

FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

The Function of Myth in Social Construction: The Waataa Community of Chopha Village in Focus

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Recommended citation:

Gemeda Hunde, Sussan, E., & Ronny, M. (2018). The function of myth in social construction: The Waataa Community of Chopha Village in focus. *Ethiop.j.soc.lang.stud.*, Vol.5.No.2; pp. 45-60. eISSN: 2408-9532; pISSN: 2412-5180. ISBN: 978-99944-70-78-5.

Web Address: <http://www.ju.edu.et/cssljournal/>. Open access address: journals.ju.edu.et

Abstract

The relationship between the Waataa community inhabiting Chopha village and the neighbouring non-Waataa social groups is complex. The Waataas identify themselves as a 'gifted' people. On the one hand, the neighboring non-Waataas have a more complex perception about the Waataa people. They consider the Waataa the 'blessed' people and need their cultural services. On the other hand, the non-Waataas deprecate the Waataa's culture. For this reason, the neighboring groups marginalize them. Nowadays some Waataas and young Waataas refuse to accept their ancestors' culture. Hence, the Waataa's practices are on the verge of extinction. Thus, study of the Waataa's traditional practices needs an urgent task. Based on empirical data gathered through fieldworks, this study examined the creation myth of the Waataa people. The data were analysed based on social construction and symbolic interpretation theory. It was found out that the non-Waataas have varying views on the Waataa's cultural practices. The Waataa's myth of origin is primarily used to support their status as the 'gifted' people. The Waataa's mythical self-perception is partially not shared by the non-Waataas. Conversely, a few interpretations of the myth, which is shared by the two groups, strengthen their relationship. Thus, the interpretation of the myth is determined by specific purpose of meaning construction. Furthermore, the myth is used to justify the Waataa's traditional practices. It is also used to empower their important role in the social construction of the neighbouring Oromo groups.

Key words: /Endangered culture/Extinction/Meaning/Perception/Social construction/
Symbolic interpretation/

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

This paper examined the creation myth of the Waataa people. The Waataa people are one of the Oromo social groups, who inhabit areas that stretch from Ethiopia to Kenya. In Ethiopia, they inhabit Arsi, East Shoa, and Borana Zones of Oromia Region, and the Sidama Zone of the Southern Ethiopia Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SENNPR). In Kenya, the Waataa people live in scattered territorial groups along the Tana and Galana rivers and in the Taru Desert in eastern Kenya, on the Kenya coast, in Isiolo and Marsabit districts in northern Kenya (Kassam & Bashuna, 2004). Moreover, Stroomer (1987) affirms that the Waataa people live in the Tana River District and Kilifi District of coast province of Kenya. They mainly reside in villages north and south of Malindi and some families of Waataa people live in Malindi town. Furthermore, Stroomer (1987) discusses that a large proportion of Waataa are living among the Borana in northern Kenya.

Regardless of the fact that the Waataa people inhabit different areas in Ethiopia and Kenya, this paper focuses on the Waataa people, who are living as a small community in Ziway Dugda *woreda*, Senberro *kebele*, Chopha village, bordering Lake Ziway. Sometimes, the neighbouring social groups identify the Chopha village as the *Waataa Village*. In other *Woredas* of Arsi Zone, the Waataas live in scattered situation; i.e. not as a community in a particular village. In the past, the Waataa people were excluded from taking part in socio-economic and political activities. Currently, the above social attitudes are not applicable, but the segregation continues in some social and cultural deeds. Consequently, the segregation on the Waataa people influences the continuity of their traditional practices.

The origin of the Waataa people is mythical. Their traditional practices and spiritual power are embodied in myths, proverbs, blessings, curses, and sayings of and about the Waataa people. Nowadays, the Waataa's traditional practices are declining. They are among the endangered cultural traits of the Waataa people in particular and the Oromo people in general. Therefore, Waataa's traditional practices, wisdom, and indigenous lexical knowledge have to be studied, recorded, and documented for future use. In light of this, the study examined the creation of myth among the Waataa community.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The Waataa people are perceived as the 'blessed' people with the spiritual power vested in them by *Waaqaa* (God). Though they are few in numbers, their role in the neighbouring social groups' ways of life is a greater one. Nonetheless, the Waataas'⁴ importance in service of cultural practices is declining. Modern education and knowledge, major religions in the area, rapid socio-political changes, and urbanization are among the factors that are influencing the Waataas' culture. The Waataas' age-old cultural practices are recently taken as inferior to Islam and Christianity by most members of the younger generation of the Waataa people and other Oromo social groups. This is accounted for by the youths of the Waataa people to disregard their

⁴In Ziway Dugda Woreda and the neighboring Woredas, the term Waataa denotes both, the Waataa people as the group and an individual member of the Waataa people. The term also denotes a person, who belongs to the Waataa people and performs the cultural practices of the Waataa people.

cultural practices. Hence, nowadays, a few elderly members of the Waataa community practice the Waataas' traditional practices.

