

Some Notes on the Past of Oromo Society: The Story about Akkoo Manooyyee in Focus

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Abstract: This article aims to shed light on the past of Oromo society through the assessment and analysis of some oral traditions, particularly the story about Akkoo Manooyyee. The research that resulted in this article was a mix of historical, anthropological, and sociological research that was undertaken in the last five years. Descriptive and narrative research designs and a qualitative research approach were employed in the study. Data were collected from well-informed and knowledgeable informants from different parts of Oromia. In addition to oral data, relevant written sources were also consulted and used to augment the oral data. The findings of the research indicate that Oromo society had possibly been a matriarchal society for a considerable period in ancient or prehistoric times before the gradual evolution of the patriarchal system. During this matriarchal period, women seem to have been dominant socially, economically, and politically in society. It seems that Oromo society was ruled initially by women and later on by men before the gradual evolution of the Oromo *Gadaa* system some 5000 or more years ago.

Keywords: Akkoo Manooyyee; *Gadaa*; Matriarchy; Patriarchy; Story; Oral traditions; Oromo

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1. Introduction

The distortion of Oromo history in the past has resulted in many ambiguities and misunderstandings about the present Oromo people and nation. In fact, the true history of the Oromo had never been written due to the alien and unfriendly political system that was imposed on them over the last hundred and fifty years. In the distorted history written about them, the Oromo were even denied the natural right to belong to their geographical territory, which they have been inhabiting since time immemorial.

It is only since the sixteenth century that some written materials have been produced on the Oromo, mainly focusing on the military conflict between the Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia. In these writings, the Oromo were generally depicted as the opponents of the Amhara. The Christian chroniclers who wrote about the Oromo primarily demonstrated a strong bias that was firmly ingrained in Abyssinian society (Tafla, 1987). This heightened prejudice toward the Oromo was taken to the extreme by several twentieth-century scholars from Abyssinian society and the West.

The prejudice toward the Oromo led to the distortion of Oromo history by non-Oromo writers, and these writers played their role in the making of a controversial history of Oromo people and the Oromo land. As Hassen (1994:77) states,

[f]rom the moment when Africa fell under foreign colonial domination in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Oromo shared the fate of other Africans, and like them, they were colonized, 'brutalized, dehumanized, exploited, despised, cheated' and well acquainted with an unmitigated colonial assault on their language.

After Emperor Menilek's subjugation of the Oromo land, myths and stories were fabricated to arbitrarily portray the Oromo as people devoid of significant material culture and history (Hassen, 1990). This was done to systematically break the Oromo "in body, soul, and spirit" in the attempt to make them helpless, insecure, or passive objects (Hassen, 1990, 1993).

However, thanks to some genuine foreign and local scholars and the mythological and linguistic resources of the people, the history of the Oromo has been under serious reconstruction since recently.

The Oromo, as established by many genuine writers, constitute the largest ethnic group in the Horn of Africa. Moreover, the Oromo are said to belong to the Eastern Cushitic language stock of the Afro-Asiatic super-family and have been living in north-eastern Africa since time immemorial. According to Bates (1979: 7), "[t]he [Oromo] were a very ancient race, the indigenous stock, perhaps, on which most other peoples in this part of Eastern Africa had been grafted." The Oromo were indeed one of the ancient Ethiopians, as the name 'Ethiopia' itself was formerly given to the Cush people by the Greeks and was later adopted as the name of the Christian/Abyssinian Kingdom in the document known as Kibra Nagast, written by a Christian monk during the reign of king Amda Tseyon, who ruled Abyssinia between 1314 and 1344 (Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau (OCTB), 2006).

As the Oromo are of Cushitic origin, their religion also emanated from the ancient Cushitic people, and this Cushitic origin of the Oromo religion makes it the oldest of all religions that existed for about 6,000 years before the present (Kelbessa, 2001; OCTB, 2006).

Oromo society, being an oral society in the past, had no or few written sources about its ancient past. Hence, it is difficult to know the past socio-political configuration of the society as there are only fragments of oral traditions that can only be used for conjecture. More specifically, little is known about the socio-political role of women in Oromo society in the distant past. The few but important literary works on Oromo society do not extend their horizon of investigation to the early past of Oromo society, most probably due to a severe lack of written sources and reliable oral data. Hence, all references to Oromo society could not go beyond the recent pre-colonial and colonial periods. In the case of Oromo women's past, the most important contribution is the work of Kumsa titled *The Siiqqee Institution of Oromo Women*, which was published in 1997. In this work, Kumsa attempted to draw attention to the *Siiqqee* institution of Oromo women before the colonial period and how it gradually deteriorated through time with the coming of colonialism and alien influences, though it was not totally extinguished thanks to Oromo women's struggle for socio-political survival. However,

Kumsa's work does not attempt to trace the evolution of *Siiqqee* and Oromo women's socio-political roles in the earlier period before the *Gadaa* system. Waaqayyo's 1991 work titled *Women's Influence in Oromo Society during the Period of Gadaa Rule* is another significant work on Oromo women's past, but again, the scope of the work is limited to the *Gadaa* period of rule. Jalata's 2013 work titled *The Oromo, Gadaa/Siiqqee Democracy and the Liberation of Ethiopian Colonial Subjects* is another important work that touched up on Oromo women's past, though its focus is on the colonial period. In short, little is known about the Oromo past in general and that of Oromo women in particular.

The oral traditions of the people do have significant importance in the reconstruction of the past of Oromo society. In a nutshell, therefore, there is a need to conduct a comprehensive investigation of oral traditions in order to discover at least some salient facts about the early past of Oromo society. The assumption behind this research was that Oromo society's ancient past has never been properly studied and presented so far. The objective of this paper is, therefore, to shed light on the obscured past of the Oromo by assessing and analysing some oral traditions, particularly the story about Akkoo Manooyee, a mysterious and influential woman of the Oromo.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Study Area

The study was conducted at five purposively selected places in Oromia with the assumption that these places, just like other places in Oromia, could provide information on the research issue under consideration. The selected places were Arsii, Wallaggaa, Shawaa, Gujii, and Booranaa. In each study site, informants were selected purposively based on prior information collected about their knowledge of Oromo traditions.

