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**Harmahodhaa: A Traditional Child Fostering and Fictive Kinship Formation among the Oromo, Ethiopia**Abebayehu Tsegaye Aredo<sup>1</sup> and Dejene Gemechu Chala<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

*Harmahodhaa* is one of the cultural practices of adoption and fictive kinship formation with its unique features that have not been captured in the literature on the Oromo. The focus of this study was on *harmahodhaa* (literally, breast-sucking) that is a cultural practice among the people of Oromo in Ethiopia. For this study, qualitative data were drawn from Gaasaraa District, Bale Zone of the National Regional State of Oromia through interviews, focus group discussion and case study. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis were used in analyzing the data. The findings of this study revealed that *harmahodhaa* establishes culturally defined voluntary parent-child relations. By extension, it also establishes fictive kinship ties between the families on the adopted and adoptive sides. It entitles an adoptee a privilege of biological offspring in the new family. In *harmahodhaa*, the demand for adoption comes from the biological parents or caretaker of the child or the adopted person if adult, rather than the adoptive parents. The factors behind establishing *harmahodhaa* are both instrumental and emotional. It is arranged to find honest parents for a child merely from altruistic perspective. It is also instrumentally designed for some economic, political and social interests. Despite its usefulness in caring for the needy, the practice is gradually declining. Finally, the study recommends that this cultural practice be recognized by policy-makers in the country for the indigenization of social security system in the face of ever exacerbating child related social crisis.

**Keywords:** /Childcare/Fictive kinship/*Harmahodhaa*/ Oromo/Social bond/

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## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on *harmahodhaa* cultural practices among the Oromo in Gaasaraa District, Bale Zone of Oromia National Regional State<sup>1</sup> in Ethiopia. The Oromo people are from a Cushitic stock whose language is categorized into the Eastern Cushitic language cluster (Huntingford, 1955; Lewis, 2001). They are the largest ethnic group in East Africa inhabiting Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. Their land extends from North Central Ethiopia in the North to Central Kenya in the South and the Sudan in the West to Ethiopian Somali land in the East. The Oromo are known for their age-old political system called *Gadaa*<sup>2</sup>. Their traditional religion is *Waaqeffannaa*; a belief in one omnipotent, omnipresent and absolute creator of everything— *Waaqa*, who is also believed to be the guardian of truth (Workineh, 2010).

The Oromo trace descent appealing to a patrilineal ideology, but they are also aware of maternal kinship (Bartels, 1983). Patrilineal kinsmen are responsible in the process of settling cases of conflict like blood price payment (Dejene, 2007). Below clan there are *warra* (lineage), *balbala* (sub-lineage) and *maatii* (extended family). Extended family includes vertically and horizontally related family members from both sides of the spouses. The smallest unit is a nuclear family consists of the spouses and their biological and/or adopted children. For the Oromo, kinship is not only consanguineal, but also affinal and fictive.

As elsewhere in the world, marriage is one of the important ways of kinship formation among the Oromo. It creates affinal relationships between the wife takers and wife givers parties that help each other when needed. Hence the saying '*surree fi soddaa wajjin kufu*'- 'one falls down along with one's trousers and in-laws' implies that one cannot avoid his in-laws (Dejene, 2007).

The Oromo establish fictive kinship ties through *guddifachaa* (adoption) in which a child is adopted by non-biological parents (Ayalew, 2002; Dessalegn, 2006; Tariku, 2015). Mohammed (1994) shows that the Oromo assimilate and adopt the non-Oromo into Oromo identity through *moggaasa*, which forms kinship ties between the adopted and certain Oromo family or lineage. Similarly, Ayalew (1997) discusses another institution called *jaala* (literally means friends), which establishes relations of kith and kin between the Borana Oromo and the Erbare. Tsega (2002) shows how *michuu*

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<sup>1</sup>In the post-1991 Ethiopian administrative structure Oromia National Regional State is one of the Ethiopian federal units. Below the National Regional State there are zone administrations which have several district administrations.

<sup>2</sup>The *Gadaa* system is an indigenous democratic political system which divides the entire Oromo males into five *Gadaa* parties. Each party holds political power for eight years in rotation. Since this system also implements generational sets of the parties, successive generations of a particular *Gadaa* party hold power every forty years.

(friendship) institution in Western Ethiopia serves as a means of fictive kinship formation between the Oromo and the Gumuz.

*Harmahodhaa* is one type of child fostering and fictive kinship formation among the Oromo. Yet, it has not been addressed by the researches on the Oromo, except Tsega (2002) who mentions the term *harmahodhaa* with little attention. He briefly shows that *harmahodhaa* is a cultural practice establishing parent-child relationships without complete absorption of the child into the adoptive parents' identity. Thus, this study aims at describing how *harmahodhaa* functions and explaining the fictive kinship it establishes. The study attempts to show how *harmahodhaa* serves as an alternative way of child fostering in the prevailing cultural framework. It attempts to respond the following questions:

- 1) What is *harmahodhaa*?
- 2) Why *harmahodhaa* is practiced?
- 3) How does *harmahodhaa* differ from other forms of adoption?
- 4) What is the present status of *harmahodhaa*?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Fictive Kinship

The study of kinship has a long history in cultural anthropology. Works on kinship go back to Morgan's seminal work on the Iroquois and have been continuing. Morgan defined kinship with an explicit reference to a genealogical grid in terms of biological ties (Sousa, 2003). Based on this premise, the unilineal evolutionists theorized uniformity and progressive stages of evolution in human kinship systems. However, anthropological literature shows that consanguinity is insufficient for defining kinship; for parenthood is not only the result of procreation and parturition but also social convention (Read, 2001). For instance, Schneider (2004) rejects the biological/reproductive base of kinship regarding to universal genealogical grid, allegedly relevant to all cultures. Rather, the author took a particularistic approach to the study of kinship.

