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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### FACHI'E AND DERARO: TRADITIONAL EPITOMIZES OF CONFESSION AND PROSPERITY AMONG THE GEDEO PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

\*Tsegaye Ebabey Demissie

Department of Anthropology, Hawassa University, Ethiopia

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#### ABSTRACT

The Gedeo, one of the enset-culture peoples of Southern Ethiopia, have their own traditional religious system that has different practices such as culturally enriched annual ceremonies and life time events. This study signals two major practices of the tradition, *Fachi'e* and *Deraro*. Field work, interview and text review were used to collect data which are explained qualitatively. The Gedeo believe in Megeno, One Supreme God. Their religion is traditional in its practice, indigenous in its origin, and strongly linked with the natural environment. It has no written base and known associate founder. *Fachi'e* and *Deraro* are the major epitomized cultural festivities of the people. The former is related with a period of atonement that involves praying to Megeno to get protection of the people from epidemic disease and of their properties from natural disaster. Accompanied by the ceremony of purity performed around sacred rivers by the *Woyyu*, it is a sign of confession and source of ethics for the people and base for the long coexistence among themselves and with their neighbors. *Deraro*, on the other hand, is a period of happiness and good wish of prosperity and new-year to the people. Following coffee harvesting, various people gather at Michille Grissa to eventfully celebrate it. This thanksgiving festivity is another good platform to excel harmonious relationship among the people. Recognizing such icons of the people has immense contributions such as tourism development, harmonious relationship and environmental protection.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concern given to recognize and promote the importance of intangible cultural heritages is only a recent movement. Since its establishment, UNESCO's main area was mainly concentrated on material heritages across the world. Now days, its content of cultural heritage is considerably turning to immaterial heritage and democratization of heritage value is now on the spot (Keitumetse, 2006: 166; Lira and Amoêda, 2009: 4; Blake, 2009: 46). The UNESCO's instrument of 1989-*Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* was the turning point for the initiation (Keitumetse, 2006: 166; Pietrobruno, 2009: 229). Following this, the UN's *Convention on Biological Diversity* that discusses the relevance of traditional knowledge and practices for the preservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, contributed for the recognition of the significance of intangible heritage (Aikawa, 2004: 137-147). This development is succeeded with the adoption of UNESCO's 2003 convention and recommendation,

*The International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003: 1-14; Pietrobruno, 2009: 227; Aikawa-Faure, 2009, 13). This convention (UNESCO, 2003:2) clearly defines intangible cultural heritage as:

... practices, representations and expressions, and knowledge and skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage ... is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Accompanying this incitation, different scholars across the world have made discussions by extending their scopes to the specific segments of intangible heritage such as traditional religious practices. Despite of their importance in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization, these traditions are fragile in nature.

\*Corresponding author: Tsegaye Ebabey Demissie,  
Department of Anthropology, Hawassa University, Ethiopia.

Conservation of the traditions is an urgent issue due to the impact of this era of globalization that gradually diminishes cultural diversification and that leads cultures to extinction (Pietrobruno, 2009: 228). The exploration of traditional religions has been neglected by one or another reasons (Insoll, 2005: 33). Traditional belief systems across the world became disapproval by different activities such as by missionary activities in the name of cleansing and salvation. As people of a long history, the cultural experiences and values Africans are intertwined with their primal religious activities that are sustained from the forbears of Africans and which are still practiced in different forms (Awolalu, 1976: 1; Lugira, 2009: 10). Thus, the inventory and conservation of living religious heritage is a crucial activity to maintain the significant practices from risk (Stovel, 2005: 1-11). Ethiopia, a land of mosaic culture, is endowed with kinds of diversified intangible practices. The impact of continuous social changes and academic interests vitalize that the exploration of intangible cultural heritage practices is an important issue for the country. Of course, inventorying the peoples' traditions is part of documenting the history of the country. It is also supportive to maintain cultural diversities, preserve significant values, and to sustain harmonies relationships among different peoples. The Gedeo people are among the various southern Ethiopia ethnic groups endowed with different living traditions and tangible materials which are still not well investigated.

