



Sacrifice, Vow, and Ritual Feast among the Oromo of Horro Guduru Hinterland (Ethiopia)

Lemessa Mergo, Anil Kishore Sinha, and Krishan Sharma

Abstract. – The study of Oromo religious life in diverse areas of Ethiopia merits more attention than it has received. The example given here concerns the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland (northwestern Ethiopia). The article considered three contexts, namely, sacrifice, vow, and ritual feast as indicators of feeding gods, reciprocating gods, and feeding ritual attendants or guests respectively. There exist significant variations between these religious aspects of the Oromo. Sacrificial contexts are observed more on a collective basis and stress both agnatic and affinal relationships. They strictly prescribe social action, and for the most part unchanging communal group relations. Vow, by contrast, mainly involves idiosyncratic behaviors and highlights individual spiritual commitment to bestowing deities. The vow situation is a characteristic personal religious realm, particular to privately dealt concern with gods, that is absent in the collective sacrificial context. Ritual feast represent affluent preparation and dedication of lavish foods and drinks to the cause of some annual traditional rituals expected to feed ritual attendants. In this regard, it is a cultural layer which illumines the hospitality matrix in Oromo religious ritual observance. These aspects are explored in the light of various anthropological theories. [*Ethiopia, Oromo, Horro Guduru, sacrifice, vow, ritual feast, Oromo religion*]

Lemessa Mergo, Dr., Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Jimma University, Jimma (Ethiopia). – His articles appeared in *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, *Indian Journal of Physical Anthropology*, and *Human Genetics*, and in “Global Warming, Human Factors, and Environment. Anthropological Perspectives” (2012) edited by K. Sharma. – See also References Cited.

Anil Kishore Sinha, Dr., Professor and Chairperson, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh (India). – His major research interests include tribal studies, anthropology of food, Panchayati Raj institutions, gender studies, and medical anthropology. – To his credit are more than fifty research publications. – See also References Cited.

Krishan Sharma, M.Sc., PhD, former Professor of Anthropology and Chairman of the Anthropology Department at Panjab Uni-

versity, Chandigarh (India), and still serving as an editorial board member of various journals. – His research interests include the fields of biological anthropology, twin studies, and tribal anthropology. – He is known as author and editor of more than 100 scientific publications. – See also References Cited.

Introduction

The anthropological account of Oromo religious belief systems and practices goes back some forty years. Early works are attributed to Knutsson (1967) and Bartels (1990), two Europeans who did religious study among the Macca Oromo at different times. Knutsson studied the *Qaalluu* institution among the Macca Oromo, while Bartels has focused on the myths and rites of Oromo religion among the same society. Both studies paid little attention to sacrifice, vow, and ritual feasts as aspects of Oromo religion. Indeed, little was known about Oromo religion prior to these works. Afterwards, however, several myths and realities of Oromo religious practices and beliefs were evident. The gap was in fact on account of two major reasons. One, the Oromo possessed no written cultural accounts¹ and other cultural dissemination mediums such as missionary culture. Because of this orally bound tradition, Oromo religion has been anchored for long only in the cosmic domain of Oromo society. Further, the colonial conquest of the Oromo by the Amhara for more than a century seems equally significant and

1 Legesse (1973, 2000); Hassen (1990, 2007); Dewo (2009).

is perhaps a more impinging factor for this issue. Based on assertions in a number of studies,² the colonial experience could have been a more detrimental reason. This is because the Amhara imperial rule has superimposed not only Amhara culture, but also Judeo-Christian religious belief on Oromo culture and religion for a protracted period. Comparing the religious ambitions of the Amhara with that of the Oromo, Levine (1974) writes that the Oromo religious culture could not be exported to other peoples whereas the Amhara armies were preceded, accompanied, and followed by monks and priests who facilitated the imperial expansion by planting the roots of Amhara Christian culture. The Oromo have never and ever used their religion as a tool of domination and exploitation, because they believed that religion is divine which must not be used for oppressive actions and ends (Dewo 2009). Despite the attempts of cultural invasions, the Oromo were able to retain at least some major components of their religious practices and beliefs.³ A prevalent observance of traditional religious practices in the sacred home of *Qaalluu* (Oromo religious expert) and the dedication of sacrificial bulls to the forest deity are among the retained religious elements of Oromo religion (Mergo et al. 2011).

The present study explores three major components of Oromo religious practices and beliefs: sacrifice, vow, and ritual feast with a focus on the Horro Guduru hinterland. The Oromo variant of sacrifice to a god is *Ayyaana sooruu*, which embeds another interrelated concept, namely, *Dhibaayyuu* (libation or drink-offering to a god). *Ayyaana sooruu*, under the context of sacrifice, signifies feeding; it also entails libation. In this context, *Waaqa* (God) and his colossal agents in the universe are offered either with drink-offering or food-offering. Vow, on the other hand, is implied in Oromo concept as *wareega* or *gashii*. This generic term concerns mostly the final process, which is known as *gashii wareegaa* or simply *gashii* (vow-offering). The vow realm in Oromo religious belief systems seems an action of reciprocating god's virtuous reply to one's prayer urges, on a ritual scene, or to what has been vowed in the past. Indeed, both sacrifice and vow require a ritual observance, where it is necessary to offer a ritual feast. In this connection, the present study also attempts to explain ritualized environments selected for sacrifice and vow-offering to *Waaqa*. Before providing an explanation on these rituals, it is

important to give an overview of the Oromo in general and the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland in particular.

An Overview of the Oromo

The Oromo are distinguished as ancient people, a great African nation (Kanno 2005). They speak Afaan Oromo (Oromo language). The Oromo language is the largest Cushitic language family in the Horn of Africa regarding its number of speakers (Gragg 1982). This language has a very rich vocabulary and it is the third most widely spoken language in Africa, exceeded only by Arabic and Hausa Fulani.⁴ Sociologically and ethnographically viewed, thus, the Oromo are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, perhaps next to Hausa of Nigeria (Hassen 1990; Beyene and Tolera 2006).

According to Bates (1979), the Oromo people are a very ancient race, the indigenous stock, perhaps, on which most other peoples in this part of Eastern Africa [Horn of Africa] had been grafted. The people mostly reside over a vast region of Ethiopia predominantly Hararge, Bale, Arsi, Borana, Guji, Jimma, Illu Abba Bor, Wallagga, Horro Guduru, Shewa, Southwestern part of Gojjam, and Wallo in Ethiopia, apart from their evident residence in some East African counties such as Kenya and Somalia outside Ethiopia (Beyene and Tolera 2006; Jalata 2012).

Oromo Religious Beliefs and the *Gadaa* System

Several studies, which portray the Oromo as ancient people and a great African nation, were put forward by European scholars during the second half of the 19th century. Among such early Western scholars were the erudite French scholar Antoine d'Abbadie (Hassen 2007) and Martial de Salviac (Kanno 2005) of the same nation. The former is assumed to have done the first detailed study on the *Gadaa* system – the rich Oromo customary heritage (Hassen 2007). Whereas, Martial de Salviac's 1901 French edition on the Oromo – translated to English by Ayalew Kanno in 2005 – provides a detailed demonstration of some fundamental beliefs of the people.

Contemporary ritual observances in Horro Guduru might be well illustrated as explicit reflection of the *Gadaa* system, which Dewo (2009) recognizes as an institution having the ability to serve as a

2 Hassen (1990, 1994, 1999, 2000); Levine (1974, 2007); Pausewang (2007); Dewo (2009).

3 Bulcha (1996); Baxter, Hultin, and Triulzi (1996); Dewo (2009).

4 *Gadaa* Melbaa (1988); Hordofa (2001); Beyene and Tolera (2006).

comprehensive storehouse of Oromo moral values. The *Gadaa* system is indeed invariably understood as the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious system of the Oromo (Legesse 1973, 2000). It is a folk way which is always celebrated once in every eight years as a ritual cycle and only once in one's life span as a plain marker of an important life stage – in most cases this is forty years after one's father has celebrated his *Gadaa* stage. But there is also a possibility for the ego (son) to celebrate his *Gadaa* just before that of his father.

