

## Wayyuu – Women’s Respect and Rights among the Arsi-Oromo

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An ethnographic account of wayyuu and its implications for women’s rights among the Arsi-Oromo constitute the central part of this paper. The paper demonstrates the importance of integrating anthropological research as an important part of the development of human rights. Efforts to strengthen human rights should be done with great cultural sensitivity and with an aim to both reveal and incorporate “traditional” notions of human rights into the discourse.

During the last decades several scholars have challenged what has been labelled “the patriarchal pastoralist” and have argued for a rethinking of the role of women in pastoralist societies (Hodgson 2000). This paper draws on these writings, as it describes some of the features of the roles and rights of women among the Arsi-Oromo of Bale, particularly with focus on women’s protective sexual rights.

The findings in the paper are based on research conducted in Bale during 2005-2006<sup>2</sup>. An ethnographic account of wayyuu, a moral concept of respect and sacredness, constitutes the centre of the paper. Wayyuu is one of the major constructs in a “traditional” Oromo worldview and is a concept with clear religious connotations. It is reflected in various cultural practices and has among others implications for regulation of sexual accepted behaviour. Wayyuu also plays a decisive role in defining the position and the rights of women in a “traditional” Oromo society; among others wayyuu seems to have played a preventive role when it comes to sexual abuse and sexual harassment.

Even though the main objective of this paper is to provide an ethnographic account of wayyuu and its implications for women’s rights among the Arsi Oromo, it is difficult to neglect the challenges and questions that this representation raises to the human rights discourse. The paper is therefore also a contribution in a line of scholarship that argues for the need to incorporate a variety of cultural values and institutions in the development of human rights.

### Wayyuu – an introduction

Wayyuu, woyyu or saffuu<sup>3</sup> has been described by several scholars of Oromo studies. The term wayyuu is applied by scholars such as Dahl and Mamo (Dahl 1996: ; Mamo

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<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted in Kokosa and Raytu districts of Bale zone as of the administrative structures of 2005; an administrative division of the zone excluded Kokosa district from Bale zone in 2006. Both districts are situated on the outskirts of the Bale zone (as of 2005); Kokosa in the West and Raytu in the Eastern-lowlands. The impact of modernization and education in the two districts are therefore limited, compared to the more central areas of Bale. Some of the institutions described in this paper are thus not to be taken as existing among the Arsi-Oromo of Bale in general. With no doubt what is described in this paper is increasingly being challenged and weakened due to various factors, such as religious change, education and modernization.

<sup>3</sup> In the literature the spelling of the term varies. In the direct quotations I have applied the spelling

Hebo 2006), and is also defined and illustrated in detail in the newly published dictionary of Borana culture (Leus & Salvadori 2006). Hinnant, who studied the gadaa<sup>4</sup> system among the Gujji Oromo is using a term which is slightly different; woyyu (Hinnant 1977). Finally, quite late during my fieldwork I was made aware of the term saffuu which seems to be the equivalent term applied by other Oromo groups. The term saffuu has been discussed by several scholars of Oromo studies (Bartels 1983: ; Gemetchu Megersa 1998: ; Kuwee Kumsa 1997: ; Negaso Gidada 1984: ; Workineh Kelbessa 2005). In the following I will use the term wayyuu when referring to my own empirical material. Where other scholars are referred to I will use the terms according to their respective use.<sup>5</sup>

### What is wayyuu?

Not easily translated into English, the following are some representations given by my informants in order to give meaning to the word wayyuu:

- Something which is sacred
- Something that should not be touched
- Something or someone to fear
- Persons who have respect (wayyicha )
- Persons who should be respected

Corresponding with Bartels' observations of the term saffuu (Bartels 1976: 3), the presentations above illustrate that wayyuu is used both as an adjective and as a substantive. The above mentioned dictionary of Borana culture, gives a 6-page long explanation of wayyuu, including a long description of the term as part of the gadaa system. The definitions given in this dictionary are very much in accordance with how I have come to understand the term during my own fieldwork:

wayyuu-ni (m) (1): something/someone revered, blessed. This can refer to an object, or a person, category of persons, a place or an animal, also several specific positions (....) to call something or someone wayyuu implies an element of respectful sanctity (.....) a person who is related to you, is for you wayyuu, (....) people of blessing, peace and respect (....) various people are called wayyuu, because of their position, stemming from fear because of their position (....) the term is used for people with whom there is a relationship of respect and fear, notably in-laws. For a man, his mother-in-law is definitely wayyuu, the relative for whom he has the greatest respect and reason for fear, and this attitude extends even to sister, aunts, in-laws. With such people one behaves with respect, never speaks crudely or of shameful things.

