

## Indigenous Climate Knowledge as Reflected in the Folk Narratives of the Forest–dependent Oromo Society, around the Bale Mountains<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** A folk narrative of every society embodies various perspectives of indigenous knowledge. The purpose of this study is to unearth ecological indigenous knowledge as reflected in the folk narratives of the Oromo society. The analysis of this research is based on the African perspectives or worldviews towards nature. More specifically, the study is concerned with the practices of indigenous knowledge related to climate and seasonal fluctuations in the folk narratives of forest- dependent Bale Oromo. An attempt was made to find out the local knowledge that the people draw from the interconnections of human and nature. As far as the major finding of the research is concerned, the aspects of climate indigenous knowledge are experiential and are based on the society's relationship with plants and animals or the physical environment. Unlike many societies' taxonomy of seasons, i.e., four seasons, the Bale Oromo society practices five classifications of seasons. Moreover, this research examines the folk narratives related to indigenous climate knowledge and identifies the significances of ecological indigenous knowledge that the local people structure and reflect in various representations.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous Climate Knowledge, Oromo, Folk Narratives, African Perspectives

### *Introduction*

Indigenous tribes already own a great wealth of knowledge about the seasonal fluctuations including, rain forests, rainfall patterns, changes of plant species trailed by climatic conditions. The attempt of moving societies from their native knowledge into global knowledge system seems easier said than done. The separation of the prior/ indigenous knowledge from African tribal society resulted in a negation to their existence. Traditional societies established their own form of epistemology that

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enabled them, not only to live in harmony with their environment, but also envisage their sustainable future. As such, indigenous climate knowledge emanates from such long-rooted empirical knowledge of indigenous societies.

The study of indigenous knowledge has increasingly shifted to embody primitive expressions of folklore that challenge Western science. Studies in oral tradition, covering contemporary field work, are making evident the profound relationship between oral tradition and indigenous knowledge practices. Oral traditions occur in contexts (cultural, social, linguistic), and without consideration of these contexts one cannot begin to deal with questions of function, meaning, and significance (Mhando, 2008). African oral traditions, hence, need a critical theory to extract the best of indigenous thought and practice. In addition, an African centred approach to indigenous knowledge entails several fundamental concerns. These usually include matters of creation, form, history, meaning, significance and others.

In Africa the pursuit of indigenous knowledge dates back to the colonial era, when European colonizers expanded their territories into the lands of Africa- in large part of an effort to control not only more markets and labor power, but also natural resources and traditions. The enormous practices of indigenous knowledge of local community were weakened or destroyed by colonial policies (Ranger, 1989, Peet and Watts, 1996). While Africans were urged to acknowledge Western forms of knowledge for a better life, they suffered from the effects of denying notions of self and local knowledge. The implementation of these policies, in addition to effects of perpetuating colonial exploitation, caused growing problems of pollution, deforestation and the loss of other natural resources. The effect threatened the livelihood and modes of survival of small farmers and indigenous groups, displacing them from their indigenous lands.

A number of studies in Ethiopia also confirm that the people's indigenous knowledge practices are playing a vital role in solving various societal problems. In contrast to other African countries, Ethiopia resisted the colonial imposition and its impacts. Consequently, along with its ethnic diversity and a long history of oral traditions, its peoples' social self-confidence and political self-consciousness helped to keep their practices of indigenous knowledge. Besides this, the majority of the rural population relies dominantly upon a traditional way of life to sustain their livelihood.

Oromo society, as one of the country's ethnic groups, is rich in practices of indigenous knowledge. Their oral tradition is a source of knowledge. Some scholars show that for the Oromo, particularly the Bale Oromo, indigenous knowledge is an organic experience that needs to be studied- though they did not indicate the role of folk narratives for the 'passing on' of indigenous knowledge (Alemayehu, 2012, Workineh, 2001). Hence, in interdisciplinary studies, the key aspects of indigenous knowledge in folk

narratives have remained largely unexplored so far; even though, social interaction of any society provides oral traditions which are the bedrock of indigenous knowledge. Therefore, this study will shed light on the wider concerns of indigenous climate knowledge as reflected in folk narratives. To this effect, the study explores indigenous knowledge practices that guide Bale Oromo traditional people in their innumerable interactions with the climatic milieu- with the following specific objectives:

- Find out what practices of climate-based indigenous knowledge are drawn from the interconnections of the Oromo culture and nature,
- Explore the folk narratives that reflect axiomatic experiences of indigenous knowledge related to seasonal fluctuations and,
- Identify symbolic representations conveyed in various forms of natural phenomena and folk rituals.

