This study is aimed at deciphering meanings embedded in the cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo women of Southern Ethiopia. Relevant data were collected through observation, interview, and focus group discussion which involved 30 participants. The data were analyzed thematically following the analytical framework of material culture theory. Results of the study reveal that, in addition to their beautification purpose, cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo women communicate meanings related to personal status, social identities, and the rights and privileges of the wearer. Cultural norms and restrictions govern the ornamentation practice of Guji women. Such practice of ornamentation shows the deep-rooted indigenous wisdom of the Guji society in promoting important cultural values such as virginity, marriage bond, and personal success while discouraging unacceptable practices such as sex before marriage and gender-based violence.

1. Introduction

1.1. Ornament and ornamentation

Ornamentation is among the oldest and common cultural practices of human society which can be cited as a manifestation of human creativity (Glaveanu, 2013). The term ornament is a broader and elusive concept. Its definition often oscillates between its aesthetic value and its utilitarian or communicative function. Trilling (2003, p. 21) conceives ornament as “the art we add to art”. For Kuhn and Stiner (2007, p. 42), ornaments are things that we put on our body parts and clothes as signs indicating our personal, religious, and economic identity. Iliopoulos (2020, P. 192) also states “body ornaments have as much informative function about the wearers' cultural identity as they have ornamentation or beautification function”. Trilling's understanding of ornament seems to be limited to its aesthetic value whereas that of Iliopoulos, Kuhn and Stiner emphasizes its utilitarian or communicative value. The definitions given by many other scholars also focus on utilitarian or communicative functions of ornament (Joyce 2005; Kazhgalioi, 2003; Nikolenko, 2013; Wadley, 2001). They believe that ornaments, other than their beautification value, can convey broader symbolic meanings related to the social, cultural, and identity of ethnic groups and individual wearers in a given society. Archeologists take the value of body ornaments beyond identity markers. They claim that cultural body ornaments can be seen “as items reflecting important cognitive and neural capacities” of their creators/users (Abadía and Nowell, 2015, p. 967). According to Glaveanu (2013), ornament encompasses broader domains such as objects, gestures, images, and even melodies. However, in the current study, only the object ornaments are considered.

The communicative function of body ornaments can be categorized at two levels: intracultural and intercultural. Wearing a given body ornament conveys meanings that only members of a particular cultural group understand and this is intracultural communication. Ornaments also serve an intercultural communicative function when they are used as markers of the identity of a given ethnic group.

In general, Glaveanu (2013, p.96) categorizes the function of ornament across four major dimensions: aesthetic/utilitarian and individual/social roles many of which could be conveyed at a time by a single ornament. However, with a closer look at these dimensions, one could see overlaps between aesthetic values and individual roles on the one
hand and utilitarian and social roles on the other. An individual wears ornaments to appear unique or attractive; however, other members of the social group not only appreciate the beauty of the individual but make their interpretation of the message of the ornaments based on pre-existing shared cultural knowledge of the society. The latter is considered as the social or utilitarian function of ornament.

The utilitarian or communicative function of ornaments is context-specific. With regards to this, Smeets (1982, p.126) states “Ornament is a language, which is spoken where it is alive and understood.” As to this scholar, the underlying symbolic meaning of body ornaments can be deciphered only by members of the society that makes and uses the ornaments or in the socio-cultural context of the same. Citing evidence from archeological studies, Iliopoulos (2020) also asserts that cultural ornaments are intentionally designed by skilled individuals of the hosting society to convey symbolic meanings that can be detected by members of the society. Other scholars also witness the strong reliance of the interpretation of symbolic meanings of body ornaments on the socio-cultural context of the wearers (Nikolenko, 2013; Seeger, 1975). In general, body ornaments can convey several meanings about the cultural, social, or ethnic identity of their wearers in addition to boosting the physical beauty of the wearers.

1.2. Studies on body ornaments

So far, several studies have been conducted on body ornaments by scholars from various disciplines such as archeology, social anthropology, art history, material culture, semiotics, and iconography. Archeologists have examined the social values, cosmologies, or systems of belief of ancestors through the lenses of cultural artifacts such as body ornaments that are extracted from the ground (Abadía and Nowell, 2015; White, 1989). Archeologists mainly emphasized the analysis of symbolic meanings of shells and beads as body ornaments (Iliopoulos, 2020).

