
<b>Fichche</b>	New Year celebration of the Sidama
<b>Garote Songo</b>	The third level in the hierarchy of the council of elders
<b>Gorfa</b>	Dress made of leather (in Sidama)
<b>Gudumale</b>	Traditional court among the Sidama
<b>Halaale</b>	Principle of the ultimate truth and justice (in Sidama)
<b>Kebele</b>	Lowest/grassroots administrative unit (in Amharic)
<b>Luwa</b>	Age grade systems of Sidama
<b>Magano</b>	God (in Sidama)
<b>Mahber</b>	A self-help association (in Amharic)
<b>Mentu</b>	Women (in Sidama)
<b>Mocca</b>	Liquid that comes out during the preparation of enset
<b>Moote</b>	A clan leader in Sidama
<b>Mootete Songo</b>	The highest level of the elders' council
<b>Ollu Songo</b>	The first-tier and lowest level council
<b>Qaricho</b>	Leader of women's institutions and gatherings in Sidama
<b>Qu'ne</b>	Women's girdle made from either a garment or animal leather
<b>Randicho</b>	A respected elder's sister who is central in rituals and feasts in Sidama
<b>Sidaamu afu</b>	Sidama language
<b>Siqqo</b>	A long, thin stick held by women as a symbol of honor
<b>Songo</b>	An elders' council in Sidama
<b>Wassa</b>	Staple food of Sidama
<b>Woma</b>	Leader of traditional religion as well as head of cultural, indigenous institutions
<b>Woreda</b>	An administrative unit/ district/ (in Amharic)
<b>Yakka</b>	A women-only institution among the Sidama



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# FOREWORD

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The Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) is a board-led, for-not-profit organization registered in Ethiopia under the Civil Societies Organizations Proclamation 1113/2019 with registry number 4307 by the Authority for Civil Society Organizations. CARD acquired its legal personality on 24 July 2019.

CARD aspires to see Ethiopia where democratic culture flourished on human rights values and has been working with a mission to empower citizens and groups of citizens to ensure their ability to promote and defend human rights and build democratic governance in Ethiopia. To this end, CARD implements various projects under five program areas namely Women and Youth Empowerment, Civic Engagement, Media Literacy, Digital Rights, and Democratization Index.

CARD Werdewet Research Fellowship is project under the Youth and Women Empowerment program with the objective of raising the capacities of youth and women to make knowledge-driven societal changes through the facilitation of research opportunities and promotion of gender rights and protection of marginalized and vulnerable groups.

The CARD Werdewet Reserch Fellowship was first introduced in 2020. It is named after the Guraghe legend, Yeqaqe Werdwet, who fought for women's equal marital rights in the second half of the 19th century.

CARD decided to name this research fellowship after Yeqaqe Werdwet because Werdwet's story is historical, inspiring, and educating to address traditional challenges through traditional means by promoting and exhaustively exploring local remedies. Werdwet Fellowship will continuously take young researchers and assist their search for evidence to promote gender-sensitive values in Ethiopia's traditions and give their research reports a platform for the use of civil societies.

The Fellowship additionally gives women and the youth an opportunity to pursue their passion in researching and promoting indigenous knowledge and local medium to fight inequality and the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups.

In 2022, CARD awarded the fellowship opportunity to five Ethiopian youth who aspire to scale up their research skills whilst helping knowledge-based advocacy for equality and promotion of a rights-oriented socio-political system. The research fellows have received financial support to cover all related costs of the research work. Furthermore, a research advisor have been hired to assist the fellows develop a quality research product.

By doing so, CARD believes that it can empower the fellows as well as support its advocacy through evidence-based researches. Netsebrak Tamene's study on the Yakka customary institution of the Sidama people is an evidence to the rewarding investment CARD has been doing through supporting young researchers. Her work has put more light in centuries old institution women created to own their agency in a patriarch social organization.

With the growing societal disenfranchisement, emerging threats to democracy, and democratic institutions, and undermining of basic human rights, empowering youth and women to produce evidence and bring traditional institutions to the fore so that they can contribute their share in mending the divisions and wrongs in the society is imperative.

**It is with a firm belief that supporting young people and women would contribute to the overall democratization process in Ethiopia – the aspiration we underscored in our tagline – MAKE DEMOCRACY THE ONLY RULE OF THE GAME!**

**Befekadu Hailu,**

Executive Director

Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)

# ABSTRACT



**Yakka** is a women-only customary institution that women use to protect themselves from various attacks, mistreatments, and injustices. The research attempted to examine issues of the women's customary institution and its untold power in ensuring and protecting women's rights among the rural women in the Sidama Region, Southeastern Ethiopia.

The study employed a qualitative approach to collect data from primary and secondary sources. The primary data collection methods used in this research were semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. The fieldwork was conducted in two districts of the Sidama Region, namely, Wondogenet and Malga.

Customary institutions and customary laws in Ethiopia affect the lives of many people. Most studies concerning customary institutions reveal that they oppress women and are the causes of the violations of women's rights. In contrast to this, this research attempted to show how customary institutions among the Sidama, particularly *yakka*, protect women from mistreatment and ensure their rights. The *yakka* is an informal institution where women do not hold regular formal meetings and gatherings; instead, they come together to denounce men's actions (sometimes taking *actis*) when a domestic violence or violation of certain rights is committed by men against women. Some of the reasons that invoke the *yakka*

institutions, according to the findings, are physical, psychological, and sexual abuse of women. *Yakka* has various social-cultural functions and contributions, and it enhances the bond between women. Further, *yakka* plays a significant role in dispute settlement between married couples and serves as a platform for prayer team.

Though *yakka* had all these functions in previous times, its role is currently declining for various reasons including the introduction of Christianity, the expansion of modern education, the establishment of various formal governmental institutions at the kebele level such as Women's and Children's Affairs Offices and the police.

Other than *yakka*, Sidama women exercise their basic rights through various other social and cultural institutions of women. *Yakka* and other customary institutions of the Sidama play a significant role in preserving and advancing women's civil, political, socioeconomic, and collective rights.

The roles the *yakka* institution of the Sidama women play imply that considering local and customary institutions is important to address issues of women, besides adopting international laws and establishing formal governmental institutions.





# 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ETHIOPIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Most cultural norms in Ethiopia support the discriminatory aspects relating to women's participation in decision making at all levels; however, there has not been a comprehensive historical study of Ethiopian women that documents their position as social agents in various historical eras (Meron 2012:1).

Even though notable Ethiopian women and customary women institutions have advocated for women's rights in different periods, their contributions have been muted. Moreover, the issue of women's rights in Ethiopia is associated with modern institutions and organizations established by either the government or by women themselves.

The emergence of women's organizations in the modern sense dates back to the early twentieth century. The Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association was founded in 1935 and was the first national organization (Emebet 2010:73). This was followed by the opening of the first girls' school in 1931, Empress Menen School, which gave girls the opportunity to enroll in formal education, but it was only open to girls from wealthy families (Tsfaye et al. 2019:235). Because this association of women focused mostly on generating money and supporting projects for urban women (Helen Pankhurst 1999) in Gemma (2013:96), it did not bring the issue of women into national policy or regulations (Meron 2021:6).

The Armed Forces' Wives Association was another women's group that was established during the Imperial era with the intention of aiding widows and children of fallen soldiers. Around the same time, the

Ethiopian Young Women's Christian Association was also established. These organizations were formed to represent the needs of women from a specific social group, and they lacked the resources or the organizational framework to mobilize the vast majority of Ethiopian women. When the Derg regime nationalized all of their assets, their activities came to an end (Emebet 2010:73).

In 1980, the Derg administration established the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA), which consisted of about five million members. In order to create a new generation with a "revolutionary spirit", the organization helped build a number of development projects, including handicrafts, retail stores, grain mills, and the expansion of kindergartens (REWA 1982:24) in Gemma (2013:98). Later, however, it came to be seen as a political organization that integrates women into the political system for the service of the regime. In practice, women had little or no influence on governmental decisions, legislations, and regulations. Women's positive achievements throughout this regime were seen in the incorporation of the women's agenda in the constitution and in positions within its institutions (Ibid: 100).

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, which was established shortly after the overthrow of the Derg in 1991, introduced new political and socioeconomic orientations. This new government established a system of Women's Affairs Offices and approved a National Policy on Women (WAO). At its highest level, the WAO was affiliated with the Prime Minister's Office down to the lowest administrative level, the Kebele. Each department of the federal government had a WAO (Ibid.).

Again, the Ethiopian government announced and adopted various legislations and regulations to alter the legal trajectory, enhance women's participation in the socioeconomic sphere, and foster their development. The 1995 FDRE Constitution guarantees equal rights to women and men and puts an end to discriminatory laws and regulations that adversely affected women (Article 35 of the FDRE Constitution). Institutional measures have also been made at all levels to implement this, advancing the



constitutional goals forward and ensuring women's empowerment (Tsehay and Lebesech 2010) in Dagne (2021:6). Important government initiatives and plans, such as the Growth and Transformation Plan I: 2010/11-2014/15 (FDRE, 2010) and the Plan for Accelerated and Sustainable Development to End Poverty (PASDEP): 2005-2010 (FDRE, 2005a), give special consideration to women and their justifiable demands for social, economic, and political inclusion. In response, significant efforts have been made to increase women's political representation and economic emancipation, as well as upholding their legal and human rights (Nigatu and Tesfaye 2015:22).

The transition to a democratic political system under the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has also opened new opportunities for women's activism in Ethiopia. Since 1991, civil society organizations (CSOs) that advocate for various disadvantaged groups, such as women and children have proliferated. The Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA) was founded in 1995 to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and challenge legislations that discriminate against women. The Addis Ababa Women's Association (AAWA), the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), and the Organization Against Gender-Based Violence are additional CSOs that focus on women's problems. The mission of NEWA is to advance gender equality, women's rights, and women's empowerment in Ethiopia, whereas working toward the social, political, and economic empowerment of women in Addis Ababa City is the main goal of the AAWA (Meron 2021:9).

After 2005, there was a trend to mobilize women in various associations. The Women's Associations (*Yasetoch mahiberat*) and the Women's Development Armies were the two most notable examples. A Women's Development Army is composed of a group of 25 - 30 women who live in the same area. The army is further sub-divided into smaller groups with five members (locally known as a one-to-five network), where one woman assumes the leadership responsibility as a model to bring these women together on a weekly basis. The ruling party utilizes these organizations and development armies for political mobilization (Ibid: 11).

The Federal Government of Ethiopia recently appointed Ethiopia's first female president and head of state, who is the only currently-serving female head of state in Africa, as part of all these efforts and commitments to advance the issue of women (Meron 2021:11). In addition, in 2018, the Federal Government mandated that 50% of the Ministers' Council be women (Dagne 2021:6).

In addition to these advancements and the dedication of women's modern associations in urban areas, Ethiopian rural women use a variety of customary institutions to defend and ensure their rights. However, when political systems change, so do the roles and commitments of these institutions. Additionally, a variety of customary organizations dominated by women may be found in many ethnic groups in Ethiopia. These institutions could support women's involvement in the socioeconomic and political life of their communities.

Among the various women-led customary institutions, *yakka* in the Sidama society is the most prominent though it is not widely known outside the Sidama society. The institution serves women by defending their rights from any attack or mistreatment.

This research was conducted to examine the role of *yakka*, a women-only customary institution among the Sidama, in promoting and protecting the rights of women. It also attempted to investigate ways of reconstructing this institution.

## 1.2. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

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An extensive literature exists on customary institutions in Ethiopia. Most of them are focused on their traditional governance system as well as their role as dispute resolution mechanisms.

However, customary institutions have been criticized from a gender perspective. Various scholars condemn the institutions and the laws as sources of oppression against women and consider them 'unfortunate and weak' (Ayalew 2016:10).

In fact, women in Ethiopia face many challenges from their childhood to adulthood (IIRR 2003:ix). They are subject to discrimination in every aspect of their lives - in economic, social, cultural, and legal aspects (Guday 2005:3). They frequently experience violence, including the widespread forced marriages in Ethiopia (IIRR 2003: ix). They are excluded from a number of economic, social, and cultural benefits because of their restricted access to resources and knowledge. Additionally, they have limited employment and income opportunities, and plenty of them are in a disadvantageous position, being deprived of significant benefits, rights, power, and authority in the society (Guday 2005:3).

In order to compensate for the historically disadvantaged position of women, the FDRE constitution, in Article 35:3, stipulates a suitable provision, which states: “In recognition of the history of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia, women are entitled to remodel and take affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to enable women to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, economic and social life, and to gain access to opportunities and positions in public and private institutions” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, FDRE, 1995).

Despite the constitutional protection stated above, studies show that Ethiopian women still experience many culture-based, widespread rights violations from the community. The main instruments that work against women’s cultural practices are customary laws and institutions. They have been the source of discriminatory practices such as substantial workloads, early marriage, marriage by abduction, exchange marriage, marriage by payment of blood compensation, misunderstandings of religious canons, and poor perception of female education (Ayalew 2016:10).

In contrast to these, there are cultures where customary institutions in Ethiopia serve as sources of power or agencies for women. There are various women-led institutions throughout the country. Among these institutions, *Siqqe* among the Arisi Oromo is the most prominent one. *Siqqe* serves the purposes of protecting women’s rights and making peace

(Endalkachew 2018:9). It enables them to engage in socio-judicial decision-making processes (Meron 2021:1). *Don Kachel*, among the Agnuak women in the Gambella region, enables the village's elderly women, *Jaye*, to keep peace and stability in the community. This institution helps to avert conflict and dispense female justice (IIRR 2003:28). The religious institution known as *Atette* among the Arsi has to do with the honor and respect of the feminine spirit and women (Leiela 2016:4-5). The social institution called *hefcho*, a traditional women's association among the Kembata, helps settle disputes within the community and pool resources to help the poor and the sick (IIRR 2003:21). The cooperative institution referred to as *Tsire* among Gamo Gofa constitutes women who carry manure, harvest grain, gin cotton, or spin thread (Ibid: 33). Also, the festival known as *Antrosht* among the Gurage is a mothers' day festival where women gather to celebrate their feminine identity (Netsebrak 2009:31).

In addition to all these women-led customary institutions, there were prominent women who fought for women's rights in a male-dominated society. *Ye Kake Werdewt* of Gurage was a bold female figure who resisted the oppressions of women in the early 19th century. She advocated for women's rights and condemned many of the common cultural values and practices in her community (Akalewold 2015:11). *Akkoo Mannooyyee* of the Oromo was also another well-known woman advocate who is regarded by the community as a strong and wise leader (Jelayan 2014:5-6). Further, the story of *Queen Fura* among the Sidama is an emblem of women's privilege and empowerment though men consider her as an enemy (Markos et al. 2011:54-56).

Thus, unlike the statements and arguments by various scholars that customary institutions and cultural practices are the sources of women's oppression, there are social, economic, and political institutions that helped them to exercise their rights and freedom fully. These and many other significant and multifaceted roles of customary institutions in promoting and protecting women's rights have been neglected in the cultural and historical documents (Meron 2021:1).

Since Ethiopia is a country with many ethnic groups with significant cultural differences, gender construction and women's institutions also vary cross-culturally (Regassa 2006:26-27). Nevertheless, most studies conducted so far could not sufficiently give a complete picture of the gender relations manifested throughout the country, as well as various types of women's institutions and their contribution to women's rights.

Hence, there has been a knowledge gap regarding the role of customary institutions in protecting and promoting women's rights. This study emphasizes the role of customary institutions and their contribution in enhancing women's rights. It describes how different institutions and traditions enable women to protect, promote, and claim their rights. It also assesses how women are able to resolve disputes peacefully through the help of the traditional institutions in a rapidly-changing social environment.

This study examines *yakka*, a women-only customary institution of the Sidama society. *Yakka* is an indigenous sociocultural institution that prioritizes protecting women's rights. It is a special institution with a purpose of defending women from domestic violence. It is organized and run entirely by elderly women. The members are all women who strive to end domestic abuse, violence, and mistreatment.

However, *yakka* has not been studied well. The only study focused on this institution is the two-decade-old senior essay by Dilu (2001), which focused on documenting the practices, changes, and continuity of the institution. Other than that, there have never been detailed and comprehensive studies of the *yakka* institution. No study has been conducted to investigate its role in promoting and protecting women's rights. Hence, the current project intends to examine the role of the *yakka* institution in promoting women's rights and protecting them from violence and abuse within the society. It also deals with the role of *yakka* institution in the peace-building process.

## 1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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The following research questions are addressed in the study:



How is the *yakka* (women-only customary institution) among the Sidama being practiced?



How does the *yakka* customary institution among the Sidama protect women's rights and serve as an agency of women empowerment?



What are the challenges and opportunities of the *yakka* institution in protecting and ensuring women's rights?



What changes have taken place in the *yakka* institution?

## 1.4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

### 1.4.1. General Objective



The general objective of the research is to investigate the role of *yakka*, an indigenous women-only institution, among the Sidama society in ensuring women's rights.