Among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland, who are mostly descendants of the fourteen clans (*Kudha Arfan*)⁵ of Horro, almost every customary ritual practice tends to maintain the ethical-moral standards of religious life prescribed in the *Gadaa* system, i.e., upholding the will of *Waaqa* and his colossal agents (*Ayyaana*) throughout all walks of life. Yet, it is usually admitted that maintaining the will of *Waaqa* without compromising it with human will is unfeasible. It seems that humans are limited to fully capture a pragmatic distinction between the profane and the sacred spheres of their environments. In Oromo culture, sacred scenes have *safuu Waaqa* (dignity and respect of God) so that they need to be well-regarded with awe and marvel. Normative rules prescribed in the *Gadaa* system articulate the contravention of *safuu Waaqa* not only as an express disobedience to him but also a cognizable spiritual offense against him. Violating such an inviolable space reinforces insistence for time-bound ritual observance. Failure to abide by the will of *Waaqa* is often believed to result in divine retaliation in the form of *bona dheeraa* (catastrophic droughts), *lolaa* (floods), *bubbee* (gale or rushing whirlwind), *hongee* (starvation after crop failure) and many more calamities. Once ritual observance is instituted, it needs perpetuation to posterity just keeping its once anchored – by ancestors – spatial and temporal realm. Sacrifices, vows, and ritual feast are also required to be proffered at such ancestor and posterity connecting scenes. Accordingly, some creatures – special trees, groves, forests, springs and moorlands – have got socio-cultural a spiritual significance among the Oromo apart from their economic and natural values.

Religious practices such as sacrifice, vow, and ritual feast signal diverse realms of Oromo culture though they had been scarcely studied and documented. Therefore, it is the task of anthropologists

5 The 14 clans of Horro are said to have entailed Guta, Dulla-cha, Buukko, Migiruu, Akaako, Daaragootii, Abboollee, Jar-tee, Alshaayyaa, Maalika, Yemaalgii, Abbayyii, Ganjii, and Gitiloo (Fieldwork 2011, and written sources, e.g., Haile 2006, Nagara 2010).

or other related professionals to study and document these diverse cultural practices including religious beliefs and observances and the inferences therein.

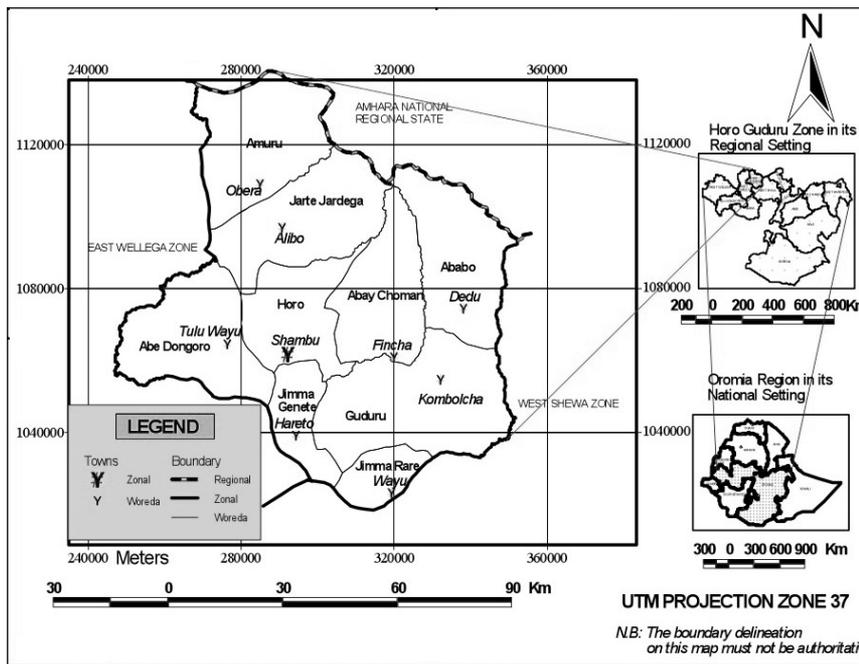
The Oromo religious practice revolves around two major concepts among others: *Waaqa* and *Ayyaana*. In other words, *Waaqa* and *Ayyaana* are cores of Oromo religious beliefs. *Waaqa* is understood in multiple perspectives in the literature. The general notion is in fact the attribute ascribed to him as a Supreme Being, commonly distinguished throughout Oromo traditional belief.⁶ It is also contended that *Waaqa* is one god manifested in two forms – black and red – in which the red being, when provoked to anger, manifests wrath in displays of lightning which the black form muffles and turns into thunder (Tippet 1970, cit. in Daniel 1983).

The main concern which needs to be stressed is, nonetheless, the prevalence of beliefs in the multiplicity of spirits, which might have had necessitated the practice of appeasing *Waaqa* by way of sacrifices. The Oromo used to dedicate rituals to their traditionally distinguished spirits such as forest, tree, spring, and moorland spirits often commonly named *Ayyaana*. There has been no forest or other nature-based ritual observance and sacrifice offering in non-Oromo religious beliefs and practices in Horro Guduru. Instead, widely contemplated beliefs and practices were being operated at man-made tabernacles. Comparing the belief systems of the Oromo with their counterparts in other religious categories, especially Judeo-Christian oriented religion, Martial de Salviac states in 1901:

The Oromo abhor idolatry ... they have not raised temple to Waaqa ... they repudiate all anthropomorphic representation of the Divinity. Their temple, that is the universe with arch studded with stars; their altar, the surface of the earth; their sacrifices are always innocent, even the ones which we see to sanctify the cradle of humanity, that is to say the first fruit of the fields and the primes of the herd. They ask only of the giants of the forest or of the most beautiful neighboring tree of their village to shade, with its luxuriant tress, their prayers and their immolations. As the most ancient peoples, they adore God and venerate the genies under the emblem of the forces of nature, but without confounding them with it (Kanno 2005: 160).

Studies on Oromo religious beliefs in general concern the foregoing core spiritual domains to put some traditional religious practices of the society into perspective. Indeed, an unadulterated quest for understanding the cultural realm of Oromo religious life ought to concern the preceding traditional spir-

6 Daniel (1983); Cerulli (1922); Legesse (1973); Knutsson (1967).



Map: Location map of Horro Guduru zone. Adapted from Finance and Economic Development Bureau of Oromia. Source: Firdissa Sadeta (2007), used with permission.

itual elements of the people. In spite of this, however, much more remains to be understood; as the religious practices and observances of the people ensemble in the matrix of traditional belief systems being practiced in different regions inhabited by the Oromo. As a preliminary attempt and in line with the preceding backdrop, this study mainly concerns the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland.

Ethnographic Procedures

Three representative *ganda* (smallest administrative unit with an average of 500 households) in Horro district were selected for this study: Dachaa Caabir, Odaa Bulluq, and Daaddoo. The ethnographic data were generated through interviewing local elders, aged above 75 years, and observations of ongoing ritual practices and scenes. The researchers interviewed 17 aged informants of the study community from 15 August 2010 to 12 June 2011. These elderly members of the community were believed to know more about the topic under discussion. The interviews with them helped in generating adequate ethnographic material about sacrifice, vow, and ritual feast as had been and is being practiced among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland. Both participant and non-participant observations were made to supplement the empirical evidences obtained through interviews. Literature review and archival investigations were also made on pertinent written sources about the Oromo in general and their reli-

gious beliefs in particular to complement the points of argument generated through fieldwork.

Feeding Gods: Sacrifice

Sacrifice, named *Ayyaana sooruu* or *Dhibaayyuu* in local language as per Oromo religious beliefs, refers to voluntary relinquishing of something valued, for example, bull. It can also mean a thing thus relinquished. Thus, sacrifice means not only slaughter of a tame animal but also surrender of valuable properties as form of offerings to a well-marveled deity. Keeping this notion in context, it is useful to pose



Plate 1: Slaughtering sacrificial bull favoring *Catto*, 15 August 2010.