Even though the 'gifted' members of the Waataa community contribute to the well-being of the Oromo society in general and the Arsi Oromo in particular, their contributions are not well studied. More importantly, their traditional practices, knowledge, conventions, rules, and orders are not well studied and documented. They survive in the mouths of these elderly members of the community and they rehearse them orally. Thus, their essences and social functions are liable to misapprehensions and extinctions, when these old-aged members of the Waataa community pass away.

On the other side, although, few studies have been conducted on the Waataa people and the marginalized social groups (Cerulli, 1922); (Panhkhurst, 1999); (Kassam, 2004); (Dabala Goshu and Meyer, 2004); and (Ayehu, 2005), their focuses are different. Furthermore, their depth and limited scopes of data collections made these studies, only descriptions. These points reveal the gaps of researches, which dealt with the Waataa people of Ethiopia.

Thus, with a focus on the epistemological-ontological notion, by widening its scope and employing different methods of data collections, this research endeavoured to bridge the gaps. Thus, this study aimed to answer the following research questions.

- How do the 'gifted' members of the Waataa people perform the selected cultural practices?
- How do traditional practices of the Waataa people are perceived by the neighbouring Oromo social groups?
- How do the Waataa people are portrayed in the creation myth of the Waataa people?

Hence, by analysing the creation myth of the Waataa people, this research provides new information and captures the social construction of meanings and actions.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the use of myth in the social construction of Arsi Oromo and the neighbouring Oromo social groups. The specific objectives are:

- To examine perceptions of the Waataa community and the neighboring Oromo social groups about the traditional practices of the Waataa people.
- To elucidate the Waataa's role in conducting the selected traditional cultural practices of the Waataa community.
- show how the creation myth portrays the Waataa people.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Conceptual Framework

This study was framed in concepts drawn from both ethnography and linguistics. It focused on the endangered cultural practices that are unique to the Waataa community. Currently the cultural practices of the Waataa people are on the verge of extinction. Different factors have been contributing to the extinction of the Waataa's cultural practices; among which the influence of the major religions of the area, rapid socio-political changes, modern education, and urbanization, are the main factors. Thus, based on the recent application of social construction paradigm

(Gergen & Gergen, 2008), the study used anthropological approach of Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description" (Dawson, 2002; Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtli, 2010) to examine the Waataa's cultural practices. By this, the unique cultural practices of the Waataa community was interpretatively analysed, beyond mere description. Furthermore, the Waataas' unique culture and the involvement of the neighbouring Oromo social groups in the selected cultural practices were explicated from social interpretative and symbolic interactionist points of view.

As discovery of cultural traits is associated to mere descriptive examination, construction of meaning is linked to interpretative and interactive construction of meaning on the shared sign systems. For this purpose, the researchers' immersion to the Waataa community of *Chopha* village enabled them to examine the construction of meanings in particular among the endangered ones. This entails that the research was a combined description, interpretation, and symbolic interactionism of the selected cultural practices. The interpretative and interactive approaches helped to view the cultural traits from within, sharing the Waataas' cultural values, ideology, and purpose. This did not necessarily mean that the researchers agreed in all attitudes towards the endangered cultural traits by either the Waataas or the neighbouring Oromo groups. More importantly, the researchers believed in giving dignity to the Waataa's cultural practices, as the study was conducted from the inside. Moreover, interpretation of the creation myth from the Waataa community and the neighbouring non-Waataa social groups, predominantly the Arsi Oromo, were done from the actions taken differently.

2.1 The Waataa Community of Chopha Village

The Waataa community constitutes an isolated group in Ziway Dugda Woreda. The Waataa people live as a small community in Chopha village bordering Lake Ziway in the west. They live neighbouring different Oromo groups and the Zay people.

The exact number of the Waataa population, as a social group, is not known; since there is no reliable demographic data. As a result, researchers cite different population sizes, regarding the Waataa community living in Chopha village. For instance, Dabala and Meyer (2004) indicate that the Waataa people around Lake Ziway constitute about 100 persons, whereas Habib (2001) states the size as about 200. During the first field visit to Chopha village on 10th of December 2011, one of the researchers conducted a preliminary survey to estimate the population size. As a result, there was a significant difference in the estimation. The key informant, from the Waataa community, who was about 67 years old, informed one of the researchers that there were around fifty heads of households, which the total population is estimated to be about 250. On the other hand, the Vice Chairperson of Senbo *kebele*, Edris Kurcha, informed that the population was not greater than 350. Hence, if we consider the latest reports, the population of Waataa community live in Chopha village, was in the range of 250 – 300 individuals.

The Waataa people were hunters and gatherers before the land reform proclamation of February 1975 that gave them the right to land ownership. They used to eat wild animals, which are prohibited by different religions' thoughts. This implies their marginalization from the other Oromo society.