2.2. Research Design and Approach

Both descriptive and narrative research designs and a qualitative research approach were employed in the research that resulted in this article. The research was a blend of historical, anthropological, and sociological research that was carried out in the last five years.

2.3. Data Sources and Types

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources through fieldwork and desk reviews of available literature, respectively. Fieldwork was undertaken to collect primary data through key informant interviews, while secondary data were collected through the critical evaluation of relevant written sources.

2.3.1. Key informant interview

Primary data were collected from key informants (resourceful men and women community elders and leaders). A total of 27 key informants were interviewed for this study from the different selected parts of Oromia.

2.3.2. Desk review

A desk review or review of related literature was made to collect relevant secondary data. The libraries of Addis Ababa and Haramaya universities were visited to collect the relevant secondary data.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were sorted, coded, and thematically analysed following a thematic analysis approach where themes are identified, interpreted, described, or narrated. In the course of data analysis, field notes were converted into full-fledged notes, while the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data were then organized into specific units, words, and sentences. Major themes were sorted out through reading and re-reading the transcripts and looking

for similarities and differences between and within the data. The primary data were analysed and compared with secondary data from the literature to find agreements and contradictions or cross-check the validity and authenticity of the primary and secondary data.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Oromo's Categorization of the Past

The Oromo categorize the past into three phases. The first phase of time was the time of *Ambiyoota Faanoo Saddeettamaa* (ancestors of 80 footprints), while the second phase of time was the time of *Ambiyoota Faanoo Afurtamaa* (ancestors of 40 footprints). The third phase of time was the time when Oromo ancestors began to have a life expectancy of fewer than four hundred years. One footprint is considered to be equal to a decade. Thus, *Ambiyoota Faanoo Saddeettamaa* and *Afurtamaa* were Oromo ancestors who had a life span of 800 years and above, and 400 years and above, respectively. According to Oromo tradition, Oromo ancestors lived longer, unlike the later generations (Informants (Infs): Gabramlaak Guyyee and Abduqaadir Sukkaaree).

Though the beginning and end of each of the categories of time indicated above cannot be known, the scanty but existing oral traditions of the Oromo seem to indicate the fact that for a long period before the emergence of patriarchy, Oromo society used to be matriarchal, or at least matrilineal. However, it should be underscored that the patriarchal system of the Oromo that came possibly with the gradual decline of the matriarchal system was not similar to the patriarchal system of the Westerners presented in different literature. Oromo society had never practised a hierarchical system of rule or governance, unlike western societies and the Abyssinians. Oromo society has been exposed to the Abyssinian's hierarchical political structure and alien cultures mainly since the beginning of the second half of the 19th century (Jalata and Schaffer, 2013).

The patriarchal system of the Oromo seems to have been started sometime before the beginning of the *Gadaa* system with the gradual rise of the system of private property and the development of marriage culture and the consequent men-headed families. Until then, it seems that women played unequivocal roles as mothers, leaders, and organizers of their society for thousands of years (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, and Ahmad Galatoo).

It is possible to infer from the accounts of informants that in the later era of the Oromo matriarchal period and the emergence of the marriage system, there was no immediate shift to a patriarchal system. Rather, women's power seems to have evolved gradually to the extent of playing not an equal but a dominant role in the family, contrary to the argument of Morgan (1877) and Engels (1884) that the matriarchy period was the period of communalism and equality of both sexes in human history. It looks like there was a time when women were heads of the family until they were replaced by men later in time, perhaps towards the end of the matriarchal period. This particular time seems to have witnessed not only the rise of women as family heads but also the time when female figures came to emerge to play the role of organizing and leading their communities under a certain political structure that was not men-friendly. Moreover, it seems that the first oppressive system was created at the end of the matriarchal period against men (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, and Ahmad).

According to Bachofen (1967), the initial social formation was a family that followed maternal lineage and where women were also responsible for governing the state. Nonetheless, since the first half of the twentieth century, several social anthropologists have come up with the idea that there is no proof that there was a matriarchal society in the ancient past. Lowie, in his 1921 work titled *Primitive Society*, concluded that there was no evidence that women had ever ruled in the ancient past.

Bamberger, in her 1974 work, specifically argued that stories and fables about female rule in ancient times do not reflect a previous history of matriarchy but instead were "social charters" created for male dominance. Considering the stories about the rule of women in Amazonian societies, she came to the conclusion that the stories themselves justify the rule of men by providing an alternative to an imagined society dominated by women. According to her, the stories justify the fact that women did not know how to handle power properly when in possession of it and, consequently, justify the

inferiority of their present position. Therefore, according to her, stories about matriarchy are arguments for patriarchy. However, it is difficult to dismiss the stories about matriarchy as the orchestration of men to deny women political power. If women did not occupy any significant political power in the ancient past and if they were not threats to men's power, what forced men to ideologically contest for power? It is also odd to discredit stories about matriarchy to functionally justify that men were in rule from the beginning and women were always subordinate to men in all aspects. The fact that stories about matriarchy exist in different parts of the world and in different societies seems to strongly suggest that there was a time when women had a certain political power, whether it was under a matriarchal system or under other socio-political arrangements. In this paper, therefore, the denial of the existence of the matriarchal period in human history is considered to be counterfeit and problematic.