Anthropological studies of cultural ornaments on the other hand mainly focus on exploring the roles of ornaments in the traditional or indigenous society of the world. To mention few scholars in this area, Seeger (1975) found out the strong psychological and social values that Suya tribes of Central Brazil ascribe to their traditional body ornaments. In his investigation of the value of body ornaments among indigenous communities of North America, Gray (2017) also discovered that beads serve as a major tool to strengthen cultural and spiritual bonds and as a “symbol of cultural resilience” of the wearers. Similarly, Beaujot (2008) studied the symbolic meaning of British women’s body accessories such as a glove, the fan, the parasol or umbrella, and the vanity worn during the Victorian and Edward era. According to the researcher, women of the Victorian era wear white gloves to identify themselves with the White Society, the then-dominant or “civilized” race worldwide.

Similar studies have also been conducted on body ornaments in the context of our country. To begin with, Aneesa and Gemetchu conducted an extensive study on body ornaments of Borana Oromo of Ethiopia. According to these scholars, Borana Oromo people use ornaments in their daily life not only as instruments of personal beautification but also as tools to reflect their “deep-seated, social, cultural and spiritual values” (Kassam and Megersa, 1989, pp. 23). Summarizing the function of body ornaments among Borana Oromo, these scholars state that body ornaments are intentionally designed by skilled individuals of the hosting society not only to appreciate the beauty of the individual but make their interpretation of the message of the ornaments based on pre-existing shared cultural knowledge of the society. The latter is considered as the social or utilitarian function of ornament.

Using an interpretative research approach, Kederala has also analyzed the meaning conveyed through cultural clothing and ornamentation among the Silkie ethnic group of Southern Ethiopia. She found out that clothes and ornaments are “used as an expression of one’s social, cultural and economic status within the community” (Kederala Mohammed, 2017, p 28). Another extensive local study was conducted by Klemm (2009), who explored meanings embedded in three body ornaments (garna, ambarka, and kula) worn by women of the Afran Qallo Oromo branch in Eastern Ethiopia. Klemm found out that women in the target society wear various ornaments on their different body parts, mainly their neck, hair, and face to reflect their personal, cultural, religious, and political identities within the overarching Oromo identity in Ethiopia.

Given their ubiquitous nature and tremendous utilitarian values, scholars such as Glaveau (2013) and Prown (1982) still believe that body ornaments are not well studied. Indeed, the knowledge gap in this area seems to be high in the context of our country. Although there is widespread utilization of traditional body ornaments among the ethnically diverse societies of Ethiopia, few research works have been conducted in this area to the best knowledge of the researchers. Hence, the current study has attempted to decipher cultural meanings embedded in traditional body ornaments of Guji Oromo women of southern Ethiopia.

The researchers believe that the current study is an add-on to the literature in the field of material culture studies which consider cultural artifacts as tools of intracultural and intercultural communication, a research theme that has been given little attention according to Roth (2001). It also contributes to the documentation of the cultural heritage and better understanding of the cultural values and beliefs of Guji Oromo.

1.3. Theoretical framework

The overarching premise of the current study is that cultural ornaments, in addition to their aesthetic values, are used to communicate various messages about the wearers. There are several research methodologies utilized in the field of material culture studies. Among the commonly utilized methodologies are archeology, ethnography, anthropology, semiotics, iconography, and art history. These methodologies consider material culture as one source of information about the past and the present civilization, belief system, or ideology of a given society. However, analyzing the contemporary communicative function of ornaments was rarely taken as a primary focus of researches in these disciplines (Abadía and Nowell, 2015; Chaney, 2011; Roth, 2001; Smith and Hannan, 2017; Woodward, 2007).

Another object-based analysis of cultural artifacts, Material Culture Theory, was introduced to the discipline of material culture studies by Jules Prown (1982). Material culture theory is an approach to investigating the belief systems of a given society through the analysis of artifacts or materials made and used by the society. According Jules Prown, as a qualitative method of inquiry, Material Culture includes elements of both theory and procedures of analysis. It is based on the assumption that objects produced or modified by a given society directly or indirectly reflect the level of consciousness, intellectual capacity, and belief systems of the society that produce and utilize them.

Prown’s methodology of material culture involves the analysis of objects at three major stages: description, deduction, and speculation. The description focuses on telling about the observable parts, dimensions, and contents of the target material without including the analyst’s subjective assumptions. The second stage of analysis, deduction, includes an explanation of the link between the material and the perceiver’s experience. It is the stage at which the analyst deduces and tells what the object divulges about its culture. The speculation stage involves critical analysis of the object based on the information in the preceding two stages, external shreds of evidence, and the analyst’s creative imagination Prown (1982).