The major living cultural segments of the people include traditional religious tricks and administrative system (*Balle* system) that have been developed in the course of time. Documenting this tradition is undoubtedly important to deeply understand the history and culture of the people under study. However, these traditions are not well studied and recognized. Practices of their religion are rarely mentioned in scholarly works. Passing remarks have been given by Kippie (2002: 27-30) and Regasa (2007: 51-52). Kippie (2002) mentions that the people have their own God what they call *Megen*. He also indicates the role of the elders and the processes of sacrifice and ritual activities. *Magen* is believed by the People as a Supreme Being (Shibru, 2011: 31). Despite of the influences, that some of the religious activities of Gedeo are still practicing along with the Orthodox and Protestant Christianity activities. More interestingly, Kippie (2002: 30) indicates the impacts of evangelical activities by disappearing some of the megalithic cultures because the evangelists mistakenly associated them with satanic activities. On the other hand, Regasa (2007: 51-52) mentions that the traditional religious activity of Gedeo was shrinking by other religious activities, such as Christianity. All these remarks are scanty and hardly represent the values of the tradition in terms of concern, context and profundity of the tradition. Some of these remarks are also not written in a critical manner. The tradition's philosophical thoughts, material and immaterial cultural resources are not yet appropriately documented. Above all, the people's major cultural ceremonies, *Fachi'e* and *Deraro*, are not evidenced in literatures. This intimates the need of recording such significant values of the society. This study, therefore, aims to explain the traditional religion of Gedeo, major features of the religion and its cultural activities prioritizing the epitomic cultural events of *Fachi'e* and *Deraro*.

## METHODOLOGY

This study follows an historical-anthropological perspective of research methodology.

It utilizes both historical and anthropological sources collected in a fieldwork made in 2016 & 2017. Gathering written sources related to the study was the basic pre-field activity of this research. This pre-field assessment of literatures was convincing to identify a research gap which is attempted to be addressed in this study. A field work was made to the major centers of the tradition to observe the actual phenomena and contextual features. In addition to the notes taken, photographic pictures are also taken as sources of study. In-depth interview was also made with the local elders to collect historical and living practices of the tradition. Because traditional religion is mainly oral in orientation rather than depending on sacred scriptures (Draper & Mtata, 2012: 97), the interview method was effectively used by reminding the role of oral traditions to understand cultures that are unwritten. Interview questions were prepared and locally known and knowledgeable informants were interviewed. During the interview, audio-video recording materials were used to keep the information obtained from them.

Data analysis of this study has incorporated activities of data management, translation, data crosschecking, and data analysis in order to successfully reveal and present the tradition's values. The research is conducted based on phenomenological approach (that involves the study and description of phenomena), which is commonly used in the academic study of religion (Tilley 2005: 151). This method based on empathetic descriptions of insiders and the *sui generis* characteristic of religion is on continuous debating among phenomenologist. This approach is conceptualized with critical observation of insiders' interpretation through interpolating and providing a sound academic interpretation without simply suspending approach and generalizing the tradition with other contested traditions such as Christianity and Islam (Rodrigues & Harding, 2009: 74-82; Cox, 2012: 25-38). It considers religious phenomena\_ rituals, myths, sacred spaces, institutions, ethics, and expression of the divine in terms of essentiality and irreducibility. It also clarifies that religious study is in the way of understanding the relevance of the tradition to knowledge production, academic integrity and ethics (Cox, 2012: 38). This approach helped me to avoid bias and undue emphasis of the tradition as well as to identify which one is sacred and profane among the practitioners. The study is analyzed through explanatory and descriptive approaches that are popular in social sciences studies (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004: 4).

**Historical overview of the Gedeo people:** The Gedeo people are settled in what is now Gedeo Zone, in the Nation, Nationalities and Peoples of Southern Region. Its administrative town, Dilla, is located 359km from Addis Ababa, along the Hawassa-Moyale main road. The origin of the people is not well known. According to Regasa (2007: 43), the oral tradition about the origin of the people is controversial. However, Kippie (2002: 22, 24-25) indicates that the Gedeo trace their origin from an aboriginal tribe, *Murga Gosallo*. He adds that some Gedeo traces their origin from Derasso from whom seven Gedeo tribes, ancestors of the people, descended. Derasso is believed to have been a senior brother of the ancestor of the Guji Oromo. Derasso is said to have had seven sons who were the seven Gedeo tribes: Dobba'a, Derashsha, Gorggorshsha, Hunma, Bakargo, Henbba'a and Logoda. These were organized into two houses: *Sholle Batte* (the senior) to which the first four houses of Gedeo belong and *Sase Batte* (the junior) to which the last three houses of Gedeo belong.