### 1.4.2. Specific Objectives

Based on the aforementioned general objective, the research has the following specific objectives:



To investigate the practices of *Yakka*, the women-only customary institution;



To describe the role of the *Yakka* customary institution in ensuring the rights of women in their day-to-day lives;



To investigate the challenges and opportunities of the *yakka* institution in promoting women's rights; and



To identify the changes that has taken place in the *yakka* indigenous institution so far.



## 1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

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Customary institutions are usually considered as harmful and backward. Despite the dominance of such a one-sided narrative, there are several cases where customary institutions contribute to women empowerment and serve as a source of societal integration and protection. This study reveals how the yakka institution enables women to exercise their rights and resist patriarchal domination in the Sidama society. Given the high status accorded to the institution, the research findings point to the importance of revitalizing the institution among the community. This research could also serve as a pioneer for future research inquiries.

**In short, this study is believed to have the following specific outcomes:**



It could be taken as an instance of a critical study of customary institutions in the Ethiopian rural society.



It may inspire researchers to delve deeper into the analysis of customary institutions and their role in protecting women's rights.



It could provide an additional perspective into how customary institutions have been helping women to come forward.

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## 1.6. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

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### 1.6.1. Research Approach

This research employed a qualitative research approach since such an approach allows for the investigation of qualitative phenomena in the selected subject matter. Obviously, studying the indigenous institution of women can best be undertaken using such an approach as it is convenient to examine sociocultural issues that need the interpretation of meaning and symbols.

Cultural episodes such as indigenous knowledge, community relationships, marriage, etc. are among the topics appropriate for a qualitative research approach (Earl 2007:37). The focus of qualitative research has been the meanings and reasons underlying cultural symbols (such as language), individual experiences and events, and social world processes (Kalof et al. 2008).

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### 1.6.2. Data Collection Techniques

#### 1.6.2.1. Primary Data Collection Methods

Through the primary data collection method, the study has attempted to get adequate information on and insight into the issues discussed. The primary data collection methods employed in this study were the following.

## A. Semi-structured Interviews



Semi-structured interview is the most common type of interview used in qualitative social research. In this type of interview, the researcher may look for specific information that can be compared and contrasted with information gained in other interviews. To do this, the same questions need to be asked in each interview. However, the researcher may also want the interview to remain flexible and unstructured, for there could emerge other important pieces of information from the interviewee.

For this type of interview, the researcher designs an interview schedule. This may be a list of specific questions or a list of topics to be discussed. This is used for each interview to ensure continuity (Dawson 2007:29-30).

In light of the foregoing logic, the researcher undertook an in-depth interview with pre-selected informants. Each interview lasted about an hour and included open-ended questions generated from the guiding question.

The semi-structured interview in this study was carried out to investigate the details of the practice of the yakka indigenous institution of Sidama women. It is an important tool to understand the perspectives and voices of women and their interactions with their surroundings. In addition, this interview enabled the researcher to collect data about the role of the yakka institution in promoting the rights of women. Informants (adult women and men) were selected through the purposive sampling method. Then, in-depth interview sessions were carried out by the researcher. A total of 13 in-depth interviews (5 male and 7 female) were conducted in the research sites.

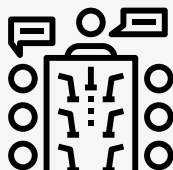
## B. Key Informant Interviews



The majority of people in any group or society are unaware of all the forms, meanings, and purposes that make up their culture. Key informants are able to provide detailed information, for they possess a deeper understanding of what is happening around them due to their personal abilities or position within a community. The procedure requires interviewing someone who has in-depth knowledge or experience on a topic that interests the researcher or interviewer in order to obtain information directly from them (Marshall 1996:96).

Thus, the participants of the KII in this research include *qaricho*, elderly women who are leaders of a *yakka* institution, elderly men who are familiar with the Sidama culture and tradition, experts and officials from the Women's and Children's Affairs Bureau, officials and experts from the Culture and Tourism Bureau, and *Woreda* administrators who are familiar with the issue.

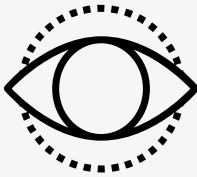
## C. Focus Group Discussion



Focus group discussions were arranged in the research sites. A total of four FGDs (two with adult women and two with adult men) were

administered with both genders, which included 6 to 8 participants in each group. The FGD aimed to gather data regarding the customary institution in Sidama and women's role within the institution.

## D. Observation



As part of the qualitative approach, observation was made at the research sites and their environs. Using this method, the researcher was able to establish a sound rapport with informants. However, the researcher's observation was limited to looking at materials, tools, and cloths used during ritual performances and visiting the villages. However, the researcher did not observe the actual yakka gatherings since it is fading away from the culture.

### 1.6.2.2. Secondary Data Collection Methods

Regarding secondary data, various materials, including books, journals, articles, theses, senior essays, reports, and other publications were consulted in order to substantiate the primary sources. Information from relevant literature was used to construct a theoretical and conceptual framework for the study.

## 1.7. METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

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The data gathered from the field were interpreted and analyzed in descriptive and narrative writing styles. This qualitative way of interpreting and analyzing data helped to discuss, describe, explain, and examine the issues under study. Beyond this, the data obtained from different sources were triangulated and analyzed employing a systematic approach.



## 1.8. RESEARCH SITES AND FIELD EXPERIENCE

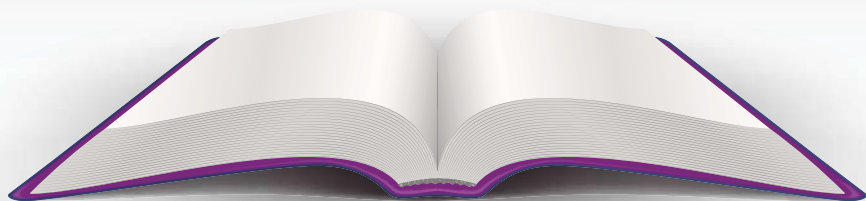
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This research mainly used primary sources that are analyzed qualitatively, so the researcher carried out fieldwork within the study community (Sidama). From the 18 districts of the Sidama Regional State, the fieldwork was conducted in two districts, namely, Malga and Wondogent. There were two main reasons for selecting the two districts. The first reason is that the researcher could easily access the districts, and the second one is that Malga district is a place where most cultures and traditions of the Sidama people are actively practiced.

According to the data obtained from the Malga Woreda Finance and Economic Development Office, the district is divided into 23 *Kebele's* and 3 rural towns. The total area of the district is 32,651ha, of which 18,177ha is cultivated. In the highlands, which account for the highest proportion of the district, *enset* (the staple food), barley (cereal crop), potato (root crop), and vegetables like cabbage and carrot, are among the major crops grown in the district. The district had an estimated total population of 109,793 people, of which 55,676 were male and 54,117 were female. The administrative center of the district is called Wejjigira town (Malga Woreda Finance and Economic Development Office 2022).

The second research site, Wondogent district, is located to the south of Malga district, to the west of Hawassa Zuriya, and to the north-east of Oromia region. Based on the 2007 Census, this Woreda had a total population of 155,715, of whom 79,664 are men and 76,051 women; 23,125 or 14.85% of its population are urban dwellers. The administrative center of the district is Wondogent city (Wondogent Woreda Administrative 2009).

Regarding the site selection, first I obtained permission from the Women's and Children's Affairs Bureau and Culture and Tourism Bureau of the Sidama Regional State. I had research assistants from the districts that facilitated access to informants. The assistants also helped the researcher in translation during the interview sessions. Thus, most interviews were conducted in the Sidama language (locally known as Sidammu *Afo*) except for those interviews with experts and government officials, which were conducted in Amharic. Sometimes, electronic devices (e.g. a voice recorder) were used with permission from the interviewee.





## 1.9. RESEARCH ETHICS

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The data collection was carried out in accordance with research ethics and principles. First, adequate information or explanation was given to all participants about the whole purpose and intent of the study, and actual and potential benefits of the research. An informed consent from each of the participants was secured prior to engaging the participants in the research. In addition, all participants were duly informed of their right to anonymity and confidentiality with respect to the personal information they provided during the interview. Also, they were told that the information they provided would be recorded but pseudo names would be used instead. Thus, the researcher did not use the actual names of the informants in any part of the research.



## 1.10. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

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Conceptually, the study is delimited to women's customary institutions, particularly to yakka. It attempted to discover the role yakka in ensuring and promoting the rights of women.



### **Time Scope:**

The study looked into how the institution protected the rights of women and defended them from gender violence in the past. It also tried to determine the present condition of the institution, how it is sustained, and the challenges for its continued existence. Thus, the study utilized a diachronic approach in order to understand all aspects of this customary institution along with the changes it had undergone and the challenges it had encountered thus far.



### **Geographical/Communal Scope:**

Two sample districts were selected for this study. The districts are Malga and Wondogenet. From the two districts, Woteraresa kebele from Malga and Woshasoyam and Wotoranakichema *kebele's* from Wondogenet were selected. The rationale behind the selection of these districts was the abundance of the customary practices as well as the ease of access to the districts.

## 1.1.1. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

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The main fieldwork of the study was conducted during July and August, the rainy season in Ethiopia. Thus, the weather made movement in the villages challenging to the researcher. The other major limitation of the research was that the researcher could not observe any of the customary institutions of women. However, all the processes and rituals of the customary institution were captured via the Key Informant Interviews.



## 1.12. ORGANIZATION OF THE PAPER

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The research is organized into seven chapters: *Chapter One*, which is the Introduction part, deals with the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, research methodology, field-work experiences, significance, scope, limitation, and ethical considerations. *Chapter Two* presents the review of important literature related to women's rights, feminist theories of women's rights, customary institutions, as well as some empirical studies conducted in this connection in Ethiopia. *Chapter Three* provides background information about the Sidama community. It begins with a general background of the Sidama people. The chapter describes the location, population, social organization, and various institutions in which women are heavily engaged, perspectives of women, as well as important titles of women in Sidama. *Chapter Four* describes functions of yakka and the role of women in peace keeping. *Chapter Five* deals with the changes and continuities of the institution. It also presents the challenges and opportunities of the yakka institution. *Chapter Six* examines various customary institutions of women in light of the principles of human rights in general and women's rights in particular. Finally, *Chapter Seven* summarizes and concludes the study; it recommends possible mechanisms to reconstruct and revitalize the institution.





# 2

## LITRATURE REVIEW

**This chapter covers the conceptual framework for human rights in general and women's rights in particular. It also describes customary institutions in the context of women's rights. The theoretical foundation is centered on feminist approaches to women's rights. In addition, the chapter seeks to highlight several customary institutions dominated by women throughout Ethiopia.**

## 2.1. HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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The efforts of the United Nations with regard to international human rights protection began at the end of the 1940s and gave rise to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Since then, the United Nations has advocated human rights as part of its mandate (Kjaerum 2020:20). On the basis of moral precepts pertaining to what society views as essential to a decent living, it constitutes a system of standards controlling the treatment of persons and groups by state and non-state actors. These standards are included in national and international legal systems and procedures to provide remedy for victims of human rights violations and hold the duty-bearers accountable (Marks 2016:1). Indeed, these rights are rights inherent to all human beings (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:19).

In political science, moral philosophy, and jurisprudence, there are different theoretical disagreements on the origins, scope, and significance of human rights. According to Marks (2016), the term “human rights” is used in a variety of discourses driven by societal norms (legal/political discourse), moral principles (ethical discourse), or social mobilization (advocacy discourse) (Marks 2016:1).

Moreover, the fundamentals of human rights also address what they entail. According to its basic principles, human rights are fundamentally universal and inalienable, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. They are universal because everyone is born with the same rights, irrespective of place of residence, gender orientation, racial, religious, cultural, or ethnic background. They are inalienable because people’s rights can never be taken away. They are indivisible and interdependent because all rights – political, civil, social, cultural and economic – are

of equal significance and cannot be completely enjoyed without the others. They are equally applicable to everyone, and everyone has a say in decisions that impact their lives. They are strengthened by justifiable demands so that duty-bearers can be held accountable by international standards and the rule of law (UNESCO and UNHCR 2006:4).

In line with this, scholars constructed three sets of rights in an effort to describe the collection of human rights drawn from philosophy, history, and normative political theory. Currently, these categories are frequently used as a benchmark by practitioners and others while discussing human rights. These categories are: 1) civil and political rights; 2) economic, social, and cultural rights; and 3) solidarity rights (Landman 2005:2-3).

Civic and political rights uphold the individual's integrity before the law, as do the freedom to participate in civil, economic, and political society. Civil rights, when enforced, protect one's "personhood" and freedom from state-authorized intervention or violence. Political rights protect individuals' rights to engage in public and governmental activities. Civil and political rights have traditionally been seen as important human rights that all nation-state governments have a historical and conceptual commitment and responsibility to protect (Landman 2005:2-3).

These two categories of rights include the right to life; freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from slavery, servitude, and forced labor; the right to liberty and security of person; the right of detained persons to be treated with humanity; freedom of movement; the right to a fair trial; the prohibition of retroactive criminal laws; the right to recognition as a person before the law; the right to privacy; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; freedom of opinion and expression; the prohibition of propaganda for war and of incitement to national, racial, or religious hatred; freedom of assembly; freedom of association; the right to marry and have a family; the right to take part in public affairs; vote; be elected; and have access to

public office (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:20). These rights, according to Landman (2005), have been viewed as “negative” rights because they only need to be upheld in the absence of being violated (2005:2-3).

On the other hand, according to Landman (2005), economic, social, and cultural rights are often seen as an aspirational and programmatic set of rights that national governments ought to strive to achieve through progressive legislation. These rights are viewed as “positive” rights whose realization significantly depends on the fiscal capacity of states. Hence, they are considered less basic than the first set of rights (2005:2-3). Some of them include the right to work and have favorable working condition; the right to form and join trade unions; the right to social security, protection of the family; the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing; the right to health and education; the right to the benefits of culture; the right to indigenous land, rituals, and shared cultural practices (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:21).

Solidarity rights guarantee certain groups of people to possess the right to share the natural resources as well as those goods and products produced through procedures of economic growth, expansion, and innovation. These rights include the right to use public properties, like development and the environment. It aims at ensuring people have shared the benefits equally (Landman 2005:2-3).

Women’s rights, on the other hand, cover a wide range of issues. It is challenging to identify legal boundaries to define women’s rights. Mostly, it is related to job discrimination, sexual and domestic abuse, and reproductive rights. These days, feminist leaders mainly focus on the points where women’s rights and other issues converge, viewing these points as part of a greater movement for social justice. In other words, as long as women are part of the society, their rights continue to be issues (Rosenfeld 2007:4).

Moreover, the issues of women’s rights have caught great attention since the fourth World Conference on Women (WCW) held at Beijing in 1995. During the conference, Amnesty International launched a significant



campaign for the first time on women's rights with a motto: "Human Rights are women's Rights" (Ganzfried 2021:17). Indeed, the protection of human rights as a concept does not entirely exclude the rights of women. For instance, the 1945 UN charter acknowledged that everyone should have access to human rights and fundamental freedoms regardless of their gender (Otto 2018: 309). Women have been historically excluded from the establishment and application of human rights criteria and concepts. They have been victims of patriarchal domination. For this reason, a number of human rights violations, especially against women, have remained unchallenged until today (Amnesty International 2005 in Etsegent 2016:3).

Further, among the major international bill of rights which guarantee the rights of women, the document of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 is equally applicable to all individuals without discrimination based on sex, race, language, etc. It guaranteed women the full recognition of their humanity in international law for the first time, showing a significant departure from the long-standing legal depiction of women as lacking full legal and civil capacities. They ratified the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty in 1979 to raise attention to the entrenched nature of women's inequality and the necessity for considerable positive action. It is also considered as the fundamental international law that covers women's rights in political, social, economic, and cultural spheres (Otto 2018:309).

On the other hand, the DEVAW (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women) guarantees the fundamental rights of women under international law. It was put into action in 1993 so that states could prevent the violation of women's rights by investigating and prosecuting offenders in accordance with the state's legislation (Amnesty International 2020:15).

In addition, violations of women's rights such as violence against women, female genital mutilation, early marriage, and abduction are seen as violations of their rights under these international and national human

rights instruments. Such acts were also acknowledged by bodies of the UN human rights treaty as a violation of women's rights in their general observations (Etsegent 2016:4).

Despite these and other international agreements on women's rights, significant human rights crimes against women persisted. Fundamental human rights and UN values include achieving gender equality and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. However, women's human rights are regularly infringed throughout their lives, and respecting women's rights has not always been a major priority. As a result, in order to devise effective solutions to eradicate such discrimination, establishing equality between men and women necessitates a full understanding of the ways in which women are discriminated against and denied equality (United Nations Human Rights 2014:1).

The United Nations has a long history of addressing women's human rights, and in recent decades, significant progress has been made in achieving women's rights around the world. However, there are still significant disparities, and the realities of women are continually shifting as new forms of discrimination against them frequently emerge. Some women face additional forms of discrimination because of their age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, health, marital status, education, physical impairments, and social status, among other factors. Therefore, when developing policies and strategies to combat gender discrimination, it is critical to consider these intersecting forms of bias (Ibid).