Though Prown introduced material culture theory as a methodology of studying cultural artifacts decades ago, few scholars have utilized it in its totality. Thayer (2004) utilized Prown’s methodology to decipher meaning embedded in a technical manual in his investigation of professional communication. This researcher illustrated the three steps analysis of Prown’s method by analyzing a Native American arrowhead. Chong Kwan (2015) has also drawn on Jules Prown’s material culture method to investigate individual’s sensory interaction with the dress they wear every day. The other scholar, Triemstra-Johnston (2013) utilized the material culture analysis method in combination with other two methodologies to study the existing apparel design and use-value design elements. Chaney (2011) also utilized Fleming’s model for material
cultural analysis, which served as a foundation for Prown's material culture theory in her investigation of the cultural messages communicated through Hmong baby carriers in Minnesota.

In the current study, the researchers preferred to use Prown’s material culture theory for some reasons. To start with, Prown has introduced this methodology primarily to study meaning communicated through clothing and personal adornments (Chong Kwan, 2012). Hence, we found it more relevant to our research topic. Secondly, Prown’s material culture theory is somehow unique in considering artifacts as primary data. It is also rather comprehensive in the sense that it subsumes the basic principles of semiotics in considering artifacts as meaning carrying tools and that of anthropology in analyzing meanings of artifacts from the broader social, economic, and political context of the users. By using a clear and stepwise procedure of analysis, material culture theory also minimizes the possible interference of the researcher’s personal bias (Chong Kwan, 2012; Prown, 1982). Above all, the clarity of its analysis procedures is what motivated the researchers to rely on this methodology.

With regards to the suitability of material culture theory for the study of body ornament, Prown (1982, p.13) states that “personal adornment promises to be a particularly rich vein for material culture studies.” Smith and Hannan (2017, p.7) also witness that Prown’s method of material culture study “allows for the examination of both aesthetic and utilitarian facets of a given object”.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Overview of Guji Oromo socio-cultural background

The Guji, also locally named as Jam Jam or Jamjamtu by their neighboring ethnic group, are members of the Oromo people, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The Guji Oromo occupy semi-arid highlands and lowlands areas in the southern part of the country in the Guji zone and Borana zones of Oromia Regional State (Dejene Negassa, 2009; Gumi Boru, 2017; Beriso, 2004). The Guji shares borders with the Borana in the south, Burji and Amaro in the southwest, Wolayta in the west, Arsi in the east, and Gedeo and Sidama in the north (Asebe Regassa, 2007; Beriso, 2004). Owing to its diverse ecology, the Guji land is endowed with abundant natural resources which include precious minerals (Dejene Negassa, 2009). Like many other Oromo groups, the Guji Oromo were predominantly a pastoralist society, but nowadays agriculture also takes the lion’s share in their economic activities (Dejene Negassa, 2009; Beriso, 2004). Nevertheless, livestock is still considered a major source of emotion and pride among Guji Oromo. According to Baxter (1991), having cattle is an important criterion to be considered as proper Guji. In addition to their economic benefit, cattle play special roles in the social and ritual life of Guji Oromo.

Like many other Oromo branches, Guji social structure is hierarchically organized from higher to lower as gosa (clan), mana (lineage), warra (extended family), and maatti or maayaa (nuclear family). These kinship ties are arranged along the patriarchal line of descent (Dejene Negassa, 2009). Taddesse Beriso (2009), Hinnant (1978), and Van de Loo (1991) describe Guji as a federation of three culturally tangled phratry3 called Haraga, Maatti, and Hokku.

The Guji Oromo, like their neighboring Oromo branches, the Borana, still practice the Gadaa system, an indigenous system of governance among Oromo people (Asebe Regassa, 2007; Dejene Negassa, 2009). A prominent scholar, Asmerom Legesse (1973), describes Gadaa as a concept upon which the whole way of life of the Oromo is built. According to Asebe Regassa (2007), one can hardly understand the spiritual, cultural, and historical values of the Oromo people without understanding the Gadaa system and its elements. The system encompasses various institutions that govern the social, cultural, political, religious, and economic aspects of Guji society. Compared to other Oromo groups, the Guji and the Borana are said to have better preserved the traditional values of the Gadaa system (Legesse, 1973; Van De Loo, 1991) although Asebe Regassa (2007, p. 41) claims that internal and external challenges have “currently reduced its roles to ritual activities in the case of the Guji”.