wayyuu-ni (m) (2): specific person of special sanctity, there are more than a dozen such 'official' wayyuu. These wayyuu are highly respected, the epitome of all that is considered positive. But they are also feared. (Leus & Salvadori 2006: 653 f).

When it comes to saffuu, Bartels presents different contexts in which the term is used and concludes that it is used in widely diverging situations (Bartels 1976: 3). On one hand, some of the features of saffuu which he describes seem to be very close to

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according to the author's use; otherwise I spell the word saffuu.

<sup>4</sup> The gadaa system is the Oromo generational class system.

<sup>5</sup> Actually I have been confused when it comes to the correct spelling and pronunciation of the term wayyuu. In the lowlands of East Bale the first syllable is pronounced with a more clear a-sound (Oromo pronunciation) whilst the pronunciation in the West seems to have a more clear o-sound. Since Mamo, who did his research in Kokosa district uses the term wayyuu, I have chosen to use the same term when presenting my empirical material.

wayyuu, while on the other hand, the use of saffuu is illustrated in a number of ways which I never heard of among the Arsi and which is not included in the dictionary of Borana culture. However, in general, many of the descriptions of the term saffuu seem to be very much equivalent to wayyuu:

The Oromo believe that saffuu involves avoiding embarrassment, bad conversations, lying, stealing (...) Saffuu is respecting one another (...) According to the Oromo, saffuu is ulfina (respect) (Workineh Kelbessa 2005: 9).

Saffu is a moral category, based on Oromo notions of distance and respect for all things. The concept of saffu is not merely an abstract category: it constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded; it is that which directs one on the right path; it shows the way in which life can be best lived. (Gemetchu Megersa 1998: 42).

Even if the above definitions of saffuu seem to make sense and to apply to wayyuu as well, none of my informants were able to give such a philosophical description of the term as presented by Gemetchu. Common for many of my informants was to recite a long list of persons and items which are considered to be wayyuu. In order to illustrate the most common articulations as well as the complexity of the concept, I have, together with short explanations, listed some of what is said to be wayyuu among the Arsi Oromo:

Waqnii wayyuu - God is wayyuu.

Laftii wayyuu - The earth/land is wayyuu.

Abban wayyuu - The father is wayyuu. This also includes classified fathers.

Soddaan wayyuu - A male in-law is wayyuu.

Soddaatii wayyuu - A female in-law is wayyuu.

Haatii deete wayyuu - The woman, who gave birth to you, is wayyuu for you. This also includes the masaanu – the co-wives of your mother.

Hadha mana wayyuu - The married woman is wayyuu.

Durbi wayyuu - The unmarried girl (the virgin) is wayyuu.

Dubartii ulfaa wayyuu- A pregnant woman is wayyuu.

Qanaffa wayyuu - The Qanaffa is a sign that a woman will wear on her forehead during the 4-5 first month after she has delivered. This implies that a woman who wears the qanaffa is wayyuu.

Hanfala wayyuu – Hanfala, a belt made of leather from cattle which the married woman will wear around her waist is wayyuu.

Sinqee wayyuu – Sinqee, a stick (ulee) a woman will receive on her wedding day is wayyuu. It is used during religious ceremonies (ateete), as well as during collective female-only marches mobilized when a woman’s wayyuu or her rights have been violated.

Gaadii wayyuu - A piece of leather that the women will use to tie the back legs of the cow when she is milking.

Gooltii wayyuu - The “bedroom”/ the bed of husband and wife is wayyuu and a protection area for a woman. If a woman enters her gola nobody can touch her.

The list could have been extended even further; as one of my informants actually said that “everything has its wayyuu”:

The respect which is reflected in wayyuu is not ordinary respect. It is a special respect that comes from God. It is a mutual respect. God has given respect to all things.