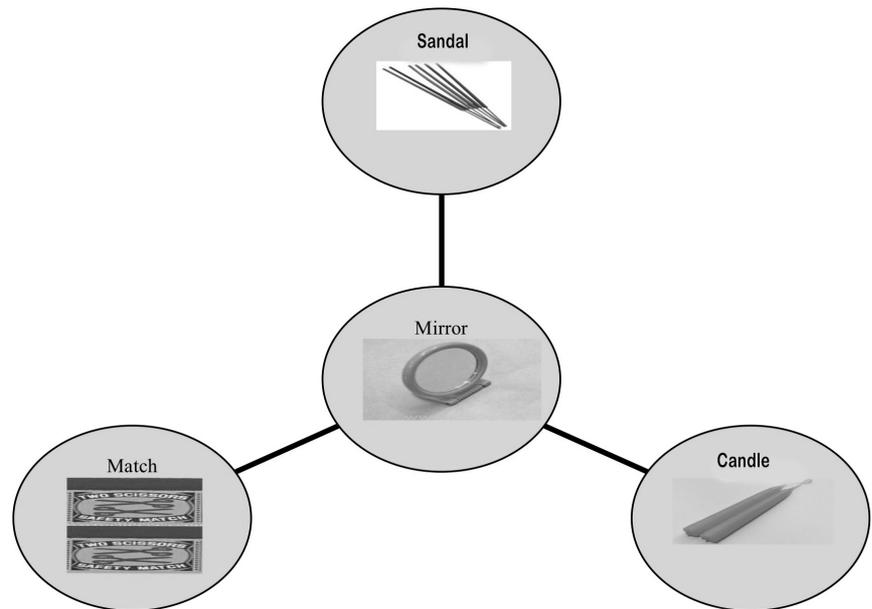


Plate 2: Variety of material cultural vows reciprocated to *Caato* deity, 15 August 2010.

what kind of sacrifices the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland offers to *Waaqa* or his varied agents which are commonly named *Ayyaana*, in their religious beliefs. Most of the time sacrifices involve live animals like bull (Plate 1), sheep, goat, and hen. Valuable material cultural products (Plate 2), libation of milk, honey, *biqila* (various kinds of locally prepared alcoholic drinks) and invoking a deity with *coqorsa* (freshly hacked green grass) are also presented to the revered divinity on every occasion of religious ritual. Yet some variety of sacrifices may change in account of the issue of affordability and intrinsically prescribed individual or collective attachment to the non-physical agent. But there are always *coqorsa* and *biqila* in observing traditional religious rituals in Oromo religious beliefs. These culturally set items mainly symbolize an avid desire for fertility, health, wealth, peace, and stability.

As understood through participant observation, the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland offer the sacrificial bull to *Ayyaana* of *Caato* (pronounced as *chato*) sacred forest at least bi-annually. The *Ayyaana* of *Caato* has been believed as an agent of *Waaqa* to help maintain this sacred forest and the entire natural resources in it. A bull is the most important animal in Horro Guduru economic contexts. Not only its cost has been rising more than any other tame animal available for sale but, more importantly, a bull is the backbone of the acme of Horro Guduru's economy, agriculture. Agriculture is the zenith of economy in Horro Guduru, but it is unlikely possible in the absence of a bull or oxen because farming has invariably been dependent on the oxen-driven plow system since time immemorial. Hence,

why should the people slaughter such an economically essential animal in the midst of its increasing price rise in that agricultural economy which almost entirely depends on oxen-driven farming system for centuries? The reason, according to informant RDh entails:

People always commit sin, no one is blameless in life, no one is punctilious in habits, no one is correct in deportment; morally, almost nobody's character was flawless. So people need to constantly check their walk with their creator so that he would grant them mercy, peace, and fertility. That is the central message, theme, and purpose of observing ritual through sacrificial offerings; message of mercy, peace, and fertility to humanity; theme of peace and fertile life; and purpose to retain merciful, peaceful, and fertile life (aged informant RDh, 15 August, 2010).

Other informants also claim that no one dares to think of conflict, riot, strike, and whatsoever evil may be present, provided that people abide in the traditional religious life such as the offering sacrifices to *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana*. It is believed that all ritual attendants need peace: peace with *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana*, peace with the natural and social environment, peace with oneself. It is also believed that all attendants need mercy: mercy from *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana* to those with faulty deeds, mercy of forgiving each other, and mercy to hold and retain a tranquil life. Further, it is believed that all attendants need fertility: fertility of land, fertility of human reproductive system, fertility of livestock, and fertility of the wider environment and cosmos. The problem is that all of this could hardly be achieved with human carnal effort, but with spiritual attachment to *Waaqa*

or *Ayyaana* through regular ritual observance with cheerful sacrificial offerings. Therefore, what has been done in this case is neither futile social gathering nor folly religious practice. It is believed to be extremely essential to attain and maintain what humans need in life so long as they live. The result also entails *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana* condescends to bless peoples' prayers and efforts to offer sacrifice to him; that, many times, he causes his providence to awaken and arouse cumulus which would sooner or later descend in the form of showers longed for, productive rainfall. In other words, *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana* graciously consent to do for the people what they desire from him while showing his superiority over all circumstances, which otherwise they could not do by themselves – no matter how they yearn for these productive provisions from him.

Indeed, it is believed that the sacrificial bull has a triple purpose. First, wrong deeds are to be imputed (reckoned) to it – as the people say: *Bita keenya fudhatee deema, balaan nu hinqaqqabu* (literally, “the bull would die, taking off our wrong deeds”). Thus, no harm would happen against those who believe in such a deity. Second, *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana* who demands people's cheerful sacrificial offerings feeds on its blood and is pleased to show mercy and prosperity to the people. Third, its meat is used to feed ritual attendants or guests, apart from another popular cultural dish known as *cumboo* (flat thick traditional pancake) feast, prepared and dedicated to guests during ritual observances. In this order, *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana* is presented with *dhiiga sooru* (feeding on blood, which is the bull's blood in this case), while the bull's meat would be eaten by guests (hospitality), its bone is to be discarded off at the slaughter scene, and its skin is meant for domestic use (not for sale), i.e. often by the person who has organized the ritual from the very beginning to its very end in that particular year.

One of the most noticeable religious rituals being observed by the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland in which bulls are sacrificed to deities is widely named *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* (literally, August ritual). This ritual has always been observed on the first Sunday of the second week of every August. Among this community, slaughtering a sacrificial bull is relatively bold and a collective action is needed to observe this ritual. The August ritual is meant mainly in need of mercy from *Waaqa* in general and *Caatol/Catto* (forest deity) in particular. This community virtually practices a communal way of life in observing their customary religious ritual that a sacrificial bull is obtained through collective contributions of money meant for purchasing the bull. Due to this strict prescription in social action, *Garanfa-*

sa Hagayyaa ritual attendants are always required to contribute some amount of money at least once in two years as per their interest which in turn is believed to have been influenced by the individual's perception about *Caatol/Catto*, i.e., both its retributive and contributive influence on their life. Oral history supplements the fact that slaughtering bulls and other tame animals at natural scenes like mountains, springs, sacred forests, and groves as well as under huge trees has been common among the Oromo. All these are assumed to have unique and ascribed spiritual results in the eradication of *golfaa* (disease believed to result from misdeed or misfortune), *hongee* (relentless drought), and other natural calamities. This implies that indigenous belief systems are not mere common knowledge but they entail perceptions and lore for how to curb natural harms coming against humanity in specific and nature at large. People do not merely contribute money and slaughter economically valuable bull in honor of some assumed mystical power. It is rather due to deep experience achieved through life course. In this sense, natural spaces have the capacity to shape and sustain culture, at least in indigenous communities such as the Oromo of Horro Guduru. Culture in turn has considerable impact either to sustain or obliterate nature, though the case in this paper reflects the sustainability matrix.

As such, *Caato* as the densest and hugest natural forest panorama in Horro Guduru is the only emblematic natural forest protected on account of its believed deity – the deity can interchangeably be named as *Caato* or *Catto*. Actually, people oftentimes used to call *Catto* that appears an awful non-physical agent indwelling the sacred forest – *Caato*, which has been sustainably conserved by Oromo religious belief systems traversing history to date.

In the past almost the whole indigenous communities round the sacred forest used to engage in *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual observance. Following the intrusion of Amhara imperial conquest and associated imposition of Judeo-Christian administration in indigenous affairs since 1870s, however, ritual attendants had been declining to the current figure of about 200 households. This was because the imperial administration has superimposed the Judeo-Christian belief system and the Amhara-Christian culture over indigenous belief systems, for example, belief in sacredness of natural scenes. The question is that why this number of households still lingers in offering a sacrificial bull to the forest deity in the midst of prolonged state interference in indigenous religious affairs? It seems that it could be their resolute belief in the worth of indigenous traditions, both cultural and environmental, that the remaining

households observe the *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual in honor of *Catto/Caato*. Interview results prove that people still observe the *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* because they know from experience that they would get *fayyaa* (health), *karra* (wealth), *dhala* (children), *qabbana uumaa* (natural environmental stability) and the like by observing the *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual and paying substantial sacrifices and vows to the non-physical agent called *Catto* dwelling in *Caato*. Conversely, those who mutiny and defy the sacredness of the forest were believed to have usually been committing suicide or other misfortunes (informants RDh and MB, personal interview on 27 February, 2011).