The Gadaa governance system classifies males into twelve different stages or age grades and clearly defines the social rights, responsibilities, and social restrictions put on every individual male at each grade (Legesse, 1973; Beriso, 1995). There are slight differences among scholars in sequencing these age grades. Habtamu Disassa (2017) puts the grades in ascending order as Dabballe, Junior Gaammee, Senior Gaammee, Kasa, Raba, Doorti, Gadaa, Yuba (yuba I, yuba II, yuba III, yuba IV), Gadamoojjii and Jaarsa . Dejene Hinew (2012) on his part sequences the same as Dabballe (0–8 years), Junior Gaammee (9–16), Foollee (senior gaammee (17–24), Kausaa/Raabo/Qondaala (25–32), Raabo/Doorti (33–40), Gadaa/Luba (41–48), Yuba (Yuba I - 49–56, Yuba II -57-64, Yuba II - 65-72), Gadamoojjii (73–80), Jaarsa (above 80). The transition from one age grade to the next is marked with rituals officially attended by various groups of the society (Legesse, 1973; Dejene Negassa, 2009; Habtamu Disassa, 2017; Beriso, 2004). According to Beriso (2004), the Guji celebrates about thirteen rituals or ceremonies that mark such types of transitions.

Among Guji Oromo, marriage is given a special place for it is an institution that helps to create strong social bonds between different clans. It is a guarantee for man to acquire full membership right in the rituals Gadaa power transfer. To use the words of Dejene Negassa (2009, p.22), “Men attain their full status only after marriage.” Due to this reason, arranged marriage which is done with the consent and involvement of families and clans of the couple is best preferred. According to the same author, among Guji Oromo, premarital sex is strictly discouraged because virginity for girls is highly valued during the marriage. The Guji society uses birth and marriage ceremonies as special events “where children are granted property and symbolically assigned their gender roles.” (Dejene Negassa, 2009, p. 27).

The Guji were predominantly followers of Waaqqanuu, the indigenous religion of the Oromo people which is based on the belief in Waqqa (Sky God); however, many have been converted to Christianity (mainly Protestant) and Islam. The qallas (spiritual leaders) are entitled to lead the religious wing of Gadaa system as supreme structure (Asebe Regassa, 2007; Dejene Negassa, 2009). In their interpretation of color, Guji considers white color as a symbol of poverty, disease, and misfortune whereas black is associated with earth, sky, water, grass, Waqqa (Sky God), and the Guji themselves. The Guji identify themselves from other ethnic groups by using their religion, language, clothing, body ornaments, house model, and the scars marked on their arms and forehead as boundary markers (Beriso, 2004).

Using myths and traditional stories of the society as lenses, a local scholar, Dejene Negassa (2009) has examined the position of Guji Oromo women in their society. According to this scholar, women play significant roles especially in the ritual practices of the Gadaa system although they are marginalized in the political spheres. Dejene Regassa considers the participation of Guji women in Gadaa rituals as the best tool that integrates them into their society. Guji Oromo women do not directly involve in the age sets because of various mythologies and beliefs of the society that discourages such practice. So, the status they assume in socio-cultural system emanates from the status of their husbands. Nevertheless, according to Dejene Negassa (2009) women play crucial roles in the peacemaking process, a practice which is true in many other Oromo groups (Alemu Disassa, 2015, Jeylan Woliyi, 2005; Legesse, 1973).

In general, the Guji have numerous cultural practices that could be used as potential resources for scholarly studies. However, due to their cultural contacts with their neighboring ethnic groups, the assimilation policy of the former feudal governments, and the introduction of Christianity and Islam, several indigenous cultural practices of the Guji have been threatened. Hence, conducting a scholarly investigation on these

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3 Phratry is an exogamous subdivision of the tribe, constituting two or more related clans https://www.yourdictionary.com.
cultural practices could be useful in the preservation and revitalization of the practices. It is with this objective in mind that researchers of the current study attempted to decipher meanings embedded in the traditional ornaments of Guji Oromo women.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The data for the current study were collected from Adola Redi, one of the districts in the Guji zone of Oromia National Regional State using anthropological techniques. First samples of women’s cultural body ornaments were collected through observation and taking photos with the help of personnel from the culture and tourism bureau of the target district. The co-researcher has made physical observations at various rituals and cultural events and took an actual photo of women adorned with different cultural body ornaments. The photographs were taken following the full oral consent of the wearers. Next, the data about the cultural meanings and functions of the body ornaments were collected through unstructured interviews and focus group discussions held with participants that were selected through purposive sampling techniques. The respondents were elders of both sexes who have better socio-cultural knowledge and understanding about the functions and cultural meaning of body ornaments worn by the Guji women. A total of 30 participants, (10 men and 20 women), with the age range of 40–84 years were contacted as data sources. Adults of this age group are active participants in the governance of Gadaa system and thus have good knowledge of cultural practices.