Everything has its wayyuu. God is also wayyuu (Waqnii wayyuu). Heaven is also wayyuu (Samii wayyuu). This means that we do not dare to speak bad things about heaven; this is because heaven is the home of God. This is the holiest place since it is the place of God and it is wayyuu. God is the greatest wayyuu. He is the one who created everything. He gives life. He is the one who feeds us. He can kill. He is the one who gives and takes. He is above all authority and he is the first wayyuu.

The religious dimension of wayyuu is here clearly discernable, in turn corresponding with descriptions of the term saffuu often defined as one of the important elements in the Oromo world view, along with concepts such as Ayyaana (spirit), Uuma (creation/creator) and Waqaa (God) (Bartels 1983: ; Bartels 1976: ; Gemetchu Megersa 1998: ; Negaso Gidada 1984). The religious connotation of wayyuu remains important, not the least in order to grasp the religious role, the respect and the rights of women in a “traditional” Arsi Oromo society.

### **Respect for women among the Arsi Oromo**

Even if several scholars have dealt with wayyuu or saffuu in their works, wayyuu has been relatively little discussed in relation to women. Except for a study on the siiqee (or siinqee) institution of Oromo women that relates saffuu to women’s rights (Kuwee Kumsa 1997), little attention has been paid to wayyuu and its implication for women’s respect, their rights and their position in the society. In the following I will discuss wayyuu particularly in relation to women and sexuality.

At an early stage of my fieldwork I was struck by the tendency of wayyuu to a greater extent being associated with the female sphere than with the male. The above list (page 3) is quite illustrative as the majority of the numbers (5 – 14) are related to women or to material objects and locations which belongs to the female sphere. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to embark on a detailed discussion on the various implications of the different persons and objects that are said to be wayyuu, I will rather focus on the following:

Wayyuu - symbolized by the sinqee stick.

Wayyuu – implications for women’s religious and political roles

Wayyuu – expressed in the value of virginity

#### *Sinqee – a symbol of Oromo women’s rights and respect*

The ulee<sup>6</sup> sinqee is a special stick which a woman who gets legally married will receive on her wedding day. The shape of the sinqee stick varies from place to place; in the eastern lowlands of Bale it is a straight stick, in the western part the upper part is formed like a fork. My informants label the sinqee “a woman’s weapon”, symbolizing the respect and the power that a married woman has:

The sinqee stick is given to a woman in order to protect her rights. If a woman has a sinqee she has to be respected. Nobody should fight with her. The sinqee stick is important and related to the rules and regulation of marriage. There are forms of marriages which are based on sinqee, and there are marriages that are not based on sinqee. In the kadhacha<sup>7</sup> form of marriage, sinqee is important. If there is marriage by force (butta) this is not by sinqee. People will say “Sinqeen gurguraan” (She is married by sinqee). If a woman is married based on sinqee, she has full rights. She is formally married. If she is married without sinqee she has no power in her husband’s family.

<sup>6</sup> Ulee - stick

<sup>7</sup> Marriage based on agreement between two families.

They will not respect her. She will have no freedom. She will be considered a gursumetti.<sup>8</sup>

The sinqee has traditionally been used on a number of different occasions:

During religious ceremonies, in particular when women go for Ateete<sup>9</sup> – a religious women-only ceremony. Women will march to a nearby riverbank where they will pray to God. This is in particular done when the community faces problems, such as lack of rain, infertility, disease among human and livestock and in times of political instability and war.

If a woman is insulted, intimidated or sexually abused.

If a husband beats his wife or insults her during her pregnancy or during the qanaffa time.

When there are conflicts between clans (gosa).

During marriage ceremonies.

Important to note is that sinqee not merely is a term for a material symbol, it also refers to an institution, to a women’s organization totally excluding men, which has both religious and political functions. The word sinqee is thus often used to describe various mobilizations conducted by women, yet the term ateete is also applied. Ateete or sinqee seems interchangeably to refer both to religious marches as well as to political mobilizations conducted when women’s rights or perhaps more correct to say, women’s wayyuu has been violated.