At the present-day, the livelihood of the Waataa community of Chopha village is based on subsistence economy of small-scale agricultural activities. They mainly produce maize (corn), wheat, and barley. In addition, they rear a small number of

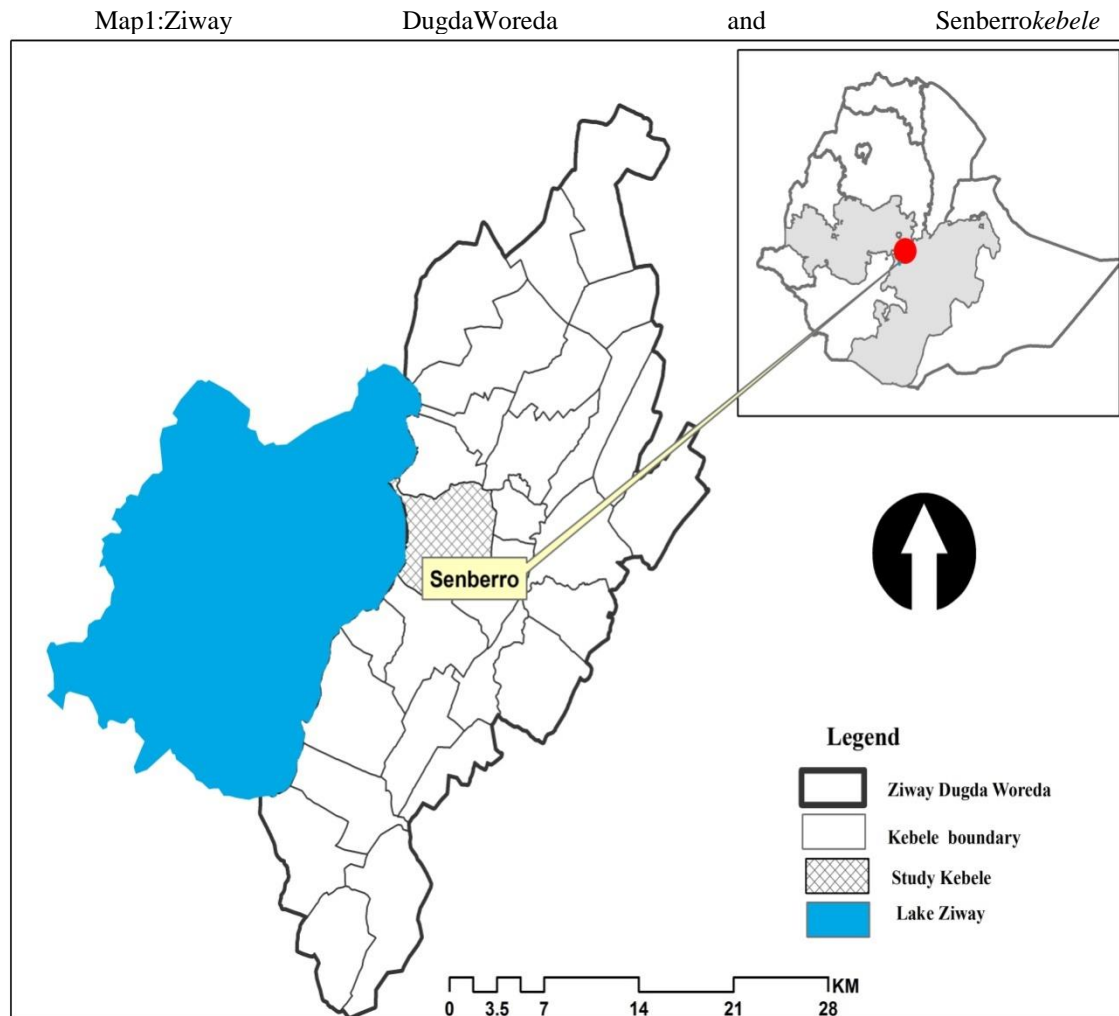
cattle, sheep, and goats. They also assist their lively hood by earning money for cultural services they provide to the neighboring Oromo society.

The Waataa people are viewed as 'gifted' people, who have the power to bless and lay curse. In the past, the 'gifted' Waataa people were the most important participants in any rituals of Arsi Oromo. They are respected in mediating conflicts, and practicing reconciliation. They are also needed to bless women who considered infertile and to bless cattle for greater reproduction. In addition, they pray to *Waaqaa*, when the neighboring social groups encounter difficulties. The Waataa also bless children taken by *guddifacha* 'cultural child adoption'. When a family head conducts the '*wadajaa*' ritual, he invites the Waataa to the ceremony. Furthermore, the Waataa pray for safe delivery, when the pregnant women face hard labour. In Borana Zone of Oromia, the Waataa perform the circumcision of the Abba Gada (Harris, 1884, p. 749).