The analysis of the ornaments was done following an inside-out approach which is stated in the analytical procedure of material culture theory. It starts with the physical description of the body ornaments and then moves to its function, the context of use, and the broader sociocultural belief and philosophies which shaped the meaning and utilization of the ornaments. The qualitative data obtained through unstructured interviews and focus group discussions have been used mainly in the second stage of the analysis. The results of the analysis have been presented under various themes based on the utilitarian functions of the ornaments. Only those body ornaments that the researcher could capture through photos have been included in the analysis of the current study. Photos of some of the cultural ornaments have been included to give the reader visual information.

3. Results

3.1. Ornaments of girlhood and virginity

Participants of the current study revealed young girls of Guji Oromo wear various traditional ornaments which indicate their virginity, marital status, and other social identities. Through these ornaments that they wear on different body parts such as hair, ears, shoulder, and hands, the girls attract the gaze of young men for marriage. Of these cultural practices could be useful in the preservation and revitalization of the practices. It is with this objective in mind that researchers of the current study attempted to decipher meanings embedded in the traditional ornaments of Guji Oromo women.

3.1.1. Ficee

Ficee ‘headband’ is a traditional ornament that Guji girls wear on their heads stretching it from the forehead to the back of their shoulder through the middle of their braids hairstyle (see Figure 1). It is made of softened skin of goat and beautifully decorated with metal clips (ficee). Together with this ornament, Guji girls wear a leather overcoat (bonkoo duudaas) decorated with colorful beads. Unlike that of bonkoo of married women, the bottom edge of the girls’ bonkoo is not cut in stripes. It is kept normal to symbolize the virginity of the wearers, according to our informants.

Wearing ficee gives a girl special respect in the Guji society mainly because virginity is highly valued among the society. According to our respondent (Aadde (Mrs) Dharroo Gadaa and Obbo Mr. H/yesuus Sorsaa, Obbo Hayilee Boruu), a girl who wears ficee (keep her virginity) till her wedding, will be awarded a heifer and fed butter by her parents-in-law on her wedding day. Several of the bridgroom family and clan members also give her heads of cattle as signs of honor and respect. Such a girl does not allow her mother-in-law to untie the ficee from her head and declare her womanhood until she secures the gifts. Contrary to this, a Guji girl who loses her virginity before marriage is socially dishonored in the face of her husband and his whole family. She won’t be given a heifer or fed butter. Instead, she will be fed local soup called bulaaga or moocaa made of cereal powder. This type of girl could make her family feel ashamed. To avoid such social disrespect and keep the honor and dignity of their family and themselves, Guji girls strictly keep their virginity.

Ficee also shields girls against any form of unwanted attack from the opposite sex. Men are strictly forbidden to touch or harass a girl wearing ficee wherever she goes. According to our respondents, committing any form of sexual harassment on a girl wearing ficee leads to punishment by seven heifers. In general, ficee conveys a cultural or symbolic meaning that the whole society of Guji agrees upon. It shows the deep-rooted indigenous wisdom that the Guji Oromo society has been using to protect the natural rights of girls. The Guji Oromo inculcates this cultural norm of wearing ficee using folksongs which are sung during a wedding ceremony.

3.1.2. Mijuu

Mijuu is a ciicoo filled with fresh milk that a bride takes to her parent-in-law on her wedding day. It is a gift that the mother gives to her daughter on her wedding day. The bride carries mijuu on her back with decorated leather over wear (see Figure 1). The bride carries mijuu during almost all types of a marriage ceremony, except abduction. According to our local informants (Aadde Lootuu Soraa, Obbo Samaroo Waaree), if a girl is missed from her home, the first thing that her mother does is checking whether her mijuu is in the house or not. The absence of this material from home indicates that the girl has left for marriage, usually willingly.

The Guji society attaches strong cultural meaning to mijuu in the context of wedding ceremony because it primarily symbolizes the virginity of the wearer. Besides, it indicates that the wedding has been
arranged with the full consent of the wearer. The following remark by one of our informants in the target district illustrates this.

Intalli seera aadaatin heerumte: bantii saaqata qabdii aada’a; quttoo (ficees) qabdii aada’a; siqtoo qabdii aada’a; mijuu qabdii aada’a; kadhoo qabdii aada’a jiru. Guyyaa kana malee heerumte “buttaa” jechuuf dhabanii, seera (Obbo Samaroo Waaree).