Ethiopia has accepted all of the major international human rights treaties approved by the UN, including CEDAW. The country has also ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, as well as its Protocol on African Women's Rights. By ratifying these international and regional human rights accords, the country assumed responsibility for abolishing certain harmful cultural practices, including violence against women. One of these options is to enact new laws or change current ones to conform to international human rights standards (Etsegent 2016:5).

Etsegent (2016) explained the reasons for the violations of women's rights in Ethiopia in her study entitled: Major Gaps on the Rights of Women in Ethiopia. She claimed that the society is quite 'conservative' and 'traditional' (2016:3). Due to this, numerous violations of women's rights, including FGM, rape, abduction, and early marriage, are quite prevalent, especially in rural areas. FGM, for example, has been practiced for decades and continues to be practiced today. It has impacted 80% of the country's women, the majority of whom are supported by other women (Medhanit and Sofanit 2014:9).

Despite being criminalized and recognized as a violation of women's human rights under Ethiopian national laws, violence against women is nonetheless prevalent in the nation (Etsegent 2016:4). Another violation of women's rights that most rural Ethiopian women have been dealing with for a while is child marriage. According to surveys, one in every five girls marries before the age of 15, and two out of every five females marry before the age of 18 (Girls, not brides: Child marriage around the world: Ethiopia). Available at <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/childmarriage/Ethiopia>). Besides, the other two more significant obstacles to the realization of women's rights in Ethiopia are rape and abduction. Deep-seated customs and practices are frequently mentioned as the primary causes of such egregious violations of women's rights (Etsegent 2016:4).

Ethiopia's family code and constitution both respect the fundamental rights of women. The amended criminal code also made some harmful traditional practices including rape, FGM, and kidnapping as illegal acts. Despite the legislations and other measures, harmful cultural practices persist in Ethiopia. Women, even those who live in towns, are frequently subjected to violence on a daily basis. Deeply engrained traditional and cultural practices have an impact on fundamental women's rights (Ibid:5).

Besides, Ethiopian women attempted to defend and promote their human and women's rights through their institutions, either formal or customary. Of these customary institutions, *yakka* among the Sidama used to ensure women's rights against violence and other injustice.

## 2.2. CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND STATUS

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Scholars, development specialists, and government officials all had different perspectives on customary institutions. The majority of sociologists and political scientists have typically thought that customary institutions are informal since the state does not recognize them under the law or the constitution. To comprehend social reality, however, a diversity of disciplinary and methodological approaches are required due to the formal/informal dichotomy. However, according to Bassi (2012), when customary institutions are viewed from the perspective of local actors, they are regarded as 'formal' as opposed to the view of the nation-state, which sees them as 'informal' (Bassi 2012:2).

Customary law governs and regulates customary institutions. As with the concept of customary institution, there are problematic definitional concerns associated with customary law. The connotation associated with this term varies significantly because there are numerous contradicting and overlapping sociological and anthropological definitions of custom and customary rules. It has been given different names by different scholars (Muller 2003:31).

Some scholars have labeled customary law as "folk law", "people's law", "unofficial law", "indigenous law", or "primitive law" frequently implying that it is inferior to the current Western state-originating laws (Murade and Gebreyesus 2009:9). The expressions 'traditional law' and 'customary law' have been criticized for suggesting that non-state law is unchanged and static, while law is – like other aspects of culture – dynamic and subject to continuous change (Benda-Beckmann 2001) in Epplé (2020:18).

The terms 'people's law' and 'folk law' have been rejected for minimizing the forms of non-state law. The expression 'indigenous law' has been seen as giving the wrong impression, as indigenous societies that seemed untouched by European influence at the time of early ethnographic research had, in fact, already been vulnerable to outside influences (Merry 1988:876 - 877). The rather neutral term 'local law' has been suggested as 'a generic term for law that is being used and maintained at a local level, from whatever source it is derived' (Benda-Beckmann 2001) in Epple (2020:17). Cunneen & Schwartz (2005) defined customary law as retrospective and backward-looking (in Ayalew 2012:15-16).

Despite the criticism, customary law continues to play an important role in Africa and is now explicitly recognized in several African constitutions, although the level of recognition and legal areas recognized varies greatly depending on the country's history and colonial past (Merry 1991:89). In fact, it continues to be frequently used in both national and international laws and policy papers as well as in academics (Epple 2020:19).

According to Ndulo (2011), a large number of African lives are significantly impacted by customary law. Particularly, it has an impact on personal concerns like marriage, inheritance, and conventional authority. When it comes to issues like bride price, guardianship, inheritance, appointment to traditional roles, exercise of traditional authority, and the legal age of majority, it frequently discriminates in its application (2011:87-88).

Researchers have also looked at the connections between human rights and customary law. They protested in many international forums about how "culture", particularly in reference to rural areas or poor nations, is still portrayed as static and a barrier to change and growth. As a result, it appears that "culture" hinders the implementation of human rights (Epple 2020:5). Cultural rights are no longer upheld when the rights of those who are less powerful such as women, children, stateless people, the frail or the poor are infringed (Logan et al. 2010:14). They pointed out that several case studies have examined the difficulties of implementing human rights

in particular local contexts and how, in particular, women's rights and gender equality are frequently at odds with those values and practices (Epple 2020:5).

Furthermore, a number of events highlight clear discrepancies between traditional institutions and individual human rights, notably in the case of women. On the one hand, enforcing universal human rights can jeopardize a people's geographical or cultural rights as well as their integrity. On the other hand, a variety of harmful traditions are degrading and constitute human rights violations (Muluken 2021:35).

There is a major debate between human rights activists and traditionalists. The debate focuses on whether customary norms are consistent with the norms for human rights stated in international treaties and national bills of rights in national constitutions. Traditionalists contend that through advancing traditional values, customary law benefits the advancement of both women's rights and human rights. Human right advocates, on the other hand, claim that some customary law standards consider women as inferior. Women are typically viewed as adjuncts in the groups to which they belong, such as clans or tribes, rather than as equals (Ndulo 2011:87-88).

In addition, there is a debate about women's status in customary courts. Two main strategies have been developed in response to the problem. The first strategy presupposes that informal systems of customary courts fundamentally contradict with women's rights, hindering their access to and usage of formal courts. The second strategy seeks for a quick generalization that gender discrimination at customary courts is unacceptable. In addition to the advantageous general characteristics of accessibility, familiarity, and efficacy, there are model customary women courts that enable them to assure their access to justice. As a result, it must change informal systems to conform to international standards (Chopra and Isser 2011:24).

Regardless of its merits, the dominating discourse in this argument about women's rights in Africa's traditional legal systems has been linked to patriarchal cultural norms that place women in a subordinate position. In

general, these exclusions are deeply ingrained in the stifling patriarchal social organizational structures. Women are not allowed to have leadership or mediation positions in the customary institutions of dispute resolution because of the erroneous notion that they are intellectually inferior to males and cannot lead others effectively and efficiently. Such patriarchal tendencies frequently result in gender-based choices that restrict women's access to justice in addition to the under-representation of women and unequal power dynamics in customary courts (Meron 2015:3).

In most cases, they have male family members representing them to present their case and provide evidence. This limits women's ability to present equal evidence and arguments in response to opposing claims. A violation of the right to a fair trial would result from the usual failure of the court to provide each party an unrestricted opportunity to refute the other's arguments. Another form of discrimination utilized by customary courts is a gendered double standard in ownership, possession, administration, inheritance, and compensation, including property distribution following divorce (Ibid).

In addition, the majority of people in many civilizations use informal judicial systems as their main venue for resolving conflicts. The non-state informal justice institutions such as customary courts are where women regularly go to seek a remedy in this regard. In reality, a multitude of barriers and limitations prevent women from exercising their right to access justice (Chopra and Isser 2011:24).

Ethiopia has historically used customary law, as have the majority of African nations. Ethiopia was never colonized, unlike the majority of Africans, and there are no codified versions of local normative regimes there (although some indigenous conceptions are represented in areas of family law, successions, and property law) (Getachew 2020:44). The majorities of Ethiopia's non-state normative orders are still active and coexist with the state structure. Therefore, the term "customary law" is only used to describe local rules that are a living continuation of earlier types of legal arrangement when applied in the Ethiopian setting (Epple 2020:19).

In his book *Customary Law in Ethiopia: A Need for Better Recognition and Question*, Ayalew (2012:10-11) describes how customary rules and institutions view women as unlucky and weak. He pointed out that Ethiopian women, particularly those who reside in rural areas, typically have a lower standing when it comes to their social interactions. As she grows older, a female encounters numerous culture-based violations from the community. The traditional rules and practices of the various Ethiopian societies could attest to this observation.

According to Ayalew, most of the customary laws and practices in Ethiopia reflect discriminatory practices. Some consider the husband as the head of the family; therefore, in cases of disputes, the family arbitrators usually listen only to the husband, disregarding the voice of the wife. Ayalew (2012) harshly condemns the customary institution, using the Gurage as an example. He pointed out that the community has always been mainly male-orientated and that women are not allowed to attend traditional events. Women are prohibited not only from participating in conventional gatherings but also from presenting their own claims. Male relatives make claims on their behalf (Ayalew 2012:10-11).

Ayalew went on to explain how most civilizations do not consider women as human beings. Decisions that are biased and detrimental to their interests are typically the result. Numerous customary practices such as early marriage, marriage by abduction, exchange marriage, and marriage by payment of blood compensation; ignorance about religious doctrines; and negative perceptions on women's education put a heavy burden on women. According to some traditional beliefs, the family of a girl must give their daughter away as reparation to the family of the victim. A girl who is given away in this fashion is escorted right away to the victim's family to wed one of the men there. Through such actions, the girl is treated and seen as an object rather than a person (Ayalew 2012:10-11).

Unlike Ayalew's work, which mainly focused on the negative aspect of customary institutions on the lives of women and which considers women only as victims, Tuli Bayissa (2011), Liela Qashu (2016), and



Muluken Kassahun (2021) attempted to show how customary institutions empower women, by taking a case from the Oromo of Ethiopia. Muluken (2021) noted that several traditional institutions for women serve as an agency for women's emancipation among the Oromo. Women have their own distinct indigenous institutions and procedures that enable their socioeconomic and political participation in society from childhood. These organizations carry out a variety of duties to guarantee the protection of women's rights.

Similarly, this study on Sidama women sought to show how customary institutions support and protect women rather than oppress and harm them. It describes how women use customary institutions to resist violence and safeguard their rights. It also describes how these institutions help women as agents of empowerment.



## 2.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.3.1. Feminist Theories and Women's Rights

The reasons for women's oppression and subordination are a topic of contention among various feminist schools of thought. As Lorber (1997) noted, the main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained within the culture of the society. Gender inequality is common within marriage and families; work and the economy; politics; religions; the arts and other cultural productions; and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social, and not individual, solutions. In other words, feminist theory posits that oppression of women, solely due to their sex, is the result of dominant ideas and concepts of patriarchy (1997:7).

Among various ideologies of feminism, this study relies on the four major feminist theories:



Radical  
feminism



Liberal  
feminism



Socialist  
feminism



Cultural  
feminism

## Radical feminism

Promotes the basic ideas and concepts of feminism. Its proponents argue that oppression of women is the cruelest oppression around the world without distinction to race, culture, tradition, and religion. They also argue that there is a need for societal change; hence, putting legislations in place is not enough by itself to eradicate patriarchy. (Tong 2009:48). Therefore, the intention of radical feminists is to dismantle all patriarchal institutions, including the family, for the liberation of women. Radical feminists are interested in analyzing and then dismantling established gender norms in both the public and private worlds (Lorber 1997:17).

The theory also posits that men's control of women's sexual and reproductive lives and women's self-identity, self-respect, and self-esteem is the worst form of oppression in its type in human history (Tong 2009: 48).

## Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism on the other hand, claims that gender differences are not based on biology, and, therefore, that women and men are not all that different - their common humanity supersedes their procreative differentiation. If women and men are not different, then they should not be treated differently under the law. Women should have the same rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities (Lorber 1997: 9).

This feminist ideology has been the most popular one during the civil rights movement in the 1950's and the 1960's. According to this theory, patriarchy and oppression of women existed because of the socialization of men, not because there is a mental capacity difference between men

and women. Supporters of this theory argue that women should live a life they choose, not a life chosen by others. They should also be accorded equal political, economic, social, and cultural opportunities with men (Etsegent 2016:5).

Liberal feminist politics took important weapons from the civil rights movement – anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action – and used them to fight gender inequality, especially in the job market (Lorber 1997: 9).

Thus, these feminists who belonged to women’s rights groups, such as the National Organization for Women, believed they could achieve gender equality by reforming the “system” – by working to eliminate discriminatory educational, legal, and economic policies. Achieving equal rights for women was the paramount goal of these reformers. They advocate for women’s equal legal rights and participation in the public spheres of education, politics, and employment (Tong 2009:48).

## Socialist feminism

**Socialist feminism believes that there is a direct relationship between class structure and patriarchy. They decided to move, unlike the Marxist feminists, beyond relying on class as the sole category for understanding women’s subordination to men. Increasingly, they tried to understand women’s subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation (Tong 2009:48).**

They argue that men usually get rewarded because they produce things that have monetary value compared to women who tend to spend their time and energy in household activities that do not generate income. Socialist feminists believe that social roles are neither natural nor inherent to the human nature. According to the theory, class and gender

should be eradicated to overcome the oppression of women and women should equally participate in public spheres along with men. Unlike liberal feminism, which focuses on individual oppression, social feminism focuses on the societal relations among the community such as race, ethnicity, and the like (Cited in Etsegent 2016:5).

The last one, cultural feminism, argues that the enemy of women is not merely a social system or an economic institution or a set of backward beliefs but masculinity itself and, in some cases, male biology.

## Cultural feminist

Cultural feminist politics revolves around creating and maintaining a healthy, environment-free, masculinist values and all their offshoots for the female principle. Feminist theory, the explanation of sexism, and the justification of feminist demands can all be grounded securely and unambiguously on the concept of the essential female (Alcoff 1988:408). Thus, a significant biological difference between men and women should be celebrated because women by nature are more kind and gentle compared to men. As a result, cultural feminists argue that our world could be a better place and peaceful if it was ruled by women (Ibid: 410).

Even though there are several feminist theories that are not discussed in this paper, the above four theories are important to be used as a framework to this study. Each of the four theories discussed above, in one way or another, helps to explain the various women's rights issues. The patriarchal system that dominated the world is the result of socialization of boys and girls within a society. Therefore, gender roles ascribed to men and women are not inherent. In order to transform the status of women, it is not enough to enact legislations; it is also necessary to bring about attitudinal changes in the community.

## 2.4. EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON WOMEN'S CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

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Studies already conducted on Ethiopian women's customary institutions show that their contribution in promoting women's rights is considerably less important than their function in fostering peace and resolving disputes. As mentioned earlier, most studies deal with the way customary institutions violate basic rights of women.

Nevertheless, some studies have shown the role of women in peace building and the contributions of women-ruled institutions in the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of women in various social settings in Ethiopia.

Agnuak women have a peace-making institution known as *Don Kachel*, which literally means 'let us all live in peace'. A group of wise and elderly Agnuak women led by *Jaye* is involved in a peace-making initiative. The *Jaye* arbitrates disputes that arise between two disputing parties. The woman would say, "Let peace prevail in the district", as she concludes the negotiations (IIRR 2009:28). Elderly and well-respected women from a community in Raya-Azebo, Tigray, founded the *Debarte*, a center for peace-making. The *Debarte* is crucial in preventing the negative consequences of the culture of revenge (Ibid: 71).

Eyayu Kassaye (2020) showed the customary role of women in dispute resolution among the Erob people of Tigray in his systematic review of the role of women in indigenous conflict resolution and peace building in Ethiopia mentioning the works of Solomon (2014). Instead of women serving as community elders (*Aruha*) directly, the indigenous system has created a way for them to participate in the resolution of disputes. Being

sisters, mothers, and wives gives Erob women an indirect and informal authority within their society. Moreover, this demonstrates that, despite having the right to support (advise) male lineage members in difficult circumstances, women have little room to take on leadership responsibilities in settling intergroup conflicts. Women indirectly contribute to the indigenous system. They have a parallel role in the reconciliation process, offering ideas and viewpoints, despite the fact that they are only indirectly involved. Women have a unique responsibility during the ritual of homicide reconciliation; beyond preparing food and local drinks (Eyayu 2020: 4).

Another study by Mekuanit (2015) showed that the roles of women in the *Shimgilina* (elders' meeting among the Amhara) vary from place to place. There is no female-based institution that operates to resolve conflicts and protect the rights of women and their leadership and decision-making positions. Sociocultural attitudes and lack of the necessary experience make it difficult for women to take part in public decision-making processes in some areas. However, in other areas, there are still women who present their cases in the *Shimgilina* through their male relatives, and their participation as mediators is very limited. However, sometimes, women play numerous roles in handling conflicts in families and neighborhoods. They are believed to be engines of peace in families (Mekuanit 2015:101).

Women in Gamo play a significant role in halting a conflict and preventing it from escalating further. Even though they mostly act as advisors, they have been crucial in persuading their male relatives to put an end to the bloodshed. The contribution of women to decision making in the settlement of indigenous conflicts is minimal; they take on a supporting role (Astatike 2020:1183).