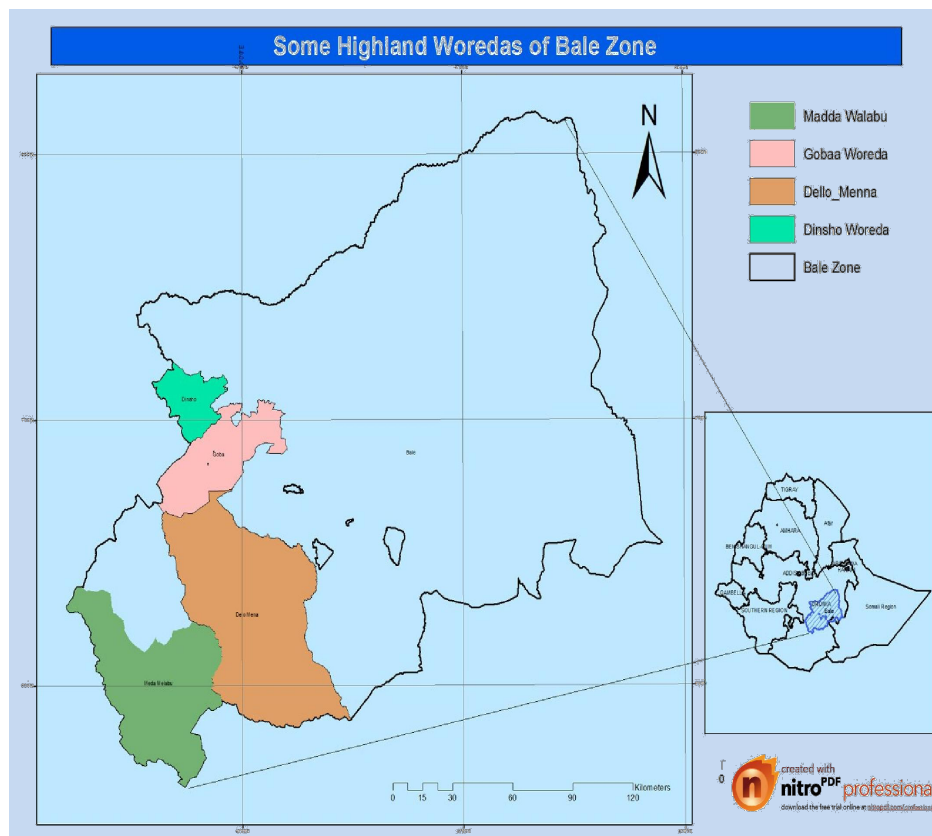


Figure 1. Map of the region of the Bale zone.

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*Folk Narratives as Ways of Transferring Indigenous Knowledge*

Folk narratives mirror the socio-cultural and environmental practices of a given society wherein the story is created and told. Folk narratives represent a major part of the domain of folklore. Folklore is an interdisciplinary field of study, which developed from nineteenth century's interests in understanding and collecting customs and stories from traditional people. It has developed its range to encompass at least four broad areas that satisfy the intellectuals' interest: oral literature, material culture, social folk custom, and performing folk arts (Dorson, 1982, McAdams, 2006 and Kumarasinghe, 2009). They posit that these areas cannot be considered mutually exclusive. For instance, in a storyteller's oral performance, it may not be possible, or desirable, to separate the tale (i.e. the folk narratives) from the telling (i.e. performing folk arts) (Barre and Tilley, 2009).

A cumulative body of environmental knowledge and beliefs is handed down through generations by verbal folklore, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment. Folk narrative provides a common definition that describes it as folk literature, and mostly includes a more expansive view of folktales, proposing that it comprises a variety of modes of oral expression such as ballads, folk songs, myths, jokes, and proverbs. In the African ethnographic concept, folklore replaces the oral literature category by verbal arts and uses the subdivision to folk narratives that include anecdotes, epics, fables, general narratives, histories, jokes, legends, myths, personal experience narratives, and tales (Degh, 1982; Toelken, 1996).

The broader domain of folk narratives refer to any traditional verbal arts that have been passed on orally from the past to the present and the future, and they include all traditional literature appeared as in prose or in verse. The documentation of oral literature among traditional society came from the cultivated art of storytelling in all ages and among all nations of which we have any record; it is the outcome of an instinct and implanted practices in the human mind.