Anthropological literature reveals the different kin relationships, which include consanguineal, affinal, fictive and ritual. The first refers to relationships through blood. The second is through marriage and the third refers to relations through cultural arrangements like adoption (Parkin, 1997; Ayalew, 2002). *Harmahodhaa* falls under the last category.

Fictive kinship is a universal practice in different cultures. Dhakal and Rawal (2017) define fictive kinship as a social relationship which is neither consanguineal nor affinal. This kind of fictive kinship tie is sanctioned by a certain ritual, religious or secular. These authors took an example of the *miteri* institution in Nepal which

establishes kinship ties between individuals and by extension between the wider categories of kin and kith of the original partners. *Miteri* bond connects not only the two individual partners but also their families in kinship ties.

Similarly, Wilson (2010) presents fictive kinship focusing on what is commonly termed as *compadrazgo*, which refers to complex relationships established between individuals through participation in certain religious or secular rituals. *Compadrazgo* is commonly established during religiously sanctioned life-cycle—baptism. But there are also instances in which the *compadrazgo* is established on the occasion of secular events like a birthday celebration.

Nelson (2013) discusses a typology of fictive kinship which includes situational kin, institutional kin, and ritual kin. Situational kin refers to kinship tie that happens when the blood or legal family is physically absent. Institutional kin denotes fictive kin that emerges in the framework of certain institutions, like a prison, rehabilitation and voluntary institutions such as churches. Ritual kin is part of customary practices such as fictive kin system of co-parenthood of the *compadrazgo* type. Godparent selection in the Christian community is a typical example. Among the Oromo, kinship ties through adoption, including *harmahodhaa* are typical examples of the latter.

## 2.2. Why Fictive Kinship?

Literatures answer the question ‘why fictive kinship ties are established’ by referring to different social, biological, psychological, economic and political factors. These provide explanations why *harmahodhaa* is also practiced. According to Dhakal and Rawal (2017), different studies on *miteri* bond, among the Nepalese, show that the purposes behind establishing fictive kinship ties are instrumental and affective. For instance, according to Messerschmidt (1982), *miteri* bond is often sought by business partners for effective business performance. Yet, regardless of some pragmatic reasons, it involves elements of affect as its ingredient. If this does not exist, the relations are artificial.

Dhakal and Rawal (2017) show that once *miteri* relations are initiated, the partners maintain the relations through different exchanges, cooperation, mutual supports and expectations in their social, economic or political lives as well as fulfillment of any culturally required duties at any time of life crisis. The commitments pertinent to the *miteri* institution are reciprocal. Both the material flows in the form of gifts or supports and the social relations in the form of emotional attachments are reciprocal.

According to Dhakal and Rawal (2017), *miteri* bond is practiced in caste-based society crosscutting the traditional caste segregation. Yet, regardless of the caste system the kinship tie is strong. They are kins in its true sense and a marriage as well as sexual intercourse between individuals from the two families is strictly forbidden.

Similarly, Wilson (2010) discusses that fictive kinship system serves different purposes. For instance, *compadrazgo*, which is part of the Christian tradition serves other social relationships beyond the spiritual life. It provides social security through mutual

aid. It is a valuable institution for the needy and the marginalized section of the society in fulfilling their socio-emotional and economic needs.

Similar explanation comes from Nelson (2013), who discusses that fictive kin relations entail complex obligations and rights. As opposed to the biological or legal kinship, fictive kin relations stem basically from a consensus between certain individuals. Yet, in some contexts these relations last a lifetime. This is also confirmed by Dhakal and Rawal (2017), who reveals the practical instances of the *miteri* bond in which relations last lifelong and even for several generations.

Orlowska (2006) shows that among the Ethiopia Christian community the institution of god-parenthood was important tool in kinship formation. In the former aristocratic political landscape of the Christian northerners, the institution was comparable to a political marriage that established a strong and a lasting kinship bond between the godparents and the godchild as well as the child's biological parents. Similarly, Desalegn (2014) discusses *kiristina* (god-parenthood) and *tut-metabat* ('breast feed') which are ways of fictive kinship formation and child fostering in Christian tradition in northern Ethiopia. *Kiristina* is god-parenthood which is arranged in relations to baptismal ceremony. The godfather or godmother usually takes part in a baptismal ceremony of the godchild and take an oath to discharge full responsibilities for the spiritual and personal upbringing of the child. Despite the fact that it begins as a religious institution, it also gives economical benefit in which the families on both sides support each other in all aspects when needed.

Tariku (2014) explains that *tut-metabat* is another kind of adoption in which individuals who are not biologically related establish a fictive kinship tie. The author shows that the *tut-metabat* practice can be between persons of any age in which someone who intends to form the tie may approach another person of his/her interest for a proposal of 'breastfeeding' for oneself or for somebody else as caretaker. Once the kinship tie is fixed, the adoptee and the adoptive parents have parent-child relations.