The epoch of civilization that is said to have begun 5000 years ago in the world (Morgan, 1877) was most probably the epoch in which men came to assume dominant social and political roles in their societies, relegating women to secondary positions. The *Gadaa* system was most probably created by a patriarchal society that came to emerge during the beginning of the so-called civilization epoch, but it was not a system that was created to solely serve the interests of men. This makes the Oromo patriarchal system different from those of the Western world. Under the Oromo patriarchy, the division into the classes of men and women was not as significant as that of the Westerners since the *Gadaa* system was a democratic system that cared for both sexes. It is also important to mention here that the Oromo patriarchy and the *Gadaa* system seem to have started in the civilization stage of human history. If we accept the Oromo oral tradition that the *Gadaa* system was in practice 5790 years ago (Infs: Ahmad and Gabramlaak), this period falls around, if not beyond, the beginning of the so-called civilization era, and the Oromo patriarchy had already been evolving before the emergence of the *Gadaa* system (Infs: Ahmad and Gabramlaak).

3.2. The Story about Akkoo Manooyyee

Oromo society is one of the few societies in the world that have myths of origin and stories about important figures and events in the past. It is also among the few societies that have successfully preserved their oral traditions. When it comes to important past personalities, a woman known by the name Akkoo Manooyyee has had an extraordinary place in Oromo oral tradition. No man or woman is given special attention and consideration in the stories of Oromo society like Akkoo Manooyyee. Every Oromo group or community in different parts of Oromia can easily narrate the story with little difference in the contents.

The popularity of the story about Akkoo Manooyyee among the Oromo in different parts of the Oromo land tells us a lot about the Oromo past. The story informs us about a period when all the Oromo were under a single political umbrella and ruled by women. Akkoo Manooyyee is a symbol of Oromo unity even more than Abbaa Muudaa of Fugug in Bale, who was a spiritual figure or priest-king of the Oromo and whom the Oromo from different parts of Oromia, East, West, Central, North, and South, used to visit as pilgrims until 1900, the year in which Menilek banned the pilgrimage (Hassen, 1994).

As will be presented in the subsequent sections below, all informants from the different parts of Oromia considered Akkoo Manooyyee a political figure of the Oromo. Therefore, it is likely that she was the ruler of all Oromo groups sometime in the ancient past. In the story told about Akkoo Manooyyee, every Oromo community claims her to have been its ruler sometime in the past. This claim indicates that the story came to pass from generation to generation and was reduced through time to the context of different communities, as each community seems to have created its own separate geographical unit and space over time. The claim also seems to indicate that Oromo society, which was highly unified under one political system many centuries or perhaps many millennia ago, had been gradually expanding and drifting apart with the decline of the central power and the consequent rise of semi-autonomous entities or communities. These entities were evolving with their

own socio-political world, adopting and claiming many common elements of the past when they were parts of a unified whole.

The story about Akkoo Manooyyee is indeed fragmented and does not give us the chance to know fully about the woman and her time of rule. Even so, it is not an ordinary story that was created from nothing. It seems that Akkoo Manooyyee was an influential political figure in the unknown past of the Oromo. The hatred Oromo men and the love Oromo women had for her in the story strongly signifies that the story is not something that can be ignored as a fiction orally composed by men to discredit women's political leadership.

Oromo informants could not tell the exact time when Akkoo Manooyyee ruled Oromo society. Some informants argued that she ruled Oromo society before the *Gadaa* period (Infs: Gabramlaak and Abduqaadir), while others say she came to rule the Oromo amid the *Gadaa* system (Infs: Immaanaa Jootee, Naggasaa Atoomsaa, Liiban Jiloo, and Oshii Ajaachoo).

Oromo people still have fresh memories of this woman, as if she ruled them relatively recently in history, though this could not be the case. It seems that the story about Akkoo Manooyyee is kept in the minds of the people, perhaps because she was the first of her kind to treat men and women differently, and both men and women have had different reasons to keep reminding themselves of her from generation to generation. Sociologists believe that societies worship their influential ancestors to the extent of dignifying and mystifying them. This is believed to be how the religions of the world were formed (for instance, Durkheim, 1912). The term "Akkoo," which informants defined as grandma, may not be the correct meaning of the term. It seems that Akkoo denotes women's ancestors, not a single woman for that matter. All women of the Manooyyee period were Akkoo, ancestors, and Akkoo Manooyyee was one of them, though she is believed to be a ruler.

Akkoo Manooyyee is today highly venerated by Oromo women, though Oromo men always talk in disapproval of her behaviour. Oromo women have songs and hymns to adore Akkoo Manooyyee. In their songs, Oromo women include their complaints against men's domination and unfair treatment in their hands by longing for the golden past when women were rulers and free and used to order men to do what women are doing today. Oromo women particularly adore Akkoo Manooyyee the way they also adore Maaram, a goddess whom they worship too. However, Akkoo Manooyyee is conceived more as a political figure who stood for women, while Maaram is considered a spiritual figure who is in charge of issues of production and reproduction (Infs: Birriituu Disaasaa, Nuuree Unfaroo, Tirraa Badhaasoo, and Guutaa Magarsoo). Maaram is probably the oldest goddess that can be associated with the Cushitic Egyptian Isis Mery of the ancient period. As one of the Cushitic peoples, the Oromo seem to have inherited the worship of this goddess from their Cushitic ancestors (Benti, 2018).

As Debsu (2009: 22) stated, when drought occurs, Gujii women

... gather under the Mokonnisaa [Bakkannisaa] (*Croton macrostachyus*) tree for prayers, known as *uuddoo afataa*. They chant [Hoyooyyoo Hoyyee, Hoyyaa Gaaroyyee, Akkoo Manooyyee] — the names of their legendary women rulers — and through them, they ask their [Waaqaa], Oromo Supreme God, for rains, whereas the male group prays directly to [Waaqaa]. It is said that the women make prayers under Mokonnisaa because [it is believed that Akkoo Manooyyee] was buried under the tree.