People may commit suicide in many forms, but the case manifested as retaliation from *Catto* is believed to be evident in two forms: going to the cliff of *Caato* sacred forest and throwing oneself deep into it on one hand and hanging oneself on a tree on the other. Whenever such incidents happen in the area, people often associate the misfortune with the retributive rage of the forest deity. Hanging oneself on a tree is believed that the tree's *Ayyaana* communicates *Caato* sacred forest's spirit and enforces capital punishment against the victim (key informant WD, personal interview on 27 May, 2011). Hanging oneself is believed to be the result of a curse *Caato* that the sacred forest spirit cast against sacrilegious – in the standard of Oromo religion – individuals (key informant WD, personal interview on 27 May, 2011). This belief may be compared with the Judeo-Christian belief that Judas Iscariot committed suicide by hanging himself on account of his betrayal of Jesus Christ (Radmacher et al. 1997: 303).

Binding someone with a curse is believed to be the exact opposite of blessing the same. In Oromo religious belief a curse represents entire ills which harm an individual or some groups owing to irreverence to *Waaqa's* will. Unless appeased through ritual observance and sacrifice, there is the threat of a curse on those who violate reverence to *Catto*. Indeed, a sacrificial bull is believed to shoulder any possible curse in the community so that offering its blood to *Catto* might help the community to be freed from the curses of violating the supernatural order of the sacred forest. Sacrificial offering to *Catto* is believed to transform one's undesirable fate as a result of sacrilegious thought against the sacredness of the forest which would perhaps entail hanging oneself – dishonorable and shameful fate as narrated by aged informants – into a picture of *Catto's* sacrificial virtuous exchange. To believe in this necessitates collective worship and sacrificial offering to the forest spirit at least once in a year. Worship

here means succumb to the will of *Catto*, as he is believed to possess supernatural power; it is a kind of bowing before the spirit to express complete submission to his power.

The cultural significance of bowing down to the spirit involves recognizing the virtuous relationship between *Catto* and those who worship as well as a bad relationship between *Catto* and those who vehemently react against *Catto* (informant WD, personal interview on 27 May, 2011). For this informant, bowing down to or worshipping *Catto* means submitting to his supernatural authority that “genuine” Oromo (*Oromoo sirrii*) worship must express free cherishing *Catto* and submission to his will. Other informants also believe that submission to the will of deities has been evident in sacrificial offering on *Waaqa's* altar (e.g., earth's surface chosen by forefathers at Holqa Makoo side of *Caato* sacred forest). The Oromo expressed their dedication and gratefulness to *Waaqa*, who had supplied all their needs, through collectively dedicating a bull – the utmost sacrificial offering. Bulls, sheep and goats could be dedicated for sacrificial offering to *Catto*, but the utmost one has always been a bull. These kind of sacrifice might have been prevalent among ancient people, especially among the Israelites, as the Bible reveals that a bull (Lv 1: 3–5), goats (Lv 1: 10), sheep (Lv 1: 10), and even birds (Lv 1: 14) have been dedicated to God so that He will transfer their sin to the animals offered (Radmacher et al. 1997).

Nevertheless, among the Oromo there was no practice of placing hands by the worshiper on the animal's head to show transfer of sin to the animal. The Oromo contribute money to purchase a sacrificial bull and collectively observe through prayer and joy, while it is being slaughtered. Moreover, the Oromo have no priest, unlike the Israelite who must kill the animal and collect its blood and present it to the Lord by sprinkling it on a “man-made” altar, wherein pieces of the sacrifice were then placed on the altar and completely burned. In contrast, in Oromo religious belief system, a man from some lineage, distinguished by the community, should kill the bull (sever its upper esophagus with a cutlass) and some seven or so people collectively slaughter the severed bull. Then the killer would soon collect fresh blood from the neck of the bull in bark of false banana and soon put it under the sacred tree standing on the altar side of *Caato* sacred forest. The meat of the sacrificial animal is served to ritual attendants what could be called feeding guests. For the Israelite, sacrifice of animal blood symbolizes not only the transfer of their sin to the animal, but it was believed to have had pointed to the Messiah Jesus Christ who offered Himself as sacrifice for

the sins of all (Radmacher et al. 1997: 309). For the Oromo, it seems to symbolize appeasing *Waaqa* and his agents for misdeeds against the will of *Waaqa* – such as sacrilegious thoughts and acts against *Catto*.

Sacrifices were not ends in themselves in Oromo religion. *Waaqa* is primarily interested in the decency, decorousness, innocence, decorum of the person per se as well as his/her genuine attachment to him. The costly sacrificial systems are believed to indicate how all of life, with its different spheres and rhythms, belongs to *Waaqa* that he could keep it alive or take it as he desires. It is believed that life can be lived with a sense of gratitude towards *Waaqa*. In this sense, the Oromo believe that a person ought to live for the glory of *Waaqa* rather than for his/her self-indulgent urges. A worshiper could physically express that glory to *Waaqa* through a fellowship of offering, though the sacrificial system was by no means cheap, as bull offering, for instance, is costly. But it impresses on the worshiper that he/she could give among his/her best to *Waaqa*. The mandatory sacrifices usually serve to remind a worshiper of his/her relationship to *Waaqa*. Bad relationship between humans as expressed in sadness and even killing each other may lead to non-cooperation or misfortune caused by *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana*. But it is believed that sacrificial offering could help to overcome a fatal consequence. Nevertheless, the bad relationship between humans and the deity is sure to prove fatal (causes various calamities including muteness, barrenness, illness, drought, hunger, and even death), given that the cheerful sacrificial offerings are not in order in due time – culturally fixed annual or other kinds of ritual observance date. Transactions of blood, *biqila*, and freshly cut grass along with prayers and worship are the most pertinent ways for keeping life issues as good as they should be.

Reciprocating Gods: Vow

Vow here refers to the individual's religious promise made solemnly to a particular deity in anticipation for the fulfillment of what is desired from the god. The anticipation is what is sought by the person requesting from the god. This may be soliciting the deity to spare oneself from consequences of undesirable actions he/she has committed – a kind of plea for mercy that can be known by the person, when he/she would be able to live until sometime he/she perceived. Vows can also be made for success in life such as educational or otherwise. It can also be made to relieve from barrenness, miscarriage, income failure, etc. It can also be made to ob-

serve some bad fortune against a person, assumed to be an enemy or assumed to be entirely negative against the wellbeing of the person making the vow by calling misfortune against the perpetrator from the deity in question. Therefore, the offer of the vowed item on divine fulfillment is an indication of a reciprocal act. One vows, anticipating something from the deity. If the deity fulfils what was vowed for, the person would offer the deity what was exactly vowed; otherwise the vow would remain unpaid, because the deity did not respond accordingly. Similarly, the deity seldom spares the person from the consequences of failure to submit what was exactly vowed, because the person did not duly reciprocate the met divine request.

These elements of Oromo religion can be compared with biblical facts as written in the Mosaic Law. It reads:

Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes concerning the children of Israel, saying, "This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (Nm 30: 1–3; cf. Radmacher et al. 1997: 258).

Vows are reciprocations to *Waaqa*'s provisions of what has been pursued for from his divine hand. The Oromo could submit both live animals and non-living materials to deities as sacrifices and vows. Plates 2 and 3 A,B represent vows offered to *Caato* forest deity. From these vowed items, live animals – like hen and goat – were to be mortgaged on equal sharing basis between *Waaqa* and the herder or mortgager. But non-living items such as mirror, sandal, candle, and so forth must be kept under a certain sacred tree until littering or unknown time, as men must not take them because *Waaqa* is believed to watch them intently. This belief is an exceptional feature among the protestants who were found snatching out such vowed items from sacred scenes, yet they face no harm – which in fact has been depriving the reputation of the traditional belief systems (informants RDh and MB, 15 August, 2010).

Like the sacrifice, some variety of vows may change on account of issues of affordability and intrinsically prescribed individual or collective attachments to the nonphysical agent. They mainly symbolize a keen need for fertility, peace or stability, health, and wealth. The man holding the goat in Plate 3 B, for example, has reciprocated this live animal as vow to *Catto* after fulfillment of what he has vowed for, i.e., *gabaa fi gabii* (income). He has been a poor farmer with five household members subsisting not only on inadequate farming, but he was also



Plate 3 A: Hen vowed to *Caato* forest deity.