Likewise, there are several fictive kinship ties among the Oromo. *Guddifachaa* is one of the popular social institutions serving the purpose of child protection, kinship ties, continuity of a family line, and alliance formation. It is practiced by infertile parents who want to have children, assure continuity of their successor, secure property inheritance, and secure a continuation of ancestor worship, create political alliances, and ensure care for themselves in their old age (Ayalew, 2002; Dessalegn, 2006; Tariku, 2015). Tsega (2002) presents the *michuu* and *lubabaasaa* institutions which establish fictive kinship ties and are important for local level of conflict resolution and for daily interactions, as well as cultural tolerance, and commercial networks in the North West part of Ethiopia among the Oromo, Gumuz, Amhara, Agawu, and Shinasha. Ayalew (1997) shortly discusses the *jaala* institution which establishes amiable relations between Borana and Arbore pastoralists in trade and sharing pastoral resources. These Oromo institutions of fictive kinship bonds serve the purpose of alliance formation between the participating groups for adopting a group into another group, assimilating some groups into the culture

of others and establishing parent-child relations. This study tries to see *harmahodhaa* as one of these institutions with its peculiar features.

### 2.3. Rituals of Fixing Fictive Kinship

Turner (1957) considered rituals a social drama which often dramatizes the benefits of values and social arrangements. He emphasizes the role of rituals as an aspect of social change or pressure to change structure as well as healing social rifts and psychic disharmony. Rituals give social values a sacred authority. According to Turner (1988), there are three stages in rites of passage. These include a stage of separation, liminality and incorporation. The first stage is the time when the participant is detached from his/her original group. The stage of liminality refers to the time when someone is neither in the original nor latter stage. The last one is the time when the participant is fully accommodated into the target group at the target stage. Turner's conception of a social drama, which shows the construction of meanings through the processes of interaction, applies to understand the present study. This is so, for rituals are important ways of establishing and ratifying *harmahodhaa*. It entails so elaborated rituals and symbols which provides the central meanings of the practice.

## 3. Methods and Materials

Data for this study was drawn from Gasera District, Bale Zone of Oromia National Regional State. The administrative center of the district is also called Gasera which is situated at 470 km from Addis Ababa in South East of Ethiopia. According to Central Statistical Authority (CSA) (2007), the population of the district was 78,639, out of which 40, 298 were males and the rest 38,341 were females. Significant majority (75.3%) of the inhabitants were Muslims, while the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity followers constituted 24.3% of the population. The rest practiced either traditional or other religions.

This research followed a qualitative design of inquiry for its main objective is to describe the cultural practices of *harmahodhaa*. Within this approach, the researchers employed three data collection methods: interviews, focus group discussion and case study.

Primarily, key informant interviews and in-depth interviews were used to generate data for this study, because *harmahodhaa* is not a day-to-day activity in which the researchers can take part and observe. Meanwhile, this cultural practice is not the competency of everyone. Few individuals who are custodians of the culture of the target group under study and individuals with lived experiences in *harmahodhaa* were interviewed by the researchers. In identifying the informants, the researchers used purposive and a snowball approach, and 19 informants (15 males and 4 females) were identified.

The original entry was through district culture and tourism office. At the initial stage, the key informants were chosen purposively as custodians of the culture of the

society. In addition to the few informants, the researchers identified at the initial stage, some research participants, and through a snowball sampling procedure they recruited other participants for the study. These informants were those who directly or indirectly participated in *harmahodhaa* and were aware of the meanings, motives and rituals attached to it. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to conduct the personal interviews to guide the informants, rather than restricting them to answering what were just asked.

Focus group discussion was the second method employed in generating primary data. Two focus group discussions were organized with six participants in each. Because of the absence of any natural group of this sort, both FGDs were organized by the researchers. Russell (2006) suggests the homogeneity of the composition of focus group discussants. However, since *harmahodhaa* is declining progressively, it is difficult to get biological and/or adoptive parents in the same vicinity to organize FGD with more dependable homogeneity. In response, discussants were purposively recruited from different vicinities, but with reasonable geographical proximity, to maintain maximum homogeneity. The discussants were people who participated as facilitators, attendants, biological parents or caretakers who arrange *harmahodhaa* and adoptive parents. The participants of both FGD were more or less homogenous, because they had access to this cultural practice and have common cultural values.

We used FGD to triangulate our data through interviews and case study. This method was used to get data on both common and different ideas of the participants regarding the relevance of *harmahodhaa* practice. The central point of discussion was what *harmahodhaa* is and why and how it is practiced in the study area. This approach enabled us to receive different opinions of the participants at the same time.

The researchers also recorded some actual cases of *harmahodhaa*, and some of which they focus on in their analysis. According to Babbie (2007), case study helps to focus on a few instances of some social phenomenon to describe the essential characteristics of the issue under study. Because adoption through *harmahodhaa* is gradually declining, access to the actual case was not easy undertaking. It demands long stay over the area as well as long travel in and between villages. In spite of this, selected cases were registered and are used for analysis. These case materials were collected from individuals who established *harmahodhaa* as well as those who were active participants in the process. These include individuals who know the history of a particular case of *harmahodhaa*, biological parents who gave their children through *harmahodhaa* and adoptive parents. Case studies were mainly used to look into the motives behind *harmahodhaa*. It enabled the researchers to see the pre-*harmahodhaa* structural and psychological relations between the participants or their families. It also enabled the researchers to triangulate data from other sources.

The researchers categorized data from the field into major meaningful analytical units. The questions ‘what and why *harmahodhaa*, how *harmahodhaa*, when and where *harmahodhaa* is practiced’ are used to identify major categories. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis were used in analyzing the data. The subjective

elucidation of the content of text data was done through a systematic arrangement of coding and identifying themes or patterns. Other relevant research findings are addressed in the discussion section of the study.

Credibility and conformability of this study were ensured through data triangulation. In addition, a detailed description of the *harmahodhaa* practice was also used to promote the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, we secured informed consent from our informants. We also maintained confidentiality; personal issues, which interviewees prefer keeping private were not probed into. Instead of real names pseudonyms were used in case studies.