The way of transferring folk narratives is known as the art of storytelling. According to Egan (1995) and Hartland, (1891) as quoted in Kumarasinghe (2009), storytelling is one of the oldest method of communicating ideas and images and the art of storytelling has been cultivated in all traditional societies of which we have any record; it is the outcome of an instinct implanted universally in the human mind. Therefore, the interrelationship between folk narratives and the art of storytelling is inseparable.

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*Methodology: Generic Model*

The study areas of this research are the districts of Bale Oromia. For the setting up and arrangements of the data collection, about twenty elders and seventeen youth participants camped in the forest of Anoshe Batu with the researcher during the first part of data collection. Informants were selected from two target groups, elders and the young (or children). Because if one says, ‘Indigenous knowledge transmits from generation to subsequent generation’, it is from elders to the young group. Owing to this, both groups are stake holders, as community members involved in the research design. The purpose was to give an opportunity for elders so that they could share practices of indigenous knowledge and narratives to the youth in the Bale villages. The presence of elders as narrators, and youths as audience, was very important for riddling and storytelling time.



*Figure 2. Camping in the Anoshe Forest for data collection.*

The data collection period was classified into four sessions: in the first session, all participants (informants) led by elders were taken to forests in order to watch the environment. It was a time of day watching and night listening. In the second session, participants were gathered around fire and elders narrated: *dur- duriis* (folktales), *hiibboo* (riddles), *baaccoo* (jokes) and *faaruu durii* (folk songs) to us, accompanied by *mammaksaa* (proverbs). In the third session, elders took us to the forests to tell us about traditional medicinal plants and narratives of rituals in relation to sacred trees. The fourth session was about traditional knowledge of seasonal fluctuations and narratives in relation to cattle. In the last session, elders recounted traditional ecological and climate knowledge.

This study generated a considerable amount of folk narrative data, from which relevant narratives were selected and analysed in this study. The basic instruments that were employed to collect the necessary data in the fieldwork were observation method, interview and focused group discussions using tape recordings and note-taking.

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### *Significance of Indigenous Knowledge*

Approximately 80% of the world's population relies on indigenous knowledge that is deep-rooted in their oral traditions for their basic necessities (Nakata, 2002). The theme of utilizing indigenous knowledge to create appropriate solutions for socio-cultural and economic problems occurs repeatedly throughout developmental literature. The local people make use of indigenous knowledge due to necessity, changing conditions and curiosity, doing informal experiments on new ideas either from their own – and/or learned from oral narratives of their past generations (Reij and Water, 2005).

Moreover, indigenous innovations can help to find the best solutions for local problems. Utilization of indigenous knowledge helps foster self-confidence and self-respect amongst the community. This eventually leads to economic growth and social change in the community. Indigenous innovations encourage local self-reliance, decentralization of decision-making and fair access to natural resources. As these solutions emerge from the local context, they will be more likely to be accepted by the community. Indigenous thoughts amongst communities will create positive attitude towards life and its challenges. This will help safeguard the community morale. This will also capacitate the community against external threats that may be in the form of changing socio-economic environment, introduction of new products and technologies at the cost of indigenous resources, or even natural disasters (Puffer, 1995).

Indigenous knowledge comprises all kinds of knowledge pertaining to a particular people. The nature or use of which cannot be separately viewed from the oral narratives or traditions of one society because oral traditions are the substratum of indigenous knowledge. This knowledge includes all kinds of scientific, agricultural, and technical knowledge including cultigens, seasonal fluctuations of climate change, medicine and the rational use of socio-cultural and economic values and philosophies. In a scientific arena, indigenous scholars and advocates have stimulated an interest in the contribution of indigenous knowledge to a better understanding of sustainable development.

Traditional knowledge of the environment is being lost in communities around the world, and there is an urgent need to conserve this knowledge

to help develop mechanisms to protect the earth's biological diversity. According to Battiste (2002) the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity recognizes the importance of indigenous knowledge to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, acknowledges the contribution of indigenous knowledge as innovative approaches to environmental studies, and recognizes the validity of indigenous science. It also recognizes the value of indigenous knowledge innovations, and practices to scientific knowledge, conservation studies, and sustainable developments (*Ibid*).

Therefore, indigenous knowledge is used at the local level by communities as the basis for decisions pertaining to food security, human and animal health, education, natural resource management and vital activities. Indigenous knowledge is a key element of the social capital of the poor and constitutes their main asset in their efforts to gain control of their own lives. For these reasons, the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge to locally managed, sustainable and cost-effective survival strategies should be promoted in the development process.