Akkoo Manooyyee was accused of exhibiting inexcusable behaviour as a woman by Oromo men, as was Eve by Jewish men. The only difference is that Akkoo Manooyyee was accused of her behaviour towards men, while Eve was accused of her behaviour towards the Creator, which is said to have led to the downfall of man. However, both seem to indicate a power shift in history from matriarchy to patriarchy. According to Reed (1969), this shift of power in the course of social evolution resulted in the downfall of a woman.

To substantiate the preceding points, the story about Akkoo Manooyyee is presented in the following subsequent sections. The sections follow the places of the storytellers in different parts of Oromia.

3.2.1. Arsii

According to the oral information from Arsii, there were not only one but seven Akkoos in history. There is a saying, *Akkoon torba Halkoon torba* (Akkoos were seven as Halkoos were). Among the seven Akkoos, Akkoo Manooyyee is believed to be the senior, while the six others were her juniors. The oral information indicates that Akkoo Manooyyee was a ruler who headed a centralized state, while the six other Akkoos ruled as representatives of Akkoo Manooyyee in different parts of the Oromo land. The seven Halkoos are said to have been military leaders under each Akkoo. Akkoo Manooyyee is believed to have ruled from her centre at Odaa Roobaa (Inf: Ahmad).

Concerning Akkoos and Halkoos, the storyteller refers to the recent past, i.e., the 16th century, and he also presents all Akkoos and Halkoos as political figures of one single system and period. However, since considering the ancient event as if it happened very recently is a common practice of storytellers, particularly when the story is very old, it looks like the Akkoos and Halkoos mentioned in the story were not recent ones but women ancestors who ruled Oromo society perhaps many millennia ago. The seven Akkoos and seven Halkoos may not have been contemporaries who ruled just for one ruling period together, but each pair of Akkoo and Halkoo ruled Oromo society in succession until the reign of Akkoo Manooyyee, who was perhaps the last woman ruler in Oromo history.

According to the informants from Arsi, Akkoo Manooyyee is said to have ordered the men to kill all old men. The men acted as per her order and killed all the old men except one. The one who was saved is said to have begged the men to save him, telling them that he would do something for them during unforeseen hard times in the future (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, Guutaa, Lafee Boruu, and Warqee Chawichaa).

Akkoo Manooyyee then ordered her men to put a hill in front of the gate of her palace. The men did not know how to do it since the order was very odd. So, they went to the old man they saved from death to get advice. The old man advised them to shift the gate of her palace when she is asleep from where it is to the direction of a hill in the vicinity of her palace and completely close the previous location of the gate so that it would not look like there was a gate there previously. The men accepted and implemented the advice. When she woke up from her bed in the morning, she found a hill in front of her palace's gate, to her astonishment, which made her suspect the presence of an old person among the men (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, Guutaa, and Nageessoo Nabii).

Akkoo Manooyyee is said to have also ordered her men to build a house between the sky and the earth, touching neither of the two. The men again went to the old man for advice. The old man is said to have advised the men to request that she first drop dung or lay foundation where a hole was to be dug to erect a pillar, as the Oromo tradition requires the would-be owner of the house to do so. Accordingly, the men requested that she drop dung at a spot where they could dig a hole for the pillar. She could not know where and how to drop dung in the air, and hence the project of building a house for her between the sky and the earth could not be started as she could not lay dung at the spot where to dig a hole for a pillar (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, Guutaa, Lafee, and Tirraa; see also Dedo, 2010).

Furthermore, she is said to have ordered her men to catch and bring Qorkee (*Alcelaphus buselaphus swaynei*) for her to use instead of a horse. The men went to the old man once again for advice, and the old man advised them that they must act as per the order and catch the animal by whatever means. The men finally succeeded in catching the animal. Then, they put her on the animal's back and tied her legs to one another under the chest of the animal so that she would not fall from the back of the animal and survive the accident that would befall her. Finally, the men freed the animal to run away with Akkoo Manooyyee on its back. The animal ran into the forest, hitting her with everything on its way, which led to her tragic death (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, Guutaa, and Nageessoo).

She is said to have uttered, before the fatal accident she was to encounter, that the old man among the men was the one who must be responsible for her demise. Additionally, she is said to have instructed women not to hesitate to ask their husbands to withdraw to the other side of the bed to give them more space when sleeping together. Moreover, she is said to have advised women to bring butter

only with one finger when their husbands asked for it. She concluded her message to women by stating that these actions are all that can be taken since women have been defeated and are no longer powerful. Her message seems to indicate that she wanted to call on women to always show their resentment to men since power was taken away from women by force without their will (Infs: Gabramlaak, Abduqaadir, Guutaa, Nuuree, Tigist Baqaalaa, and Turaa Bankasii).

3.2.2. Wallaggaa

According to the oral tradition from Maccaa Oromo of Wallaggaa, Akkoo Manooyyee, also referred to as Haadha Wengellee, is said to have been very cruel in her administration, and she is said to have formulated odd regulations. Some of these regulations, according to Imana (1987), were the following:

A market should be held every day.

*Ateetee*¹ should be conducted day after day.

*Buttaa*² should be performed every two months.

A court should be held on the top of a gorge.

A bull should be used for ploughing.

An ox should be used for breeding.

Informants also state that she disliked all short men, for she assumed that all short men were cunning ones who advised men against her plans. So, she is said to have passed a resolution that all short men should be massacred without any reservation. Due to this, it is said that all short men were killed except one person, whom the men are said to have saved secretly to get advice from (Infs: Immaanaa and Naggasaa).