The *Sholle Batte* comprises more than twenty five sub tribes while the *Sase Batte* consists ten sub-tribes /or clans. Regasa (2007: 43) also similarly mentions that the Gedeo trace their origin from Derasso, an agriculturalist who was brother of Gujo and Boro, ancestors of the Oromo people. Unfitted with historical methodologies, a recently Amharic publication on the history of Gedeo people (Kippie *et al.*, 2000: 188) mentions that the people were known by others as *Derasa*. The name *Gedeo* which is used by the nation is recognized during the Dergue regime. It is associated with the language of the people, *Gedeuffa/Gedeinke affo*, a Cushitic language obviously shared similarities with Burji, Hadiya, Sidama and Kembata (McClellan 1988: 28). It is preferred by the people to be identity of the society. The history of Gedeo is suggested to have been related with the development of agricultural activities of the people before five thousand years. The people had passed three administrative histories before they have been incorporated under Menelik II. The first, whether it is corrupted or not, was referred to as *Akomanoye* which is assumed to be established by a queen. Later, it is said to be replaced by *Gosalo*, male dominated administration (Kippie *et al.*, 2000: 12, 19-21). The third one is the *Balle* system that is equivalent with the *Gada* system of the Oromo. Regasa (2002: 49) indicates that the Gedeo have learned the *Balle* system from their neighboring, *Guji* Oromo. However, Kippie *et al.* (2000: 181) argues that the Gedeo had developed this tradition before the 16th century A.D. The *Balle* system structurally is consisted of eight *Gada* grades in which a man spends his life time. This tradition was weakened for some years following the incorporation. Whether they learned from the *Guji* or not, the Gedeo's *Balle* system is similar with *Guji* administration system. It is because that the Gedeo maintained cultural and economic ties with the *Guji*. As one of the peoples of *enset cultures* of Southern Peoples, Gedeo supply them with *enset*. In return, the *Guji* supply them with cattle (Kippie 2002, 24-25). The *Abba Geda*, like the *Guji*, is the general ruler of the Gedeo. It is followed by several *songos* who conduct administrative and religious performances.

Religiously, based on the Central Statistic Agency (CSA) (2007), more than 73.3% of the Gedeo people are followers of Protestantism. The rest 10.7%, 8%, 2%, 2.4%, and 3.6% are followers of Orthodox Christians, traditional religion followers, Catholic, Islam, and others, respectively. The early introduction of Orthodox Christianity in to the Gedeo is little known. As my informant explains, before the incorporation of the Gedeo under the rule of Menelik II in the late 19th century, most of the people were followers of traditional religious practices. However, Christianity has been expanded into the area since Menelik's expansion. It was accompanied by the establishment of churches in different areas. The church of Bule Holy Trinity is the first to be established in Gedeo Zone. Other churches were also later established in the newly established towns (Asaminew Feyisa, personal communication, 01 May 2016).<sup>1</sup> Following this, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), at least for a century, was serving as a center of worshiping, education, and social activities for the people. Later, as Kippie (2002: 27-28) states, Protestant missionaries reached Gedeo in the 1950s and they established the Evangelical Church Mekaneyesus and Qale Hiwot churches that dominantly converted the people in to Protestantism. The conversion was easy because the name of Jesus Christ was early introduced to the people by EOC. The establishment of education and other societal benefits were the opportunities for the missionaries to easily accomplish their

mission. They also used the resentments of the people up on the nobles to systematically and strongly establish their mission in the heart of the people. This system jointly disregarded Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the mind of the people by leveling the church as an instrument of the northern governors. In relation to these developments, there are considerable socio-cultural changes in the area. Most of the people have abandoned their traditional religion and joined the new religions. The changes sometimes reflect undesirable aspects. Kippie (2002: 31) also indicates that the burial memorial monoliths, the historical images of Gedeo people, are disappearing due to the impact of Protestantism. Generally, it is easy to understand the witness of socio-cultural changes on the indigenous religion of the people. But it should be noted that, despite of their conversion either in to Orthodox Christianity or Protestantism, many Gedeo people do not totally forget all activities of the oldest tradition.