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#### *Oromo Indigenous Climate Knowledge as Reflected in Folk Narratives*

The traditional way of separating one season from the other is a significant component of traditional ecological knowledge in the practices of a traditional society (Berkes, 2008). The traditional society of Bale Oromo are acquainted with practices of indigenous knowledge about the changes occurring in inter-annual variability in the timing and amount of precipitation. It is a matter of great importance to them since they live where rain is generous. This is through very old familiarity with their folk narratives about seasonal patterns of climate changes or changes in precipitation and temperature. A set of local or traditional signs help to identify one season from the other.

The people's traditional ecological knowledge consists of a set of personal observations conducted over a prolonged period and reinforced by the observations of other traditional practices. When this information is collected over annual cycles, it provides the basis for the seasonal calendar. On the surface, the calendar may be viewed simply as a timetable that divides the year into seasons, and describes likely weather conditions and resources available. The traditional astronomy also includes diverse kinds of narratives or observations by an indigenous person or group. These narratives, in turn, can provide intergenerational observations of various kinds of natural resource phenomena.

The symbiotic relationship among the natural elements and the various indicators provide the local community with a wealth of folk knowledge

and perspectives for understanding the distinctive seasons found in Bale. Unlike the 'modern' classification of seasons, in Bale there are five typical seasons, each separated by experiential local knowledges: *Gannaa* (Rainy and wet season), *Birraa* (Harvest season), *Bonaa* (Dry season), *Badheessaa* (Windy spring) and then *Caamsaa* (Showery rainy spring).

Each season is differentiated by natural indicators of weather patterns, and particular climatic conditions (including cloud formations, wind direction, rainfall, and changes in flora and fauna). The folk narratives are also characterized by the changes that occur across all seasons. For instance, the wet season of *Gannaa* comprises heavy rain, cloudy atmosphere, thunderstorms with strong wind and lightning which is referred to as *balaqqeessa* (lightening). Thus, much of the folk narratives during *Gannaa* season attributed to the relieve of heavy rain and its effects on their productions. During *Birraa* season the narratives are about ritual practices related to the aftermath of the *Gannaa*; during *Bonaa* season it is about aspiration of coming rain; during the *Balaqqeessa* the narratives indicate the characteristics of wildlife. During *Caamsaa* season the folk narratives are about characteristics of nature and readiness for the coming heavy rainy season, *Gannaa*.

The cattle's or animals' behavior and narratives related to them are important indicators of seasonal changes. The ritual ceremonies, songs and narratives are also varied in accordance with the seasonal fluctuations. The ecological indigenous knowledge includes a great deal of reflections of nature and way of habitats living in the enormous climate areas. Cattle raisers are standing by to make decisions in each season about their cattle's migration area and timing. Moreover, advanced knowledge from indigenous sources, is of great value to the farmers. It allows them to include slower-maturing crops that would be excluded if they waited until the rains had settled in, and it also permits them to decide whether to clear, cultivate and plant in a larger area than usual. They thus seek this knowledge avidly.

The society's knowledge of seasonal variability forms the hierarchy for which all other traditional ecological knowledge held within the seasonal calendar that they traditionally use. Seasonal events, such as the timing of growth, development, behaviour or reproduction of flora and fauna become indicators of the annual progression through the seasonal cycles. A senior eloquent Bale Oromo elder explains that the indicators for the seasonal fluctuations are through observation of *fiuula lafaa* (faces of the earth), and changes of growth in the flora and fauna. These are the teachings of nature on the changes of seasons.

Rain has a socio-cultural significance among Bale Oromo as in other societies. Scanty rain is taken by the society as 'the sign of curse' or remuneration for bad conduct against nature. In contrast, abundant rains indicate divine or cosmological favor. For example, couples who get



married become happy when rain falls on the day of their wedding, because rain during wedding day symbolizes optimism or future prosperity and numerous blessings. In their own words they say:

*Roobni yoo roobu, 'Waaqni nuuf arjoome' jenna; roobni roobuu yoo didu, 'Waaqni nutty eekkame' jenna. Guyyaa gaa'elaa roobni yoo robe 'milkiin tole' jenna; Roobni badhaadhina waan harkiduuf.*

When rain falls, we say 'God is favoured for us' When rain declines to rain we say, 'God is displeased with us.' When rain falls during a wedding time, it is said, there is a good success. It is a rain that gives abundance.