Akkoo Manooyyee is also said to have ordered men to do the impossible. For instance, it is said that she drove cattle into a cage, closed the door of the cage, and ordered men to drive the cattle out of the cage without opening the door. The men asked the short man what they could do to execute her order. The short man advised the men to give her much drink to make her drunk and get asleep so that they could open the door of the cage and let the cattle leave and close the door again. The men did what the short man advised them to do. When she woke up, she saw an empty cage with a closed door. She is said to have also ordered men to build a house for her between the earth and the sky. When they faced this problem, informants state that the men consulted the short man whom they had saved and reserved for advice. The man is said to have advised them that they should ask her to erect the main pillar, as it was the tradition of the Oromo. Therefore, the men are said to have asked her to erect the pillar. When she was unable to do this, she is said to have blamed the men for having a short man among them. After her plan regarding building a house between the earth and the sky became a failure, she is said to have ordered the men to catch *biichee* (antelope) for her to use instead of a horse. After serious difficulty, the men are said to have succeeded in catching an antelope for her. She immediately mounted on the antelope to use it like a horse, and the men, who hated her from the beginning, are said to have tied her legs to the antelope lest she fall down from it and let the antelope run. Once the antelope began its race, the men began to curse her and decided not to give authority to women in the future. They cursed her, saying, "Let your administration be abandoned with you!" They also declared that women's authority should be confined to the cooking and sleeping rooms and that women should not decree laws (Infs: Immaanaa and Naggasaa).

After this, it is said, the men called upon Makkoo Bili, the son of Akkoo Manooyyee, and asked him to formulate laws for them. Accordingly, Makkoo Bili is said to have come to the stage and declared laws for the people. Some of these laws were the reverse of those said to have been passed by his mother, while he also declared new brand laws. Some of these laws, according to Imana (1987), were as follows:

¹ Oromo women's ritual ceremony

² *Gadaa* power transfer ceremony

A market should be held once a week.

Ateetee should be conducted every two years.

Buttaa should be conducted every eight years in accordance with the tradition.

A court must be held in the field rather than on the top of a gorge.

A bull must be used for breeding.

An ox must be used for ploughing.

The Maccaa Oromo version of the story adds more depth to the story about Akkoo Manooyyee. Akkoo Manooyyee is believed to be not only cruel, but she is also accused of reversing the existing laws of the people for no reason. In this particular story, the period of Akkoo Manooyyee is believed to be before Makkoo Bilii became the *Abbaa Gadaa* of Maccaa Oromoo at Xuuxxee Bisil (Imana, 1987). Makkoo Bilii is said to have become the *Abbaa Gadaa*³ or *Abbaa Bokkuu* in the period after the end of the 17th or the beginning of the 18th century (Ta'a, 1980). However, it is difficult to precisely know the historical period in which these very legendary figures existed. It is possible that both Akkoo Manooyyee and Makkoo Bilii were Oromo historical figures long before the 16th century, and the story might have brought them to the late period due to the storytellers' tendency of bringing and connecting events of the ancient past to a relatively recent historical period as the distance of time obscures the distant past. It is indeed less likely that Akkoo Manooyyee was the mother of Makkoo Bilii. Most probably, Akkoo Manooyyee of the distant ancient time was connected with Makkoo Bilii of the relatively recent period not only because the two figures were important in the history of the Oromo but also because they had very contradictory behaviour and images.

3.2.3. Shawaa

Akkoo Manooyyee is also remembered in the oral tradition of Maccaa Oromo of Shawaa as a cruel woman who used to order and challenge men with the impossible. For instance, she is said to have ordered men to cover a barren hill with a black cloth overnight and construct a house for her between the sky and earth. She is also said to have ordered men to bring her a mule with two heads. The woman is also said to have ordered her men to build a house for her at the precise centre of her kingdom (Infs: Dagattee Gurmuu, Mettaa Galmessaa, and Birriituu).

To deny men a means to address her orders, she is also said to have ordered the killing of all short men with the assumption that short men are always cunning and could help the men address her demands in one way or another (Infs: Dagattee, Mettaa, and Birriituu).

However, while men were implementing her order of killing all short men, one short man is said to have begged the men to save him as he could help them in the future by looking for solutions when they face problems. So, he was given the chance to live (Infs: Dagattee, Mettaa, and Birriituu).

In an attempt to respond to Akkoo Manooyyee's order to bring a mule with two heads for her, one of the men told the others that he had a pregnant horse and wished that the horse would give birth to a mule with two heads. Fortunately, it is said, the horse gave birth to a mule with two heads. Regarding the order to cover a hill with a black cloth, the short man advised the men to burn the bushes of the hill in the night so that the hill looks like it was covered by a black cloth in the morning. The men did as per his advice, and when Akkoo Manooyyee saw the hill in the morning, it looked as if it was covered by a black cloth. Concerning the construction of a house between the sky and earth, the short man advised the men to ask Akkoo Manooyyee to first erect the main pillar or pole as per tradition. Following the advice of the short man, Akkoo Manooyyee was asked to erect the main pillar as per Oromo tradition, but she could not do it. Regarding her request for the construction of a house for her at the precise centre of her kingdom, the short man is said to have advised the men to ask her to measure her kingdom and locate the precise centre first. Again, Akkoo Manooyyee is said to have failed to force the men to implement her order, and she is said to have blamed the men for having a short man among them (Infs: Dagattee, Mettaa, and Birriituu).

³ The head of *Gadaa* government.

Later on, according to the story, men who suffered from her very odd orders came together to conspire on how to get rid of her and decided to consult the short man for advice. The short man advised them to build a fake bridge on a river and cover it with grass so that she would fall into the river and die while attempting to cross. Therefore, the men did what they were advised to do, and the woman fell into the river while attempting to cross on a fake bridge and died there. Since then, women's rule is said to have been substituted by men's rule. From that time on, it is said, there was no woman's rule in the history of the Oromo (Infs: Dagattee, Mettaa, and Birriituu).