**The traditional god of Gedeo:** The Gedeo calls their God as *Megeno*, traditionally believed to be the Only One Supreme God, creator of the universe in general. Not only *Megeno* created the world but also is responsible for its survival and destruction. The people know *Megeno* in different names. They also called Him the Sky God, omnipresent and omnipotent. The Gedeo believe that all human beings are the creatures of *Megeno*. Unlike other indigenous religions in Ethiopia, these statements are indicators that the indigenous religion of Gedeo is a monotheist, worshiping in one god. According to the local story teller, this tradition has similarity with Jewish religion (Gobena Litu, personal communication, 20 January 2016).<sup>2</sup> According to the tradition, *Megeno* is also known by the people as *Ilali Megen*, to mean God of the people. *Megeno* is responsible to make the land of Gedeo conducive so as to be venerated by his people. This relation is very important to understand the internal sacramental ties of *Megeno* and the Gedeo people. The Gedeo also call *Megeno* as *Odaya'a Megen*, *Hebanik Megen* and *Balayik Megen*. As the local elder tells, all these names are given in relation to the sacred places where their forefathers inhabited and worshiped. These are to indicate that the Gedeo ancestors had gifted such sacred places from their God. *Megeno* for the Gedeo is the source of happiness of this world. Bad events can only be terminated by *Megeno's* willingness and mercifulness. *Megeno* is not at a distant in keeping His people. Thus, the close communication between He and His people is the very essential reason to sustain the happiness of this world (Gobena Litu, personal communication).

The Gedeo understand the presence of *Megeno*, through the words of their story tellers. They stated that God is everywhere, due to His nature of Omnipresent. They believed that their God usually exists and manifests himself in jungle forest and mountain peaks. They also express God's existence by interpreting physical creations of this world. The climatic fluctuation, for example, is one important way used by the people to address the existence of their God. The occurrence of drought as a result of humans' sin is believed to be the punishment of *Megeno*. The confession of man also earned an amnesty of rain. These occurrences are believed to be the manifestations for the existence of *Megeno*. The blessing of *Megeno* to the world's harmony, welfare and fecundity is the Gedeo's central worshiping philosophy. They believe in equality of human beings because of their belief that all human beings are created by *Megeno*.

They said all human beings are equal before God (Alemayehu Boku, personal communication, 13 June 2016).<sup>3</sup> This implies that the tradition has humanistic nature, related with human dignity. They also believe by life after death and they not only respect people before death but also after death. Their funerary processes magnified this issue. The religion is traditional in its practices and indigenous in its origin. Unlike Jews, Christianity and Islam, the major religions of the world, the origin of the indigenous religion of the people traced to unknown period and person (founder). In fact, it is not surprising because most of traditional religions in Africa are not concerned with addressing these issues. Rather they have enough knowledge and experience about the practices of the tradition that alive through generation. The tradition also has no any sacred written bases. Oral tradition is the basic way for the history of the religion. The responsible bodies to transfer the beliefs and practices of the tradition are the oral story tellers who play a great role by transferring the tradition's practices and the people's socio-cultural experiences. The tradition might have been rooted back to the period when the Gedeo were organized in form of farming communities. The Gedeo associate their religion with their forebear, *Deraso* who first arrived in the present day of Gedeo. Since *Deraso*, though he was not the founder, the tradition stayed being practicing by the rulers of the *Akomanaye* and *Gosalo* dynasties. Following the end of *Gosalo* dynasty, the religion was practiced through the *Balle* institution.

It is usual that religious experts (the story tellers) are responsible for the transmission and ritual practice of the tradition through inculcation. Due to this, the religious experts of Gedeo are recognized as the keeper of the people's culture and history. The mediation between *Megeno* and the people is given to them. They are healers and practitioners of medicine. They are also arbitrators if disputes happened among the community or with other neighboring communities. They usually receive the leading knowledge through blessing and transmission from their fore-experts. The experts are usually males who mainly pas through the *Balle* system. The *Balle* leaders or the *Woyyu* (distinguished spiritualists) has been celebrated to be responsible for the narration of their religious trends and ritual processes. There are also few people among the Gedeo called *Wabeko* (saints) who are believed to be capable of predicting future happenings (Tesfaye Herbaye, personal communication, 19 January 2016).<sup>4</sup>

As it is indicated above, the Gedeo developed their religious discourse through creature interpretation. Their worshipping is mostly associated with different natural features such as mounts, rivers and trees where *Megeno* is believed to be revealed for his people. Environment has thus a great relationship with the religious activities of the people. The traditional religious activity of the people is confined with sacred places and trees. Some of the sacred places are served as center of *tolcha*, a process of sacrifice made among some groups or individual families. The places where they first arrived with the help of *Megeno* are memorized and recognized to be the gift of their God. Hence, they called *Megeno* as *Odaya'a Megen*, God of *Odaya'a*. *Odaya'a* is said to be the first place inhabited by Gedeo ancestors in Gedeo settlement. They also derived the name *Balaik Megen*, from the second place where the ancestors of Gedeo had settled. These two sites are located in the Dilla Zuria and Bule districts, respectively. Most dominantly, Gedeo have no tradition of constructing worshipping centers, the Gedeo

communicated their God at *Hebanik Megen*, located on a highland in Bule district. They used this place to deliver their praying to *Megeno*. The above three places have a great respect among the people. The Gedeo believe that *Megeno* manifest Himself to His people through his creatures. Thus, they have special place for the natural environment that is believed to be directly created by their God. Though it is not common to construct a worshipping center, *songo* houses can be used to conduct religious activities. For instance, in Bule district, there is a sacred house constructed from bamboo served as center both for religious and *songo* practices (see Figure 1).