A girl who gets married as per our cultural norm has a plait hairstyle; that is the norm. She has a leather headband; that is the norm. She holds a ritual stick (siiqqoo); that is the norm. She carries mijuu; that is the norm. She wears a leather overcoat; that is the norm. If she gets married without these things: that is considered as abduction as per the cultural law [of Guji Oromo].

As can be evident from this quotation, carrying mijuu and wearing related body ornaments and clothes for a bride is considered as the cultural norm of the Guji. Such types of norms are often declared as customary law (seera) in the Gadaa system. Among Oromo people in general and Guji in particular, a container full of food/drink (guutuu) is considered a sign of good fortune and prosperity. It is often considered abnormal to give, especially to a guest, a container of any form of drink half empty. The recipient often gives his/her blessing by saying “Guutuu nuuf kenneete, guutuu siif haa kenne” meaning “You gave us full of a container; may God give you full.” This indicates the belief system or worldview of the Oromo people regarding economic prosperity. In general, by wearing mijuu, a Guji girl communicates her status which could help her harness appropriate social respect and privileges.

3.2. Ornaments of social achievement/status

3.2.1. Midhoo

Among Guji Oromo, married women wear various types of body ornaments which reflect the political status of their husband in the Gadaa system. Midhoo/hair tube is one of such ornaments that is worn by a woman whose husband is in the Raaba stage of the Gadaa grade. It is made of a local tree called dambii with the shape of a cylinder (see Figure 2) and decorated with strips of metal grooves sparsely put on it. The six pieces of midhoo are tied to a leather band that is put around the head of the wearer. Four of the pieces are hung on the right and left side while the remaining two are hung from the back of the wearer’s head.

A married Guji woman wears this cultural ornament to celebrate the success of her husband in the Gadaa system (Aadde Dharroo Gadaa). What is more interesting about this ornament is that craftsmen who make it are so respected that they are given a bull as a gift. This indicates a high value that the target society gives for this ornament. A woman begins wearing midhoo with a big official celebration or feast prepared at her home. Hence, in addition to its beautification role, midhoo conveys cultural meaning related to the social status of women in the socio-cultural arena of Guji Oromo.

3.2.2. Guutimala

Guutimala is a headband worn by a wife of Abbaa Gadaa, a leader or the highest power holder in the Gadaa system. It is made by wrapping the skin of a bull or goat on four pieces of metal (copper) attached to flat skin cut in a rectangular shape. Its edges are decorated and carefully seamed with a zip fastener on all sides. The wearer hung it on her head from behind on a decorated leather band that she ties around her head (see Figure 3).

Like that of midhoo, guutimala is worn by a married woman to celebrate the achievement of her husband and harness the appropriate social respect. According to our informants (Obbo Danbalaa Elemaa), the Guji society shows its respect for a woman wearing this cultural ornament by smearing butter on her head whenever she comes to their home, and failure to do so is considered shameful (guumii). The respect and honor that society gives for this type of woman are almost equivalent to that of her husband who is Abbaa Gadaa. To put it simply, guutimala is a cultural symbol of the ‘first lady’ in the Guji Oromo. This woman is locally addressed as the mother of women (Haadha Bollaa). Like that of midhoo, the beginning of the wearing of guutimala is also marked by a celebration called jila guutimala. A special feast is prepared in honor of such success.

3.2.3. Guutuu

Guutuu is also a kind of cultural ornament worn by a Guji Oromo woman during the ritual of gadaa power transfer. It is made of a bunch of yarn ropes in strips of various colors attached to a circular node. It is worn by tying the circular node at the forehead and stretching it to the back of the wearer’s head through the middle of her fringe hair (see Figure 4).

Like that of midhoo and guutimala, guutuu is worn by a married Guji woman to honor the successful transition of her husband to doorii stage.

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5 Raaba – the name given to the fifth Gadaa grade in the Oromo Gadaa system. Males in this grade are mature enough (in twenties and early thirties) to marry and are considered to be senior warriors (Habtamu Diassa, 2017).

6 Abbaa Gadaa – is a person in charge of making the highest decisions (together with his council members) on major issues such as societies law and order, protecting the social, economic, political, spiritual wellbeing of the community in the Gadaa system of the Oromo people (Habtamu Diassa, 2017; Jemjem Udessa, 2020).