Similar women’s rituals and institutions have been documented by researchers of other East-African pastoral cultures. The yakka institution of the Sidama in Ethiopia, seems to be almost identical with the ateete institution (Dilu Shaleka 2001), and these institutions have many parallels with the practices of the Barabaig and the Iraqw of Tanzania. Blystad describes the Barabaig women’s influence in relation to men as follows:

Also they have the customary right to carry out legal actions against men who have violated their rights, and women’s ritual contributions, particularly through the fertility ritual called ghadweta, are recognized as indispensable to Barabaig welfare. All these factors enhance a Barabaig woman’s position in society and her bargaining power in relations with men. The above should not be taken to mean, however, that women and men are necessarily equal in matters of sexuality...But, as noted, Barabaig women exercise considerable influence in their relationships with men, and in connection with the most intimate aspect of their union. (Blystad 1995: 95).

Blystad argues that women’s reaction to unacceptable male behaviour in the form of collective mobilizations is related to the procreative role of a woman (Blystad 2000). The following illustration of how ateete is applied, together with what led to this particular ateete mobilization indicates a similar notion among the Arsi Oromo:

Two years ago one of my male neighbours, insulted me sexually saying; “All women are like old empty milk containers (koonka)<sup>10</sup>, but above all you are the worst”. I found this insult to be so serious that I brought it up before our women elders. They discussed

<sup>8</sup> A gursumetti is a woman who has run away from her husband and gone to live with another man. Since divorce traditionally has been banned and close to non-existing among the Arsi Oromo such behavior has been highly condemned.

<sup>9</sup> Ateete is the term used in the western parts of Bale where the institution still exists. In the eastern lowlands of Bale, a similar institution called daalalle has ceased to exist.

<sup>10</sup> This is one of the most serious insults among the Arsi-Oromo. The milk container refers to a woman’s sexual and reproductive organ.

the case and concluded that it was necessary to call for *ateete*. All the women in my neighbourhood went to the man's house with our sticks (*sinqee*). We confronted him with what he had done. The man refused to admit his offence and to settle the case. He did not respect our *ateete*; arguing that he did not believe in this tradition anymore, now that he had become a Muslim. All the women in our neighbourhood gathered outside his house regularly for more than two months. Outside his house we were chanting "songs" dominated by sexual insults; (among others saying that we hoped he would be infected with HIV) in order for him to accept his wrongdoings. He refused this, and we ended up cursing him. After a few weeks we saw him coming to the clinic with a serious skin infection on his face. He also lost 5 of his cattle, they were hit by lightning. All this happened in accordance with our curse."

The story illustrates that disrespect for women, and in particular denial of women's requests when they have mobilized with their *sinqee* could have serious consequences in form of curse. Male informants clearly expressed their fear for women in general and during *ateete* mobilizations in particular, and with no doubt this is related to a strong fear for the female curse. The respect and the fear for the married women, seems to have given Arsi-Oromo women some degree of religious as well as political power. But why do women have this sacred respect? This leads us to the next subject; the religious role of the Arsi-Oromo women.

#### *Wayyuu and the religious role of Arsi-Oromo women*

My informants expressed great fear for the *sinqee*, which I came to understand was due to perception of the *sinqee* having spiritual power. It was denied that the *sinqee* stick contained bad spirits (*jini*); however, "if women go out with their *sinqee*, bad spirits will also come out (*jini hin bahaa*)." As I started to realize that the religious fear and the respect that my informants expressed for the *sinqee* also applied to women, I one day happened to ask a question which I initially thought was absurd: "Are women closer to God than men?" This was confirmed and the notion was continuously supported by all the informants who were asked the same and similar questions, in turn sustaining the idea that women among the Arsi Oromo have had and still have an important religious role. All my informants, both men and women said women are feared and respected because of their religious power. The religious superiority of women compared to men where explained by their closeness to God.<sup>11</sup> Women are closer to God because she is more humble and weak; she is soft, she is innocent and she will not fight. "Their spirits are with God" (*Hafura waqaa wajjin qaban*), it was underscored. These are qualities which contribute to the fact that God will listen more to women than to men and was among others articulated in the following belief: "What a woman blesses will be blessed, what she curses will be cursed."