However, the Waataa people have been living as a small community in Chopha village, there exists intergroup relationship between the Waataa people and the neighbouring groups. The relationships that exist between the Waataa community and the neighbouring groups are social and economical. In these relationships, the neighbouring groups, particularly the Arsi Oromo, have been influencing the Waataa people, socially and marginalize them from Oromo groups.

In the past, marginalization of the Waataa people were manifested socially, politically, and economically. However, nowadays political and economic marginalization of the Waataa people is not overt; the social marginalization is still very strong. It prevails in strict marriage rules and restrictions on relations with the Waataa community.

The Waataa people of Ethiopia are speakers of Afan Oromo. They speak the Afan Oromo dialects spoken by the neighbouring Oromo groups. However, most members of the Waataa community of Chopha Village shifted their traditional belief to Islam religion; a few members of the community are performing their traditional practices to date.



2.2 Origin and History of the Waataa People

There is no reliable information available about the original home of the Waataa community of Chopha village. A few earlier literatures attempted to show the origin of the Waataa people of Ethiopia (Harmuzd, Rassam, 1869; Cerulli, 1922; Spencer, 1952; Harris, Cornwallis, 1844, p.50). Though, the information they provide about the origin and history of the Waataa people of Ethiopia vary; they contribute to the knowledge about the Waataa people.

Harris (1844, pp. 50-51), who was a British traveller, states:

Among the Oromo sorcerers and soothsayers, the Wato⁵, already mentioned as inhabiting the mountain Dalácha, towards the sources of Hawash are the most universally celebrated. Neither Pagan nor Christian will molest this tribe from the same superstitious apprehension of their malediction, and still more from a desire to obtain their blessing; whilst he who receives the protection of a Wato may travel with perfect security over every part of the country inhabited by the Oromo.

⁵ The Author's spelling is retained.

According to Harris (1844), the Waataa people lived in the current West Shoa Zone of Oromia, on the area neighboring the source of Awash River, west of Addis Ababa. They are adherents of their traditional belief. Different Oromo social groups need their traditional service; i.e. blessing, for the Waataa people own the spiritual power. The Waataa people also believe that Waaqaa provided them the spiritual power. Furthermore, they believe that their spiritual power safeguard them, everywhere they travel among different Oromo social groups.

Furthermore, Harris (1844, p.51) writes:

Subsisting entirely by the chase, the Wato wander from lake to lake and from river to river, destroying the hippopotamus, upon the flesh of which animal they chiefly live-whereas no other heathen will touch it. Feared and respected, and claiming to themselves to be the original stock of the Oromo nation, they deem all other clans unclean from having mixed with Mohammadans and Christians; and refusing on this account to intermarry, remain to this day a separate and distinct people.

We learn from Harris (1844) that the Waataa people are the ancestor of the Oromo people. According to this Author, different Oromo groups did not exclude the Waataa people from the mainstream Oromo society; rather it is the Waataa people, who disregarded other Oromo social groups, and the marginalization continues to the current time. They also thought the non-Waataa Oromos are the followers of either Christianity or Islam religions. Furthermore, Harris reveals that the Waataa people prefer to live near water bodies to hunt hippopotamus. On one side, different Oromo groups fear the Waataa people. On the other side, they respect the Waataa people.

During the fieldworks, the research informants from Arsi Oromo and Waataa community told us an identical story to Harris (1844) about the origin and spiritual power of the Waataa people. One of the informants, Haji Ahimed Mohammed Dhekko, about 70 years old, from Arsi Oromo, Ogolcho sub-clan, a knowledgeable person in Oromo culture in general and the Arsi Oromo culture in particular, affirms that the Waataa people are one of the ancient Oromo groups.

To conclude, the Waataa people are one of the Oromo social groups, who have been living together with different Oromo social groups. Although, the Waataa people share common culture together with other Oromo social groups, they practice their unique culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Background of the Study Area

Ziway Dugda is one of the 25 *Woredas* of East Arsi Zone. Geographically, the *woreda* lies in the great East African Rift Valley. The population of the *Woreda* consists of different ethnic groups. According to the Central Statistics Agency (CSA) report (2007), the total population of the *Woreda* was 120,121 (60,700 males and 59,421 females). The majority of the *Woreda's* population is the Arsi Oromos, who together with other Oromo groups constitute 94.84% of the total population. The Amhara constitute 1.43% and other ethnic groups account for 3.73% of the population.

Concerning the languages, Afan Oromo is spoken as a first language by

94.35% of the *Woreda's* population, Amharic is spoken by 2.47% and the remaining 3.18% are speakers of different languages as the first language (CSA, 2007). The majority of the inhabitants of Ziway Dugda *woreda* are Muslims, with 89.56% of the total population, while 10.17% are followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, and 0.27% of the total population is followers of different religions.