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Result

***Harmahodhaa and its basics.*** The term *harmahodhaa* is derived from two Oromo words *harma* and *hodhaa*, which mean breast and sucking, respectively. Thus, it means breast-sucking. Data from the field indicated that connotatively, it implies the actual mother-child relations of breastfeeding. The relationship between a mother and her child is exceedingly vital with breastfeeding habits not only for its nutritional value but also for its psychological attachments.

Under normal circumstances, biological mothers feed breast to their children and this institution is named after the biological fact underlying these mother-child relations. According to the interviewees as well as FGD discussants, the term refers to an institution that establishes parent-child relations between two individuals in the interest of the child or mainly the interest of the child's biological parents or caregiver(s). Thus, *harmahodhaa* is a procedure in which the demand for adoption should come from the side of the adopted. The consent of the adoptive parents is also mandatory. It is a direct reversal of *guddifachaa* (child adoption) in which couples who are interested in adopting a child request the biological parents of the child for adoption.

The question 'who is eligible for *harmahodhaa*?' is also important. The field data from all sources indicated that a young boy as a social son is linked to an adult man as a social father through *harmahodhaa*. Either biological parents or caretakers link their son to a certain person of their choice. In principle, there is no gender as well as age restriction to establish ties through this cultural practice. According to the key informants, in the past, there were cases in which adults initiated *harmahodhaa* in response to their psychological and socio-economic challenges. An adult person who is adopted via *harmahodhaa* is considered a child in due process of fixing the adoption. Yet, the field data did not show any practical instance of female and adult male adoption through *harmahodhaa*. This is an indicator of the ever-declining of the practice itself.

## 4.2. Procedures of *Harmahodhaa*

*Harmahodhaa* has its own culturally prescribed procedures. The request for *harmahodhaa* should come from the side of the adopted person or his/her family/relatives or caretaker. It is only in rare cases that the adoptive parents demand for *harmahodhaa*. Even though the proposal belongs to the adoptive parents, the official request is always from the adopted side. Customarily, prominent elders and respected personalities of the land handle the case and take responsibilities of facilitating *harmahodhaa*. Based on prior arrangement, the facilitators visit the residence of the adoptive parents. As per the custom, the visiting elders stand up at the gateway of the hosting family and politely utter the following words of request:

“*Ilman siita’aa abbaa naata’i*.”<sup>3</sup>

Let me be your son, be my father.

“*Ilman siita’aa abbaa naata’i*.”

Let me be your son, be my father.

“*Ilmansiiita’aa abbaa naata’i*.”

Let me be your son, be my father.

The field data from the interviews and FGD showed that such a request deserves a positive response from the hosting family. In rare cases, there are possibilities of rejecting the request for justifiable reasons. This might happen if there is a serious grudge between the two families and/or clans of the families, which the hosting family is not willing to give up. If the problem entails clan level conflicts, the hosting family should take the case to clan leaders for decision. If the mediating elders think their request for *harmahodhaa* is likely rejected, they can use some cultural materials to put pressure upon the hosting family. *Kallacha*<sup>4</sup>, with irresistible ritual power, is among these cultural materials. However, in no case the arrangement is fixed under a total pressure against the interest of the adoptive parents.

If someone is chosen to adopt someone or to be a social father/parent, it is a privilege and honor for the person and his family. It is recognition of the social, political, ritual, and economic position of the chosen family. Under normal circumstances, the requested family or person has to respond to the demand positively saying, “Okay, I will never reject your request, let you decide the date for the ritual of *harmahodhaa* and bring me my son/daughter.” With the consent of both parties, a date is fixed for the final performance of *harmahodhaa* ritual.

<sup>3</sup>The term *ilma* (‘son’) is substituted by *intala* (‘daughter’) if the adopted child/adult is female.

<sup>4</sup>*Kallacha* is believed to be a metal that drops from sky through thunder. It is believed that if milk spills over the place where thunder drops, *kallacha* emerges from underground. Once the *kallacha* metal is discovered it is shaped by local expertise, giving it the shape of a male sexual organ. Requests by holding *kallacha* are more powerful for this cultural material is highly honored and feared.

### 4.3 The Ritual of *Harmahodhaa*

The ritual of *harmahodhaa* entails two main aspects—merrymaking and formalizing the kinship formation. The first aspect of the ritual is a festivity in which both parties enjoy themselves and their relatives in response to the *harmahodhaa* kinship formation. Both parties prepare traditional food and drinks for the ritual. Both parties receive supports from relatives, friends, and neighbors to cover expenses incurred for the ritual. The second aspect entails the cultural meaning of the ritual, which is more important in communicating the formation of child-parent relations.

According to the key informants, the special occasion of this ceremony is the *rifeensa haaduu* (hair shaving) ritual. It is performed just a day before the final ritual of *harmahodhaa*. The adopted child's hair is removed by someone from the child's side. This practice is important for its symbolic implication. It is to show that the child is a newly born one who is ready for rebirth in the new family. Friends, relatives and neighbors of both sides take part in the ceremony to witness and acknowledge the event.

According to the key informants and FGD discussants, the final ritual of *harmahodhaa* is performed at the residence of the adoptive parents. The parents or families of the adopted child/adult with their relatives, lineage, and clan leaders, if any, take the child to the residence of the adoptive parents. This is the day that marks the actual links between the adopted child and his/her new parents. At the adoptive parents' residence, the two sides select two elders, one from each to facilitate the ritual of *harmahodhaa*. The one from the guest side forwards formal request to handover the child to the hosting family, saying "I am here to ask you to be my father/mother/parents please allow me." The elder forwards a proxy request, replacing the person to be adopted. The representative of the hosting family allows the guests to proceed with their culturally prescribed gifts and provisions for the ritual and handing over the child to its new parents.