Plate 3 B: A man while offering a goat vow to *Caato* deity.

generating income from praising reputable individuals through traditional songs with skillful harp performances – focusing on achieved statuses of individuals in the community. He was distinguished as *asmaarii* (traditional harp player and singer), who used to collect money by praising good deeds and denouncing the bad ones just at various social gatherings meant to celebrate ceremonies, namely, ceremonies signaling wedding and successful completion of higher educational studies. On the date of *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual observance in 2010 (15 August), he declared that he has generated adequate income from his profession, *asmaarii*, after vowing a goat to *Caato* deity in the last ritual observance (a year back from 15 August, 2010). The goat vow was bought with part of the money generated during the year. He has rather mortgaged the goat back, based on the deity's favor for herd on equal sharing basis. This particular goat was *goromtii re'ee* (nanny goat) and the young it could deliver thereafter will be shared fifty-fifty between the man and the deity.

Although vows might be found both in narrative and in legal sections in different cultures, biblical evidence shows that the first person who utters a vow was from Israel named Jacob – son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. When he was on the run from his older twin, but ferocious brother Esau, Jacob spent a memorable night under the stars. Jacob had a dream, a vision of angels ascending and descending. It reads:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the

stone that he had at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it ... Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to You" (Gn 28: 16–22; cf. Radmacher et al. 1997: 51).

Inundated by the awe of the place, Jacob seems to reciprocate God's sign. In his vow, Jacob asks for uncovered necessities and to turn back home unharmed. Consecutively, he will build a house for God and separate a tenth of his income for sanctified causes.

An Oromo makes mostly a vow to *Waaqa* or his agents when he/she is in distress, but what he/she has vowed, namely as a vow merely in sayings which then emanates from a longing heart, that needs to be performed to *Waaqa* or his agents. In other words, what one's lips have uttered and has been spoken out through his/her mouth when he/she was in distress must be reciprocated at the time of fulfillment. The Oromo says that it is worthy or commendable to make a vow in time of trouble to *Waaqa* or his agents for intervention than merely lingering on the trouble which would otherwise yield undesirable effects such as misery, solitude, hopelessness, despair, or even committing suicide in various ways: by drinking poisonous substances, hanging oneself with a rope on a tree branch or roof structure of a house just to relieve of the trouble being escalated.

Yet, this encouragement towards resorting to vows in time of trouble appears contrary to the danger of failure or inability to reciprocate *Waaqa* or



Plate 4: Gurree (center) holding her son and two sheep for met vow (birth of this son beside her); her husband stands behind her between two women who also are ready to make vow against their problem taking the experience of Gurree; the *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho is believed to have given this child to Gurree. The man sharing loaves of bread (right) was Gurree's *Ayyaantuu* (special witness); he was serving *mugeerii* (bread) to ritual attendants.

his agents at the time of the fulfillment of what has been vowed for. Deeming the subject of vows as an entirely positive religious expression is missing the manifest realities on the other half side of the coin. Some elderly Oromo caution that a vow is a dangerous deception and that one must keep away from indulging in the practice. This is because vows are always solemnly and over-ambitiously promised to a perfect *Waaqa* or his agents by an imperfect man being devoid of anything to fulfill the spiritual promise. The perfect *Waaqa* would invariably fulfill what has been requested from him, but the imperfect person would barely live up to his/her promise but to incur vengeance – believed to be the right divine intervention in favor of maintaining the moral order among the society which involves the pursuit of justice, virtue, and the defense of *Waaqa*'s majesty.

The story of unreciprocated vows draws attention to the fact that the spiritual necessity to reciprocate *Waaqa* or his agents was often contextually sandwiched by some tragic occurrences. The elderly narrate cases, when some people had died for their possessiveness of what has been vowed to *Waaqa* or his agents. The implication is that this and other tragedies could have been avoided had the people who had once vowed kept their vow. One fundamental question thus comes up: Why would vows be a part of religious consciousness and expression, if the result of non-reciprocated vows was so negative? This is because the possibility of a failed vow could never have deterred people from pleading to *Waaqa* for intervention in time of anguish. Those who are believed to vow with a longing, innocent,

decent, and prudent heart could fulfill their promise and reciprocate *Waaqa* or his agents which is often said to have been credited with contentment, reputation, and long life. This makes the implications and ramifications of vows to become clearer. Successful vows – in a reciprocal manner as both the person who vowed to *Waaqa* for something and *Waaqa* himself appear to involve a mutual spiritual transaction – reinforce people to vow against their agony and make vows to pervade religious consciousness and expression. The successful vow is considered as a great religious endeavor which is believed not only to confirm the receiver's innocence but also the very presence of the cheerful and caring *Waaqa*.

Whilst, the implications and ramifications of vows have become clearer, the essence of the vow still remains rather vague. The following vow narrated by Gurree, however, might illumine the essence of a vow in the Oromo religion. "If the *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho⁷ shall evade my barrenness and give me children, I will surely give him two sheep" (Gurree, observation on the Gadaa Bacho ritual celebration at Laga Daaddoo in Horro district, 22 May, 2011).

7 Bacho refers to the only Oromo group from among other Oromo of Horro Guduru in practicing the eight-yearly gadaa ritual in the area. Other Oromo assert that they had dropped practicing the gadaa ritual some centuries back because of lack of grain demanded for the lavish feast to celebrate one's gadaa while the Bacho endured the episode by celebrating their gadaa with a milk feast alone – as they believed that leaving the practice aside would be detrimental to their reputation and the very existence of their ancestral creed.

The realization that *Waaqa* would evade her barrenness and give her children inspired Gurree to vow sheep to *Waaqa* in reciprocation (Plate 4). The essence of the vow – the dedication of sheep to *Waaqa*, the separation of an “innocent” tame animal and imbuing it with blessedness – is the becoming endowed with the ability to bear children. It also unfolds *Waaqa*’s faithfulness in fulfilling the mutual spiritual promise once entrusted upon him. Here, the person’s desire to have children through divine intervention against barrenness on vowing basis resulted in a reciprocal symbol on the part of *Waaqa*. In that there exists a kind of moral, spiritual, and material reciprocity between *Waaqa* or his agents and the people. Gurree narrates: “The *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho gave us a boy child after I and my husband had vehemently vowed to him two sheep eight years back now; but I conceived a baby boy soon and here is the boy aged 7.”

This concept of understanding the *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho as a powerful being who can evade barrenness was pervasive among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland. Throughout the history and socio-cultural systems of the people, even along the colonial path unleashed by the Amhara, the eight-yearly Gadaa Bacho ritual in Horro Guduru hinter-

land has remained a conspicuous occasion for both making and dedicating vows and sacrifices. Examples are given in Plate 4, which shows the evidence on 20 May, 2011, and in Plates 5 A,B,C,D Gadaa Bacho ritual on 12 June, 2011. Here, the man holding a white colored sheep claims that he has received what he had vowed for (income – he was the most known sheep dealer in Horro Guduru) during the last ritual event (12 June, 2003). He has dedicated this sheep to *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho on the occasion of the Gadaa ritual celebration (on 12 June, 2011) at a ritual scene named Odaa Bulluq.

Not only vows were reciprocated to deities on the ritual event, but others who participated in the ongoing ritual – particularly to plead to *Waaqa* for avoiding their heartache on a vowing basis – also promise a vow. It was observed that such eventful rituals have been taking place at various ritualized scenes. In consequence, people who suffer from barrenness and other forms of distress are still making vows to *Waaqa* or his various agents such as the *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho, spirit of *Caato*, Odaa Bulluq, Corree, and at other ritualized scenes in Horro Guduru hinterland.



Plate 5 A: A man slaughtering sheep vow to Tulluu Corree deity.



Plate 5 B: A man offering sheep vow to *Waaqa* Gadaa Bacho.



Plate 5 C: Two men standing in a river (Laga Daaddoo) amid Abbaa Gadaas and ritual attendants making vow to the *Waaqa* of Gadaa Bacho for divine intervention against thieves who stole their five oxen.



Plate 5 D: A barren woman pleading to *Waaqa* Gadaa Bacho at Laga Daaddoo for a child by promising him a vow in return.