3.2. Participants of the Study

Chopha village was selected as the study site for the Waataa community, who live in this village, have marked identity constructions and social representations by other social groups, especially, by Arsi Oromo, which resulted in the Waataa community living isolated from the mainstream Arsi Oromo. A few Waataas, who are living in neighbouring *Woredas*, were not covered by this study. In addition, the study did not consider the whole population of the Waataa community, who inhabit the *Chopha* village. Rather the selected members from the community, who claim the 'gifted' ones and actively engage in the endangered traditional practices, were included.

Parallel to this, key informants were selected based on their recognition as knowledgeable and able to provide rich insights into the Waataa's culture and their relation to Arsi Oromos' way of life. Key informants from both the Waataa community and the Arsi Oromo were selected by purposive sampling method. Accordingly, these informants provided the necessary primary data. Some informants, from the Waataa community, who provided information included *Waataa*⁶, old aged people, women, and youths. Participation of the women and the youths reveal their insight about the Waataa's traditional culture. It also shows the women's role in the traditional culture of the Oromo society in general and the Waataa people in particular. The selection of informants from Arsi Oromo was conducted likewise the Waataa community. They also provided information on the relationship that exists between the two groups; i.e. the Waataa community and the Arsi Oromo. In general, informants provided information on the role of Waataa people in the social construction of Arsi Oromo and the neighbouring Oromo groups.

The study employed mainly three types of data collection instruments: namely, interview, focus group discussion, and observation. In the analysis of the data, it used the narratives that emerged during data collections. The ethnographic data were analysed using both symbolic interpretation and symbolic interaction approaches to gain insight into the endangered cultural practices performed by the 'gifted' Waataa. This helped to examine how people's variant interpretations in the natural settings were constructions, which were the foundations for people's involvement in cultural activities. The Waataa's cultural domains brought the constructions of subjective meanings at times, and shared interpretations for common goals with the Arsi Oromo.

The researchers acknowledged and applied the ethical consideration of Himmelmann (2002, p.16), who affirms interests and rights of contributors and speech community should take precedence over scientific interests. Thus, the data were collected upon the consent and good will of the informants, from the Waataa community of Chopha village and the neighbouring Oromo groups.

⁶In Ziway Dugda and the neighbouring *Woredas*, Waataa stands for the Waataa people as a social group, each individual member of the Waataa community, and the gifted members of the Waataa community.

4. Results and Discussion

The Waataa people are generally perceived as a low caste social group by different neighboring social groups. Though in the past the Waataa people were outlawed from direct participation in social, economic, and political activities, practically they have been playing an important socio-cultural role in the neighbouring Oromo groups. They engage in unique social and economic activities of the neighbouring Oromo groups; i.e. the Arsi Oromo, the Borana Oromo, the Jille Oromo, and different Oromo groups inhabiting Ziway Dugda *Woreda*. The cultural services of the Waataa people also extended to the near by *Woredas* and zones.

The Oromo social groups need the cultural services of the Waataa people in areas such as conflict resolution, *guddifachaa* 'traditional child adoption ceremony of the Oromo people', *moggaasaa* 'naming ceremony by Oromo people, incorporating war captives and non-Oromo ethnic groups and individuals to be Oromo', and production of whip⁷, shield, and pots. They are also needed in cleansing, rituals, prayer to *Waaqaa* on behalf of the Oromo people to bring the extended absence of rainfall to an end, to bring the hard labour to safe delivery, to enable cattle to reproduce in greater number, and prayer to *Waaqaa* to bring to an end, when extensive rainfall and epidemic diseases appear in the area. In general, the non-Waataa groups depend on the Waataa people for these traditional services.

The Waataa people earn money and different items for services they deliver. In other words, the Waataa people subsidize their livelihood by providing traditional services. The traditional services serve the Waataa people as a source of income. The earnings show the economic dependence of the Waataa people on the Oromo groups. Therefore, there exists a mutual interdependence between the Waataa people and the neighbouring Oromo social groups. The relationship and the interdependence that exist between the Waataa people and the neighboring groups are embodied in the myth of the Waataa people. Thus, to elucidate the relationship and interdependence of the Waataa people and the non-Waataa social groups, discussion and interpretation of the creation myth of the Waataa people are presented underneath.

The creation myth of Waataa people portrays the 'origin' of the Waataa as the people and as an occupational group. It also reveals their role in broader socio-cultural contexts. The origin of the Waataa people is mythical. The myth portrays that disobedience to the *Waaqaa* and competition with *Waaqaa* led the Waataa to poverty. Then after, *Waaqaa* offered the Waataa four things for livelihood; i.e., *botoyyaa*⁸, clay soil, the power to reconcile, and hippopotamus. Hence, begging is thought as a means of livelihood by the Waataa people, which came to being, because of the curse put on them by *Waaqaa*. Thus, begging, which assumed an apprehensive practice by most societies, is acknowledged and practiced as the ascertained source of income by the Waataa people. According to the creation myth of Waataa people, after the Waataa's cattle were depleted, *Waaqaa* made the first *botoyyaa*, blessed it and gave it to the Waataa to let him earn the livelihood through it. *Waaqaa* ordered him to carry the *botoyyaa*, whenever he begs, performs cultural practices, and practice rituals. Hence, he needs to carry the *botoyyaa*, whenever he goes out to maintain order, perform rituals, practice traditional ceremonies, and begs.