Another interesting concept related to the spiritual and religious character of a woman is what is called the *ayyana hanfala laafa*, literally translated as "the spirit of the soft belt." This is somewhat related to another symbolic item which is mentioned in the above listing on what is *wayyuu*, namely the belt a woman will wear around her waist. When I heard women pray during ceremonies of blessing, I recognized that they would

<sup>11</sup> This is not to be seen as an absolute. It is important to take into account that there are differentiations. There are men in the society who are *wayyuu* and who have special religious power, such as the *qalluu* the *daballe* and *gadaamojjii* (see next page). They might have stronger religious power than women. There is also a gradation of *wayyuu* among women. A woman's respect will gradually increase at the time of the birth of her first child, her grandchild etc. The degree of *wayyuu* might also be related to other factors, such as clan affiliation, economic and social status within the society.

direct their prayers to the ayyana hanfala laafa. Some of my informants said that the religious leaders were telling the women not to direct their prayers to ayyana hanfala laafa, as it was argued that the perception of the belt as an intercessor between God and men would not be in accordance with Islam. The women I discussed with denied that this is a spirit or a mediator, saying that the ayyana hanfala laafa rather expresses the spirit of all women as a collective marker. To pray to God through the soft and humble spirit of all women, seems to be a way to strengthen their prayers.

With the religious dimension of wayyuu in mind, this also explains the fact that women are said to be wayyuu; that they are even more wayyuu than men. In most of the literature dealing with wayyuu or saffuu, the religious power which is implied in wayyuu is however only described in relation to men; in particular in relation to the qalluu as the ritual officiant in the gadaa system (Hinnant 1977: 57f ). That the sacred respect implied in wayyuu is closely related to women’s religious position, her rights and power in the society has received limited attention.

The special respect and sacredness which my informants attribute to women are also similar to the features of two of the classes in the gadaa system, namely the daballe<sup>12</sup> and the gadaamojjii <sup>13</sup>(Asmarom Legesse 1973: 53f ; Dahl 1996: 173). The classes of daballe and gadaamojjii hold special sacred respect<sup>14</sup> and represent important religious positions (Asmarom Legesse 1973), are close to “the divine sources of blessing and fertility” and thus make up a sacred category able to pass on fertility and blessing (Dahl 1996: 173). Their feminine qualities have also been described (Popp 2005: 114f) (Asmarom Legesse 1973: 53) and since the features and the religious role of the daballe and gadaamojjii are very similar to that of women and appear to be rather feminine, this may indicate that the feminine seems to be a category which holds a special religious position; the feminine is perceived to be closer to God than the masculine. A similar notion is found in the work of Popp, who based on her research among the Arsi-Oromo of Western Bale, concluded that ‘not being a man’ is considered to be a gender identity that is more appropriate for the communication with God (Popp 2005: 119).

The daballe and the gadaamojjii classes in the gadaa system have been described as being liminal; as classes which lack leadership and formal role differentiation. Despite their lack of political power, they play a meaningful and important religious role as they are seen as mediators between men and God (Asmarom Legesse 1973: 117f ). It has been argued that this is one of the features of liminal groups; they play important roles in the society based on their apartness from the same society (Hinnant 1977: 9). Similar to the daballe and the gadaamojjii, women in Oromo society has been defined as a liminal group who exercise special religious power and draw “an enormous moral and ritual authority” (Kuwee Kumsa 1997: 127). This notion is supported by Kelly, an anthropologist conducting research among the Orma in Kenya, who argued that “women in general are symbolically and politically liminal and correspondingly enjoy special sacred power as a class” (Kelly 1992: 182).

<sup>12</sup> Boys born at the appropriate time in the gadaa system; ie, to parents who are in the raaba doorii grade; they are 1-8 years old.

<sup>13</sup> Senior elders with special ritual status, the gadamoji have retired from all political and economic activities

<sup>14</sup> Even if Asmarom Legesse do not use the word wayyuu in order to describe the daballe and gaddmojjii (in general his use of Oromo terms is very limited), I suspect, based on the characteristics of these groups that they might fall under the category of being wayyuu.

Based on the collective character of the sinqee or ateete mobilizations, as well as the belief in a collective spirit of all women it seems reasonable to conclude that women form a strong spiritual and religious force among the Arsi-Oromo. The humble and spiritual character of women also plays an important role in cases which involve sexual abuse and rape or in relation to virginity and to incidents where a girl is deflowered prior to marriage.