3.2.4. Gujii

According to Gujii Oromo oral tradition, four women ruled Gujii Oromo before Akkoo Manooyyee, who was the last and greatest of all. Following Akkoo Manooyyee, five men are said to have ruled Gujii Oromo before the coming of the *Gadaa* system. The five women were Hoyoooyyoo Hoyyee, Hoyyaa Gaaroyyee, Lalii Laasoyyee, Qadhoo Qaasoyyee, and Akkoo Manooyyee, while the five men were Durii Duulloo, Buraakoo Dooyyoo, Bulee Adalaa, Baabaloo Badee, and Baabboo Baasuu (Alemayehu, Bursano, Wale, Bekele, Alemu, and Kenea, 2018: 43).

In Gujii Oromo oral tradition, there was a woman whose name was Akkoo Manooyyee who ruled Gujii Oromo community in an absolute dictatorship. During her time, it is said that all domestic activities, including the care of children, were performed by husbands, and women were decision-makers in every aspect. Gujii Oromo are said to have lived under this woman's tyrannic rule for several years. Akkoo Manooyyee is also said to have ordered men to accomplish tasks that were impossible (Infs: Kiltaa Jiloo and Galgaloo Uraagoo; see also Jirata, 2019).

Among her orders was the one she gave men to bring a bag full of fleas. As this order was very odd for the men, they did not know how to do it. Therefore, the men are said to have decided to consult a wise man. The wise man is said to have advised the men to collect donkey's dung, split it on the ground, and fill a bag. Following the advice of the wise man, the men collected donkey's dung, split it on the ground, filled a bag, and took it to Akkoo Manooyyee, who thought that the bag was full of fleas. Later on, she is said to have gone for another order, in which she asked the men to build for her a house between the earth and the sky. As the order was again very odd for the men, they decided to get the support of a wise man. The wise man is said to have advised the men to ask her to first erect the door poles of the house as per the tradition of Gujii Oromo, which requires the owner of the house to first erect the door poles. When the men asked her to erect door poles, she just kept quiet, as she did not know what to do about it. Finally, the wise man is said to have advised the men to dig a deep hole, cover it with animal skin, and put a seat on it for her to sit on. When she attempted to sit on the seat, the fake stage could not carry her, and she fell into a deep hole, during which she is said to have uttered a message to her women folk: "Pretend to be loyal to men to live." From that time on, women are said to have been restricted from assuming political authority. At the demise of Akkoo Manooyyee, a man named Durii Dulloo is said to have become the first king of Gujii Oromo (Infs: Kiltaa and GalgalooUraagoo; Debsu (2009)).

3.2.5. Booranaa

According to the Booranaa oral tradition, Akkoo Manooyyee was a genius and strong woman who emerged from the Digaluu subgroup of Booranaa Oromo. She was a genius woman who is said to have even challenged her husband (Infs: Galgaloo Wiqqaa, Guyyoo Goobbaa, Baarree Gollisaa, and Boruu Lookoo). However, in the oral tradition of Booranaa Oromo, Akkoo Manooyyee is more commonly known as Haadha Manooyyee. The reason for this discrepancy cannot be established.

The Booranaa story about Akkoo Manooyyee has both admiration and contempt for her. One of Booranaa's stories, which attests to the wisdom and strength of Akkoo Manooyyee, runs in the following way: Booranaa women wore *gorfoo*, and as a Booranaa woman, she also wore *gorfoo*. One day the *malabii malaas* (the cunning women) wanted to test her wisdom. They woke up early in the morning and yelled at her, "*Hayyoo maladhu, waa sadii dhufanii, tokko ni dabartee tokko dhufaa jirtii*

tokko qabnee siin eegutti jirraa hurisii/hatattamaan koottu gorfoo hin hidhatinii” (Hayyoo do something, three things have come, one has left, one is coming, we have caught one and waiting for you, be hurry, come soon, do not waste time wearing *gorfoo*). Since Akkoo Manooyyee was too genius to be deceived, she is said to have replied to the *malabii malaa* saying “*Ka dabartee yaa dabartee, ka dhufu waalin eeggannaa, ka harkaa qabdan jabeessaa naan eegaa; gorfoo hidhadhee dhufaa*” (the one that has left has already left, we will wait together for the one coming, keep the one you caught under serious control until I come after putting on *gorfoo*). Thus, since she was a genius, it is said, the cunning women could not deceive her (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, Baarree, Boruu, Waariyoo Gurraachaa, Jaatanii Didaa, and Jaldeessaa Dullachaa).

There is also another Booranaa story that shows the wisdom of Akkoo Manooyyee. One day, an elephant attacked and threw a man onto a branch of a tree. Men looked for the victim everywhere but could not find him. As they could not know what to do, they finally decided to consult women for advice. As Akkoo Manooyyee was a genius woman, they went to her to get advice. She told them that the elephant might have thrown the man onto a branch of a tree. Thus, the men went to the site where the man was attacked by the elephant and found the victim lying on the branch of a tree (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, Baarree, and Waariyoo).

The Booranaa story also indicates that she was the councillor of women. She advised women not to easily give their hands to their husbands. She is said to have advised girls (brides) by saying:

stub the bridegrooms by your *siinqee*⁴ upon arriving at the homes of the bridegrooms, and if the bridegrooms respond by whipping you, you should not live with them. However, if the bridegrooms keep quiet and do not respond aggressively while being stubbed, they are good ones who are even dependable for the future: do not go away from them.

She always advised women, and all women loved and followed her advice. She was a ruler of all parts of Booranaa (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, and Baarree).

On the other hand, the Booranaa story also presents Akkoo Manooyyee as a very powerful dictator who ruled the Booranaa with a heavy hand. She is said to have ordered men to do the impossible. One of her orders was the one she gave to men to build a house between the sky and the earth. Men assembled for three days to discuss how to build the house. Later on, a genius boy came and advised the men to tell her to prepare a digger and start digging a hole first. As per the advice of the boy, the men asked her to dig a hole first. However, she could not do that, and her order could not be realized (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, and Baarree).