Traditional knowledge of seasonal changes consists of the identification, namings and classification of distinctive components of the environment. It contains empirical observations and information about the interactions of flora and fauna together with human beings at particular times of the year. The Bale Oromo people traditionally relied on such knowledge to ensure food, water, shelter, medicines and other resources. Physical and biological events served as indicators of change and were interpreted as signals that particular actions needed to be undertaken at certain times (including the hunting and harvesting of food sources, cultural ceremonies and practices).

Generally speaking, such traditional knowledge of ecology is learned by the local practitioners within a cultural context, and the knowledge base reflects the specific verbal communication, beliefs, and cultural processes. The weather conditions of the environment and the local climate are predicted, and interpreted by the experiential local people using combinations of plant, animal, insect, and other astronomical indicators. This aspect of indigenous knowledge is adapted to local conditions and has been achieved through long years of experience passed on from earlier generations. Traditional rainfall forecasting refers to markers that are locally exercised to construe the weather/climate conditions. Traditional rainfall forecasts or predictions of the Bale communities are based on cultural background, and environment around them.

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*The Five Indigenous Taxonomies of Seasons*

*i. Ganna Season and its Peculiar Narratives*

*Ganna* is the heavy rainy season of the Bale Oromo society. In this season one can easily separate the time. Cultivators use a diverse type of traditional knowledge to predict rainfall on the basis of their observation of such phenomena as, lightning for rainy season, animal behaviors across different seasons, the movement of bees, and the positions of the moon. The local people combine different markers to separate one season from the other and to decide on adaptive measures shaped by local conditions and needs. Knowledge is dynamic and nurtured by observation and experiences of both the men and women for their livelihood. Besides, the cultivators in the region have developed certain beliefs with regard to rainfall. Men and women have different kinds of knowledge and use it for different purposes. Similarly, elder persons are more knowledgeable and able to use more indicators with greater understanding of their environment.



*Figure 3. Elders shared Indigenous Knowledge about Nature during a series of night time story telling sessions.*

The season is well characterized by its dampness and the local people are busy in repairing the fences of their cattle's barn. They repair their huts. Clouds or a visible mass of water dominates during day time. The sun is

hidden during the day time because of the gloomy climate. Men are busy strengthening the fences and camps of their cattle; women are busy in cleaning dung of their cows. Milk is abundant. They accumulate butter. Calves are kept at home. Life is highly dependent on cattle products. Rivers flow and falls are high.

This aspect of traditional ecological practices is not simply about the availability of rain, but also provides more ecological indications that link changing climatic conditions with the behaviour of flora and fauna. Elders in focused group discussions describe the relationship between plants' characteristics and seasonal variations around the Bale Mountains. In *Gannaa* (the rainy season) nature is viewed as environmentally and ecologically friendly. At this time wild animals minimize their predatory activities. It is a relief for the predators. Plants look ever green.

#### *ii. Birra Season and Sacred Practices in Relation to Cattle*

The people of Bale Oromo long-settled where rain is generous for the highlanders and diverse for those who live in the low lands. For their convenient lifestyle they use a collective memory of weather patterns that extend from their ancestral times. This understanding of the pattern of seasons establishes the basic framework against which variability and changes are observed. In *Birra* season unlike the *Ganna* season of heavy rains, rivers reduce their flow. Flowers start to flower abundantly. It is honey bees season. Local people share a strong sense of attachment, or characteristics of the season. The season shifts from darkness of the *Ganna* (or rainy season) to the bright season of *Birra* (flowering season).

#### *Rituals Related to Cattle among the Oromo Women during Birraa Season*

The shift from the heavy season of *Ganna* to the bright season of *birra* is a great pleasure for the Bale Oromo women in particular. The mud-covered locality dries out during this *birra* season. Mind sets for clearness and the process continues in all aspects with the most important involvement of the women group. In this season a ritual of purification holds mainly for cattle. This ceremony is referred to as *Fala Horii* (purification rituals for cattle). The purification practice in this season is for all cattle; it is when cattle are gathered in their barn/shed during the night time. A woman narrator informs the ceremony of purification that 'a woman rotates a black sheep around the cattle in the barn. Then the sheep is slaughtered and blood of the sheep is put into *gorii* (milk vessel) for morning ceremony of identifying the first fruit of all the cattle type. Early down they make fire and roast the sheep's meat. They cut the skin of the slaughtered sheep and tie a rope into the forehead of the horns of the first fruit of all the cattle in their category. Using the branch of *Anshaa* tree they smear the blood on the cattle. In the morning rituals fire burns and under

the smoke of the fire all cattle leave out of their barn. Then smearing the milk into the barn using the *Anshaa* tree leaf, the following blessing has been said:

*Aanan isinii yaa deebi'u*  
*Barakaan isinii yaa deebi'u*  
*Daraaraan daraaraa nagaa isinii yaa ta'u*  
*Bonni yaa oolu*  
*Waanyoon yaa baddu*  
*Orfoon aanan isinii yaa baattu they can change their world*  
*Waanyoon dhagaa yaa taatu*

Let your milk be return,  
 Let your blessing be with you,  
 Let the flowers be flowers of peace,  
 Let the 'bonaa' (winter) far from us,  
 Let jealousies be perished,  
 Let the 'orfoo' be filled with milk and,  
 the envious be like stone.

The main duty of the cattle's purification practice is held by a woman among the community. The process of keeping the cattle in the barn till the ritual ends up, and leaving the cattle from a barn the activities are governed by a woman/wife. Hence, within these specific social and cultural practices the narrative shapes the ideology of women's position.

Semiotic activity is intrinsically social, taking place in society interactive process, and meaning occurs only in interaction, never as an intrinsic property of any sign. This activity has its own 'life', as signs and meanings circulate and change and are changed by every interaction, so that the 'life' of signs is woven into the life processes of society itself (Saussure, (1974), quoted in Hodge). The ritual is a ceremony for their cattle's companionship and their families' blessing. All cattle kept together with family for purification by slaughtering a sheep in the barn. The sacrifice of the sheep represents the emancipation of all their cattle from evils. The sign of the rope on the forehead or horn of all the cattle indicates the first fruit of all type of the cattle and wishing more reproduction. This traditional ritual practice is for the health of their cattle and harmonious life. The discourse of blessings that follow the ritual practice is clear and they know why they carry out such rituals and what they want.

The narrative discourse implies the power relation established in the social structure of the society. The blessings and curses performed by elders are believed to be true and powerful. The practice of *falaa* is a declaration of peace and health for their cattle. The enactment of power control by the elders group is both in the content of their speech and structure of the narrative- that 'by saying something, they are doing something'. They are positioned to a higher place in the social hierarchy

of the society that, if elders bless, ‘the milk of their cows to be abundant, flower of their land to be a peaceful’, it is believed it happens. Flowers in Bale Oromo’s culture are sign of peace as in most ethnic group of the country or elsewhere in the world. Elders as powerful speakers, through the ritual declaratives like, ‘let your milk be..., let your blessing be...’, through their word of mouth they can change their world.

The narrative indicates that for the Bale Oromo society cattle and cattle’s product is their basic necessity and they are keen to protect their cattle from all harmful elements- they also show highest form of respect and care. Milk is also seen as a sign of blessing when they say ‘let your milk return; and let your blessing be with you’.

### *iii. Bona (Dry Season)- Cattle Rearing Folk Songs Depicting the Season*

Indigenous knowledge is separating one season from the other using indicators of nature. The signs are different from season to season. For example, when leaves fall down, it is a sign of *Bona* (winter). Unlike the northern hemisphere of the globe- which is believed to be cold, in the season of *Bona* the earth is hot; the sun is strong and leaves become dry and wither. This is a season when the people around the lowlands suffer scarcity because water declines and grass dries in Bale Oromo.

Everywhere the season brings to all scarcity of water around the low lands (arid and semi-arid areas), although there is abundance in the high lands; and in winter the very dawn of life is darkened by this shadow.

Through their ritual narratives elders associate the harshness of the nature with human dreadful character. The following blessing- narrative reveals this fact.

*Bonni yaa oolu  
Waanyoon yaa baddu;  
Inaafuuun dhakaa yaa taatu.*

Let the ‘bonaa’ (winter) far from us,  
Let jealousies be perished;  
Let the envy be like stone

If elders/ speakers of the community curse anyone who acts against the norm of the society, it is believed that irreversibly what they speak out will happen. Winter or *bonaa* is a dry season which is associated with jealousy because *bonaa* perishes the green nature of the *gannaa* and *birraa* seasons- which precede it. Likewise, jealousy is symbolized by this season. At times elders utter words of curse like, ‘let the jealous be perished..., let the envy be like stone...’ there is a change in the mood and that is likely to happen.