Research works on environmental conservation state that the indigenous knowledge of Gedeo people has played a great role for the conservation of Gedeo green land. This knowledge has been inculcated from the traditional belief of the people (Legesse *et al.*, 2014: 14). As the local people adheres, greening environment is a life of Gedeo since long times. But the principal secret that makes the land of Gedeo green is the deeply accumulated experience of the people that emanated from their religion. According to the natives, the Gedeo life is highly intertwined with three elements: coffee, enset and tree. The principles of environmental protection and preservation are developed from this deep root perspective. Every creature such as mounts, rivers and forests are usually protected. Their ethical scene does not allow clearance of trees. If a man has cleared one tree for an intended purpose, therefore, he should have to plant and grow another instead of it (Desta Tessema, personal communication, 26 December 2015).<sup>5</sup> Of course, the people know that trees are the source of their sustainable farming activity. There is a strong belief that the protection of trees yields the increasing in their crop production. That is why they connote the safeguarding of trees during their praying time in addition to the safeguarding activity they made at the ground. Environmentalists thus can learn much from each Gedeo farmers who are practitioners for the safeguarding of their environment. To produce, one item crop, they do not destroy trees rather they developed mixed agriculture system. Though it is not the dominant religion of the people, the Gedeo indigenous religious practice is deeply integrated in to the life of the people. It has twofold interrelated activities: spiritual and cultural activities. These interrelated activities involve ritual performances and ceremonial events. The major annual ceremonial and ritual practices are *Fachi'e* and *Deraro*. There are also other lifetime events or ritual activities conducted during birth, marriage, mourning and funerary events.

***Fachi'e* (ceremony of confession):** *Fachi'e* is one of the least known eventful festivities conducted by the people of Gedeo. It is usually conducted before *Deraro* has been gathered. *Fachi'e* refers to a period of confession which is accompanied by praying activity (see Figure 2). It is mostly conducted at a small filed near the Michille Grisa *songo* site, east of Dilla town. As the elders stated, this festivity performed in times of hardship occurrences and general sin (Mengesha Woticha, personal communication, 18 January 2016).<sup>6</sup> The hardships could be manifested in terms of drought, epidemic disease or collective death, etc. Calamities such as epidemic diseases on their coffee are seen to be occurred due to the angriness of *Megeno*. The people associated the occurrence of these hardships as a result of man's sin. Man's sin is believed to be followed by a punishment of *Megeno* which may be manifested by one or more hardships. As the informant said, the Gedeo believe that their good deeds are the source of their



Figure 1. A sacred worshiping center at Bule District, Gedeo (Source: The author)



Figure 2. Elders and People of Gedeo at the celebration of *Fachie* (Source: Tourism and Culture Office of Dilla Zuria Woreda)



Figure 3 (Left): The *songo* at work to solve the conflict of perosns at Michille (Source: The author)



Figure 4 (Right): The tree under which the *songo* is held (Source: The author)



Figure 5. Tutufella, collective burial site of Gedeo people (Source: The author)

happiness and their evil deeds are the source of the hardship periods which occurred due to the blessing and angriness of *Megeno*, respectively. A praying also reaches for other neighboring peoples not to be suffered from a similar problem. Based on the elders, the festivity of *Fachi'e* is conducted purposefully to purify sinful persons from their sin. During this day, all the people promise to their God not to sin again and ask to terminate the hardship mercifully (Alemayehu Boku personal communication, 13 June 2016). The festivity conducts led by descendents of the seven clans/houses of Gedeo who are known for their blessing and imprecation. They prey to *Megeno* to forgive their sin, to terminate the punishment that have to be come and to bring prosperity in the future. The prayers of *Fachi'e* during the confession time are greatly believed to be accepted by *Megeno* so as to eliminate the hardship and to bring prosperity. Praying to and calling *Megeno* are a preliminary activity of Gedeo fathers in any festivity, *songo*, rituals and annual ceremonies. *Fachie* is followed by harvesting of crops. The confession is accompanied by a ceremony of purity ritual practice. Any sinful person shall to be part of this practice and to tell his or her misconducts to the *Woyyu*, men who are engaged in religious practices. The people believe that a person who conducted a sin have no acceptance by *Megeno*.