Besides their role as peace-making agents, women in different parts of Ethiopia have institutions which empower and promote them to exercise their power and rights. For instance, Leila (2016), in her dissertation, attempted to show how women in Arsi use their customary institution to

ensure their rights. For the Arsi women, the term for rights is *mirga* (literally meaning 'right'), which refers to the respect and honor that a person enjoys. Arsi women enjoy a unique spiritual standing in their community. They define their rights in terms of honor and respect because they are spiritually sacred, blessed, and highly respected (*wayyuu*). For example, if a woman is insulted or abused, this is a moral and legal violation against her honor and respect, and she then requests an *ateetee* ceremony to make things right. In the *ateetee* procedure, women sing disparaging songs to and about the offender while they travel to and in front of their target's residence. If the offender agrees to sacrifice a cow, the women bless him/her with songs and prayers in front of elders who stood to mediate the case. There is an indigenous language of rights in terms of respect and honor, but Arsi women have also localized the universal idea of women's rights (*mirgadubartoota*). They refer to *ateetee* locally by using the term "*mirgadubartoota*", and they also use it to seek rights like divorce and property ownership, including land that *ateetee* does not include (Lelela 2016: 4-5).

Oromo women use a peace stick called *siiqqee*. *Siiqqee* works to protect women's rights and foster peace. Fighting men stop fighting when a woman holds her *siiqqee* and stands between them. A mother gives her daughter this item of material culture the day before her wedding. It is a symbol of respect for married women (Endalkachew 2018:9). For instance, if a woman has *siiqqee*, which denotes that she is married, she has the spiritual authority to ask *Umaa* (the Creator or God) to give children to a barren woman, stop a catastrophe, bring rain, and pray for peace. She can also call on the community to act in solidarity, inform society that there is a conflict in the community, and preach peace for all and respect for humanity (Wake 2021:46).

A study among the Kembata people of southern Ethiopia also demonstrated that women act as peace makers by using their feminine identities. It is a popular belief that women are limited to household tasks and are not allowed to participate in public activities such as resolving



conflicts. In this aspect, the Kembata women are crucial in preventing a confrontation from escalating by shouting out “*elelelele*” and laying down their scarves (Abebe et al. 2015:240-241).

In addition to these peace-building and rights-based practices and institutions of women, some of the studies have dealt with forms of localized, community-based associations through which women have tried to help each other in times of social and economic difficulties (Gemma 2013:98).

For instance, women in south Wollo of the Amhara Region founded a women's court known as *weresh*. Although it was initially created to help women, males can also consult the *weresh* if they are having marital issues (IIRR 2009:60).

One such group, the *maheber* (a religious association), is usually established with the support of a church in the neighborhood. *Idir* is established for helping one another; money is collected and given to individuals in need, particularly after funerals, to cover the associated costs (Gemma 2013:98).

Before and after the delivery of a baby, the Kembatta perform a *qeneffa* party. As a form of social security, the party assists and supports the new mother. When the mother learns she is expecting, she starts planning for this event and announces her news by borrowing a legume (a special butter pot). She keeps butter in this pot for the *qeneffa* festival. The women come at the home on the day of the *qeneffa* around noon to start preparing for the party. They give money to purchase cheese for the meal. Everyone contributes within her means. The women chat, sing, and enjoy the cuisine during the party. Obviously, talking about babies is crucial, and topics like child raising and family planning come up frequently. The *qeneffa* celebration may last till midnight. If the husband of the hostess happens to be present, the women will approach him and demand money. He usually goes out to visit his friends or family to give them freedom and returns home after the party is over (IIRR 2003:20).

Likewise, *antrosht* is a mother's-day festival, which glorifies womanhood and femininity, which are worth promoting and reconstructing, among the Gurage women. During the festival, women of the Gurage enjoy and cherish their feminine identity. Even though this ceremony is now abandoned, research has been investigating the early ways of celebrating *antrosht* in Gurage. According to studies, women in their day-to-day lives are involved in several productive and reproductive roles. First, they heavily participate in agricultural activities such as *enset* production and livestock rearing. Second, they take full responsibility for domestic work. To take a relief from these tiresome and routine roles, they created a big ceremony, *antrosht*. That made society gives recognition to women's social contributions and celebrate their womanhood and motherhood. Their husbands even slaughter a lamb or a sheep to celebrate the occasion. The day becomes a great day of feasting, with special dishes, drinks, music, dancing, and a variety of rituals. Further, the women themselves eulogize their womanhood and transfer messages related to their feminine identity. They also discuss issues concerning their household chores, social relations, rights and duties, and reproductive roles (Netsebrak 2009:27).

Again, in the Chench and Dita areas of rural Gamo Gofa, women get together to form traditional cooperatives known as *Tsire*. There could be up to 20 members in these cooperatives. The group brings tools to the particular member's home on the specific day following her request of the leader for help. After she asks the leaders to arrange the meeting, depending on the situation and the kind of request, the material assistance may include hauling manure, harvesting grain, ginning cotton, or spinning thread (IIRR 2003:33).



# 3

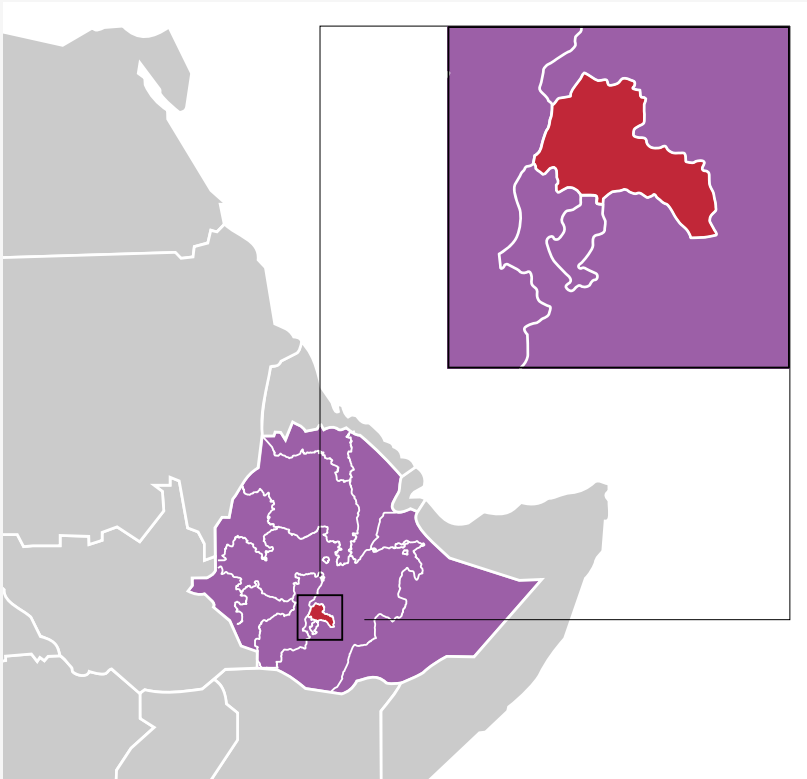
## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**This section attempts to provide information on the Sidama people, including its settlement and economic activities. The section also describes aspects of the social organization of the Sidama such as marriage systems and relevant institutions of women and their roles. Besides, it describes women's perspectives and important titles they hold in the society.**

## 3.1. THE SIDAMA PEOPLE AND THEIR SETTLEMENT

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Sidama is one of the ethnic groups of Ethiopia. It belongs to the Cushitic language family residing in what is now known as the Sidama Region. The Sidama Region is found in the southeastern part of Ethiopia. It is located at a latitude north of the equator, between 6° 14' to 7° 18' north and 37° 92' to 39° 14' longitudes (Sidama Region Culture and Tourism Bureau 2021).



Previously, the region was under the administrative structure of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPR), but since 2019, it has become the tenth Ethiopian regional state with an independent regional structure, becoming the Sidama National Regional State. The region borders with Oromia in the north, northeast, east, south-east, southwest, and northwest, and SNNPR in the south-central (Gedeo Zone) and western (Wolayitta Zone) sides. The region is estimated to be 6806.231/6981.8 square kilometers (Sidama Region Culture and Tourism Bureau 2021).

The Sidama Region is divided into 524 *kebel's*, 19 districts, 2 town administrations, and 19 towns (SNNPR 2017). Since the region is an emerging one, the new administrative structure is yet to be developed. Hawassa, which is the capital city of the region, is located in the extreme north of the region adjacent to Lake Hawassa, 270 kilometers south of Addis Ababa.

According to the 2007 national census, the total population of Sidama was estimated to be three million (CSA 2007). The Sidama people speak their own Cushitic language (locally known as Sidamu *afoo*), which belongs to the eastern highland Cushitic sub-group of the Ethio-Cushitic family of languages (Kawachi 2007:2).

Many and diverse religious groups live in the region, Christianity being the dominant one. The 1994 census data reveals that only 14.9% of the people practiced the indigenous religion whereas 66.8% were protestant, 7.7%, 4.6%, and 2.3% professed Islam, Catholicism, and the Ethiopian Orthodox, respectively (Central Statistical Authority, 1995). Because of the spread of Christianity and other factors, the indigenous religion declined and now accounts for only 3% of the population (Markos 2014:63).

Other than the religious groups, the Sidama people have two ancestral forefathers known as Bushe and Maldea. These two ancestors are sub-divided into various clans. The Bushe group comprises Hadicho,

Holo-garbicho, Malga, Faqisa-Tumano, and Awacho whereas Hawela, Qewena, Sawola, Alata, Darasha, Dafina, Alawa, Hoffa, and Fardano belong to the Maldea group (Markos et al 2011:27).

The Sidama are a patriarchal society in which men/husbands decide on significant social, economic, and political issues, both inside and outside the home. They also adhere to the patrilocal, which requires newlyweds to build their home on or near the property of the groom's father. Regarding systems of descent, the Sidama are patrilineal in that they count their descent through the male's/father's line (Dagne 2021:8).

The Sidama customarily practice clan exogamous marriage. Even though monogamy is the accepted form of marriage, polygyny has also been practiced, though its practice has decreased due to the expansion of the Protestant religion. The family is the basic unit of resource holding and decision making. However, power within the family is not evenly distributed among members. The dominance of men in the economic, social, and political spheres is apparent. The husband is the breadwinner and principal decision maker over major resources such as land and livestock (Ibid).

The main economic activities of the Sidama are cultivating both seeds and root crops and keeping large herds of cattle (Sintayehu 2002:33). *Enset* (*Ensete ventricosum*) is the main staple food of the society (Quinlan et al 2015:314).

This research was conducted in two districts of the Sidama Region, namely, Malga and Wondogent Districts (See page 20 about the details of the districts).

The Sidama have various customary institutions, which they use to govern and administer their social, political, and economic lives. Either males or females who have special knowledge and privilege in society lead the institutions.

## 3.2. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND WOMEN'S INSTITUTIONS

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### 3.2.1. Marriage System

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions in Sidama. The event goes according to the customs and rules of the society. If a young man needs to marry a girl, many things are taken into consideration before the marriage. Marrying a woman from one's own patrilineage or matrilineage is strictly prohibited (*Bosaallo*) because of the rules of exogamy. This rule also applies to sexual intercourse.

Among the Sidama, there are four major types of marriage. These are:

#### i. Huchato

This type of marriage is the most traditional, and the parents of the bride and groom usually arrange it. In such type of marriage, once the ideal partner is found, the boy's father and the village elder's (*chimesa*) visit the girl's father at his house. The girl's father welcomes the boy's father and the guests on their first visit. Then, after hearing the proposal for marriage from the guests, the girl's father gives them an appointment for the response. This may take two or three months.

After around two or three months, the groom's father returns to ask for the girl again. Once the father of the girl approves the marriage, there will be discussions concerning the wedding day. Until her wedding day, the girl will be fed a special diet of meat, milk, and *bursame* (*enset* flour combined with butter) to make her look more beautiful, attractive, and healthy. On the wedding day, when the groom is ready to take the bride, the bride's father warns him, saying, "I have given you my daughter. I give you all the things she possesses, but not her eyes or teeth, or legs, or body." Through this figurative expression, the father reminds the groom that he must avoid any physical attack on his daughter. The day after the marriage ceremony, the groom's mother prepares and serves special food and drinks to the couple. Then, they eat and drink together (In5 Woshasoyamu *kebele*: August 2022).

Eating and drinking together symbolizes the complete union of the couple. After this day, the bride and the bridegroom enjoy their honeymoon from three to six months until the arrival of the new year, which is known as *fichee chamballa* (Birhan 2021:39).

## ii. Adawana

This type of marriage depends on the interests of the girl. Despite being the most conventional, it is currently considered less significant in Sidama marriage customs. When a girl becomes fertile and ready for marriage, she may start looking for a potential husband. She starts by looking for the ideal mate. Once she has found the right candidate, she tries her best to persuade him for marriage. If the boy refuses to accept her proposal, she will take a long stick called a *seennu siqqo*, meaning 'girls' stick', and goes to the boy's mother's house. The mother asks her: "Why did you come here?" Then, the girl responds, "I came for *adawana*." The boy's mother then welcomes her. The mother provides food and beverages



to the girl. The boy will be informed about the situation later. He cannot reject the marriage in any way (FGDf Woshasoyamu *kebele*: August 2022).

According to Sidama custom, a boy cannot reject an *adawana* girl. It is thought that if he rejects her, the girl will curse him, causing him to lose his money or encounter other unpleasant experiences (Sintayehu 2002:47).

The *Adawana* marriage ceremony is simpler than other kinds of marriage. However, a woman who marries through *adawana* receives less respect from her husband, her family, her friends, and the society as a whole.

### iii. *Dii'ra* (abduction)

According to informants, the *Dii'ra* marriage type was not originally a marriage tradition of the Sidama. Rather, it was introduced due to different factors, such as the long process of the *Huchato* marriage type, the denial of the marriage proposal by a girl's family, and the inability of a bridegroom to pay a bride wealth. An adult boy who has decided to take a girl by force will discuss the issue with his friends, brothers, and male relatives. Then, they will arrange an appropriate time and place to abduct the girl. On a convenient day, they take the girl forcefully. If she resists, the men may beat her. After the abduction, they take her to the house of the boy's family.

Unfortunately, a girl who has been abducted loses her virginity, and she would remain with no choice but to accept the offer. The only chance left for her will be to marry the boy. The boy's family then sends elders to the girl's family for reconciliation. Usually, there is no way for her family to reject the marriage, either, as they expect that the girl has already lost her virginity.

#### iv. *Adulsha (elopement)*

Recently, the *Adulsha* marriage type has become the most common type of marriage though it was originally not known by the society. The marriage is organized without the family's consent. The boy persuades the girl to leave her family's home. This marriage is practiced for different reasons. One of the main reasons is to avoid the long procedures of the *huchato* marriage. The other reason is to avoid arranged marriage by the girl's family. When the family of the girl intends to give her to another man who she is not interested in, she decides to leave with the one whom she loves. Then, the lovers fix a date and the girl elopes to the house of the boy's parents. Later, she lets her parents know that she has eloped with someone by sending a message and a gift called *mine worro*.

After the girl's family realizes their daughter has eloped, a negotiation with the boy's family begins. After a long process of negotiation, the bride's wealth is determined and sent to the girl's family and a wedding ceremony begins.



## 3.3. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES OF WOMEN

The traditional Sidama people practice an indigenous religion based on the belief that the Creator makes appearances through various rites and processions (Markos 2014:61). There are women-only religious institutions and practices that manifest it on different occasions. These include:

### i. *Woxa*

*Woxa* is considered the feminine spirit, called *ayyana*, among the Sidama women. The women have their own *woxa* spirit that they respect and adore. They call the spirit when infertility occurs and during the time of labor. If a woman is unable to conceive a baby, she prays for *woxa* to give her a child. Then, when she gets pregnant, she prepares a gift and goes with other village women to a river bank to conduct a ritual dedicated to *woxa*.

Moreover, the women call on the spirit of their own *woxa* to escape from domestic attack by their spouse, saying '*woxa agartohe*', meaning 'I beg you in the name of my *woxa*'. When she says this to him, the husband restrains himself from doing anything bad, such as beating or insulting her. It is believed that anyone who defies this rule and beats his wife will be taken to the yakka court and will be punished for his act of disrespecting the honor of femininity.

When there is shortage of rain, famine, or disease, the women walk to a hill or a river valley to beg the goddesses of their feminine spirits. Every woman in the village must participate in the *woxa* ceremony, which is conducted by their leader, *randicho*. One of the elderly male informants in Woshasoyamu *kebele* (In1 August 2022) said,



**"We ask women to pray to their *woxa* spirits when there is a delay in the rainy season or when it ceases to rain untimely. Surprisingly, it starts to rain when they head to the river and begin singing and pleading."**

## ii.Falo

Sidama women arrange and perform *falo*, a ritual ceremony for a variety of reasons in times of problems such as lack of rain, war, starvation, disease, infertility, and drought. The *falo* ritual is also associated with worshiping and begging the *woxa* spirit of femininity. The community asks women to do a *falo* ritual in times of suffering because they strongly believe that God hears and answers women's pleas. The ritual mostly takes place on a hill, under a tree, or along riverbanks. All women, including unmarried ones, must participate in the *falo* ritual. They prepare different foods and drinks for the ceremony, which is accompanied by a song.