Next, the family of the adopted child/adult keeps the child naked<sup>5</sup>. Once again, this is to indicate that the child is a newly born child who is expected to be dressed for the first time by his/her new parents. The biological parents or their representatives hold the naked child or half naked adult, stand up in front of the new parents and declare saying: *Mucaa kiyya rifeensa irraa haadee, qullee dhaabee akka gaafa dhalatuutti siikenne; ilmoo kana jaaladheen siikenne; jaaladhuu naaffudhu*. 'I shaved and kept naked my child as innocent as the day of its birth and ready to give you willingly; please receive willingly'.

In the meantime, the biological parents/guardians of the adopted child hold honey and milk. Milk and honey represent the actual breast milk, which a mother is naturally endowed with to feed her child. Milk and honey are important items for the ritual, especially if the breast providing person is male. Since male does not have a breast to be sucked, the sucking child has to suck the thumb of the person. Based on the request of

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<sup>5</sup>If the adopted person is an adult, the striping is symbolic that the person remains half-dressed.

the father or anyone stands on the side of the child, the provider of the breast dips his thumb into the honey and milk and provides to the child to suck. This represents providing breast and the practice after which *harmahodhaa* is named.

Alternatively, if a breast provider is a male person who has a wife, the breast sucker can suck the actual breast of a woman (the new mother). If the breast provider is a woman, she provides the actual breast whether or not it is lactating. Honey and milk are always required for the ritual even if the breast sucking child/adult sucks the real breast. The two items are still important for their symbolic meanings. They show that the two sides are sweet or peaceful to each other.

Once the breast sucking ritual is performed, the breast provider vows to accept fully the child as his/her child. The pledging goes:

*Ilmoo kiyyaan walhindabarsu. Ija ilma/intala kiyyaatii nilaala. Abbaa/haadha ta'eetin bira dhaabadha.*

Meaning, 'I will never discriminate between the child and my progeny. I treat him/her as I do my offspring. I will be his/her real father/mother'.

Following this oath of promise, the mediating elders further declare what is expected of the breast provider as follows:

*Ilma keetiin walhindabarsin. Ijoollee keetiin walhincaalchisin. Aadaan Oromoo sihaaqabu. Kallachi Oromoo sihaaqabu. Caaccuun Oromoo sihaaqabu.*

Meaning, 'do not discriminate between your new child and your progeny. Treat the child like your children. Let our custom dictate you. Let Oromo *kallacha* guide you. Let Oromo *caaccuu* guide you.' The breast provider is given high responsibilities of taking care of the child. The new mother anoints her husband as a sign of happiness and success. The new parents dress the adopted child a new cloth which marks the commencement of taking care of the child.

As depicted by the key informants, the next step is a name-giving ritual for the former name is not valid anymore. The child that has just been already accepted by the new parents is considered not only a newly born child without a cloth and hair but also without a name. The mandate of giving name is now given to the new parents. This ritual has to be performed as soon as the new parents admit him/her as their child. The new name should reflect the context of the new relations between the two families. For males, names like *Dabalaa* (additional), *Dagaagaa* (nourishing), *Tolaa* (he who is all right), *Firomsaa* (he who makes friends), *Badhaadha* (he who causes prosperity), *Gammachuu* (happiness) are usually chosen. For females, names such as *Badhaatuu* (she who is prosperous), *Ayyaantuu* (she who has good luck), *Chaaltu* (she who is better) are selected to reveal good hope, health, wealth, unity and happiness that goes to both families because of *harmahodhaa*. The visiting family hands over a sheep for slaughter and new clothes that they bring to the hosting family. *Bullukkoo* (Thick Cotton blanket) and *guftaa* (turban) are given to the new father and *dibbiqqoo* (short-sleeved shirt, made of cotton and often used for ritual purpose) and *sabbata* (thin belt for women made up of cotton) are also given to the mother.

According to the key informants, one of the important rituals is the slaughtering of a sheep brought by the visiting family. A sheep is slaughtered by the former parents. The shading of the blood of the sheep symbolizes that the two families are now from same blood. The meat is roasted and the participants from both sides share it. This also symbolizes the two sides are of the same flesh. The child and his/her former parents usually stay that night with the new parents. This is the first time the adopted child shows his/her physical attachment to the new parents.

The new relatives and clansmen from the side of the hosting family present gifts to the child and his/her new family. The presents are to congratulate the adoptive parents for 'giving birth' to a child through *harmahodhaa*. On this occasion, songs, prayers, and blessings pertinent to the *harmahodhaa* ritual are selected. They bless the child to grow, to be beloved, and to be prosperous and healthy. Elders bless the families and pray to *Waaqaa* to fix and strengthen their unity and friendship.

According to the key informants, the adopted child/adult goes back to his/her former parents and stay there as his/her permanent residence. This is one point that differentiates *harmahodhaa* from *guddifachaa* in which the adopted child is supposed to live with the adoptive parents. Yet, similar to *guddifachaa*, an adoptee through *harmahodhaa* has full rights like a child by birth. He or she may inherit properties of the adoptive parents. The new parents and the adopted person frequently visit each other. These visits are usually on religious holiday and arranged ceremonies like marriage, baptism, traditional rituals, circumcision and others. They deserve economic and/or labor support from the other side.