Therefore, humans should to purify themselves from their sin. Unless, purified, the sin person is obliged to stay in isolation from the community. After some times of isolation, the sin person approaches to the *Woyyu* to tell his mistake. The *Woyyu* purified the sin person by sprinkling water. This process of purification is locally called *ferow* which is mainly accomplished in sacred rivers such as Hanshi Malcho River (Desta Tesema, personal communication, 26 December 2015). This implies that water has religious significance beyond its known purposes. Actually, its function is commonly used in different religions whether it is traditional or not. As it is cited by Finneran & Kaplan (2010: 156-158), water has a great cultural significance in religious activities. Thus, it symbolizes purity of a sin even among the people. Religions, regardless of their origin, are sources of ethical and moral values. The traditional religion of Gedeo is of course a source of ethical and moral values which shaped the people's day today activities and harmonious interactions. As far as it is the people's earliest and indigenous religion, it generally shapes the nation's history and image. Its long established moral and ethical principles are central screens which helped the people to live harmoniously particularly with other ethnic groups settled around them and generally with the culturally diversified peoples of southern Ethiopia.

The Gedeo fathers claim that they have developed ethical and moral principles along with their religion since long times. Coveting others property, performing adultery, abusiveness, beating and prejudicing others, murder etc are considered as unethical activities among the community. Anyone who conducts such wrongdoings has to be judged by the *songo*. These principles are guiding instruments of the people to live harmoniously with other nations for a long period of time. The people have good experiences to manage their day today activities to be ethical and fruitful. These principles shared socio-cultural values of the people and guide the good relationships among themselves and with other peoples who approached them. Their working habit and way of life as well as their relationships and toleration have been deeply established associated with their religion. The people have customs to identify the goods and wrongdoings among the society. They obeyed themselves and governed their activities through their long established ethical principles. A family establishment is always attached with ethical and moral values that are widely known among the society. These values are the base for the long stayed coexistence and toleration among themselves and with other peoples who live in and around them. The people of Gedeo understand that hardship conditions could be happened as a result of unethical persons. To be free from this punishment, all people are expected to be purified and to be free from unethical activities. Being ethical thus is the life of Gedeo people.

**Deraro (ceremony of thanks giving and wishing prosperity):** *Deraro* is the most interesting and eventful festivity of the Gedeo people. It is usually conducted during the period of harvesting just after *Fachi'e* has been practiced. According to the natives, the term *Deraro* refers to flower that implies the hope of Gedeo people on their crop, the good harvesting period (Desta Tesema, personal communication, 26 December 2015). It is also a festivity of transition from hardship to prosperity. The arrival of harvesting period is venerated accompanied by thank offering and praying. The people believe that reaching at harvesting is through the willingness and help of *Megeno*. Therefore, this festivity is aimed at giving thanks to *Megeno* for His generous mercy to culminate the hardship. It also consists futurity wishes to have a similar good harvesting period and health to the people. It is usually followed by *Fachi'e*. This festivity is usually celebrated at Michille where the higher *songo* is usually held under a tree. *Songo* refers to the traditional justice system of Gedeo people which is conducted at Michille and other small *songo* centers located in different areas of the Gedeo Zone. Michille Grissa is the main center of *songo* that has a big tree and currently there is house constructed near the tree as a symbol of the *songo*'s alive (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). The *songos* are responsible to the *Abba Geda*, the highest authority that leads the *Balle* system of Gedeo.

People who do wrong practices or sins have to be judged by their nearest *songo* which is trusted as a place of truth and no one lies in front of it. During the *songo*, judgment is given by deeply understanding and analyzing the wrong doings. A man who is claimed to be a repudiator does not attempt to cheat the *songo*. The tradition always invites all people to tell the truth and the *songo* conducts a faithful judgment. No one has been abused in front of the *songo*. This system of judgment is believed to have been practiced by the Gedeo People (Mengesha Woticho, personal communication, 18 January 2016).