When the women march to the ritual place, the people on their way, including men and the elderly, put their swords or sticks on the ground and clip fresh grass and throw it to the women, showing their respect.

However, due to the arrival of Christianity in the region, the *falo* ritual has almost been abandoned and is no longer practiced by the women.

### 3.3.1. Social Institutions of Women

Other than religious practices and institutions, Sidama women have a variety of ceremonies and festivals that they use to strengthen their social networks and discuss a wide range of issues concerning social and household chores. The following are some of the social rituals that are practiced by women in Sidama society.

#### i. Gumata

*Gumata* is a type of gift given by relatives, friends, and in-laws during delivery or circumcision of a newborn. *Gumata* can be given in kind such as butter, milk, *was*, some edible product from *enset* plant (e.g. *bula*), the finest product of *enset* plant, or a sheep/lamb. The gift could also be offered in cash.

Both men and women participate in *gumata*, but the man who wants to give *gumata* must gather a group of women known as *gugahe*, who are chosen to deliver the present. Thus, among the Sidama women, it is a privilege to be recruited for *gumata*. If the woman is married, she has to get permission from her husband to join the group of *gugahe*. However, they typically allow their wives to go because refusing to send them is socially unacceptable.

Then, the group of women, including relatives and friends, go to the house, singing and chanting. When they go to a woman who has delivered a baby, they will bless the woman as soon as they arrive, saying, '*ilancho iloe iloe*' (Ki1 August 2022), meaning 'congratulations on having a baby'.

The groups of women are served with food and drinks. The event also creates a good opportunity for women to discuss and resolve their own socioeconomic problems. They suggest solutions to some of the social problems by sharing experiences.

## ii. Woowaxo

Among the Sidama, a pregnant woman is respected, and people wish her to have a safe delivery. She is not allowed to do heavy household chores such as scraping *enset* and carrying heavy things. People around the pregnant woman show respect and sympathy; they say '*lame lubbonni no*' (FG3 August 2022), meaning 'she is carrying two souls'. As the due date approaches, she prepares food items for the delivery day and beyond.

In the past, a traditional birth attendant conducted the delivery of a newborn baby. The new mother is supposed to be brave and strong during her labor. When the pregnant woman delivers the baby, the other women around her announce the coming of the new baby with ululation. If the newborn is a baby boy, they will ululate four times, but if it is a baby girl they do so three times. They serve the new mother with porridge prepared from *bula* and butter.

Then, the ritual ceremony, which is called *woowaxo*, is carried out on the third day of the delivery (if the newborn is a male) or on the fourth day (if the newborn is a female). On that day, relatives, neighbors, and friends gather at the new mother's house to perform the ritual ceremony of bathing. They use various local leaves that have a pleasant aroma, and the husband or the father of the newborn brings water for bathing. Then, the husband leaves the house when the ritual of bathing is conducted. This bathing is specifically called *waa kadha*. The new mother's husband slaughters a sheep or a lamb, mixes the blood of the animal with butter,

and gives the mixture to his wife. The drink is given to the new mother to replace the blood she lost during delivery. A husband who fails to provide things essential to this ritual is condemned by society for failing to take care of his wife.

On the day of *woowaxo*, the women cook and serve the new mother. They enjoy the food, and they chat and sing a song, *ilaancho iloe*. Sometimes the *woowaxo* ritual becomes so special if the mother has been waiting for a long time to have the baby. There will be a great feast and ritual for such a special delivery of a baby. Every woman in the village must take part in this. A woman braids the new mother's hair in a style called *bonkooye* after three months of her stay at the homestead, which signifies her status as a new mother.

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### 3.3.2. Customary Political Institutions of the Sidama and Women's Role

Among the Sidama, *luwa* (a generational class system) and *songo* (elders' council) are the dominant customary political institutions which function only with the male line. However, these institutions exclude women from participation though there are some ways of allowing them to contribute their part.

#### 3.3.2.1. *Luwa* ( a Generational Class System)

The *luwa* system is one of the customary institutions of the Sidama society. *Luwa* is a generational class or age-set system that is practiced as a way of transforming generational leadership. In other words, it is an age grade system that deals with the promotion of a generation from youth to adulthood. Age sets are groupings composed of males entering adulthood. A new group of adolescent boys are initiated in a ceremony held approximately every eight years (Markos 2014:60).

It is believed that the Sidama have been practicing this system since time immemorial as a mechanism of mentoring, training, and initiating the youth to take up multifaceted social, economic, cultural, ritual, and political roles. The system has social, ritual, cultural, political, and military dimensions through a common rite of passage and passes through five generational cycles revolving approximately every eight years. It takes about 40 years to complete the cycle (Ibid).

In short, the system determines the culture and social activities of the Sidama people. Circumcision, marriage, ritualistic activities, the mourning ceremony, and many other practices are well connected to the *luwa* system.

Despite the massive role of men in this system, the role of Sidama women in such a generational system is only limited to serving food and drinks and performing dances and songs during feasts. The limited roles they have are observed during the commencement and closing sessions of the celebrations, i.e. providing food and drinks as well as singing songs and performing dances. As a *gudumale* (a member of the elders' council) elder in Wotoranakichema kebele stated,



**"During the initiation rites of *luwa*, men are forbidden to have any contact (sexual contact) with a woman since it is believed that he will be 'impure'. Thus, men try to avoid any communication with the women and women are not allowed to be around the ritual places."**

The implication of Markos's (2014) observation concerning the limited participation of women in the *luwa* system is worth mentioning here:



**The exclusion of women from direct participation in the generational class system can be expressed in terms of their limited roles and responsibilities in managing the ritual and participating in sociopolitical affairs of the community (2014:107).**

In contrast to this observation, Ambaye (2016) shows how women participated in the *luwa* ritual process beyond preparing food and beverages. This takes place while ritual performance called *logo* is conducted. This ritual is a kind of purification ceremony performed by the *chimesa* on a would-be promoted man's wife. Thus, a man who is going to be promoted in the *luwa* system has to conduct a *logo* ritual to his wife. Ambaye (2016:62) noted: "If she does not go through this purification ritual, her newly promoted husband cannot eat food brought or prepared by her, since the purpose of the *logo* ritual is to remove 'uncleanliness' from his wife."

After this ritual, the wife is able to serve him and provide him with food. He concluded: "Despite the fact that in many situations the role of women is frequently muted, women are at the center of the Sidama *luwa* system since the man's promotion is nothing without the purification of his wife" (2016:62).

The above argument is substantiated by a *gudumale* elder informant from Wotoranakichema *kebele* (Ki5, August 2022): "Though it is often assumed that women are only confined to preparing food and drinks, they are in fact the ones who make the promotion of a man in the *luwa* system complete. A man who does not have a wife and thus does not perform *logo* purification for her will not get the full status within the *luwa* system as expected."

### 3.3.2.2. *Songo* (Elders' Council)

The elders' council system among the Sidama is one of the fundamental components of traditional political leadership. It is a form of governing system composed of notable members of the community who preside over the sociocultural, economic, and political affairs of the community. Age and experience are highly valued in Sidama society where individuals who are older and more experienced are always accorded respect. The elders' council in Sidama is called *songo* (Markos 2014:113).

There are four levels of council which discuss and make decisions on issues that are important to the society. These include *ayidu songo*, *oollu songo*, *garote songo*, and *mootete songo*.

*Oollu songo* is the lowest level council where the majority of concerns deemed to be minor in terms of their importance are brought forward and handled. The council at this level is made up of lineage or kin members. The number of *oollu songo* is significant because each neighborhood has its own *oollu songo*. It is rather an internal council that mostly deals with issues and concerns of nuclear and extended families, close relatives, and neighbors (Markos et al. 2011:245).

The second-level council, known as *ayidu songo*, includes a larger variety of neighborhoods than *oollu songo* does. It incorporates highly esteemed and well-known elders of the community. It resolves cases and problems that cannot be resolved at the level of *oollu songo*. The *ayidu songo*, which has the authority to examine cases that the first level of *songo* is unable to resolve, is made up of those who actively participate in the *oollu songo*. This level of *songo* meets only when a problem is brought to its notice; there are no regular meetings or sessions (Ibid).

The third level of the council of elder's hierarchy is known as the *garote songo* or *boossote songo*. This body, which is made up of the all the members of the sub-groups of the clan, primarily focuses on issues that are important to all members. Moreover, this body has the power to review appeals that are not resolved by the *ayidu* and *oollu songos*, the lower-level *songos*. Most of the time, this *songo* has a permanent location

and meeting schedule. It functions at the level of a sub-clan that has a greater membership and geographic coverage. The main coordinator and speaker of this *songo* is referred to as the *garo* (Ibid.).

*Mootete songo* is the highest level of the *songo* system. It functions as a clan council made up of all the respected clan elders. It is led by *Moote Orgeelo*, with the help of the *Woma* (a leader who administers religious and cultural issues in the clan) and *Gadaana* (who also leads a *luwa*). Decisions made and a resolution taken by this committee is final and unappealable. Its duties go beyond straightforward administrative and adjudicative issues; it focuses on difficult issues like murder and intra-group and inter-group disputes (Markos et al. 2011:246).

The role and status of women in the four types of elder's councils are very limited since the system of the council functions only within the male line. However, women play roles in influencing the views and decisions of individual members of the elder's councils, either through entering into oral communication or participating in songs that are full of metaphor and pun that indirectly convey their intention. In this manner, women express their views, preferences, discomfort, complaints, observations, and grievances in various ways that influence their spouses and male relatives.

Thus, women often participate in facilitating and conducting ceremonies and rituals in the process of forming traditional leadership bodies and power holders. In some cases, women also have the right to access an elder's council to present their cases through their leader called *Qaricho*. A *qaricho* attends a *songo* meeting and submits cases that she has gathered from a group of women.

## 3.4. WOMEN IN SIDAMA AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES

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Men and women among the Sidama have different roles and status. These roles and status are governed by the rule of gender-based division of tasks. Due to the dominant patriarchal ideology, women's status is undervalued and men's status is highly valued. Thus, women's activities are mostly confined to household chores, child bearing, and the nurturing of infants, whereas men are engaged in farm labor and cattle rearing (Sintayehu 2002:81).

Furthermore, in terms of access to resources, women are denied the rights of inheriting and transferring land and livestock. These two resources are highly valued among the Sidama (Dagne 2021:9; Sintayehu 2002:67). However, they can fully own and access products made from livestock. The women could sell or exchange these products if there is surplus production beyond home consumption. Concerning this issue, a woman informant from Woshasoyamu *kebele* (Ki2 August 01, 2022) stated: "Sidama women have full rights over by-products of livestock such as eggs, milk, butter, and cheese. Men are not allowed to access such products at all. If women work hard, produce more of these products, and make them available for sale, they will be able to empower themselves economically."

Another issue that shows the place of Sidama women in the society is the circumcision rites of both sexes<sup>1</sup>. The place of women in these highly valued social activities is considered very low. It was something meant for males because it guaranteed a new social status within the *luwa* system (a system that determines the culture and social activities of the Sidama people). Thus, great feasts and ritual ceremonies are prepared when boys

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1 Currently the circumcision of female is one of the harmful traditional practices and considered a crime

are circumcised. Nevertheless, during the circumcision of a girl, no ritual ceremonies and feasts are made since the circumcision of girls does not have any meaning associated with the *luwa* system. Rather, circumcision for a woman is just a sign of getting ready for marriage in the near future.

Sidama people prefer a male child to a female one as he is considered an asset. However, it is also believed that a girl in a family strengthens kinship ties within the community, and the birth of a baby girl to a family is taken positively.

Women play a significant role in enhancing the status of men in the society. A man who has married has a better social status and is able to obtain various societal privileges given to men. An elderly informant (In 1 Woshasoyamu *Kebele*: August 2022) stated,



**“Women in Sidama are respected since it is believed that they are the ones who give birth to a hero.”**

However, the status of Sidama women within the ideology of patriarchy is considered low although the oral history of Queen Fura has been a source of pride for women in Sidama. According to oral tradition, the history of Queen Fura goes back to the 14th or 15th century when she is said to have reigned for about seven years.



**Picture 1:** Portrait of Queen Fura of Sidama

**Source:** <https://www.worancha.com/2015/01/html?m=1>

Substantiating the oral history about the Queen, an elderly woman informant from Woshasoyamu *kebele* (Ki2 August 01, 2022) said, “Due to her support for women, she established a matriarchal government; she was referred to as a ‘Friend of Women’ (*mentu biilo*) rather than the ‘Queen of Sidama’.” She was regarded as an intelligent woman and she encouraged females to resist against male authority. She also advised women to conceal their private parts, maintain their beauty, and keep men at bay. Beyond this, she assigned men to do menial tasks while organizing the women to join the fighting in the battle fields after her observation that men were losing battles. She also used to give them impossible assignments like using a sieve to collect water (Ki1, Ki5: August 2022).

According to the oral tradition, she killed men, particularly bald, elderly, and short ones. She targeted old men because they were respected among the Sidama society and could effectively confront her. The men sought the assistance of one of the older and wiser men in the society. Then, they hid him in a cave beside a river, where he served them as a secret advisor. For instance, when the Queen asked them to build a castle in the air, the wise old man advised them to ask the Queen to lay the foundations (Ki5 August 2022).

Nigussie (2005) also noted how girls sing the adventure of Queen Fura in their *Danbaryo*<sup>2</sup> songs and he narrated the message of the song as follows:

**Fura is a legendary queen who came to the throne in the land of the Sidama. She is taken as a freedom fighter for Sidama women. Fura *mentu billo* means Fura is a friend of women. The deprivation women’s rights and their servitude to men resulted in the anger of *Magano* and**

2 *Danbaryo* songs are sung by girls. Most of the time, the songs are used to express women’s problems, and they clearly show the subordination of women (Nigussie 2005:47).

***Bato*, which in turn led to the coming to power of Fura. Fura always called women and advised them to treat all males harshly. The reason was just to teach all males who used to maltreat the females a lesson. And women curse the person who killed her saying, ‘*Fura shihu shimmo*’, which means ‘let he who killed Fura dissolve and decay’.**

**Therefore, the poem [song by the girls] describes Queen Fura, who was loved by women and finally killed by an old man who was bald. And the girls in their poems praise Fura and curse the old man who killed her. Males in Sidama society did not feel comfortable about Fura’s treatment of males and, as a result, they bitterly hated her (Nigusse 2005:47-48).**

Thus, these and other popular oral narratives about the legendary Queen based on the oral history of the Sidama gave women reason to look up to her as their hero and role model, unlike men, whom they considered as their enemy. Regarding this, a woman informant in Wotoraresa kebele (Ki1 August 2022) said during the interview, “No matter what the status of Sidama women is now, their name will always be associated with the legendary Queen Fura, which is our ever bright source of pride.”

## 3.5. IMPORTANT TITLES OF WOMEN IN SIDAMA

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### 3.5.1. Qaricho

*Qaricho* is the title that has been given to the leader of the yakka institution. It is the highest rank in the institution for women. The village women select the leader based on her special ability and wisdom. She is the one who knows the norms, traditions, and customs of her society. She is regarded as a sacred and righteous woman, and even God, *magganoo*, listens to her prayers. She is also considered the mother of all village women, as she comforts women during difficult times. She is the one who listens to every woman and keeps their secrets to herself. She is a mentor and a role model.

*Qaricho* holds a special stick, *siqqo*, which symbolizes her honor and power. The *Qaricho* holds her *siqqo* when there is some special event in the community such as prayers, weddings, and death or when some emergencies occur. Everyone in the community respects and obeys her. Everybody gives her respect when she is moving around in the village, holding her *siqqo*. *Siqqo* is not used for other purposes.

A *Qaricho* can take any case to the elders' council, *songo*. The members of the *songo* do not proceed to other cases before they hear from the *Qaricho* and give a solution. This is because it is believed that women's grievances are heard by *maganoo*. Most of the time, a *Qaricho* takes marriage-related cases she has heard from the women. Most of the time, unlike a *randicho*, a *qaricho* is the wife of the *Chimesa* (the leader of *songo* members).