Feeding Guests: Ritual Feast

Before explaining some pertinent points about this sub-theme, highlighting the overall scenario of some institutionalized norms and practices for religious ritual observance among the Oromo of Horro Guduru is useful. Culturally accepted institutions for religious ritual observance among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland are rooted in the story of the earliest ancestors, the *Kudha-Arfan* Horro. Even so rituals might have happened at different

times and several places, ritual observance needs to follow the form and structure of the typical forefathers' creed. First, a cheerful and lavish feast and other necessary conditions ought to be arranged before it is too late. Second, *Waaqa* ought to be invoked first through thanksgiving and blessing and then prayer, vow, and libation by holding freshly cut grass and *biqila* (local beer). This may take several minutes as people need to assemble and queue up in disaggregated age and gender lines. In age structure, the male elders and spiritual experts take the front queue and lead the ongoing ritual through thanksgiving, blessing, and prayer. The adult males as well as male juniors follow keeping the queue in the group of their equivalent or proximate age structure. Then females come in a separate queue keeping the age structure of their male counterparts. Third, sacrificial animals, such as a bull, would be dedicated to the deity. *Waaqa* Oromo is commonly invoked. Fourth, ritual attendants take seat on the ground, putting freshly cut tree leaves beneath their buttock, for feast and drink. Fifth, the male elders close up the ongoing ritual through blessings and valedictory exhortation. In short, these are the contents and procedures usually maintained on every traditional ritual, religious or otherwise, among the Oromo of Horro Guduru.

Still, there were some requirements or preconditions for ritual observance among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland. The ritual needs to be realized as a religious language: communicating the perfect *Waaqa* by imperfect man. The ritual is a means of conveying a worship message to *Waaqa*; the feast is for attendants who participate in the rit-

ual deliberation because it must be consumed up there no matter how impossible it may be; the grass is a symbol of approaching *Waaqa* of peace with a serene heart – nobody comes to the ritual scene to fight despite the presence of bitter rivals but to revoke hostility and enmity – all evils emanating from human heart (informant Dh). Therefore, the grass carries a big symbol that one must not attend the ritual without holding freshly cut grass. It is believed that appearing in the ritual environment is appearing more close to *Waaqa* because one always thinks about him at the moment. The ritual is imminent and culminates into an engaging and worshipful celebration event. Thereafter one thanks *Waaqa* persistently though with a declining stand which gradually dictates revitalization in the next round of annual ritual. This implies that the cycle goes on and is unending from generation to generation. Generally, the ritual and the sacred environments are typical avenues for communicating with *Waaqa* – talk to him either in group through collective songs, praise, and prayers or individually, since human problems which need divine intervention vary – individuals may be in the quest for children, income, healing from sickness, cure from disease, solution to other problems, the list is almost endless (informants Rg and At).

Ritual feasts were mostly observed for religious and traditional purposes among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland. But they could also have been banqueted in some non-religious and non-traditional cases. The word “feast” could represent festival-gathering in the Oromo’s worldview. It has been operated and it served in different contexts and environments which are often deemed sacred. Explanation here is, however, limited to the “purely” religious ritual feasts on one hand and the politico-religious on the other. The “purely” religious ones were being served at *Caato* (*Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual) and *Corree* (*Garanfasa Furmaa* ritual). These ritual feasts were being observed on annual basis. The politico-religious one was being observed on the eight-yearly basis and the observance of it has been with one of the most lavish feast embedded in the *Gadaa* *Bacho* ritual among the Horro Guduru.

***Garanfasa Hagayyaa* and *Garanfasa Furmaa* Ritual Feasts**

In the context of *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* and *Garanfasa Furmaa* rituals, the festive practice has been meant to have a pilgrim feast once a year. These sacred feasts were celebrated by all people who believe in the sacredness of *Caato* forest and *Tulluu*

Corree. The ritual occasions have ever been a merry expression of gratitude to *Waaqa*, as he was believed to have helped the people effectively to conclude the critical agricultural seasons. There were two major and critical agricultural seasons among the peasants of the Horro Guduru hinterland: the harvest and plow seasons. The *Garanfasa Furmaa* ritual feast was always associated with the conclusion of the harvest season and the preparation for the next critical agricultural season, i.e., plowing. In between these critical agricultural seasons, the *Garanfasa Furmaa* ritual needs to be arranged for two main purposes: thanksgiving to *Waaqa*, as he has blessed them with crops and also helped them to harvest their crops in peace on one hand, and praying to *Waaqa* for success in the forthcoming plow season on the other. This type of ritual feast could have occurred in various places in Horro Guduru hinterland, but nowadays it has been limited to few pocket areas due to decline in the status and reputation of Oromo religious beliefs, as these beliefs were assumed to be demonic practices by other religious groups, especially by Protestant groups.

The context of *Garanfasa Furmaa* was studied through participant observation on 27 February, 2011 at *Tulluu Corree* in Horro district. The annual ritual feast was observed in favor of appeasing the virtue of believed forest spirit; *Garanfasa Furmaa* had always been arranged in keeping the time of inaugurating the forest clearing for *huussoo*⁸ agriculture. This kind of ritual has been dedicated to the *Garchi* forest spirit until very recently apart from *Tulluu Corree* (*Corree* moorland). It was a ritual performed, when people clear forests or bushes for remaining intact or cultivating fallow fields. The annual rituals serve as a way of removing danger and blessing the prospective use of the intact or fallow fields. It was witnessed that people usually believe in the existence of innumerable spirits, some of which occupy mountains, springs, trees, and forests. Wherever that belief exists, it has been essential to perform rituals, which among other things will help to send away these spirits from the bushes and trees being cleared away to make a new or fallow field. This spiritual thought of the Oromo is consistent with other findings among other traditional societies in Africa (Mbiti 1991). Mbiti asserts “If such a ritual is not done, it is feared that the people who work on that field may be molested by the spirits or may meet with mysterious misfortunes. The ritual removes such fear and danger, and helps the people to find harmony with their new field” (1991: 135). The people of Horro Guduru who reside alongside

⁸ *Huussoo* among the Oromo stands for shifting cultivation.

Garchi forest used to slaughter bulls or sheep ever in the fall of winter season. In other words, in the down of spring season, especially after the fall of February, peasants who used to subsist on *huussoo* agriculture against Garchi forest ecozone must prepare the feast and slaughter either of these tame animals for the blood sacrifice to the forest's deity so that they would not be retaliated and should achieve the desirable productivity. In fact, this kind of ritual feast is absent in Horro Guduru nowadays because of two main reasons. First, informants WA and GQ maintain that the practice of *huussoo* agriculture, which has been prevalent against Garchi forest ecozone until the last five years, was forsaken due to overexploitation caused by overpopulation. Overpopulation – the Horro Guduru population has increased by about 38 percent between 1994 to 2007 – in turn has compelled the local people to transform their field of *huussoo* agriculture from ritualized three or so yearly forest clearing system for farming through fallow method to farming without fallow system. Second, informants TDh and GQ argue that the practice of *huussoo* agriculture near or inside forest ecozones, in whatever form, has been absolutely banned on the premises that it has been causing both irreversible deforestation and irresistible environmental degradation. Therefore, these two major reasons, absence of fallow period and state prohibition, have encumbered *huussoo* agriculture and caused the banishment to the associated customary ritual processions and offering blood sacrifice to forest spirit.

The *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual feast has been associated with the plow and harvest seasons in that order. The ritual feast has been arranged in group by the local community and served at various sacred places. The *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* ritual being discussed, however, was the one studied through participant observation at the *Caato* sacred forest in Horro district. The main purposes of this ritual feast consist of thanksgiving to *Waaqa* (for he helped them overcome the years' plow season in peace) and prayer to the same so that he would help grow the sown crops in abundance and reap subsequently the harvest in the next round of critical agricultural cycle.

In general, the observed ritual feasts included processions, singing in favor of *Caato* and Corree. Dancing was but not to reveal an ordinary profane realm, for this is believed to be blasphemy to *Waaqa* and thus taboo in the Oromo religious domain. The ritual feasts also constitute joyous enjoyment of food and drink. It was intended that Oromo religious feasts are worship events, a celebration of the joy *Waaqa* had given them. Protestant religious

groups, however, condemn the feasts because they believe that the adherents of Oromo religious beliefs were desecrating these "holy" convocations with sacrilegious behavior (key informants WD and GT, personal interview on 29 February, 2011).

***Gadaa Bacho* Ritual Feast**

As attempted to be highlighted in the preceding explanation, ritual feasts can be observed at different times and places by the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland. These comprise of weekly, six-monthly, annual, and eight-yearly rituals at several scenes holding the forefathers' creed. The weekly rituals are often associated with specialized worship at individual religious domains who are known as experts of customary religion – *qaalluu* (male religious expert) or *qaallittii* (female religious expert). The six-monthly rituals take place at slack time when peasants apparently engage in recess from agricultural labor, especially the critical agricultural seasons amid laborious harvest and plow periods and vice versa. When separately treated, these six-monthly rituals become annual rituals which include rituals dedicated to the forest and mountain spirits, namely *Garanfasa Hagayyaa* and *Garanfasa Furmaa* rituals respectively, as explained thus far. Nevertheless, treating these two separate domains of *Garanfasa* rituals under the name *Garanfasa* could make them one type of ritual observed at two different periods in a year, with six months regular interval in between. The *Gadaa Bacho* ritual, however, is the most lavish and prestigious customary politico-religious ritual in Horro Guduru hinterland happening only once after every eight years. It has been a politico-religious ritual because its celebration simultaneously involves active participation of traditional political leaders (*Abba Gadaa*) and customary religious experts (*Abbaa Muudaa*), who are required at least for power transition and prayer respectively.