The main center, Michille Grissa *songo*, is located to the east of Dilla town accessed by climbing the highland of Michille. There is a big tree and setting room of the figurative Gedeo fathers. During the festivity of *Deraro*, various people of the Gedeo, including the *Abba Geda*, *songo* leaders and participants of the ceremony, gather to the aforementioned site. The farmers of Gedeo also collected some part of their harvesting in kind of crop, cattle, honey and etc to get the blessing of the *Abba Geda*. The period following *Deraro* may be characterized by different social interactions and meetings. *Qetela* is the most important festivity that creates interaction among the Gedeo people which mostly follows the ceremony of *Deraro*. It combines both ritual and cultural characteristics accompanied with local music and dances of youths and elders of the people. In this event the youths handling arrows express their attitude and emotion. They collect woods and prepare a bonfire. There is a father of fire responsible to bring blamed fire unto the bonfire. The people also prepare a sheep used for sacrifice process. The male and female youths also come together with Gedeo's traditional dance. The role of females with their dances, *wore'u*, is extended during *qetela*. During *qetela*, the youths provided traditional music activities and the male youth select their future wife. All practices have been characterized by joyousness. In all practices, praying has an immense place among the people. They deliver a petition to *Megeno* so as to be blessed by Him in their day to day activities. The Gedeo pray to *Megeno* by calling His different names as *Illali Megen* (God of the People), *Odaya'a Megen* (God of Odaya'a), *Balaik Megen* (God of Balaya) and *Hebanik Megen* (God of Hebana) (Desta Tesema, personal communication, 26 December 2016).

**Lifetime practices (ritual practices from birth to death) of the people:** The religious and socio-cultural activities of Gedeo people are manifested by different lifetime practices during birth, marriage and mourning and funerary events which have different rites of passages. These practices are respected among the people and are of course associated with all human beings. The Gedeo brightly welcomed a newly born child, celebrated an eventful marriage and see off their dead family accompanied by ritual activities. A pregnant woman has a great respect among the Gedeo. Her husband is more responsible to shoulder both household and outside home activities. While she gives a birth, a great protection is given for her and her child by her families and neighbors. The interesting event some days after birth is the naming of the child. It has a ceremony conducted after the down of the child's navel. Families and neighbors gathered together and a name is given to the child's father. In the naming process, the infant's father becomes recognized. The newly born child's hair also is shaved to accredit that he/she (the infant) has a known father. If the child remained unshaved, it implies his/her father is unidentified (Gobena Litu, personal communication, 20 January 2016). What is most amazing in this event is that the removed hair of a child is not discarded. Rather it is preserved on enset plant. This plant is traditionally given to the child as his/her own property. Other families are not allowed to use that enset, rather it waits the child until he/she become capable to feed enset product. Marriage is the other socio-cultural activity of the people. It is mainly practiced during and following the festivity of *Deraro*. According to the local tradition, families have major role by facilitating the process of marriage. After the family identified their son's future wife, they discussed with him and declare a *bultene*, an initial communication carried out between the families of the future

husband and wife. The bureaucracy that may extend the date of the marriage among the female's family is a known tradition. During the consenting, elders of the bridegroom bless and wish the bride to have a period of *Deraro*. Following the agreements between the two families, the future bride and the bridegroom are allowed to be alone to expend some time in their bridehood. During the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom's father has to offer an expensive gift, *gicha*, to the groom. Still now, the *gicha* is provided in terms of property such as sheep, goat, cow, coffee, plot and etc. There are also different traditional songs of wedding ceremonies. The most widely known is *danbobiyyo*, which means "good news", singing to celebrate the future brightness of the bride and the bridegroom (Mengesha Woticho, personal communication, 18 January 2016). Mourning and its funerary process is the last lifetime event of the people. As it is stated by the local elders, the tradition incorporates processes of curing patients from their disease. If it is impossible to survive, they have a tradition of praying to the patient to have a rest from agony and to transfer in to the next life after death. If the death is certain, families and neighbors gathered in to the dead home to see off the dead body.

The dead body buries in a prepared burial hole. The mourners sing a traditional mourning song, *willisha*. The family of the dead body thus put a sign to remember it. Since the ancient times, their burial sites are manifested by symbolical features erected as a symbolical tomb over the funerary of the dead body. The symbols have their own local meanings. Historically, burial symbols of the Gedeo manifested distinct styles and meanings. The historically known burial symbols are indentified to have phallic representation. This actually implies that the dead body was a male who was hero. But through time, these symbols are either intentionally eliminated or forgotten and now other symbols are being used as a burial sign. The replacement is being made either by symbolically unrepresented feature or by Christianized elements. Unlike the Orthodox Christians, most of the people (followers of traditional religion and Protestantism outside of towns) have no common or identified cemetery site used to bury their dead. It is so far shown that, historically, the people had collective cemetery sites such as Tutufella (see Figure 5), as it is noticed by Joussaume (2010: 1007-1008), one of the cultural heritage centers of Gedeo.