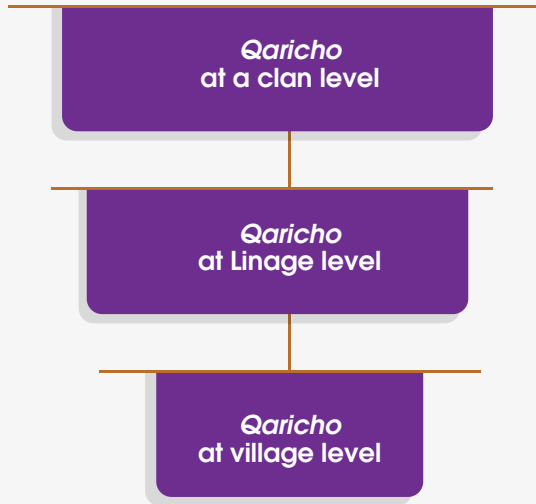




**Picture 2:** Qaricho with her siqqo in Wotoraresa Kebele

**Source:** Photo taken by the researcher, 16/08/22

Further, based on the role of a *qaricho*, Dilu (2001) attempted to show the hierarchy/structure of *qaricho* and how it functions. He stated that the hierarchy of a *qaricho* can be organized into three hierarchies, i.e. the clan level, the lineage level, and the village level in an ascending order. The clan-level *qaricho* is the highest hierarchy where the *qaricho*'s authority is settling issues beyond the capacity of the lineage-level *qaricho*. The lineage-level *qaricho* is appointed by virtue of her wisdom and skills of public speaking. She handles cases with her lineage. A village-level *qaricho* is an old, respected lady of a village or neighborhood (2001:33-34).



**Figure 1:** Hierarchy of *Qaricho*

**Picture:** Adopted from Dilu (2001:33)

### 3.5.2. Randicho

*Randicho* is the status given to an elderly woman who is known for her performance and facilitation during religious ritual ceremonies. She conducts and leads the *falo* and *woxa* religious ceremonies. When she leads the ceremonies, she holds her *siqqo*, which symbolizes her agency and power. She can also be the eldest sister among siblings since the Sidama have a special place for elderly people.

According to Ambaye (2016), a *randicho* is also feared for her power to deliver curses. If a *randicho* curses someone, it is widely believed that bad luck will befall such a person and make his/her life miserable. Moreover, a *randicho* is highly regarded for her role in resolving disputes, as she is in charge of concluding the last reconciliation phase by sprinkling water (Ambaye 2016:64).



# 4

## THE YAKKA INSTITUTION

**This chapter discusses the yakka institution. Beginning from its meaning and myths of origin, it continues to describe the functions, procedures, punishment, and compensation of the institution. The section also attempts to show the role of Sidama women in peace building.**

## 4.1. THE MEANING OF YAKKA

*Yakka* is a women-only indigenous institution, which the Sidama women use to protect their rights within the society. It is a gathering of women for different purposes, especially to defend themselves from violence and attack. It focuses on offences of men against women, in general, and abuse of wives by the spouses, in particular.

Yakka is a source of power for Sidama women. After describing the challenges of Sidama women, Dilu (2001) argued:



**“The only occasion where the woman had an opportunity to command and attract public attention used to be the event of *Yakka*” (2001: 25).**

Besides, an expert (In3 Hawassa: August 2022) from the region’s Culture and Tourism Bureau stated,



**“*Yakka* for the Sidama women was a source of courage and strength. It used to provide them with a means to speak out their thoughts and enjoys freedom.”**

It is a code of conduct which Sidama women use to decree punishments and put sanctions on those who attack them. All married women in the village are members of the yakka institution. In general, whenever women are gathered and march for a specific purpose, people say, “Women are going out for *yakka* today.’

## 4.2. MYTHS ON THE ORIGIN OF YAKKA

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Various myths have been forwarded regarding the origin of *yakka*. According to the oral traditions of the society upheld by women, the origin of the yakka institution is associated with the era of Queen Fura. The women believe that the men felt they had been oppressed and discriminated against during the regime of Queen Fura. As a result, men developed hatred towards the queen and considered her their enemy.

When the queen was dethroned and replaced by another ruler, they began to avenge their past oppressors. Men, then, began abusing and oppressing women to the greatest extent possible. The women, who were offended by this mistreatment, established a customary institution to defend themselves from violence called yakka (FGDf Woshasoyamu Kebele: August 2022).

Another myth about the origin *yakka* discussed in Dilu (2001) states that yakka, as an institution, emerged after an event where a daughter-in-law insulted her mother-in-law. Then, the mother-in-law went out crying, screaming, and ululating. The woman was heard by her neighbors, who joined her ululating and went out to punish the offender. Gradually, the practice was institutionalized and integrated into the culture of the Sidama (2001:29).

## 4.3. FUNCTIONS OF YAKKA

The *yakka* institution does not have regular formal meetings and gatherings; instead, the women gather while emergencies occur. The *yakka* has various sociocultural functions. Some of the functions of the institution are explained below.

### i. *Yakka* as a protection of women from violence

The main purpose of *yakka* as an institution is to protect women from violence in the patriarchal society. The institution gives a chance for women to strengthen their solidarity and voice their grievances during abuses and attacks. Any woman among the Sidama who is mistreated could cry out for help and call for another woman for protection. The *yakka* can give a punishment to those men who abused their wives/women. Various types of violence may invoke the *yakka* institution and subject the people/men to punishment. However, the types of violence may seem very different from one another as told by informants; they fall into the categories of violence identified by the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

The declaration defines ‘violence against women’ as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Article 4).

Therefore, factors that invoke the *yakka* institution have been categorized as physical, psychological and sexual violence.

## a. Physical abuse

Physical abuse includes beating a wife due to arguments created between spouses. According to informants, conflicts between spouses may occur for various reasons. For instance, women in Sidama, in particular, endure most of the household responsibilities, including the time-and-energy-intensive production of *enset*. Sometimes, if she fails to do all these chores, including taking care of him, he complains about it. Such arguments between them might provoke him to insult and/or beat her. This time the wife can cry out for help from a *yakka* gathering.

Another reason for women to call out for help is when a man beats a pregnant woman or a woman with a newborn. Sidama people, in general, and women, in particular, give special care and support to pregnant women. They consider a pregnant woman as lame *lubboinni no* (someone who carries two souls) and try to take care of her until delivery day. Besides, they continue their support when she gives birth to a baby through various social institutions. However, if anyone, including her husband, attempts to abuse a pregnant woman verbally or physically, instead of taking care of her, the person is automatically subject to the *yakka* punishment. The punishment will also apply to anyone who physically abuses a woman who has recently given birth.

Again, beating a newly-married woman (a bride) is also additional reason which subjects someone to a *yakka* punishment. Being a new bride - *edaycho* - in Sidama society is a privilege and an honor for a woman in her lifetime. Because of this, she will not engage in household chores for more than three months. After her wedding day, the groom's mother takes care of her and serves her with special dishes, for she is considered as a guest to the family. Contrary to this, if anyone violates the norm and attempts to beat her, the bride could bring the case to the *yakka* gatherings. This is because, on the one hand, a bride, among the Sidama, is considered a virgin, and she is highly respected. Moreover, a newly-married woman is considered a guest of the family as she has just joined the groom's family.

Above all, beating and insulting a mother or a mother-in-law is an offensive action and is not tolerated in Sidama society. Being a mother is an honorable thing in Sidama society, and it is unacceptable to attack her. However, sometimes, if a son or a man commits this crime, there will never be any room for mercy. As a woman informant (Ki8 Wotoraresa *kebele*: August 08, 2022) said, “Beating or insulting a mother may irritate village women more than any attack on women.”

A woman (mother) who is beaten by her son can immediately call out to *yakka* groups by ululating or she can report it to the *qaricho*. But, as an informant said, “Mothers usually cover up an attack on them by their own sons.”

In addition to these, Dilu (2001) also describes some other reasons which aggravate the grievances of village women, as quoted below:

The physical violence includes ... burning a woman near her sexual organs; taking her girdle off outside her bedroom (be it a husband or any other man); beating her while she is in bed and undressed; chasing out a woman during the night; cutting/shaving her hair without her consent before she reaches old age ...; and causing an injury on her body that leads to disability, especially her ears, teeth, and eyes, which might deprive her of the chance to get married (2001:27).

## **b. Psychological abuse**

Psychological abuse includes any kind of verbal abuse and humiliation such as insulting a woman who prepares *wasa* from the *enset* plant. *Enset* is the main staple food of the Sidama. As Sintayehu (2002) indicates, despite the importance of *enset* in the life of the Sidama, it imposes a heavy workload on women. The preparation process takes much of the women’s time and energy. Activities such as digging pits and cutting, uprooting, decorticating, pulverizing, squeezing, chopping, sifting, and finally cooking the *enset* and providing meals for the family are her main routine tasks (2002:83).



In addition to this, if her husband insults or beats her while she is in the backyard working on an *enset* plant, he will be put to a yakka punishment. According to a *qaricho* informant in Wotoraresa *kebele* (Ki7, August 2022), “The backyard where the *enset* plant grows is assumed to be the private place of Sidama women.”

Another psychological abuse that subjects someone to a yakka punishment is insulting a woman by referring to her sexual organs. Her husband or any other man may commit this offence. Ambaye (2016) states that this kind of insult is assumed to be extremely degrading to a woman as a mother and is regarded as an intolerable act (201:3).

In general, any insult and mistreatment concerning a woman's role and status leads a person to a yakka punishment. Thus, if the honor and privileges of a woman (referred to as *meyaate halale*) given by the society are violated, the *yakka* institution will be the one that protects these privileges and rights.

### **c. Sexual abuse**

Sexual violence, including rape, in Sidama society is the most disgraceful action. Thus, it rarely happens. However, if it is committed and reported to the *qaricho*, the yakka institution will punish the offender. According to a woman informant in Wotoraresa *kebele* (In11: August 10, 2022), “Mostly, rape happens during abduction (*dii'ra*). In this case, once she loses her virginity, she is forced to marry the man who abducted her.”

According to Dilu (2001), abuse of children by a household member or by an outsider is strongly condemned. Seducing or persuading a girl child to have sex is also a strongly decried behavior that exposes someone to a punishment by the yakka institution (Dillu 2001:28).

## ii. *Yakka* for Settling Disputes between Married Couples

The Yakka leader can resolve disputes that occur between a husband and a wife. Although individuals such as fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, elder sisters, and elder brothers could solve disputes between married couples, a woman could also take her case to the *qaricho*. Based on the information provided by the wife, the *qaricho* goes to the husband and gives him an appointment to talk about the matter. If the case can easily be resolved by the *qaricho*, she will mediate it and bring reconciliation between the couple. But if the case is beyond her capacity, she reports it to the *songo* - the elders' council. As part of her privilege to participate in the *songo* to present her case, the elders give her the first opportunity to speak and allow her to explain the case. Finally, according to their rule, the elders' council - the *songo* - passes their resolution on the case.

## iii. *Yakka* as a Prayers' Team

As explained previously, yakka is a gathering of women for various reasons, including prayers. Women go out for yakka to perform ritual activities in times of emergency as well as to pray for fertility. During their gatherings, they march to places where they perform the rituals, holding the *siqgo* (stick) and grass. During the ritual, they raise their hands and the *siqgo*. The stick shows their spiritual power during the prayer. They also carry out this ritual to pray for a woman who has not been able to conceive a baby for a long time. Putting their hands on the barren woman's stomach, they pray to the feminine spirit of *Ayanna*.

## 4.4. PROCEDURES OF THE YAKKA INSTITUTION

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Unlike the practice with men's councils, there are no regular meetings or gatherings of women's institutions in Sidama. The women gather whenever any attack against women occurs in the village. According to informants, yakka could happen in two ways. One way is for a woman to cry out during any attack and call all the village women. When the village women hear her scream, they immediately run to the house with their *siqqo* sticks. Then, they inquire about the problem and try to solve it as necessary. The other way is for a woman who is attacked to go to the leader, *qaricho*, and report her case. As the words of women are trusted among the Sidama, no additional witnesses are required to punish the offender. Then, the *qaricho*, holding her *siqqo*, calls all the women in the village to come out, and they shout and start singing *guwisoma woxa* (meaning 'honor of a woman') and marching to the offender's house (Ki7: August 06, 2022).

If they find a man as they are marching, they encircle him and mock at him, throwing at him the fiber parts of the *enset* plant. To avoid such uneasiness, men of the village would either restrict their movement or spend the day at home. Uninformed passers-by, however, do pick up a handful of grass as they pass and throw it at them as a sign of respect according to their culture (Dilu 2001:42).

Then, they begin to deal with the offender. In such a procedure, no woman is left behind in the village except for newly-married women, nursing mothers, and women with a pronounced sickness. Men and children, together with the unmarried girls of the village, are excluded from the gathering and remain secluded throughout the event.

If the *qaricho* is informed about the abuse of a woman in such situations, she screams and shouts since the offences are considered offences against all women. IIRR (2003) narrates, “When she (*qaricho*) shouts, she usually holds her breasts, signifying that she who gives birth has been unfairly abused (2003:64).” When women from the village hear the *qaricho*’s shouts, they come out and join her to show support for the woman. They yell in unison until all the women in the village join them. The women do this to increase the loudness of their shouts under the direction of the *qaricho*. At this time, the man’s insult or abuse is no longer considered as an insult against his wife or a single woman; rather, it is taken as an insult or abuse against all women. A husband cannot order his wife to remain at home when such a demonstration takes place. The yakka institution is feared by men. This institution is highly respected in the Sidama community.



## 4.5. YAKKA PUNISHMENTS AND COMPENSATIONS

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The attack reported to the *qaricho* could be resolved peacefully if the offender admits his wrongdoing. They compel him to pay compensation in the form of a bull or a sheep to the victim or slaughter it for the yakka gathering.

However, if the offender attempts to deny having committed the crime, the band of women punishes him in various ways. All the women organize themselves through their leader, the *qaricho*, and begin to march to the offender's house. If they catch him there, they beat him to deprive him of his masculine pride. They may take off his trousers, cover his body with household garbage, carry and throw him to the fire, make him carry *mocaa* (a white liquid that comes from the preparation of *enset ventricosum*) around the village, and sometimes destroy his house. Carrying a *mocaa* is a degrading act in Sidama. Under such conditions, women have the right to take justice into their own hands. The women become defiant and rise up against any authority trying to stop them. They may even go to the extent of breaking household materials and attempt to demolish his house. However, if the accused man runs away from his home, they put up a sign to let him know they are around. As the publication of IIRR (2003) narrates:

**“If the man refuses to admit guilt, the women bring their *siqqo* sticks to his house and leave them there for a week. The sticks symbolize their presence in the house and act as strong pressure on the man to admit his crime. If he still does not repent, the women break their sticks in front of his house, curse him and ostracize him. This mark of censure is sure to make a man's relatives and**

**neighborhoods and the village elders pressure him to admit his guilt. He will then have to pay a double fine for his intransigence (2003:64-65).**

The offender learns from the women's mob actions, so he never engages in acts or behaviors that degrade the honor of women. Women immediately persuade a man to confess his guilt. Then, he will be required to pay compensation as mentioned above, and reconciliation would follow. Finally, the *qaricho* blesses him, and they cut a small amount of the animal's skin, called *injicha*, and put it on top of their *siqqo* stick.

All women in Sidama have both rights and duties of taking part in yakka gatherings. A woman who fails to participate in such gatherings is discriminated against and becomes an outcast. The group will assault her home, destroying the thatch, taking her stock of butter and milk, and smashing household items. The action taken on such a woman is known as *soqqa*. Similarly, if a husband forbids his wife from participating in a yakka gathering, he is punished in kind and has to bring an ox as compensation.

In general, if the offender fails to admit his guilt after these procedures, the women curse him by raising their *siqqo*. They will curse him saying:

*“Koo hiiqqami, Be broken*

*Hiiqqohe meeyaate hanffali, May the  
girdle of a woman break you*

*Hinqqohe meeyaate hanffali, May the  
girdle of a woman break you*

*mulla ikki Get bankrupt”*(Dillu 2001:4).

The curse of a woman among the Sidama community is believed to be powerful and it is feared by all.

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## 4.6. THE ROLE OF SIDAMA WOMEN IN INDIGENOUS PEACE BUILDING

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Customary institutions solve the majority of conflicts among the rural Sidama areas. A number of studies have been conducted on customary conflict resolution mechanisms, but only a few of them have given emphasis to women's contributions to peace building in society.

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### 4.6.1. *Siqqo* as a Symbol of Peace

*Siqqo* is made up of a bamboo tree. Married women hold it only while they attend various social events such as rituals, yakka gatherings, mourning ceremonies, circumcision rites, and so on. They are not allowed to use the *siqqo* stick for other purposes, and they keep it in a respected place in their home. Men and unmarried women are not allowed to hold the stick.

In addition to the functions of the *siqqo* mentioned above, it serves as a mechanism to bring peace and resolve conflicts in society. As the stick has a symbolic meaning of peace, power, and honor, a woman, especially a *qaricho*, holds it to stop conflicts that happen between individuals and groups. When a conflict arises between parties, women carry their *siqqo* and stand between them. The parties in conflict immediately stop the fighting as they have respect for the *siqqo*.

A *qaricho* informant (Ki9 Wotoraresa *kebele*: August 08, 2022) stated,



**“As a spear is considered a protection weapon for men, so is *siqqo* for women. As soon as I hear screams or shouts in the village, I grab my stick and try to mediate. I am confident that no one tries to attack me while I am holding the *siqqo*.”**

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#### **4.6.2. Showing a Woman’s Private Body Parts**

Elderly women among the Sidama are highly respected and honored, so they are drawn into conflicts happening in the community. When two parties clash, the women quickly come between them and raise their hands to settle the dispute.