The new parents are fully responsible for the wellbeing of the adopted child regardless of the presence of the former parents and their economic stand. There are cases in which the new parents accommodate their new child. If the former parents of the adopted child are not alive and/or he/she is not comfortable for any reasons, the new parents have the responsibility of hosting him/her. The same is true if the adopted child is an orphan. Based on the willingness of all the parties involved, the child can automatically change his/her residence to stay with his/her new parents. It is also one way of tackling the problem of childlessness. Similar to adoption, childless parents use the opportunity of *harmahodhaa* to have a child.

Commenced as of the time of *harmahodhaa* the two sides are relatives. Marriage between the two sides—the biological and the new parents—is incest and is forbidden below seven ascending generations.

### 4.3. Why *Harmahodhaa*?

Data from the field through FGD, informant interviews and case study unequivocally revealed that several reasons contribute to the practice of *harmahodhaa*. These include orphan hood (protection of orphans who lost their parents or abandoned by their parents), lonesomeness, search for well-to-do parents, demand for more relatives, and need for peace building between certain families or groups are at odd with each other and/or combinations of these.

Social status, economic stand, kinship solidarities and structural and psychological relations of the two sides who establish *harmahodhaa* relations is important. The informants depicted that someone who is esteemed and honored for his economic prosperity, strong social ties, and social status, seniority, personal charismatic achievements and heroic acts during war is often chosen as a social father. To the contrary, abandoned children, orphans, individuals with a feeling of loneliness, economically weak, socially out cast individuals use *harmahodhaa* to establish certain kinship ties with a family of their interest.

***Child Fostering Arrangement.*** Among the Oromo, there are various forms of institutional arrangements of child fostering or providing parental care for needy individuals—children and adults alike. The data from FGD and key informants showed that *harmahodhaa* is an option which attaches a needy child to a certain family that is interested in parenting. When a child has no biological parents for several reasons, including natural death and when parents cannot undertake the caring role, *harmahodhaa* seems like a more viable arrangement.

It transfers care responsibility for a child to a person or persons who are not its biological parents. Its principal aim is to provide alternative care for children without proper childcare. In its form, *harmahodhaa* is non-kinship foster care even though it does not exclude kinship foster care. Abandoned individuals and orphans are often linked with new non-biological parents through *harmahodhaa*. Here, the initiative is usually taken by the relatives of the abandoned children or their caretakers who cannot shoulder the responsibility of fostering these children.

In this regard, there are debates and counter debates whether the adopted children through *harmahodhaa* are fully privileged with biological children or not. During the FGD, some participants complained about the mismatch between the actual practical lives of the adopted children and the basic principle of *harmahodhaa*. In some cases, the adopted children seem to attain a relegated status compared to biological children. In other cases, the adopted children are equally and impartially treated.

***Kinship formation.*** Data from interviews and FGD showed that *harmahodhaa* establishes fictive kinship ties between families as a substitute for biological kinship ties. For several reasons, individuals who lost their contacts with their blood relatives and fellow clansmen look for *harmahodhaa* as another alternative. Individuals might change their residence for better economic opportunities and permanently live with the non-relatives. Under these and other similar conditions, vis-à-vis where kinship ties are vital for real economic, political and social life, lonesomeness is unbearable. In response, *harmahodhaa* is taken as a mechanism of tackling social seclusion and establishing new kinship ties. Data from our case study showed practical instances of this.

**Case one:**

*Mr. Chaalaa was born in central Ethiopia where he left behind his agnates and established himself in Southern Ethiopia in Bale, Gaasaraa district at a specific place called Naqee Nagawoo. Mr. Chaalaa did not have anyone of his blood relatives and fellow clansmen over there, except few in-laws. Over the area, there are kinship categories like clan, sub-clan, lineage, extended family and nuclear family which have roles to play in the time of hardship. However, Mr. Chaalaa felt loneliness for he had no clan affiliation to call on mobilizing resources to have a hand in any crisis he would encounter. This often occurs in case of serious conflicts, which demands the participation of agnates. In response, he wanted to establish a fictive kinship bond with a prominent personality in the area, named Tolchaa Dalasaa. Mr. Chaalaa gave his son Dabalaa to Mr. Tolchaa through harmahodhaa. The relations between Mr. Tolchaa and Dabalaa extended to include the entire families on both sides. Through this mechanism, Mr. Chaalaa became relatives of the family of Mr. Tolchaa. This benefited Chaalaa and his immediate family for it addressed their former psychological problem of loneliness.*

According to the field data from the case study, interviews and FGD, individuals are interested in establishing amicable and friendly relations with high ranked, respected and honored members of the society or a group of society. Clans, families, and individuals have certain social statuses attained based on seniority, political leadership, economic position and religious role. Those who are juniors stir at achieving the better social status. Besides, individuals and families try to advance their former good relations to its fullest stage by establishing additional kinship ties. In this regard, the main reason behind *harmahodhaa* is not for being solitude, rather the need for having additional and new kinship ties. One of the cases confirmed this fact.