Cattlemen go to the river banks to make a prayer for rain. During the *bona* season, unlike *gannaa* season, river tributaries get less or dry. Elders respond that in this season what they have is honey harvest. The weather is tougher than previous seasons. During night time it is chilly and during day time the sun is strong. It is a season of migration to the highland areas—where there is relative rain and grass. It is a season during which the lowlanders migrate with their cattle for food and water. In their terms, they say *godaansaa*—a temporal move from lowland to the highlands basically for their cattle's survival. They move around *Baddaa gurraachaa* in the terms of the lowlanders which is to mean ‘highland areas’ where rain is available. But children stay home with some selected members of families. Women also migrate with their cows. During this season they accomplish traditional activities and the common *bonaa* seasonal narratives of women revolve around their cows.

The following narrative is recited to their cattle by elders (those who are responsible for the journey) during this migration season:

*Intalli isaa qorooroo harkisaa*  
*Yoo Sobbiyyoo gahe na ittisaa*  
*Daalee caraa*  
*Bakkuma si taateetti laallee gallaa.*

Somebody's lady is carrying 'qorooroo'  
 When I reach 'Sobbiyyoo' I stay there,  
 My 'daalee' of different colour,  
 I stay where it is convenient for you.

From the discourse of the narrative, it is clear to comprehend the bond between the society and their cattle is very strong. The activities of women and men vary according to the seasonal fluctuations. The role of the woman/wife is to set the scene by recalling and by worrying about her duties or responsibilities, like cleanings; whereas her husband sets his duties of searching grass lands. During this migration season of the *Bona* (dry time), men march with their cattle till they find an area of grass. From their indigenous knowledge practices, if they see a lady or woman who carries a *qorooroo* (milk vessel), they stay there as it is indicated in the above narrative, ‘Somebody's lady is carrying *qorooroo*, When I reach *Sobbiyyoo* I stay there’. Where a lady is seen with *qorooroo*, it is an area of grass- what they say in their traditional term *Sobbiyyoo* (grass areas).

During the *ganna* (rainy season) the people were benefited from their animal products, for the season was a season of abundance for cattle. The turn, in this *bona* (dry) season, is for the care of cattle when it says, ‘I stay where it is convenient for you.’ They do not expect privilege from their cattle because of the dryness of the season. They pursue favourable conditions or places for their cattle.

In the above two texts narrated by a woman and man, there are mainly two actions: the wife regulates appropriate protection particularly for cows that give milk and creating clean environment. A woman also praises her cows calling in different names. The husband is moving out the entire cattle to a convenient place. His interest is for the convenience of cattle in the harsh season.

To this end, the two folk songs by a woman and man convey two main messages in Bale Oromo cultural practices. The first is that ‘a good wife’ must be with her husband (and her cattle) and satisfy the internal needs. In this society where labour is divided along sex lines, the woman (in her roles of wife and mother) finds that it is her own responsibility to equally sacrifice, even during shortage seasons. The wife is ready to sacrifice herself for instance, in case of shortage or hardships of *bona* season. The second is the husband is the one who starves following the cattle’s footstep. Failing to act in this way would mean not being a good husband; he finds the means for getting foodstuff by travelling across the lands. Thus, both have been socialized into such cultural values through their folk narratives.



Figure 4. Elders teaching about seasonal fluctuations in relation to plants.

#### iv. *Badheessa Season*

*Badheessaa* (windy spring) is an immediate season that appears after the *Bona* (dry season). The signs that the local communities use to identify *badheessaa* season is the availability of winds, scarce precipitation and showering. The rain during this season is not satisfactory for growth of grasses. The only indication is that rain is about to come. This season is very short. According to elders' views, the indigenous knowledge that follows this season is 'Culturally it is a season of stallion and a mare because horses reproduce in this season than other time'.

Cattle production is weak but honey is still a timely harvest. The famous children play during this season is *Korboo*. *Korboo* is a traditional sport that kids play by twisting bamboo sticks and throwing a spear in the middle of the rolling circle.

#### v. *Caamsaa Season*

*Caamsaa* season comes after *Badheessaa* season in Bale zone. During evening of *Caamsaa*, there is heavy rain but during the day time there is strong sun. The flow of rivers becomes larger. Elders say, the *hooqxoo loonii* (skin-itching) of cattle is very common during this season. They itch against fences and as a result they remove hair from their skins. Based on their indigenous knowledge, animal's skin itching is a sign of the coming of rain.