Successful celebration of the *Gadaa Bacho* eight-yearly ritual usually requires storing grains and other materials like butter and honey through diligent work within the span of some two years close to the ritual feast preparation. Early preparation makes the ritual distinct and lavish though some may argue that it has been an extravagant practice against the already subsistent peasant income. The Oromo believe that *gadaa* has been the source of prosperous and peaceful life and it was being observed only once in one's lifetime so that whatever lavish feast could be prepared does never make the practice extravagant against the practitioners' meager income for they would never repeat it again. This is because

the *gadaa* ritual represents a cyclical eight-yearly ritual across generations but not within or intra-generations. The same individual who has once celebrated would never celebrate it. *Gadaa* celebrating individuals have been required to prepare lavish feast and drink for guests coming from every corner of their region so that hospitality should not lead to blame and shame on the part of the individuals, his kinship, and the *gadaa* of the year as well. Feast involves different kinds of buttered traditional foods (*murata*, *buddeena ittoo foonii*, *caccabsaa*, *laante-ta*, *fusufusoo*, *qorii*, etc.) and drinks (*farsoo*, *buqqurii*, *arraabsisaa*, *booka*, *damma*, *qundee*, etc.). Sacrifices and vows often dedicated to deities during this type of ritual are similar to those demonstrated in the foregoing plates. Plates 4 and 5 B,C,D are evidences from the *Gadaa* *Bacho* ritual of 2011 in Horro Guduru hinterland.

Ritualized Environments and Some Local Experiences

There could have been various ritualized environments in Horro Guduru, as the Oromo inhabiting the area have widely been known in revering both highly localized specific ritual centers (such as *muka jaarii*) and more encompassing ones common to all. The most pervasive ritual centers common to all the traditional religion followers include *Odaa Bulluq* and *Caato*. Although it could hardly be attested through the experimental approaches of the hard sciences, the critique of people's believe system reveals that both *Caato* and *Odaa Bulluq* have been feared and respected by the local community for centuries. Why does the local community fear such scenes in the absence of material evidence? Aged informants BG and RDh contend that as they have known through their lived experiences both environments had been convulsing heretics, hypocrites, and disobedient persons to the customary belief system. Another informant, WD, retorts that he knew a woman who betrayed the sacredness of *Odaa Bulluq* by not worshipping its *Ayyaana* and in effect has given birth to *foci* – wild cat – though the news was soon hidden for immoral reason. Disseminating such strange and taboo news among the public has less likely been sound from moral and customary view because the news that a human being gives birth to a wild animal was uncommon. Besides, it is against the reputation of the “innocent” community she has been a part of. Adding examples to his assertion, informant WD continues to retort that he knew various cases of miscarriage of those who betray customary beliefs.

Caato, as one widely known ritualized environment in Horro Guduru hinterland, is believed to have been endowed with spirit which was worshipped at different cliff sides of *Caato* natural forest. Nowadays, customary worshipping center in favor of *Caato* apparently has been limited only to the *Holqa Makkoo* (*Makkoo's cliff*) side. This is because the local community living on the sides of other cliffs of *Caato* had forsaken the practice accompanying the death of the initial ritual organizers and leaders. For example, the ritual observance in honor of *Caato* sacred forest from the *Abee Dongoro* district side was declined following the death of *Dayyaas Deeddee* – the inaugurator of this side's ritual practice at a particular village named *Dabbisii*. Yet, worshipping *Caato* has still been persisted by attendants and guests yearly summoning at the ritual center of *Holqa Makkoo* which involves preparation of special and sizeable bread called *cumboo* – eaten with spiced butter melted in a four-holed pot named *maasaroo* and thickened cheese – and various kinds of locally made drinks prepared for libation and hospitality.

The family and the community cooperation in the ritual preparation and worship of *Caato* spirit stood in the way that children contribute their part in collecting or gathering firewood and fetching water meant for preparing the ritual feast. Fathers supervise the overall ritual and worship preparation activities, and lead prayer, sacrifice offering, libation, and blessing. Mothers play extraordinary roles which involve kneading dough and making *cumboo* for the ritual feast; they also kindle fire during the moment of ritual observance for frying raw meat for guests who might not eat raw meat. Moreover, feeding the guests appears one of the active roles entrusted to women, as they always usher in guests during the ritual process.

These local belief systems were, however, being deteriorating because of external forces and internal dynamics. Protestantism, since 1965 in Horro Guduru (Negewo 2011: 4), and modern education (Mergo et al. 2011) appear the most impinging factors. Despite the ever dwindling status of reverence due to the forest or other natural environment deities, the local people are still persisting in Oromo religious beliefs and practices. As a case in point, nearly more than 200 households still dedicate annual ritual in favor of *Caato* sacred forest deity. The whole *Bacho* Oromo community of the Horro Guduru also practices the eight-yearly *gadaa* ritual observance at *Odaa Bulluq* sacred environment.

Concluding Remarks

The overall sacrificial, vows, and ritual situations among the Oromo of Horro Guduru hinterland were observed to maintain natural, individual, and societal wellbeing. Perceived in the failure to surveilance the entrenched customary rituals and sacrificial and vows offering were a tendency to drag in divine vengeance, particularly against those who deviate from indigenous belief system. Catastrophic life situations like sterility, muteness, deafness, and blindness have been rarely happening among the Oromo, but when manifested they are believed to have been the retributive ramifications of unyieldingness to believe in indigenous belief system.

Contrasting Nabokov's (2000: 151) contention that sacrifice is a private endeavor which he claims is based on the reality in Tamilnadu region of India, sacrifice is both a private and collective issue among the Oromo. The sacrificial bull in honor of *Caato* sacred forest could never have been attempted on an individual basis for it is believed that the surrounding community as a whole need to engage in the sacrifice offering through collective contribution of money meant for purchasing the bull. In contrast, *Dhibaayyuu* (libation) of *biqila*, *aannan* (milk), *damma* (honey), and freshly cut grass offering can be observed on individual or collective basis during ritual observance.

On the other hand, the vow appears as a spiritual reciprocity. By and large, reciprocity was an important value in the Oromo religious rules for living. Not only were humans in need to give and receive freely in relationships with each other, but they were to reciprocate with supernatural powers to maintain the world order, with the humans being responsible for performing ritual in return for *Waaqa's* or *Ayyaana's* support of man's existence. It was so important that rituals ought to be conducted with absolute accuracy. Otherwise rituals, particularly the most traditional ones, are believed to have been no longer performed, there being no individuals remaining who can be trusted to perform them without any deviations from the proper ritual structure.

In order to live successfully in a difficult environment, the Oromo needed to value precision and order in religious life as they have hitherto attempted. They had to have a comprehensive understanding of what is known as forest, spring, and mountain if they were to be successful in life and in their forest and mountainous territory. They also had to be able to communicate precisely with respect to directions and distance in space. These all were manifested in their religious beliefs and practices, the cosmos in general.

Ritual continues to be a central concern for anthropologists working among indigenous communities. The present case can be substantiated with other anthropological works. A typical early example in this regard was the Tsembaga Maring. These people had been dedicating pigs to ancestral spirits through a yearlong ritual feast known as *kaiko* (Rappaport 1968; Townsend 2009). Rappaport considers the Tsembaga ritual and sacrifice from neo-functional perspective as he was apparently the proponent of this anthropological school of thought. He found that increase in the number of pigs in the early 1960s among the Tsembaga has compelled the people to reduce the number of pigs by dedicating some amount to ancestral spirits in a yearlong ritual. Yet, ritual observance, ritual feast, and sacrifice dedication were distinct in the context of the Oromo for several reasons. First, among the Oromo these cultural phenomena had been rooted in historical facts of nearly half millennium long, since the time when the *Kudha-Arfan* Horro were believed to have settled the Horro Guduru hinterland. Second, sacrifices were offered to spring, mountain or forest spirits rather than ancestral spirits. Further, rituals were being observed often once in a year so that the practice was not destructive against the population of sacrificial animals, unlike the Tsembaga who had destroyed more than 100 pigs from June 1962 to end of 1963 (Townsend 2009).