7 Doorii is a Gadaa grade at which Oromo men make the final preparation for Gadaa leadership. This grade is merged with raabaa grade by some scholars (Dejene Hines, 2012) may be because men in the stage usually called senior raba (raabaa) (Habtamu Diassa, 2017).
of the Gadaa grade. It is prepared or bought by a doori husband as a gift for his wife. Our informant, Obbo Waaqoo Bunee, stated that nobody else is allowed to make or buy guutuu for a Guji woman except her husband. Doing so is considered a big crime and entails punishment by two heads of cattle, usually a heifer and a bull. This indicates the respect that the Guji society gives for marriage and family life. Such practice of husbands may also give women satisfaction and a sense of belongingness in the gadaa governance system in which they are not directly involved as main actors. It could motivate wives to provide the necessary support for their husbands to successfully play their role in system. A woman wearing guutuu is also highly respected by the target society.

In general, the three cultural ornaments of Guji women (guutuu, midhoo, guutimala) are worn only by selected groups of women as symbols of the status of their husbands in the governance of Gadaa system. These symbolic ornaments help the society to learn the status of the wearers and give them the social respect they deserve. Giving such respect for such women could be considered as one way of encouraging success in the governance of the gadaa system.

3.2.4. Saldaqaa

Saldaqaa is a bracelet made of nickel by local craftsmen and worn on forearms (see Figure 5). It is of two types: the one worn by married women and the one worn by a virgin girl. The first type of saldaqaa is bought for a newly married wife as a gift by her husband within ten days after their wedding ceremony. According to our informants (Aadde Arrasso Xelaa, Aadde Maaramii Waaree, and Aadde Dharroo Gadaa) it is a special gift that a husband gives his wife as a sign of expressing love and affection. Previously, this ornament costs a female goat. Wives of Aabaa Gadaa (Gadaa leader) wear a special type of saldaqaa which conveys symbolic meaning about her social status. An Aabaa Gadaa wife wearing this ornament is highly respected in the target society.

The second type of saldaqaa is worn by virgin girls. Girls often give their saldaqaa as a wedding day gift to express their affection for the bride. This usually happens as part of a farewell ceremony of the bride at her parents' home. The following verses from Guji wedding song mentioned by Aadde Bookaa Gomi'a illustrate the importance of this gift:

Jaaloo tiyyaa Saldaqaa baafanna (I put off my saldaqaa for my beloved friend)

Waan Saldaqaa Caalu ngaaga dhaamannee (What is more, I bid her farewell)

This verse indicates the context at which this cultural ornament is given and the emotional status of the giver. In general, saldaqaa is the best symbol that Guji girls use to express their intimacy and social bond.

3.2.5. Maldayaa

Maldayaa is also an iron bracelet worn on arm by Guji Oromo women. It is made by threading aluminum with copper or some other metal (see Figure 5). According to our respondent, Aadde Maaramii Waaree and several others, this ornament is worn only by women whose husband is in the yubaa stage of Gadaa system. It is worn during blessing rituals. Like many other cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo discussed above, this ornament communicates meaning related to the status of husbands.

3.2.6. Sageettuu

Sageettuu is also a bracelet made from copper and nickel by local blacksmiths. It is an ornament worn together with maldayaa and saldaqaa by married Guji women. This ornament is worn by wives of Aabaa Gadaa, Raaba, Doorii, and herbalist women. To distinguish the status difference of their husbands in the Gadaa system, Raaba and Doorii wives wear only one sageettuu while the wife of Aabaa Gadaa wears two (see Figure 5). According Aadde Arrasso Xelaa, a woman who has the skill of making traditional medicine (cidhuu) also wears this ornament to seek public respect. Sageettuu is worn on every occasion. Nevertheless, this ornament is rarely worn by Guji women nowadays mainly due to its inaccessibility or scarcity.

3.3. Ornaments of maternity and motherhood

Among Guji Oromo, maternity and motherhood are given special social respect. Therefore, to harness this social respect, Guji Oromo mothers wear several body ornaments that reflect their status. Once they start marriage life, Guji Oromo women take off all their girlhood cultural body ornaments and start to wear ornaments that reflect motherhood. Below are the descriptions of some of these ornaments.