**Case two:**

*Mr. Dagaagaa Tolaa was born and brought up in Gaasaraa district of Bale zone, at a particular place called Balloo. He lived with his blood relatives and clansmen in the same locality. However, he arranged harmahodhaa of his son, Firomsaa with one of the prominent, respected personality, by the name of Hurriisaa in the same geographical boundary. The two families had close and amicable relationships that they wanted to maintain and scale up to a high level. This can be done either by establishing affinal or fictive kinship ties. Mr. Dagaagaa opted for the second alternative through harmahodhaa. Since then, the two have enjoyed the social capital of this tie. The relationships also involved mutual support in terms of economy and/or labor. This harmahodhaa tie was motivated neither by a sense of altruism to provide parental care to Firomsaa by Mr. Hurriisaa nor to avert the psychological feeling of loneliness from the side of Mr. Dagaagaa.*

**Economic motives.** Information through a key informant and in-depth interviews showed that economic motive is also among the factors that push individuals to perform *harmahodhaa*. Poor persons require economic support from well-to-do individuals use *harmahodhaa* to establish kinship ties. The adopted person benefits from the material resources and the social capital of the adoptive parents. The latter also benefit from the labor of the former and/or his/her immediate family members. Economic inequality is a universal phenomenon and always people use different mechanisms to tackle the uneven distribution of resources and economic opportunities. Locally, *harmahodhaa* is one of these mechanisms in which the poor forms social bonds with the economically well-to-do families. The following case is an empirical instance.

**Case three:**

*In the village called Naqee Nagawoo there was a man named Galaanaa Turaa. He was poor and highly in need of economic support from someone else. Economically, Mr. Galaanaa was not in a position even to play an appropriate parental role for his children. To tackle his economic challenges, harmahodhaa was one of the available alternatives at his disposal. As the custom allows him, Mr. Galaanaa identified Mr. Hundee Garaadoo, who was an economically well-to-do person, to host Galaanaa's son via harmahodhaa. Mr. Galaanaa Tura adopted his son Gosaa into the family of Mr. Hundee. The situation enabled the two families to have close relations and share the available resources. The family of Galaanaa received economic support from the adoptive family of Mr. Hundee, while the former supported the latter in labor.*

**Peacemaking motives.** *Harmahodhaa* is often used as a mechanism of peace building after serious conflicts such as homicide between certain groups and/or families. Under normal circumstances conflicts are common phenomena. Various mechanisms of addressing conflicts, such as negotiation, elders moot, mediation, arbitration, blood price payment are all common in the area. Customary mechanisms of conflict resolution make as well as build peace. In this framework, *harmahodhaa* is one of the prevailing institutions reintegrating disputing parties. According to our key informants and FGD results, some conflicts are resolution resistant and continue for generations latently between the disputing parties/families or groups. *Harmahodhaa* is among other systems of alliance formation which also serve as a way of reintegrating parties which remained at odd with each other for long. The following case confirmed the above idea.

**Case four:**

*Somebody from the family of Mr. Bariisoo Lataa murdered someone from the family of Mr. Bortolaa Waaqoo long ago. Officially, the issue was settled through blood price payment and there has been no open hostility between the two groups, but the victim side might not be free of discontent towards the offender. The Oromo proverb which goes “haaloon madaa guyyaa shan haaloon du'aa waggaa shan” meaning “the grudge for wound lasts for five days, but for homicide lasts five years” expresses how such a grudge is long-lasting. Usually, the offender and his/her immediate family exile to manage the persisting latent hostility which is possibly flared up. Thus, the family of Bariisoo exiled from their original area, Arsii and settled in Bale, at a place called Cifaaroo. After a long time, the victim’s family also settled at Cifaaroo in search of better resources. Since the resent between the two sides persisted, Mr. Bariisoo Lataa and his family were not confident of their security. The family was prone to revenge from the victim side who now settled at the same area. In response, the offenders arranged harmahodhaa with the victim’s side. A young boy Saffisaa was given to the family of Mr. Bortolaa through harmahodhaa. The adoptive parents were also happy to host the boy via harmahodhaa. Since they are newcomers to the area, the arrangement was welcomed by the adoptive parents too. Harmahodhaa, in this case, was for mutual benefit of the two families, particularly to pacify the old ill between them.*

As this case reveals, the motive behind *harmahodhaa* was micro level peacebuilding between the two families. It was aimed at reintegrating and building trust between the two families. The former sense of a grudge is reversed through *harmahodhaa* relations.

In general, factors contributing to *harmahodhaa* are various and are not exclusive to one another. Whatever motive *harmahodhaa* might have, fostering the adopted child, social trusts, supports between the participants and their extended families during social, economic and political crises are in place.

Data from the field from all sources revealed that *harmahodhaa* is gradually declining in the face of ever-increasing cultural erosion. Factors contributing to this effect are contacts with other cultures, globalization, and an emerging global crisis of child trafficking, internal and international migrations. Since recently, children are often sent abroad in the form of adoption to foreigners and needy adults and youth often migrate to the other parts of the world in search of a job. The introduction and expansion of religions, mainly Christianity is also among the factors for the declining of *harmahodhaa*. Particularly, in Orthodox Christianity, there is a similar practice of Godparent selection for a child. The Oromo who are followers of Orthodox Christianity gradually substitute the *harmahodhaa* institution with religious-based fictive kinship system that allows common responsibilities of nurturing a child by biological parents and godparents.

## 5. Discussion

Findings from the study revealed that *harmahodhaa* is among what anthropologists call fictive kinship ties for it establishes culturally defined voluntary parent-child relations between the participants. *Harmahodhaa* forms ritual parenthood by admitting strangers into a certain family with full rights of biological offspring. This fits the definition of fictive kinship bond, such as fosterage and adoption, provided in different anthropological studies, like Dhakal and Rawal (2017) and Ayalew (2002). The very nature of *harmahodhaa* corroborated with what Wilson (2010) discusses about fictive kinship commonly termed as *compadrazgo*.