*Virginity and respect among the Arsi-Oromo*

As mentioned, the married woman enjoys a special and sacred respect and holds religious power, something which seems to be strongly related to her marital status and her possession of the sinqee stick. The young unmarried girl (the virgin) does not seem to possess similar power as she does not have the power to curse. Still several of my informants have stated that she is wayyuu. This seems to be mainly related to her virginity. She is considered to be wayyuu in the sense that she should not be touched; her virginity should be respected. “Her respect is her virginity” (Ulfina isii – walabumma isii). This saying clearly expresses that respect for a married woman is related to whether she is found to be a virgin on the wedding night or not. If it is discovered that the bride is not a virgin on the wedding night, this might have serious consequences, as the husband may send her back to her family. Even if this is not done, a woman who is found not to be a virgin is said to lose her respect in the society in general and among her in-laws in particular.

*Regulation of unacceptable sexual behaviour according to customary law*

The young virgin as well as any married woman seems to have been protected from unacceptable sexual behaviour through the practice of customary law<sup>15</sup>. In order to illustrate the rights of women and young girls in cases of rape, loss of virginity and other unacceptable sexual behaviours, a short overview of some of the features of the customary law as articulated in the Eastern-lowlands of Bale is required. According to my informants there are four levels of crime:

Guma – manslaughter, to kill a person.

Gora - when there is visible injury or when the injury has psychological impact, the latter related to shame. Often mentioned examples are a broken front tooth or a broken leg. Gora is also applied to rape and loss of virginity; in fact the term gora in daily speech in Raytu very often refers to rape or loss of virginity.

Qotaa –less serious injuries that are not visible, often illustrated with the damage of a person’s back teeth.

Yakka – a minor issue, if you insult a person.

It seems that these terms are used both for the crime as well as for the corresponding punishment. If a crime is classified as gora, the punishment will be gora, which in cases of sexual crime is equal to 8 cattle. Since the level of crime which is relevant for this paper is gora, I will limit the focus to this.

An idiom which expresses the central role of women in regulation of sexual behaviour serves as a starting point. I first heard the idiom when I early in my fieldwork was exploring the concept of wayyuu. At one point I asked the question: are there clothes which are wayyuu? The informants confirmed this, and by referring to the qirii, a large piece of cloth which a woman will tie around her neck leaving her shoulders bare, said that it is prohibited for a man to touch or untie these clothes. This, along with

<sup>15</sup> Not to deny the fact that there always will be a certain discrepancy between theory and practice.

an illustration of the clear connection to customary law was further elaborated in the following saying:

Qiriin<sup>16</sup> obolessa kute  
Yoo isiin toola gote, tola  
Yoo isiin gora gote, gora.

The brother (man) untied the clothes  
If she makes (says) that it is ok, it is ok  
If she makes (says) that it is gora, it is gora.

The idiom was repeatedly mentioned by various informants of different ages throughout my fieldwork, and the general knowledge of gora, both in terms of crime and punishment seemed to be strong among all segments of the population in the lowlands of East-Bale. This indicates that it is an expression of values that still are practiced and alive. The idiom seems to emphasise the decisive role of the girl (woman); as she is said to be the one who determines whether the sexual action is acceptable or not. First, unless the girl reports an unacceptable sexual behaviour, such as rape or loss of virginity, there will be no action, as obviously nobody will have knowledge about it. Secondly, and maybe the most important implications articulated through this idiom is the fact that if a girl or woman says it is gora (a crime), it will be gora. There seems to be a strong favour of the girl’s word in such cases; it is believed that these cases are of such a character that she will not lie. In general there seems to be a strong belief in a woman’s word;

“She is reliable; people trust her and her word is respected.”

“A woman will not lie about these things. In our culture we say that a woman does not lie (Dubartii hin soobdu).”

A similar notion is reported by Ibrahim in a study of the Borana:

“...if a girl or a woman accused a man of rape or any form of sexual harassment, no witness is needed to convict the alleged person.(...) If a woman or a girl is asked to tell the truth by a jury of elders, her words are accepted without further evidence” (Ibrahim Amae Elemo 2005: 96).