Moreover, managing conflicts by showing private body parts and pleading with the disputing parties in the name of breasts and the womb is common among most women in different parts of Ethiopia (IIRR 2009).

There is a trend among Sidama women to take off their clothes and show their breasts and womb to beg the conflicting parties to stop the fighting. While showing their private parts, they say:



**“Stop fighting for the sake of our breasts and womb that fed you and gave your life.”**



In addition, as Dagne (2021) mentioned, women led by their leader, the *qaricho*, go to a war front and stop the fight. According to Dagne,



**“A group of *qaritte*, comprising five women, go to a war front and lift their dresses up to their private body parts to end the war.”**

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### 4.6.3. Putting Girdle (Qu'ne) on the Ground to End Conflicts

*Qu'ne* is a women's girdle made from either a garment or animal leather. It is used to tie the waist of a woman. Sidama women also use this *qu'ne* to settle disputes between individuals or groups. When a conflict occurs, they immediately put their *qu'ne* on the ground between the conflicting parties and beseech them to stop the fighting.

Once the women put their *qu'ne* on the ground, it means that no one is allowed to cross the line. Women curse those who do not obey their request. And, since the women's curse is highly revered, no one disobeys.

Furthermore, Dagne (2021) states that *gorfa* – a woman's traditional coat made of leather – is also used to settle disputes between the conflicting groups. Dagne added, “The *qu'ne* and *gorfa* are used to resolve conflicts if the conflict cannot be resolved at different levels (family, neighbor, and clan) of Sidama elders.”



# 5

## CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES IN THE INSTITUTION OF YAKKA

This chapter covers the major factors of change in the institution of *yakka* as well as its current status. It also describes the main challenges of the institution and the opportunities that have happened recently.

## 5.1. MAJOR FACTORS OF CHANGE AND CONTINUITIES

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Change is natural for social institutions; this is how institutional systems function. However, no one element can account for societal change in its entirety. There are a lot of forces that affect societal transformation. Among these, changes in political organization tend to contribute highly to such transformation (Calhoun 1994).

In Ethiopia, the coming of the new federal political system in 1991 gave people the opportunity to revitalize various institutions. It ensured that different ethnic groups could advance and cultivate their own language, history, identity, and culture within the boundaries of their ethnic territory.

Various indigenous institutions and practices have been promoted and developed as a result of the constitutional and other provisions by the government, but the yakka institution and its practices have become weaker and less visible for various reasons.

According to informants, some of the major factors for the weakening of women's customary institutions, specifically in the *yakka* institution, are the following:

### **i. The Expansion of Formal (Modern) Governmental Institutions**

The establishment of various women's formal governmental institutions and the changing circumstances of the political system have resulted in different changes in the practice of the customary institutions. Currently, when the rights of women are violated at different levels, victims go to the formal governmental offices to report the cases. Formal governmental

offices that work for women such as the Women's and Children's Affairs Office have been established throughout the administrative structure, starting from the kebele up to regional levels. The justice system, i.e. police stations and courts at different level of the government structure, deal with cases related to violations of women's rights. Because these services are available and women can easily access them, women prefer to go there. However, ensuring women's rights through government justice procedures is not always easy.

Thus, because of the availability of formal governmental institutions, yakka is becoming less useful and is being pushed aside in Sidama. An elderly informant (Ki1 August 01, 2022) from Woshasoyamu *kebele* strengthens this statement. She posits,



**“The use of the yakka institution to protect women from attacks has disappeared from our village. For instance, let's say I am attacked by my husband and I cried out for help and ululated. Nobody will come out to help like they used to in the past because nobody understands the message of my scream and ululation.”**

Another elderly female informant added:



**“The Women's Affairs Offices have brought a lot of changes to our village, such as different technologies and systems that ease the heavy workloads of women (e.g. *enset* decorticating materials). However,**

if you ask me to compare these modern offices with the traditional ones in terms of protecting women from domestic violence and mistreatments, I will tell you the previous (customary) ones have done better. This is because I believe that men among the Sidama have more respect and fear for the customary institutions, especially for the yakka, than the formal government institutions. In my view, most of the time, the justice system out there in the formal institutions is highly abused and biased. And men can manipulate the justice system through a lot of mechanisms. That is why I don't trust it can protect women" (KI9 Wotoraresa *kebele*, August 08, 2022).

## ii. The Introduction of Christianity (Protestantism)

The traditional Sidama professes indigenous religion is anchored in the belief that the Creator manifests itself through different rituals and processions. According to Hamar (2002), the majority of the Sidama people still practice their traditional religion, and it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that it was undermined, following the coming of European missionaries to the land of the Sidama (2002:599). It was discovered that during the 1994 Census, only 14.9% of the population practiced traditional religion while 66.8% were Protestants. Islam, Catholicism, and the Ethiopian Orthodox creed practiced 7.7%, 4.6%, and 2.3%, respectively (Ethiopian Statistical Authority 1995). According to the 2007 Census, the proportion of followers of the Sidama traditional religion among the Sidama dropped to below 3% (ESA 2007).

These religious changes in Sidama have brought various changes in the lives of the people. The spread of Christianity, in particular, has critically impacted the majority of customary institutions. These institutions have faced strong opposition primarily from the Protestant mission. This is mainly due to the conviction that the customary institutions have a connection with the indigenous religion and spirits. As Dilu (2001) explained:

**“ ... while confessing acceptance of the faith, missionaries and the subsequent local preachers expected the local Sidama people to deny and abandon their ‘original’ beliefs and practices (2001: 49).”**

A *qaricho* informant (Ki8 August 8, 2022) from Wotoraresa *Kebele* argued, “People are abandoning indigenous rituals such as *falo* and *woxa*. They are also disregarding yakka and other rituals. However, as far as I know, yakka does not have any connection with the spiritual ceremonies mentioned above; instead, its main objective is protect women who are attacked.”

Furthermore, the new generation does not have respect for traditional customs and institutions. They consider these women’s institutions to be archaic, barbaric, and backward.

### **iii. The Expansion of Modern Education**

Increased female enrollments in schools, urbanization, and modernization have contributed to the change. Informants in the study area claim that the use of traditional institutions is dwindling because the exposure and access to formal/modern governmental institutions is gradually increasing. For instance, the Sidama seem to no longer use or respect

*siqqo*<sup>3</sup>. The new generation has not been given awareness about its cultural significance. They are significantly impacted by modern education and global media outlets.

Nevertheless, the spread of the Protestant religion, and the expansion of formal governmental institutions and modern education have not succeeded in totally abolishing the traditional practices. The yakka institution has now begun to revitalize and modify its ways, and there is some hope for its continuity.

According to a *qaricho* informant during the interview at Wotoraresa *kebele* in Malga district, though the tradition of yakka is not currently being practiced as it was in the past, dispute resolution negotiations among marriage partners still continue. She said, "In the past, we were busy conducting various rituals to protect women from violence and abuse and to reconcile parties in conflict. But currently, there is no such ritual of reconciliation. Instead, women go to the kebele or police stations in their villages. But, sometimes, women come to me and tell me about their disagreement with their spouses. Then, I talk to them together and try to resolve their differences (Ki9 August 08, 2022)."

In addition to this, sometimes women among the Sidama consider their gatherings as yakka. For instance, they march to the courthouse when a case related to domestic violence is heard in their *kebele*. They do this to stand with the woman in question. An informant (Ki3 August 02, 2022) from the Women's and Children's Affairs Office of Woshasoyamu *kebele* said, "In our kebele there was a woman called Almaz (a pseudonym) whom her husband mistreated and physically abused for a long time. She took the case to court. All the kebele women and I marched to the court on the day when her case was heard. We did this to stand by her in the spirit of the *yakka* tradition of the Sidama women."

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3 They also associate holding the siqqo stick to the traditional religion and the women themselves don't want to hold the stick any more, especially if they are adherents of the Protestant religion (In3 Hawassa: August 8 202).

The *yakka* institution has another form of revitalization initiated by the formal governmental institution. According to an expert from the Women's and Children's Affairs Office in Malga district (In 10 August 06, 2022), "Since *yakka* was a rights-based advocacy instrument of women in the past, we encouraged our women to participate when the people were fighting for the Sidama regional statehood in 2019. When the referendum was delayed<sup>4</sup>, we organized our women from each district of the Sidama region and conducted a huge *yakka* women-only demonstration." This statement was also corroborated by elders who said they participated in the march to demand for regional statehood held in Hawassa, the capital city of the region, in April 2019. The following further describes the situation:

**The Federal government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had promised in 2018 that the Sidama statehood question would be resolved in accordance with the constitution. When the promise was not kept, thousands of Sidama women took to the streets of Hawassa to demonstrate against the postponement of the referendum.**

**In keeping with Sidama tradition, women protestors held fresh leaves and *siqqo* sticks in their hands. The main purpose of their only-women**

4 A referendum was conducted in Sidama Zone on Nov. 2019 to decide on the long-standing claim of regional statehood of the Sidama people. The Sidama Region officially came into being on 18 June 2020, seven months after the referendum was held.



**marching (*yakka*) was just to show that Sidama women support the effort to become a state as a right.**



**Picture 3:** Women marching on the street of Hawassa city demanding the formation of the Sidama regional state, April 2019

**Source:** Ethio-Sidama Diaspora, [www.Sidamadiaspora.com](http://www.Sidamadiaspora.com)

Later, the demand for regional statehood was resolved and the right to self-administration was ensured. After the issue was resolved, the women should have marched again for blessing as per the principles of *yakka*. Nevertheless, they did not appear in the street of Hawassa again for thanksgiving and blessing. As a *qaricho* informant (Ki8 August 08, 2022) said, “According to *yakka* customs, as soon as the question of Sidama regional statehood was answered, women should have gathered and gone out for thanksgiving. Because we did not come back and express our gratitude, it is considered that we have not returned to our home.”

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## 5.2. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE YAKKA INSTITUTION

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An attempt is made to shed light on the opportunities and challenges associated with the promotion and revitalization of women's customary institutions, especially in relation to *yakka*. Although some opportunities have been created, there no evidence that anyone is committed to revitalizing yakka at any cost.

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### 5.2.1. Opportunities

The advent of a federal structure in Ethiopia, which is flexible and accommodating in many ways, offers better chances for revitalizing positive indigenous institutions and customary practices as a way to address fundamental issues from the grassroots level. It provides chances for policy alternatives and choices in addressing issues and worries about the interactions between customary and modern institutions. The constitution and the legal systems do not prevent the operation of indigenous institutions unless they are against the law of human rights, including women's rights.

What is more, as described above, *yakka* is being revitalized in another form as it has been targeted and promoted by the government institution called Women's and Children's Affairs Office. The determination of officials in these offices to collaborate with customary women's institutions

and leaders and vice versa may bring tangible changes to further harness the plausible components that support the way in which customary institutions function.

Another opportunity that provides better prospects for reviving customary institutions and practices of women as means of dealing with issues of women relates to research works and publications. As indicated in the Literature Review section, a lot of studies about women's agency, power, and voices have begun to obtain attention recently<sup>5</sup>. The growing focus on the literature and events on customary institutions of women, agency, and power contributes to further enrichment and application of women's institutions. Moreover, a number of studies have confirmed the relevance of customary institutions in the sociocultural, economic, and political lives of women. Besides, the institutions serve as agencies of women empowerment among rural Ethiopia.

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### 5.2.2. Challenges

Despite the aforementioned windows of opportunity, there are ongoing issues that threaten the legitimacy of informal methods of ensuring the rights of women in general through customary women's institutions that were unable to function for a number of reasons. For instance, traditional institutions and customs are no longer accepted by a variety of social groups such as the educated, the young, followers of various protestant religious sects, and urban residents. Most of the time, traditional institutions are seen more as sources of women's oppression than as systems that ensure the protection of women's rights.

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5 I participated in a conference entitled "Locations of Women's Voices and Power in Ethiopia" organized by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the French Center for Ethiopian Studies on June 2022.

Moreover, despite the fact that parts of the fundamental rights are represented, safeguarded, and kept by the *yakka* institution, Sidama women are not included in significant decision-making processes that take place in elders' councils.

The *yakka* values themselves are on the verge of extinction nowadays because of the exposure of the young generation to new cultures, urbanization, the media, and modern institutions. The young generation of women also has no/limited opportunity to learn and participate in the practices of *yakka* as the older generation is no longer practicing it. As a result, people tend to consider the institution as obsolete.



CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS OF WOMEN



# CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS OF WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

**This section examines the significance of various Sidama women's customary institutions, especially the practices of yakka, in assuring the protection of women's rights and security. It also attempts to look into the challenges and limitations of customary institutions.**

## 6.1. SIDAMA WOMEN'S CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS VIS-À-VIS WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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Many feminist and human rights scholars contend that traditional indigenous institutions privilege men and ignore women's voices and desires. They argue that, like in economics and politics, the root cause of female oppression is entrenched in customs and traditions. Even in cases where women's rights are legally protected, tradition works against full access to those rights. Thus, according to these scholars, women cannot have their equal share until they become free from traditions (Meron 2015).

On the other hand, there are numerous institutions run by women that are actively engaged in issues that matter to their members by resolving problems affecting women, defending women's rights, and uniting members to perform various tasks associated with rituals and celebrations that are thought essential for increasing society's well-being.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 1968), the concept of human rights is associated with concepts such as justice, individual rights and dignity, freedom from oppression and persecution, and individual participation in collective endeavors that are practiced in every part of the world. Nevertheless, statements that human rights are not universal still appear in a variety of contexts. For example, states have often questioned the universality of human rights in justifying violations of women's human rights in the name of culture. These practices are often based on harmful stereotypes regarding women's roles in society (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:22).

Contrary to the above claims, this study attempted to show how local cultures contribute to ensuring the rights of humans, including women.

The study examined the Sidama customary institutions, especially the women's institution (*yakka*), from the perspective of protecting basic human rights. Obviously, human rights are women's rights; the attainment of basic human rights means the achievement of women's rights, too.

Hence, the three categories of human rights principles and their sub-concepts, namely, civil and political rights; economic, social, and cultural rights; and solidarity rights (Landman 2005:2-3), which have been briefly explained in the Literature Review, Page 23-24, are taken into account to examine the customary institution of the Sidama.

The right to personal liberty and security is one of the sub-concepts of civil rights. As the Human Rights Committee has defined it, liberty of a person is understood as "freedom from confinement of the body, not a general freedom of action", and security of a person is understood as "freedom from injury to the body and mind" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:135). This right provides protection against an intentional imposition of bodily or mental injury or violence. This is expressed in terms of sexual, physical, and psychological attacks. The Sidama women's customary institution in this regard protects women from such violence and mistreatment.

As per the unwritten principles and customs of *yakka*, it is strictly prohibited for a man to hurt a woman sexually, physically, or psychologically. A man who commits these crimes against a woman is subjected to various punishments and sanctions. A woman who has reported any violence against her is protected until she guarantees her security. Women stand for a woman who has been insulted because of her status and seek restitution for the breach of her rights. Markos et al. (2011) examined a song chanted by women when an insult/a psychological attack occurs. For instance, if a woman is insulted as "slave/servant", all the village women gather, led by the *qaricho*. Then, the women begin to sing and scream as follows:

*Isi boceenna gii'roommana* I burned the woods that he had cut,  
*Borjicho yaannoena* He called me a 'slave'?"  
*Borjichu isootina* actually he is the one who is a slave

*Ce'notalla xuu'roommana* I milk the cows he reared  
*Ashikaricho yaannoen* He calls me a servant  
*Ashikarichu isootina* actually he is the  
one who is the slave, not me.

(Markos 2011:294).

Moreover, the *siqqo* (stick), which symbolizes the power of women, protects the right to physical security through various mechanisms. A woman who holds the *siqqo* has never been hurt and she has the ability to stop any attack on a woman. As it is stated, "When women carry *siqqo* on their way to resolve a dispute, or when coming back from resolving one, or when going to pray for the entire community, no one should cross their route" (IIRR 2003:64).

The right to religious freedom and worship is another sub-concept of civil rights. Article 18 of UDHR stipulates, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:154). Previously, the Sidama had their own indigenous religion<sup>6</sup> which was practiced by the masses. The foundational elements of their faith are God and the spirit of ancestors. According to their belief, God is called *Magano*, the omnipotent and omnipresent. This is true for the women, too. There were also women-only religious practices such as *falo* and *woxa*. Women publicly performed various rituals in times of emergency. No one can prohibit them from exercising the full observance of their beliefs. An elderly male informant said, "We ask women to pray and beg their spirit in times of hardship such as war, hunger, and drought." However, most women in Sidama are abandoning their indigenous religion and following other religions, mostly Protestant Christianity.

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6 According to Seyum et al. (1997), the majority of Sidama people practice their traditional religion, and it was only in the 1960s that it was undermined, following the coming of European missionaries to the land of the Sidama.