In line with Nelson's (2013) discussion of a typology of fictive kinship, *harmahodhaa* is situational. Several social, political and economic factors motivate the individuals and families to arrange *harmahodhaa* as a solution to a certain problem at hand. *Harmahodhaa* is not just like *compadrazgo* (godparent) selection which seems common in Catholic and Orthodox dogma, which was depicted by Wilson (2010). *Harmahodhaa* is optional; certain pushing factors should be there to go for it. It is not something that everyone goes through. It is also institutional; because, *harmahodhaa* is performed in the framework of Oromo cultural milieu. Basic Oromo political and religious institutions back it.

*Harmahodhaa* is also different from the common child fostering practices by different welfare agencies. It establishes kinship bond at different levels, including individuals, families and for other political, economic and social reasons. Even though *harmahodhaa* involves child fostering, more important is the social capital derived from the link. It goes beyond mere economic support and entails strong social and kinship bonds. Compared with practices like *guddifachaa*, *moggaasa*, *michuu* and *jaala* in Oromo culture, *harmahodhaa* has its unique features. Discussions by Mohammed (1994), Ayalew (2002), Tsega (2002), Dessalegn (2006) and Tariku (2015) show that *guddifachaa* is the practice where the adoptive parents request for adoption of a child. The adopted child has the full privilege of being like a child by birth and supposed to stay physically with his/her adoptive parents.

With *harmahodhaa*, the adoptive parents grant the adopted person/child full privileges of being a child by birth, but physically the adopted stays with his/her biological parents, unless otherwise, some other factors dictate the change of his/her residence. *Harmahodhaa* is an option when someone wants to tackle his/her loneliness, economic problem and solve a conflict, particularly when the family is prone to vengeance. Commonly, the poor, the marginalized and those who are in a state of isolation and lack supporters go for *harmahodhaa*. *Moggaasa* is more of a group adoption of the non-Oromo into Oromo identity and different from *harmahodhaa*. The *michuu* and *jaala* practices establish friendship. These institutions do not involve child-parent relations and they are less incorporative of the participants. They rather establish the relations of equals who cooperate in the economic, social and ritual life of the

participants. These kinds of alliance differ from *harmahodhaa* as the latter is individual-based attachment, even though it involves family relations.

Close observation of the findings showed that the factors behind establishing *harmahodhaa* are both instrumental and emotional. *Harmahodhaa* serves to find honest parents for the needy merely from an altruistic perspective. It is also instrumentally designed for some economic, political and social interests. In this regard, the data corroborated with what Dhakal and Rawal (2017) show as purposes behind establishing fictive kinship. The authors state that both instrumental and affective reasons contributed to the establishment of the *miteri* bond among the Nepalese.

The findings indicated that *harmahodhaa* is a secular practice as opposed to *compadrazgo* or *kiristina*, which establish relationships of godparents through baptism for religious purposes. As stated in the literature review, fictive kinship helps in evading the prevailing and traditional social structure. For instance, *miteri* bond among the Nepalese bridges between the highly segregated castes (Dhakal and Rawal, 2017). *Harmahodhaa* differs from this kind of bond for it is practiced among the Oromo who are an egalitarian society.

The findings of this study showed that *harmahodhaa* involves elaborated ritual performances and can be depicted from the perspective of symbolic interpretation. From the perspective of the term, *harmahodhaa* intends to symbolize the natural relations between a mother and her child. A mother is supposed to feed breast to her newly born child. This very natural and biological link between the two symbolizes the institution of *harmahodhaa*, which intends to form child-parent relations. Besides, the whole ritual processes, materials involved, the blessings, prayers as well as promise of allegiance aim to fix that the adopted child is newly born one given to the new parents with all obligations and rights to both sides at all levels. The attendance of close relatives from both sides is a mechanism of inaugurating corporate responsibilities and rights because of this fictive kinship ties.

*Harmahodhaa* is fixed through highly colorful ritual performances at different stages. The findings corroborated with what Turner (1988) states as a social drama to provide social values a sacred authority. As the discussion above revealed, elaborated rituals are important in *harmahodhaa*.

In summary, this study focused on *harmahodhaa* among the Oromo. This cultural practice is one of the indigenous practices in which the orphan and the needy to have an honest, but non-biological parents. It is also one way of fictive kinship formations and peace building institutions between the participants and their lineages.

Despite its declining tendency, *harmahodhaa* is persisting to date, for it is highly embedded into the value system. The motives and procedures of establishing *harmahodhaa* bond fit in the basic Oromo worldview. Participants from both sides enter an oath of loyalty, for which *Waaqaa* is the guardian. Any violation of the promise would inflict calamity against the offender and his/her descendants. Partly this compliance provides the explanations of why the system has survived.

## 6. Recommendations

Despite *Harmahodhaa* is ever declining, it is a culture bounded practice with clear relevance to local level social protection and alliance formation. It makes social protection not only possible within the community's means but also value-oriented that serves as local fertilizer for the national social protection policy. Thus, firstly the researchers recommend this cultural practice be recognized by policy-makers and given legal protection in the country for indigenization of the social security system. Secondly, *harmahodhaa* can profitably be introduced into the social protection system and child-related policies. Finally, given the large size of Oromia and some variations across space, the present work is not a comprehensive material on the subject; the researchers thus suggest further and in-depth investigations.

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### Authors' contributions

<sup>1</sup>The first author designed the study and defined its research problems in consultation with the second author. She conducted fieldwork and analyzed the data. The study was originally in partial fulfillment of her BA degree in Oromo Folklore and Literature, Jimma University.

<sup>2</sup>The second author advised the first author to design the study and define its research problems. Later, he restructured the paper into an article with additional literature review and analysis. He made ready the paper for publication and accommodated all comments from reviewers.

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