Grass begins to grow abundantly, cattle become stronger, and people turn their face to them. This season is also referred to as 'Wolves season'. Wolves prey upon sheep. For the question why wolves restlessly hunt sheep more during this season, they say that there is a tale of the Wolf that:

*Dur dur geedalatu namichaan 'hoolaa naaf kenni' jetteen. Namtichis tibba Caamsaatti koottuu siifan kenna jedheen. Namtichis osoo hin kenniniif waan dagateef haaloo saniif geedalli hoolaa tibba kanatti adeemsiti jedhama.*

Once upon a time a Wolf asked a man to give him a sheep. And a man said, 'Come in the season of 'Caamsaa' (spring) and I'll give it to you'. But a man forgot what he promised to a wolf and in revenge to this broken promise a wolf hunts a sheep every time that this season comes.

Animal's representations have been used as symbols of distinct seasons throughout folklore and even nowadays like in Bale Oromo oral traditions. Depending on their behavior the indigenous knowledge behind symbolic representations are mysterious. In the tale of wolf- sheep, prey-predator game, the knowledge communicated is the representation of human-animal characteristics during seasonal fluctuations. The symbolic



significance is the identification of a specific season. Apart from other seasons, the prey and predator fight is enormous in *Caamsaa* season- and for the local people, when the common wolf prey consists largely of sheep, they know that the season is *Caamsa* (spring). Elders say in this season there is chilly temperature; daybreak is too cold for cowboys when they attend cattle. They add the night is short and day time is long during this season.

Moreover, the Bale Oromo make their prediction of rainy season using stars on the sky and insects on the land. The identification of various types of stars, according to their symbolic representation, is known for the wise elders who endowed astronomical knowledge. They say among the numerous stars *Jeyi* ('lead star') is associated with a coming of rain. *Jeyi* is not a star that always spotted on the sky, but when it appears to sight they associate with rain. So, when the *Jeyi* star returns they say that rain returns. Additionally, their indigenous astronomical knowledge indicates that if stars accumulated and their movement is to the direction of the Wabe River, or to the South, they know that rain is about to fall. But, when stars move to the direction of Awash, or to the north, they say there is no rain around Dinsho and Bale mountains.

On the other hand, the traditional community also separates one season from the other based on the movements of insect species. If a colony of honey bees march to the low land, they suggest that it is raining around the lowlands. If honey bees march to the highlands, they become conscious that rain returns to the highlands.

In addition, there are also plant species that are associated with raining season. The blossoming season of the *Urgeessaa* tree is a sign of raining season. The blossoms of this tree are a spot on indication for raining season. The rain that falls down following the intensification of *Urgeessaa* trees is conducive for farming season, which is referred to as *Hagayyaa*, season around Madewelabu distret. When chickens' wing also falls down, they also believe rain is about to fall.

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### *Conclusion*

The study addressed the representations of indigenous knowledge reflected in various forms folk narratives and signs. In Bale Oromo, discourses about gifts of nature and their significance to their existence are told in a daily basis of experiences. They pursue everything about the water, land, plants, animals and land forms. Different kinds of narratives invoke seasonal signs and cultural meanings in those places about all things. Ideas are shared with gestures, silences, implied meanings and metaphors. The images are patterned and juxtaposed to create mental

pictures. Elders tried to share their experiences of day watch in the forest and night listening around their residences in the village. In Bale Oromo elders develop practices of traditional knowledge from their attachments with the elements of natural movements and the voices they hear. They interpret the voice of primal nature and translate into extended narrative of exploration. The motif of constructing meaningful messages has its roots in folk narratives. They create a dialogue between human and nature. Storytellers have recounted the wise words spoken by wind, rivers, mountain, trees and animal.

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#### Editor's Note

Readers who have particularly enjoyed Dr. Yosef Beco Dubi's discussion of the paradigms and place of indigenous knowledge within Bale Oromo may also find the following article by Te Maire Tau to be of great interest:

Tau, Te Maire 2001, 'The Death of Knowledge: Ghosts on the Plains', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 131-152.

Tau discusses notions of indigenous knowledge within the contemporary context of New Zealand's South Island with great insight. Tau's comments may be of special interest to those considering the Australian social debate regarding Koori indigenous knowledge. Tau's article can be downloaded from the University of Auckland-hosted *NZJH* website at: <http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/>

AAJ