Other times, she ordered men to bring a skin that had hair on both sides. As they could not find one, they again went to the genius boy to ask him how to get the said skin. The boy advised them to cut a donkey's ear and take it to her. Donkey's ear has hair on both sides, and the order of Akkoo Manooyyee was met by taking it to her (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, and Boruu).

Akkoo Manooyyee was a ruler who had her own throne. When she called a meeting under a tree, her throne was carried to the meeting place for her to sit on. Because of her cruelty, men are said to have suffered a lot during her reign. Therefore, men are said to have conspired to kill her. According to the Booranaa story, Akkoo Manooyyee was killed by the Booranaa. The Booranaa are said to have dug a deep hole under a tree where she used to lead meetings, covered it with grasses, and put her throne on the grass on a meeting day. When she went to sit on her chair, she fell into a deep hole with her chair. The place where she died was today's Nagallee Booranaa, about 18 kilometres from Nagallee Booranaa Town in Liban District. Today's saying “*qileyaabalooyyee buute*” (fell into the deep hole of yaabalooyyee) is said to have been derived from the tragedy encountered by Hadha Manooyyee, which led to her demise. It denotes something that is lost and cannot be restored in any way (Infs: Galgaloo Wiiqqaa and Boruu). Akkoo Manooyyee is said to have left behind some messages for women before her death: “Reduce the amount of milk or whatever you give to your husbands; be reluctant to accept the orders of your husbands, refrain from responding to your husbands’ first call.” From then on, women have never ruled the Booranaa moiety (Inf: Galgaloo

⁴ The thin stick females hold from the day of their wedding. It is also known as *siinqee* in some parts of Oromia.

Wiiqqaa, Guyyoo, and Baarree).

The Booranaa story about Akkoo Manooyyee is almost identical to Oromo stories about Akkoo Manooyyee elsewhere in Oromia, but one very unique aspect of the Booranaa story is that it attempts to present the strong and weak sides of the woman, unlike the stories told by other Oromo groups, which attempt to present only her weak sides.

3.3. An Analysis of the Myth/Story about Akkoo Manooyyee

The above stories about Akkoo Manooyyee that are collected from the different parts of Oromia are almost similar in content, though every Oromo group claims her as its own, to the extent of naming the community from whom she was born and the place where she was buried. For instance, in southern Oromia, the Gujii and Booranaa claim her and locate in each of their vicinity where she was buried. Far to the west, Maccaa Oromo claim that she is theirs. From these accounts, it may not be difficult to argue that she belongs not to any one group but to all. Every Oromo group seems to have claimed her in its own context. It is perhaps just like referring to the God of all as one's own God.

Be that as it may, though our knowledge of Oromo history before the 16th century leaves a lot to be desired, stories may play a role in giving us some hints about the past. There is little doubt about the existence of Akkoo Manooyyee in the past. Akkoo Manooyyee does not seem to be just a fictitious political figure. Though the points raised against her in the stories seem to be more fictitious than reality, put together, they seem to indicate a time when women were very influential in the history of Oromo society.

The time when Oromo society emerged as an independent entity cannot be known for sure. However, it does not seem to have been in the recent past, as the separation into different Cushitic groups from the proto-Cushitic family and then further division and re-division might have taken thousands of years.

As indicated in one of the previous sections, one oral informant reported that the *Gadaa* system was in use 5790 years ago. If this were the case, *Gadaa* as a system of governance would be one of the oldest institutions in history. If Akkoo Manooyyee was a ruler before the *Gadaa* system, this would mean the period was thousands of years ago. Whatever the case, it is needless to mention that Oromo society was among the ancient societies that emerged with their particular civilization thousands of years ago.

From the story about Akkoo Manooyyee, it is possible to see a mix of things. There are words of appreciation for her wisdom and determination, as well as words that downplay her talents and capacities as a ruler. Above all, however, she is portrayed as a very cruel woman who always mistreated and disgraced men and favoured women. The story, however, does not say a lot regarding how she mistreated men and fairly treated women. The major accusation against her was that she ordered men to do the impossible.

However, in addition to complaining about her difficult or impossible orders, the question that should have been asked by the men of her time was how those orders came to her mind. Let alone in ancient times, even today most women and men cannot think of something unusual. She thought about a mule with two heads, a house that could stand in the air, a wild beast that is faster than a horse, a skin that has hairs on both sides, a barren hill that is covered with something overnight, a bag full of fleas; a mountain or hill that moves from its original place, etc.

All men of her time were very frustrated by her orders, as they could not think beyond the usual. In the story, men did not value Akkoo Manooyyee for her extraordinary orders, but they tried to ridicule her as a stupid woman whose orders were absurd and awkward. However, the stories about her did not hide the fact that men were challenged by her orders, which were too extraordinary to be realized. This implies that the woman was superior in her thinking compared to the men of her day. However, the story attempts to give credit to a few wise men among men for seeking solutions to the challenges posed by her. Nonetheless, these so-called wise men were not truly wise but rather cunning ones who always attempted to address her orders in such a way that they would become futile. They were not

wise indeed because they did not aspire to try to implement but stood against the orders by providing the men with ill advice.

It seems that Akkoo Manooyyee attempted to take her men beyond common knowledge by exposing them to extraordinary ideas. Unless a person strives to know more, his or her mental faculties cannot expand. So, Akkoo Manooyyee seems to have tried to initiate her men to aspire for knowledge rather than remaining only with the known. Thus, all of her orders were mind-boggling ones, much to the frustration of the men of her time who were not ready to think beyond what they already knew.

Nonetheless, the key issue about the story surrounding Akkoo Manooyyee is whether the story was orchestrated by Oromo men to discredit women's leadership qualities or whether it was actually telling us about the period when women were ruling Oromo society. Recent social anthropologists are likely to argue in favour of the former, while they cannot exactly tell us why men created the story in the absence of women's tradition of political control. In this work, therefore, it is understood that the story about Akkoo Manooyyee points to the distant past when women were in political control under a certain socio-political arrangement that was either matriarchal or any other.