In addition to civil rights, political rights also guarantee various human rights. The right to assembly, association, and demonstration is one of the sub-concepts of political rights. These human rights guarantee various rights such as the right to hold public meetings, to form or join associations, and to hold a peaceful demonstration when necessary. The Sidama women's customary institution protects and promotes these rights of women intensely. As the study found out, Sidama women have the right to meet publicly for various purposes and are able to communicate freely. Most of the time, when they gather, they are led by their leaders, either by a *qaricho* or a *randicho*. Furthermore, they are free to form and join associations that have religious and social significance. Beyond this, for a woman, it is even obligatory to attend the associations and meetings of women. When there is a demonstration, it is common for Sidama women to march together for various events. They march to worship and perform ritual activities. They march to punish a man who has physically abused a woman or his wife. Their demonstration might sometimes turn violent, including throwing stones at and kicking the perpetrator. It can go as far as demolishing his house.

The right to marry and have a family is one of the significant sub-concepts of political rights. It is stated that mature men and women have the right to marry and have a family without any discrimination due to race, nationality, or religion. Marriage shall only take place with the free and full consent of would-be spouses. The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to the full protection of society. This right among the Sidama is guaranteed and protected. Marriage is a highly respected institution through which society is able to establish and protect a family. It is established between a man and a woman for the purpose of reproduction. As Sintayehu (2002) explained, among the Sidama, pre-marital sexual relations are strictly prohibited, and women are forbidden from bearing children out of wedlock (2002:37). But, if pregnancy happens outside marriage, the woman has to marry the man just to build a family and give protection to the newborn baby.

On the other hand, the marriage type known as *adawana* (see Page 47) gives a woman extra rights over the choice of her spouse unlike the norm that guarantees a man as the only one who has the choice over his mate.

Regarding political participation of women as a sub-concept of political rights, women in Sidama did not have the right to vote or make decisions in the *songo* or *luwa* systems. However, they could highly influence the voting system through various means. Anyone who is accused of harassing or abusing his wife or another woman is automatically disqualified from elections.

A social, cultural, and economic right is another category of human rights, which encompasses various sub-concepts. When these rights are protected, it helps to promote individual growth, social and economic development, and self-esteem. These concepts include rights such as the right to form labor and free associations, the right to education, the right to reproductive health and well-being, the right to work and property, the right to leisure time, and the right to social security.

Cultural rights, on the other hand, include such rights as the right to the benefits of culture; and the right to indigenous land, rituals, and shared cultural practices (Landman 2005:3-4). In one way or another, Sidama society has been protecting the socioeconomic and cultural rights of women through its customary institutions. Some of these rights are going to be examined below.

The right to social security, according to UDHR (Article 25), aims at providing a comprehensive coverage against all situations that may threaten a person's ability to earn an income and maintain an adequate standard of living. Among the Sidama women, there are various types of norms that support and provide for the needy. For example, the Sidama support new mothers through their institutions called *gumata* and *woowxa*. Furthermore, the village women take care of the new mother and the baby if she has no one around to take care of her.

The right to property is another sub-concept which gives an individual the right to own property. Among the Sidama women, some own and dispose of property in different ways. For instance, any gifts that were given to women upon marriage and giving birth belong to the women under any circumstances. Women are responsible for preparing the staple food of the Sidama obtained from the *enset* plant. The women have full rights to the foodstuff from *enset* such as *wasa*, *bulla* and *amicho*. In addition, women own the backyard cabbage. She has the full right to sell or use these items for domestic consumption. Furthermore, women have access to livestock products such as milk, eggs, and butter. Like the *enset* products, women are entitled to sell or consume livestock products.

The right to reproductive health and well-being is another right protected under the UDHR. This includes women's right to control their fertility, the right to decide whether to have children, the number of children, and the spacing of children; the right to choose any method of contraception; the right to self-protection and to be protected against sexually transmitted infections; the right to special protection for pregnant mothers and post-natal mothers; and the right to have family planning education.

The Sidama society protects these rights through its customs and norms. The respect and care given to pregnant women and new mothers during pregnancy and after they give birth is highly encouraged within the society. A Sidama husband has the duty to take care of the new mother by providing the necessary things, including the slaughtering of a cow. If he is unable to take care of his wife after she has given birth, he will be held responsible or alienated from the society at large, including his wife. Attacking a woman both physically and psychologically after she has given birth is one of the reasons that trigger a yakka gathering. Pre-marital sex relationships are strictly forbidden, and this prohibition encourages virginity. According to the Sidama, this protects young women from unwanted pregnancy, sexual exploitation, and various diseases that are transmitted sexually. They also have a ritual and an institution through which they conduct prayers for barren women to become fertile.

Moreover, the *Adwana* marriage gives a woman the right to have children before menopause since such women who have been unmarried for a long time.

The right to participate in social and cultural life includes the right to engage in recreational activities, the right to rest and leisure, and the right to freely and fully engage in cultural and artistic activities. Concerning this law, it could be concluded that most customary institutions and cultures among the Sidama ensure these rights. Women in Sidama have the full and free right to participate in various social and cultural events. For instance, the *gumata* tradition, which is performed only by women to visit a new mother, gives the women the opportunity to entertain while taking care of the new mom. Different rituals such as *falo*, *woxa*, *wowaxo* allow women to freely and fully participate in ritual ceremonies. Wedding and circumcision rites are the major ceremonies in whose preparation and facilitation women play significant roles. There are songs and dances performed by Sidama women to entertain themselves on various occasions. These are *hore* (folk songs performed starting from the day of fiche *chambalala*, the Sidama New Year celebration, to the conclusion of *qexalla*) and *farro*, a most prominent rite at fiche *chambalal*. *Farro* is a dance performed by both women and men on a variety of occasions. The dance event is a good opportunity to select a mate. In addition to these young female dances, there are also songs and dances performed by adult or married women only such as *illancho eloe*, a song and dance during the *wowoxa* celebration. *Hanno* is another dance performed, usually during the inauguration of a new house and when a person is circumcised or becomes *chimessa*. A party with traditional foods and drinks accompanies this ritual.

Solidarity rights, which include rights to public goods such as development and the environment, seek to guarantee that all individuals and groups have the right to share in the benefits of the earth's natural resources, as well as those goods and products that are made through processes of economic growth, expansion, and innovation (Landman 2005:5). Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration can be fully realized.

## 6.2. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS

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Despite the benefits of customary institutions mentioned above, there are still enduring challenges affecting their rationality in regard to the protections of human rights, in general, and women rights, in particular.

According to the findings, although some of the basic rights of Sidama women are represented and protected through some of the customary institutions such as *yakka*, they are not fully functional and they are not being used towards realizing women's rights. Most customary institutions in Sidama function only on the male line of the family, which is why having a male child is preferred. Because of this, women are excluded from the major decision making process that takes place in the elders' councils. Furthermore, traditional institutions are, in this case, viewed as instruments for violating women's rights despite several improvements that have been observed recently.

Moreover, traditional norms and customary laws and values are viewed as being perpetrators of harmful traditional social practices like female genital mutilation, polygamy, abduction, etc. For instance, among the Sidama society, once a girl is abducted and loses her virginity, she is forced to marry the abductor, which it is considered to be against women's rights.

Another issue discussed by Markos (2014) is that until recently, the Sidama society had not even recognized the land ownership rights of women, except under special conditions when the husband dies, which allows the wife to claim guardianship of the children. This enduring practice in the Sidama society has discouraged female participation in social activities (2014:142).

7. CHAPTER SEVEN, CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS



# CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

**This section attempts to summarize the main findings of the study. Recommendations are forwarded from the findings for concerned bodies to work on customary institutions and related issues to maintain traditions as long-standing indigenous knowledge systems of the society with their diverse opportunities.**

## 7.1. CONCLUSION

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The leading premise of this study is that women among the Sidama people ensure and protect their social, political, and economic rights through women-led customary institutions. Based on this premise, the study examined various customary institutions of women, mainly yakka gatherings. It also examined how these institutions ensure and protect the civil, political, economic, and cultural rights of women.

Sidama women have developed various institutions that enable them to participate in social, economic, and political issues. They have used these institutions to increase their acceptance and impact in the society. Some of the institutions are used for religious purposes while others serve to elevate the economic and social status of women. Women use *woxa* and *falo*, the two religion-based institutions, to empower themselves. They perform rituals using these two institutions when human-made or natural problems such as infertility of a woman, scarcity of rain, disease, drought, hunger, or instability occur. *Gumaata* and *wowaxo*, on the other hand, allow women to participate in social and cultural issues; they also use these rituals to entertain themselves. Both institutions are associated with the birth of a new baby. The women use the occasion to take care of the new mother and to have fun.

Marriage is also another social institution in Sidama in which women are the main actors. The various types of marriage performed in the area have been discussed. These are: a) *huchato*, which is the most traditional institution and is usually arranged by the parents of the bride and groom; b) *dii'ra* (abduction), which is a kind of marriage that is arranged forcefully, though it was not originally the marriage tradition of the Sidama; c) *adulsha* (elopement), which is a type of marriage organized without the family's consent; the boy persuades the girl to secretly leave her house; and d) *adwanna*, which is a type of marriage that gives a chance to a

woman who has remained unmarried for a long time; this marriage type is arranged based on the interest of the girl, and a man who is selected for *adwanna* cannot reject the marriage.

*Luwa* (an age-group system) and *songo* (elders' council) are some of the institutions that show the place of women in society. The study confirmed that these systems function in the male line. However, women have some roles to play in *luwa* and *songo*. Women influence the opinions and decisions of both institutions by engaging in conversations. They also convey messages through poetic musical performances to influence the outcome of the decisions. In this way, women communicate their opinions, preferences, discomforts, complaints, and grievances, which affect their husbands and male relatives. However, in some cases, women also have the right to access the elders' councils and present their cases through their leader, known as *qaricho*. The *qaricho* attends the *songo* meeting and submits cases that she has gathered from the women. However, their main task in these male-dominated institutions is to prepare food and drinks during various rituals of the institutions. Furthermore, women are enabling agents for the assigned positions of men within *luwa's* and *songo's*.

A major objective of the study was to investigate the practice of *yakka* and its role in protecting and ensuring the rights of Sidama women. The leader of the institution is called *qaricho*. She specializes in managing injustice and violence. The other important title in connection to women's institutions is *randicho*. The title is given to a woman who specializes in performing religious rituals. The *yakka* institution does not have regular formal meetings and gatherings, but the women gather when problems such as physical, psychological, and sexual attacks or violations of rights occur. *Yakka* has various social/cultural functions and enhances the bond between women. According to the findings, some of the reasons that invoke *yakka* institutions, are the physical, psychological, and sexual abuse of women such as insulting and beating a wife, a mother or mother-in-law, a woman who recently gave birth, a newly-married woman



(bride), and a woman who works in the backyard of an *enset* plant. Further, the *yakka* institution plays a significant role in dispute settlement between married couples. It can also be used as a prayer team.

Even though *yakka* had all these functions in the past, it is now being abandoned due mainly to the introduction of Christianity, the expansion of modern education, and the establishment of various formal governmental institutions at the kebele level such as Women's and Children's Affairs offices and police stations. These are considered the main reasons for abandoning the practice. However, there are some signs that show the institution is being revitalized through the initiation of governmental offices. This has been witnessed during the popular demand for an independent regional state of Sidama, where women conducted a march in the streets of Hawassa in April 2019.

As per the objective of the study, these customary institutions are examined from the perspectives of human rights, in general, and women's rights, in particular. According to the findings, the customary institution of women plays a significant role in preserving and advancing women's civil, political, socioeconomic, and collective rights. Women who practice the aforementioned customary institutions specifically enjoy the rights to security and integrity; access to justice; political participation; information and freedom of expression; freedom of movement, assembly, and demonstration; freedom of association; and rights related to marriage. Various customary institutions of women guarantee property rights; labor-related rights; the right to social security; the right to health care and free access to food; the right to reproductive freedom; and the right to take part in social and cultural life, which are among the major socioeconomic and cultural sub-rights of women achieved by Sidama women. The rights to peace and to development are the most important solidarity rights, which the customary institutions complement.

Customary institutions at the local level play a pivotal role in the lives of indigenous people. The perception associated to such institutions is that they are traditional, backward, and valueless. When it comes to matters

involving women and girls, this mindset manifests itself double. . Many foreign and Ethiopian scholars criticize the limitations of traditional institutions in Africa. They contend that traditional indigenous institutions privilege men and ignore women's voices and desires. It is generally believed that such customs and traditions tend to marginalize women. Even in cases where women's rights are legally protected, tradition works against full access to those rights.

To sum up, at a time when there were no modern government institutions and women's rights advocacy groups who stood and fought for women's rights, the Sidama women were able to defend and enjoy their rights as much as they could. The researcher in this study does not dare to conclude that Sidama women do not have challenges; they do share the challenges with many women in Ethiopia, but they also have mechanisms to fight them. Therefore, if we really want to bring about real changes and justice, we should pay attention to these kinds of rural women's indigenous institutions and traditions. They could play a significant role if they are integrated with the modern institutions.

Furthermore, no human rights, in general, and women's rights, in particular, are fully attained unless they incorporate local knowledge. To address issues of women, it does not only require adopting international laws and establishing formal governmental institutions; it also requires to consider the already existing customary institutions in the society. Women-specific, indigenous institutions like yakka are necessary to address women's issues; they can assist in the endeavors of localizing universal human rights at the grassroots level.

## 7.2. THE WAY FORWARD: IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

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Based on the findings of the study, the research suggests the following as a way forward:

- ✔ Instead of focusing on the problems and challenges of women, it is better to target the potentials of women and their customary institutions such as *yakka*. This helps to empower them and to attain their social, economic, and political rights.
- ✔ Government institutions should encourage and promote customary institutions that work on the protection of women's rights, taking them as an agent of change.
- ✔ Society is more loyal to and respectful of customary institutions; thus, if a positive change toward the attainment of women's rights is to be achieved, women's customary institutions such as *yakka* must be protected, strengthened, encouraged, and promoted. The government should provide assistance and recognition to that effect.
- ✔ Most customary institutions including *yakka* are abandoned or endangered. Thus, it requires the intervention of a responsible body to revitalize these endangered customary women's institutions.
- ✔ In order to transfer customary women's institutions to the next generation, there must be mechanisms to integrate the knowledge through the educational curriculum.
- ✔ Lawmakers and law enforcement bodies should consider customary laws and knowledge before adapting existing laws or drafting new ones in order to bring real changes in the realization of human rights, in general, and women's rights, in particular.
- ✔ Society, in general, and leaders of customary institutions, in particular, should consider modifying some practices of the customary institutions and amend them so that they could align with the dynamism of the modern world.

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## ANNEX: PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

(Participants in one of the categories are also employed in other categories, i.e. a key informant may be FGD participant)

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date
1	Ki1	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Elder	01/ 08/22
2	Ki2	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Elder	01/08/22
3	Ki3	Female	Wondogent	Wosha soyamu	Women and Children Affairs Office	02/08/22
4	Ki4	Male	Wondogent	Wotorana Kichema	Elder	04/08/22
5	Ki5	Male	Wondogenet	Wotorana Kichema	Gudumale elder	03/08/22
6	Ki6	Male	Wondogent	Wotorana Kichema	Gudumale elder	03/08/22
7	Ki7	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Oaricho	06/08/22
8	Ki8	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Oaricho	08/08/22
9	Ki9	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Oaricho	08/08/22
10	Ki10	Male	Hawassa	Hawassa	Culture and Tourism Bureau Expert	04/08/22

■ \*ki = key Informant

### Profile of In-depth Interview Participants

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date
1	In1	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Elder	01/ 08/22
2	In2	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Government Office	02/08/22

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date
3	In3	Male	Hawassa	Hawassa	Culture and Tourism Bureau	02/08/22
4	In4	Female	Hawassa	Hawassa	Women and Children Affairs Bureau	01/08/22
5	In5	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	03/08/22
6	In6	Female	Wondogent	Wotorana Kichema	Adult woman	04/08/22
7	In7	Female	Wondogent	Wotorana Kichema	Adult woman	04/08/22
8	In8	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Culture and Tourism Office	06/08/22
9	In9	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Women and Children Affairs	06/08/22
10	In10	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult woman	10/08/22
11	In11	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Culture and Tourism Office	10/08/22
12	In12	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult Woman	06/08/22

■ \*In = In-depth Interview

### Profile of Focus Group Discussion Participants

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date of Interview
1	FGDf1	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
2	FGDf2	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
3	FGDf3	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
4	FGDf4	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
5	FGDf5	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
6	FGDf6	Female	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult women	August 05, 2022
7	FGDf7	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date of Interview
8	FGDf8	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022
9	FGDf9	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022
10	FGDf10	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022
11	FGDf11	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022
12	FGDf12	Female	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult women	August 08, 2022

■ \*FGDf = Focus Group Discussion with female

No.	Code	Sex	District	Kebele	Status	Date
1	FGDm1	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
2	FGDm2	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
3	FGDm3	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
4	FGDm4	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
5	FGDm5	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
6	FGDm6	Male	Wondogenet	Wosha soyamu	Adult men	August 03, 2022
7	FGDm7	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022
8	FGDm8	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022
9	FGDm9	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022
10	FGDm10	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult man	August 10, 2022
11	FGDm11	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022
12	FGDm12	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022
13	FGDm13	Male	Malga	Wotoraresa	Adult men	August 10, 2022

■ \*FGDm = Focus Group Discussion with male



**CARD**

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