The Oromo case is rather consistent with the work of Ortner (1975) who did detailed anthropological study among the Sherpa of Tibet. Ortner has analyzed the Sherpa ritual from the point of view imbued in Clifford Geertz's "Religion as a Cultural System" (1966) and "Ideology as a Cultural System" (1964). She approached the Sherpa ritual from symbolic interpretation for she was likely influenced by the cultural interpretive models devised by Geertz. Ortner endorses Geertz's symbolic thought that in order for human beings to operate in any given reality, they must have an ongoing sense of what that reality is all about, what it means, how it is to be conceptualized and felt about, in order to be acted upon. Likewise, in the Oromo worldview the sacred environments, typically the more commonly revered scenes like the *Odaa Bulluqa* and *Caato* sacred forest, could not be merely acted upon unless it is felt and conceptualized in the historically rooted traditional ritual and sacrificial system. Ortner asserts that Geertz sets two propositions to which any particular symbolic structure may be said to be a response, and in terms of which it must be explained. First, the actual social, historical, natural, and psychological realities present in the society at that time invites explanation. Second, the strate-

gic orientations (conscious or unconscious) – what some would call ideological orientations – also calls for ethnographic contemplation and interpretation.

Explanation and interpretation of the social, historical, natural and psychological as well as ideological constructs the Oromo had been utilizing in their ritual and sacrificial systems could hardly escape these propositions. This assertion is valid in line with the detailed symbolic interpretation and discussions considered thus far based on the question of survival the Oromo realize in their spiritual life. As the Oromo recognize survival requires thorough knowledge of some basic environmental relationships and a desire to put that knowledge to use. The Oromo believe that reverence paid to spiritual ecologies not only influences and supports the very natural and stable base of that ecologies but also help humans reside in hospitable environment. This idea has been revealed in the work of ecologists that they suggest that natural selection favors species that contribute to the stability of their ecosystems; a species that continually disrupts the ecosystem in which it participates is itself seriously threatened (Plog and Bates 1976: 150).

Ritual can refer to *Ayyaana* in Oromo worldview as the concept *Ayyaana* can also be conceptualized as festivity of holidays often celebrated through sacrifices (Daniel 1983). Such rituals among the people are by no means limited to the ones considered in here: *Garanfasa Hagayyaa*, *Garanfasa Furmaa*, and *Gadaa Bacho* (currently named *Gadaa Horro-Bulluq*). But there exist other traditional holidays which these paper was incapacitated to consider.

Up till now, the belief and belief system of the Oromo can be understood the way Gulia (2007: 270) defines these terms stating, “belief and belief system are terms used both popularly and technically, loosely and tightly, but generally they refer to some unseen intellectual/emotional activity of human beings.” Almost all the ritualized environments in Horro Guduru hinterland including those not treated in this article have been believed sacred because of the local peoples’ belief systems. A number of *Qaalluu* shrines and ritualized sacred tree domains being prevalent in the area were being believed sacred and protected from anthropogenic attack through customary belief system.

In Oromo culture, tame animals like cows are not considered sacred unless prescribed through some privately dealt spiritual transaction often communicated through religious experts, *Qaalluu*. Still, though it is difficult to accept the cultural materialist proposition because of the realities manifest in Oromo culture in line with Harris’ (1995) critiques expounded below, the Oromo can kill cows, espe-

cially when the cows get older, for meat consumption. They can also kill tame animals as sacrifices to deities. Harris’ cultural materialism in line with the spiritual components of Oromo culture appears too pale to stand credible. Harris argued that the taboos on cow slaughter among the Hindus (*emic* thought) were superstructural elements resulting from the economic need to utilize cows as draft animals rather than as food. In Harris’ reflexivity, however, male calves were observed to be starved to death when feed supplies are low. Harris contends that the scarcity of feed (infrastructural change) shaped ideological (superstructural) beliefs of the Hindu farmers. Thus, Harris favors how an *etic* perspective is essential in order to understand culture change holistically by using empirical methods.

Nevertheless, this materialist empirical approach to culture change appears too simple and straightforward as several theoretical perspectives rightly critique. First, the Marxists believe that cultural materialists depend heavily on the one-directional infrastructure-superstructure relationship to explain culture change, and that the relationship between the “base” (a distinct level of a socio-cultural system underlying the structure, in Marxists’ view) and that the superstructure must be dialectically viewed; than through one-dimensional cultural materials approach. The fear of the Marxists is that a cultural materialist approach can disregard the superstructure to such a degree that the effect of superstructure on shaping structural elements can remain unobserved.

Second, the idealists, particularly the proponents of structuralism, view the *etic* view of culture as inappropriate and full of ethnocentrism. This group maintains that culture itself is the controlling factor in culture change. In idealism, culture is based on a universal human structure embedded within the brain, and cultural variation is the result of each society’s cultural experience filling that structure in its own way. Thus, the quarrel is that the cultural materialist emphasis on an *etic* perspective creates biased conclusions.

Third, the postmodernists also reprimand cultural materialism because of its use of strict scientific method. The basic assumption in this thought is that science is itself a culturally determined phenomenon that is affected by class, race, and other structural and infrastructural variables (Harris 1995: 62). In effect, some postmodernists assert that science is a tool used by upper classes to oppress and dominate lower classes (Rosenau 1992: 129). This implies – according to the postmodernists’ explanation – that the use of any science is useless in studying culture, and that cultures should be studied using relativ-

ism and particularism. This is also a direct attack on cultural materialism with its objective studies and cross-cultural comparisons.

The relationship between sacrifice, vow, and ritual feasts in Oromo religious belief appears mutualistic. These religious elements and related events reinforce each other adding flavor and reputation to customary religious ritual observances. Inability to reciprocate gods in time of fulfilled divine request is believed to result in unfathomable misfortunes and calamities. It is also believed that if gods are not provided with blood, they will remain angry just to create climactic wrath in due course. Similarly, if one remains in laxity and tendency not to provide ritual attendants or guests with lavish ritual feast (customary foods and drinks), the latter will be angry and may defame and blame one another as members of the community who organize the ritual being observed. Collective behavioral and practical attempts to evade all these ills from happening significantly end up in a kind of positive and mutualistic relationships between humans and gods on one hand and between the host community and the ritual guests on the other. Hospitality or feeding guests is, thus, necessitated by the desire to make ritual processes and observances blameless. Actually, it is believed that religious ritual feasts should not incur shame unlike the non-religious ones for the motto is not filling bellies but *galata dhiyeessuu* (thanksgiving), and *hedachuu* (prayer) to *Waaqa* or *Ayyaana*, and cheerfully and joyously practicing his *safeeffachuu* (worshiping). Indeed, in Oromo cultural practice the hospitality situation is not believed to be an individual affair so that a private individual could shoulder the blame in time of shortage in the ritual feast, though seniority (elderly people) has always been maintained in the culture. “Elderly” refers to a collective action so that there was no room, to use Berger’s (2011: 43) phrase, for agency and strategic maneuvers. Therefore, people often tend to refrain from blowing shame against some distinguished individual or group for they find their spiritually prescribed place within the overall ritual structure.

Much of the ritual feast activity in and between the Horro Guduru villages at the time of ritual observances centers on a type of hospitality food called *cumboo*. The cultural significance of this food can hardly be overstressed. The genealogy of Horro Guduru Oromo as it exists today is said to be the result of a primordial ritual feast, when the baked food (*cumboo*) only was sufficient for fourteen sons of Horro as a group of brothers who had just come to the area where the *Kdha-Arfan* Horro (the fourteen Horro republic) have lived there before six centuries. The ritual feast proceeds from holding

the forefathers’ tradition but the Oromo do believe in the superiority of *Waaqa*’s law over their traditions (man-made laws).

Based on the foregoing premises, the grandiose idea of cultural materialism is hardly tenable in view of this “religious” people who believe in a supreme being *Waaqa*,⁹ and his virtuous agents in the universe, to live and possess whatever material goods. Oromo afford decisive and paramount wisdom to the spiritual, ethical-lore and moral life (a combination of *Ayyaana* and *safuu*) which Marvin Harris claims are the superstructure determined by the realities being wrought in the infrastructure (technology and economy). In sum, this article has attempted to show that the spiritual culture of the Oromo seldom appears to have been determined by the structure, but the superstructure which is believed to endow the people with material and spiritual life, which implies that Harris’ materialistic determination of culture appears untenable in the context of the Oromo.

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⁹ Daniel (1983); Bartels (1990); Kanno (2005).

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