The Gedeo have abandoned the use of common cemeteries and they now merely buried their dead around their home. Most of the time, they used their plots and home yards as a burial site. Burying their dead in their plot seems to have its own implication. Burying around their plot and court yard is believed that the spirit of the dead lives around its family and keeps them. It also has an implication of respect and piney of the people to their dead families. The other implication that I adheres here is that burying their dead in or around their plot has an economic interest. It served as a means of owning a land as a property of the dead families. This tradition seems to be used commonly among different peoples such as Sidama and Guji. Among the Gedeo, the area where one's dead buried is reserved for the dead families. No one attempted to cut a piece of wood in that area. Thus, burial sites become symbols of land ownership. This practice is still continued and is evidenced in various house yards of the Gedeo people. This tradition may probably be difficult for cultivable land management. Generally, all the above ceremonies and ritual activities are credited in shaping the cultural history and

contemporaneous activities of the people. The events served as exchange of experiences among the different people of the Gedeo. It is through these activities that the people preserved their custom, working habit, environmental integration and other valuable experiences. The art of shaping stones for different purposes is a well known practice in Ethiopia. Stone artisans take the responsibility by developing the skill and imitating meaning of symbols. Erecting symbolical features over a dead body is widely known. The *stellae* of Aksum and the megalithic stones of Tiya are so far identified to be dead memorial symbols. The something is true that this knowledge was also known among the Gedeo people. All the megalithic sites distributed at different parts of the Gedeo land are erected to memory their dead ancestors. Among the major megalithic sites of Gedeo are Tutufella and Chelba Tututi.

As it is mentioned above the knowledge is well known earlier, probably since the 11th century A.D. The importance of art is often remarked in its representation of ideas of the past people. As it is noticed by Joussaume (2010: 1007), the phallic monolith shaped by stone artisans represents figurative personalities in the locality. There also other artistic works accomplished upon various memorial megalithic stones. The knowledge of stone art work is continued to this day with varied skills and symbols. Most of the contemporary stone hewers follow the demand of the local people; it is further developed to shape note only burial memorial signs but also for huge construction materials. Now a days, most of the widely accustomed burial symbols have Christianized or Islamic features. Most of them are characterized by decorated built tombs which actually imply cultural and religious change among the Gedeo people. However, the use of plots as a burial site is continued.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

As one of the various nation nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia, people of Gedeo have their own history and tradition. Their indigenous traditional religion is monotheism which is based on worshipping One Supreme God, *Megen*. Its theological pleading and knowledge is addressed orally. Every practices of the tradition are preserved by the story tellers of the Gedeo people. These story tellers tell the people about their God, *Megen* and educate their relatives the process of conducting rituals and ceremonies of the tradition and how to lead the *songo*. *Deraro* is the major ceremonial event of the tradition. As a thanksgiving period, it is conducted joyfully among the people. Having good harvesting period is the base to conduct this festivity. To have a good harvesting period, they usually have a confession period, *Fachi'e* which is conducted before *Deraro*. Ritual activities of the tradition are also manifested in life time events. Birth, marriage and mourning have their own image among the Gedeo. Each ritual practices have meaningful process. The Gedeo buried their dead mainly around their plot or courtyard. This process has mainly a spiritual aspiration. Historically, the people had common cemetery site such as Tutufella and Chelba Tututi. Generally, the indigenous religion of Gedeo people is the source of indigenous knowledge, harmonious relationship and toleration which are significant issues for the development of Ethiopia. *Fachi'e* and *Deraro* are the two major pillars of cultural expressions of the people. In addition to these, the ceremonies, practices and sites of the tradition are significant to reflect the history of the people and operate tourism activity. For peoples with no historically written archives like Gedeo,



these practices are museum of reliable information about the traditions, history and practices of past human beings. The tradition is also source of art, music and architecture. But some of its values lacked promotion and recognition. However, the major festivities of the tradition need a promotional work particularly the ceremony of *Deraro*. The memorial heritage of the people also needs conservation that can be done in collaboration with the local people. To this effect, awareness creation platforms for the local people are indispensable that can be easily made by the nearby district culture and tourism offices.

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