There might be cases where the man will deny the accusations, but if a man has been accused by a woman for rape or taking a girl’s virginity, the elders in his clan will do everything possible to convince him to accept the accusation. What is to be avoided is for the case to reach the level of oath giving (kakuu). If a case reaches such a level, this might have serious consequences, in particular if the man does not speak the truth. It is believed that if a man lies while under oath, not only he, but his whole clan (gosa) as well as his descendants will be cursed. For a woman to be under oath, seems to be very rare.

The strong belief in the words of a woman is by my informants explained by her character as humble, as soft and as closer to God. Once again we see an illustration of how woman’s religious position and character gives her protection from sexual unacceptable behaviour.

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<sup>16</sup> Qiriin is the traditional clothes of a woman, a large piece of cloth which she would tie around her neck leaving her shoulders bare. It is prohibited for a man to touch or untie these clothes, they are wayyuu.

*“Traditional” rights and the human rights movement*

In contrast to the many presentations of the “oppressed African woman”, this paper presents a picture of African women who are highly respected, have considerable power in the society and who have rights which to some extent seem to have provided them protection from sexual harassment and abuse. This is in particular illustrated through wayyuu and the existence of institutions such as *ateete* as well as through the practice of customary law.

These accounts challenge the human rights discourse in several ways. One of the first questions that occur is whether such local cultural values and institutions are taken into consideration in the development of human rights. There seem to be indications that this is rather not the case. Several scholars have challenged the human rights movement’s quite negative portrayal of culture and it has been argued that the issue of culture within the human rights movement has a clear tendency to view culture as a barrier to progress, rather than a resource (An-na’im & Deng 1990: ; Merry 2006). UN-documents concerning women are in particular likely to describe culture as a hindrance to the human rights of women (Merry 2003: 11). Scholars have argued for the importance of cross-cultural dialogue (Hellum 1999: 25), and for integration of values and norms from a variety of cultures in the human rights discourse. It has been suggested that such an approach to cultural diversity would reinforce and strengthen the international standards of human rights (An-na’im & Deng 1990: xii).

The empirical material above also challenges the debate on the origin and universality of human rights. Within the human rights discourse these are highly debated issues. Some scholars argue that the very notion of human rights as well as its origins is founded solely on the philosophy of European enlightenment. Mutua disputes that such arguments actually destroy any claim of universality because it positions the very notion of human rights within a specific culture. “How are human rights to be realized universally if cultural chauvinists insist that only their version is valid?” he ironically asks (Mutua 2002: 79). He argues that rather than claiming the exclusively Western origin of human rights it would be far more fruitful to study other cultures in order to develop an understanding of how they protect and also abuse human rights. (Mutua 2002: 79). The ethnography presented in this paper is an example of the existence of notions of human rights in the Oromo culture. It has been argued that such representations rather are expressions of human dignity than of human rights and that human dignity can be protected in society that is not based on rights (Howard 1992: 165).

Another important question is whether the introduction of international human rights standards as such, actually will result in improvement of people’s daily lives. In this particular case, the important question is to what extent the human rights movement will be able to provide Arsi-Oromo women better protection against violence. Could it actually be that they would be better protected through their own cultural values, institutions and laws? There is obviously not a clear “yes” or “no” answer to this question. However, the question emphasises the above mentioned need for cross-cultural dialogue within the human rights discourse.

**Closing remarks**

An ethnographic account of wayyuu and its implications for women’s role and rights among the Arsi-Oromo constitute the central part of this paper. The ethnography in

itself is of value, as it provides an alternative human rights narrative, at a point in time where both NGOs, national governments and various UN bodies put considerable effort into issues of women’s rights and gender violence. If the role of NGOs and activists in fighting for women’s rights is based on stereotype assumptions of the “oppressed African woman” this may have significant negative consequences for women’s lives. To uncritically apply western notions of human rights, without taking into account the local context, might actually destroy mechanisms, values and institutions that traditionally have given women respect and protected them from violence and abuse. One might risk tearing down traditional values which are not merely theoretical “laws” but which are embedded in cultural practice. Efforts to strengthen human rights should therefore be done with great cultural sensitivity and with an aim to both reveal and incorporate “traditional” notions of human rights into the discourse. This requires that anthropological research is recognised as an important part of the development of human rights. In case of the Arsi-Oromo, this study could hopefully serve as a starting-point for a discussion on human rights and legal pluralities in a wider context. Obviously the topic is so vast it requires further research.

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