⁷ Whip has vital functions in the customary rule of the Oromo society (see Gameda, 2016).

⁸ *Botoyyaa* is a short ceremonial stick carried by the 'gifted' Waataa people. It is approximately 1.00 to 1.5 meter long. The *botoyyaa* is only usable by the 'gifted' Waataa. Its head (top) adorns with different colors of pieces of cattle skins.

Botoyyaa signifies a man, who carries it as the Waataa. It also signifies the spiritual power and authority vested in the Waataa by *Waaqaa*. Hence, for the Waataa people and the neighbouring Oromo groups, *botoyyaa* is not a simple ritual stick; rather, an insignia carried by the 'blessed' Waataa people, when they perform rituals, carry out spiritual ceremonies, and mediate the society and *Waaqaa*. Thus, the Arsi Oromo and different neighbouring Oromo groups obey the Waataa's traditional rule, particularly when the Waataa carry the *botoyyaa*.

The pieces of the cattle skin, which set on the top of the *botoyyaa* as a dornment symbolizes the Waataa's cattle, which were killed by *Waaqaa*'s cattle in the former day. The myth also portrays the Waataa as the first man, who appears on earth, and who lived with *Waaqaa*. It also depicts the Waataa as a brother of *Waaqaa*.

According to the creation myth of the Waataa people, the Waataa's women are accursed to be a potter, which is an occupation of a group of low caste social status. The Waataa people believe that their women became potters, because of the punishment that *Waaqaa* put on them in the past old days.

The myth also presents hippopotamus as the cattle of the Waataa people that are provided to them in compensation to their cattle, which were killed by the *Waaqaa*'s cattle. Thus, for the Waataa people, hippopotamus is 'clean' and eating a meat of the hippopotamus is not a sin as it is *Waaqaa*'s provision to them. Yet, the followers of the major religions and different social groups of the area consider hippopotamus 'unclean' and condemned by the religions of these groups. Therefore, they abhor the Waataa people and marginalize them in social, economical, and political sectors.

Furthermore, the myth rationalizes the foundation of the relationship and interdependence that exist among the Waataa people and the neighbouring non-Waataa social groups. It also presents the established division of occupation that exists among the Waataa people and the non-Waataa social groups. The Waataa people produce pots, shields, and whips, which are needed by the non-Waataas. They also provide spiritual services to the non-Waataa social groups and in conflict resolution and restoring the peaceful co-existence of the societies. The non-Waataa social groups involve in other different occupations.

The creation myth of the Waataa people can be analyzed from ecological, political, and spiritual points of view. Ecologically, first *Waaqaa* pulled the Waataa people out of the competition from the niche by depleting their cattle and depriving them of the right to owning cattle. Thus, they would not compete with the Arsi Oromo and the neighbouring social groups to own the cattle. Therefore, the non-Waataa social groups, including the Arsi Oromo, practice mixed agriculture; while the Waataa people hunt hippopotamus in the water body. For this reason, competition could not emerge among the two groups in the niche to own the dry land. In this regard, the myth reveals the established traditional rule regarding the distribution of natural resources among the Waataa and the non-Waataa groups; i.e. the Waataa own the water body and poor land; while the non-Waataa social groups inhabit the wider fertile areas and the grassland.

The creation myth of the Waataa community proposes the origin of religion, philosophical outlook and how things around them are originated. It also describes the origin of natural phenomena and human institutions within a pre-existing world. The myth of the Waataa people seems to justify the established social rule among the two groups by portraying that *Waaqaa* originated it.

We can observe the function of myth; i.e. how the myth is used to maintain social bonds by assigning to them different roles. The myth served to compensate the

social, political, and economic superiority of the non-Waataa groups with the spiritual superiority of the Waataa people. Therefore, the Arsi Oromo, who lead a well-established economy and inhabit the wider areas, need the cultural services of the Waataa people. Furthermore, the Arsi Oromo depends on the Waataa people for artifacts such as whips, shields, and pots. Thus, even though the Waataa people are assumed to be inferior to Arsi Oromo and constitute a marginalized group, they are superior in the production of cultural stuffs needed by the Arsi Oromo. The myth assigns the Waataa people the role of producer and the Arsi Oromos the consumer role. This shows that a mutual-relationship exists, but with a high degree of inequality, between the two groups.