4. Conclusion

The story about Akkoo Manooyyee indeed tells us a lot about the past of Oromo society. It indicates that there was a period in the history of Oromo society when women played dominant social, political, and economic roles. This period seems to be not simply a matriarchal period of Oromo society but rather the advanced stage of the matriarchal period when women, using their pivotal roles in the ordinary matriarchal period, empowered themselves to the extent of twisting political power to women's advantage at the expense of men. From this, it may be inferred that in the ancient family system of the Oromo, the first heads of families were women, not men. This in turn seems to imply that in the first sex-based division of labour, women were dominant in all aspects.

In short, the period before the rise of the patriarchal system was a period in which women were highly respected and feared for their socio-economic and political positions in Oromo society. However, gender ideology had already been emerging during the last stage of the matriarchal period, when women started to assume dominant political positions. Under patriarchy, gender ideology continued, but this time men occupied dominant socio-economic and political positions at the expense of women.

However, the *Gadaa* system that emerged later on seems to have benefited from Oromo society's experiences of both the matriarchal and patriarchal periods to become a system that is not purely patriarchal. Though the Oromo civilization might not have started with the *Gadaa* system, there is no doubt that the *Gadaa* system was the outcome of the Oromo civilization. Having philosophical, theological, and cosmological knowledge matters for civilization to happen. The *Gadaa* system seems to have been the outcome and, at the same time, the contributor to all of these. It is difficult to expect these elements from the communal primitive societies of the past.

In today's moral systems of the Oromo, the period of Akkoo Manooyyee still has strong implications. The way men and women perceive each other has a lot to do with the moral circumstances during the time of Akkoo Manooyyee. Women always evaluate and disapprove of their existing social realities vis-à-vis the realities during the period of their beloved ruler, Akkoo Manooyyee. They also celebrate her as a symbolic figure representing women's freedom, and in doing so, they not only attempt to resist men's domination and oppression but also fervently wish themselves a better future to come either in the form of the grandiose period of Akkoo Manooyyee or any other better socio-political system.

It also seems that the period of Akkoo Manooyyee also informed the *Gadaa* system not to be a system created by men for men. This seems to have also created an environment where the *Gadaa* system was forced to stand for men and women fairly, regardless of the gender division of roles in the society. It is indeed very surprising to see the *Gadaa* system as a system that strives to stand for both

men and women in an environment where patriarchy seems to be more of a rule than an exception. The *Siinqee* institution of the *Gadaa* system seems to have been informed by the significant political role of women before the *Gadaa* period to be established and cater for the rights of women and gender balance.

A significant lesson to take away from this research is that men are not inherently destined to lead or rule. In the past, women held powerful positions in Oromo society, and it was only through gender struggles that power dynamics shifted. Nevertheless, the *Gadaa* system seems to have fairly addressed gender issues of Oromo society, particularly during its golden age, leaving behind a lasting legacy in Oromo culture. Therefore, it is vital to revitalize Oromo society's own knowledge and approaches to promoting gender equality, which involve community dialogue and consensus-building throughout the process. Instead of relying solely on top-down, Western-influenced governmental interventions, it is essential to incorporate and enhance endogenous practices and positive experiences that can effectively and constructively tackle gender problems.

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List of key informants

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Year of interview	Place of interview
1.	Abduqaadir Sukkaaree	M	75	20/03/2018	Boqoojji, Arsii
2.	Ahmad Galatoo	M	40	28/03/2018	Ziwaay-Dugdaa, Arsii
3.	Baarree Gollisaa	M	50	05/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa
4.	Birrituu Disaasaa	F	60	20/07/2018	Ambmo, Shawaa
5.	Boruu Lookoo	M	65	05/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa
6.	Dagattee Gurmuu	F	63	20/01/2021	Amboo, Shawaa
7.	Gabramlaak Guyyee	M	60	21/03/2018	Kofalee, Arsii
8.	Galgaloo Uraagoo	M	75	12/03/2017	Bulee Horaa, Gujii
9.	Galgaloo Wiqqaa	M	62	08/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa
10.	Guutaa Magarsoo	M	77	29/03/2018	Goljotaa, Arsii
11.	Guyyoo Goobbaa	M	63	08/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa
12.	Immaanaa Jootee	M	80	11/07/2022	Gullisoo, Wallaggaa
13.	Jaldeessaa Dullachaa	M	63	09/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa
14.	Jaatanii Didaa	M	55	06/03/2017	Badhasaa, Booranaa
15.	Kiltaa Jiloo	M	70	11/03/2017	Bulee Horaa, Gujii
16.	Lafee Boruu	M	57	24/07/2018	Qarsaa, Arsii
17.	Liiban Jiloo	M	56	09/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Boraanaa
18.	Mettaa Galmessaa	M	61	03/10/2019	Amboo, Shawaa
19.	Nageessoo Nabii	M	56	29/03/2018	Goljotaa, Arsii
20.	Naggasaa Atoomsaa	M	82	25/07/2018	Aayraa, Wallaggaa
21.	Nuuree Unfaroo	F	53	29/03/2018	Qarsaa, Arsii
22.	Oshii Ajaachoo	M	46	29/03/2018	Qarsaa, Arsii
23.	Tigist Baqqalaa	F	32	29/03/2018	Goljotaa, Arsii
24.	Tirraa Badhasoo	M	89	29/03/2018	Qarsaa, Arsii
25.	Turaa Bankasii	M	65	01/02/2019	Goljotaa, Arsii
26.	Warqee Chawichaa	F	35	20/03/2018	Boqoojjii, Arsii
27.	Waariyoo Gurraachaa	M	62	05/03/2017	Badhaasaa, Booranaa