Moreover, the myth has served to keep the balance of power among the Waataa people and the non-Waataa social groups. However, demographically, the Arsi Oromo constitute the greater population than the Waataa people; the myth is used to maintain the status and security of the two groups. It is also used to empower the role of the Waataa in traditional practices. The Waataa people consider that their traditional belief safeguards their status. Therefore, the interactional function of the myth is used to maintain the social bonds and to keep the balance of power between the Waataa people and the Arsi Oromo.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to discuss how the myth is used in the social construction of a society. Along with this aim, how myth constructed contextual meanings was dealt with. To address these principal questions, it examined the creation myth of the Waataa people. Furthermore, to reveal how the Waataas, who are perceived as the 'gifted' people, perform their traditional practices, the Waataas' and the non-Waataas' construction of meanings are explored simultaneously.

It is found that myth has no similar interpretations along with different contexts and functions. For example, the Waataa people, who perceive themselves as the 'gifted' people, understand that the mythology related to eating hippopotamus is backed up with the claim of the supreme power of *Waaqaa*. This posits that hippopotamus meat is not a profane; rather it is a sacred one. However, for the non-Waataa social groups, hippopotamus is 'unclean'. Even the youth within the Waataa community of *Chopha* village do not show interest to their parents eating hippopotamus. More importantly, the non-Waataas who oppose the cultural practice of eating hippopotamus despise the Waataas, because of their eating habit. The non-Waataas arguments are framed in their own religious beliefs, which can be easier of the mainstream religious tenets. Both religions, i.e. Islam and Christianity support their claim with the holy books; the Holy Koran and the Holy Bible respectively, which do not allow eating of both domesticated and wild animals that do not munch and have full hoofs.

Some lexical expressions are constructed in significantly noticeable interpretations such as, begging, poverty, and conscription as soldiers. This variation of meaning suggests difference of attitude towards involvement in begging. This is to mean that the Waataas engagement in begging is because of *Waaqaa's* word. The non-Waataas do not accept begging. Poverty is also understood differently; for the Waataa people, it is acceptable, whereas for the non-Waataas it is the contrary. Similarly, the Waataa people accept their life style. This assumes that the curse by *Waaqaa* is His unalterable decision. Thus, the Waataas' way of life at the present is not improved or changed in the course of time and situation, because of the timeless

decree of *Waaqaa*. In addition, the difference between the Waataas and the non-Waataas in terms of ideological position suggests that the former considers a sin to kill any one, even at the battle field. On the contrary, the non-Waataas regard to kill and be killed in wars as a patriotic act. Equally, it seems lawful to generate income by producing and selling war instruments for non-Waataas, with an understanding that conceives killing in war front is not sinful, but not for the Waataas. Similarly, the whip made from the hippopotamus skin is used by the non-Waataa social groups, who are not permitted to produce it. Rather, it is solely produced by the Waataas. The other Oromo social groups, who conduct judgments and make new rules, necessarily hold the whip and swing it. This is analogous to some extent to the modern day court room wood hammer used by judges to signify final order. Thus, with the spiritual power vested in the Waataas in maintaining order and mediating conflicts require holding *botoyyaa*, not whip as in other Oromo social groups. This assumes how different material objects are interpreted to be used by one group, but not allowed to be used by the counterpart. In brief, whip is used by the Arsi Oromo, but not by the Waataa people. Similarly, *botoyyaa* is used only by the Waataa whereas not permitted to Arsi Oromo.

Though, the 'gifted' Waataa are actually facilitators to judgments such as by the council of elders or *Gada* leaders, their decree has the power to abolish a sense of enmity entirely, since people attribute the words of the Waataa even beyond the limit of time and space. Eventhough formal court decisions may end up with conflicts, their decree strength would not over live time and place. In brief, enmity will not be abolished in such decisions, but they can be eliminated by Waataa's decisions.

The study also presented the analysis of the creation myth of the Waataa people from ecological, economic, social, political, and spiritual points of view. The myth is used to justify the relationships and interactions that exist between the Waataa people and different social groups. Furthermore, it is used to uphold the social bonds, peace, and security of the two groups. It is also used to show the peaceful and 'fair' division of natural resources established between the Waataa people and different non-Waataa social groups in the area.

In general, the myth of the Waataa people portrays the Waataas' and the neighboring social groups' spiritual and material culture and social, political, and economic activities. Moreover, the spiritual and material culture and social, political, economic activities of the Waataa people and the neighbouring social groups are embodied in the myth. Moreover, indigenous wisdoms, proverbs, lexical knowledge, etc. of the groups are symbolized in the myth. Thus, the traditional practices and indigenous knowledge, and lexical knowledge of the Waataa people in particular, and the neighboring societies in general need to be further studied. Their significances to the knowledge about the Waataa people and the neighboring societies, i.e. language, history, sociology, anthropology, etc. of these social groups should be acknowledged in the academic circles.

Acknowledgments

A number of individuals and Offices contributed to the success of this study. Especially, we are deeply indebted to our informants, who are the members of the Waataa community and Waataa themselves; Ato Telila Robi, Ato Dule Kawwetti, Ato Marga, Ato Efa, and Ato Chala, for sharing us their own life experiences, their knowledge about the culture and belief of the Waataa people, and the Arsi Oromo. They sacrificed their time with us and made available themselves for many hours' interviews and focus groups discussions, which could enabled us to complete this study. Equally, the close supports we got from Ziway Dugda *Woreda* Administration Office and Ziway Dugda *Woreda* Tourism and Culture Office, were crucial to the success of this research. Ato Abdella Bifo, Head of Ziway Dugda *Woreda* Tourism and Culture Office, showed interest to the research and offered us his expertise and worked with us unconditionally. Thus, we owe great debts to thank these individuals and Offices, for their invaluable supports throughout the study period. Furthermore, we are thankful many individuals, whose supports assisted us much, most of whom we remember by name, though space prohibits us from listing their names here. Finally, we would be wrong if we forget appreciating Dr. Tesfaye Gebeyehu, Editor-in-Chief of the Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences and Language Studies, Jimma University, for his support, which enabled the research published.

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Appendix: The Creation Myth of the Waataa People⁹

In the very old days, the Waataa owned many cattle. The exact number of his cattle was unknown to him. At that point, in time, the Waataa was living with Waaqaa on the earth. He was a brother of Waaqaa. The Waataa was such a prosperous person, who boasted, because of his prosperity. One day the Waataa said to Waaqaa, “my Waaqaa! Let us bring our cattle together and then compare to know who owns more cattle”. Waaqaa refused. The next morning, the Waataa requested the same again; but Waaqaa refused for the second time. Then, the Waataa continues requesting the Waaqaa repeatedly; but Waaqaa refused to accept the request. Finally, Waaqaa showed interest and made an appointment, when and where to bring their cattle together, to determine the owner of more cattle.

Then, they brought all their cattle to the big field. Waaqaa’s cattle were lions, tigers, hyenas, foxes, jackals, crocodiles, snakes, and the like; while the Waataa’s cattle were oxen, cows, donkeys, horses, sheep, goats, etc. When Waaqaa’s and the Waataa’s cattle were brought together, Waaqaa’s cattle devoured all of the Waataa’s cattle. The attack was conducted near big water body. While Waaqaa’s cattle were killing the Waataa’s cattle, the Waataa saw a calf running towards the big water body. The Waataa rushed to the calf to save it. In the meantime, Waaqaa ordered him to return back. “Do not follow the calf! Come back! It will be your cattle in the future. Come back!” The Waataa returned back. The calf sank into the water. Then the Waataa recognized the extinction of his cattle. Waaqaa said to the Waataa, “You will not get your cattle back. Your cattle will be the calf, which sank into the water. The calf will reappear as hippopotamus and will be your cattle”. Thus, the Waataa had lost all his cattle.

The Waataa became a poorest man. His family starved and some of the family members died. Then, the Waataa went to Waaqaa and requested Him, “Give me a means of living”.

Waaqaa said to the Waataa, “I will give you four things for living”. Then Waaqaa gave botoyyaa to the Waataa. “Take this botoyyaa. Go and beg with it.” Waaqaablessed the botoyya and gave it to the Waataa. Moreover, Waaqaa ordered the Waataa to obey the following rules:

- 1. “Be a person who give bless and lay curse. Whenever you bless and lay curse carry the botoyya. Let your blessing and curse is fruitful!*
- 2. May the blood of others be taboo for you! May the blood of Arsi be taboo for you!”*
- 3. I will not give you cattle. You had enough cattle. Earn the living by begging and blessing. Let others receive what they lack through your blessings. Be a Waataa! Be the Waaqaa.”*

The second thing Waaqaa gave to Waataa was the clay soil, which the Waataa women use to make pots. The Waaqaa said to the Waataa, “This clay soil helps you to support your family. The Arsi feed on the pots your women make from this clay. You are assigned to be potter. Make pots from the clay and sell it to the Arsi women and others!”

Then the Waataa asked Waaqaa, “What things else would you give me for

⁹This Creation Myth of the Waataa people was narrated by TelilaRobi, 67, one of the key informants of this research, who lives in Chopha village and Waataa himself. It was narrated in Afaan Oromo, and the researchers translated it to English.

living?” The Waaqaa replied, “Earn the living by reconciling the Arsi and other Oromo groups, when they kill each other. Cleanse the murderer from the blood. Be a person who give blessings and put curses!” Finally, Waaqaa said to the Waataa, “Hippopotamus is your cattle, make use of it. I offered you these four things for your livelihood; i.e., botoyyaa, clay soil, the power to cleanse and reconcile, and hippopotamus. Do not ask me for more things, I will not offer you more things. ” And Waaqaa departed from the Waataa’s sight.