3.3.1. Samaxee

Samaxee is a kind of body ornament that married and elderly Guji women wear on their heads. It is made by wrapping fresh goatskin on a circular plate of wood. It is dried under the shade of a house so that it won't bend and lose its flat shape. Once it is dried, it is polished with butter. Smaller circles are beaded on the top surface of the plate as decoration. Stripes of leather ropes wrapped with a metal sheet and decorated with beads are attached to the plate from behind to make it more attractive. Samaxee is tied to the center of the wearer’s head and bent backward to protect her from strong sunlight (see Figure 6). According to our informants, Aadde Bookaa Gomi’a, Aadde Danbalaa Elemaa, and Aadde Lootuu Soraa, previously, samaxee was worn only by mothers who gave birth to two or more children. The numbers of leather ropes that are hung from the plate of samaxee symbolize the number of children the wearer already gave birth to. During Gadaa ritual, the wife of Aabaa Gadaa wears samaxee while her husband wears a phallic symbol called kaliacho on his forehead.

According to our informants, previously samaxee was worn by traditional herbalist women as a symbol of their traditional skill. But
nowadays, it is worn by almost all women, especially by those women whose husbands are in Gadaa grades of raaba to yauba. It is worn during special rituals and journeys to other places to guard oneself against strong sunlight and light rain.

3.3.2. Finqilaa

Finqilaa is a headband made from skin or hide, nickel and bead. The leather band has an oval shape and beautifully decorated with a bead. There is a small hollow circular shape attached at one edge of the ornament. Attached to this circular end are chains of nickel that are hung at the back of the wearer’s head (see Figure 7). Unlike that of ficee (see Figure 1) which has a solid circular shape, the circular shape of finqilaa is hollow and this symbolizes the absence of virginity or womanhood.

Once she gets married, a Guji girl takes off her ficee and puts on finqilaa, and starts her marriage or womanhood life (Obbo Danbalaa Elemaa). A woman wearing this ornament is highly respected as a mother and men are strictly forbidden to attempt any kind of sexual harassment on her.

3.3.3. Qulfi

Qulfi is a metal clipper that a Guji woman wears while she is in her maternity house. It is clipped into the wearer’s front hair which is worn in shurruba style (see Figure 8). It is bought from the local market. A woman who gives birth to a baby boy starts wearing this ornament beginning from the fourth day while those who give birth to a baby girl starting from the third day of her delivery following a highly respected ritual held at her home (Aaddde Arrasso Xelaas, Aaddde Lootu Soraa, and Aaddde Dharroo Gadaa). It is worn for six months for delivering a baby boy and five for a baby girl. In the case of Arsi, other Oromo groups neighboring Guji, another type of ornament called qanafaa is worn in place of qulfi for the same purpose (Jeylan Wolyi, 2004).

A mother wearing qulfi or qanafaa is highly respected among her family and the whole society. It is strictly forbidden to insult, beat, or mistreat a woman wearing these ornaments. In addition to protecting them against all forms of harassment or physical attack, these ornaments are believed to protect the wearers from evils eyes, according to our informants. This depicts the respect that the Oromo people in general and Guji, in particular, give for fertility or childbirth. The difference in the duration of wearing these ornaments in the case of a baby girl and the baby boy also reflects the gender ideology of the Oromo people. Due to their patriarchal social structure and exogamous marriage practice which allows all male children to stay with their parents/clan while forcing women to leave their parents or clan, male children are considered to be more important in the Guji society. According to our informants, male children are considered to be guardians or the ones who defend the whole clan against foreign enemies using an arrow.

3.3.4. Hanfalaal

Hanfalaal is a leather belt that Guji Oromo women wear in their maternity bed. It is commonly made of softened animal skin and occasionally out of the bark of a local tree called dambii (see Figure 9). This cultural ornament is believed to have a strong contribution in strengthening the waist of a woman who recently gave birth (deessaa). Concerning this, one of our informants, Obbo Damisee Shannaggaa, stated that if a woman fails to wear hanfalaal in her maternity bed, her belly becomes enlarged and she looks like a frog. This type of woman is often disgraced in the Guji society. This indicates the concern of the Guji society for the natural beauty or shape of women.

Our local informant also told us about the symbolic role of hanfalaal in the traditional reconciliation of conflicting husband and wife. Traditionally, the conflict of husband and wife is solved by Jaarsummaa, an indigenous method of conflict resolution conducted by local elders among the Oromo people. At the reconciliation phase of Jaarsummaa, elders persuade the couple to accept the reconciliatory decisions made by the elders (Alemu Disassa, 2015). According to our informants, if the wife full-heartedly accepts the elders’ decision, she proves it by unbuckling her hanfalaal. If the wife accepts the decision without doing so, the reconciliation is believed to be superficial or not genuine. In short, in addition to its aesthetic value, hanfalaal serves other important symbolic functions.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As it has been discussed elsewhere in the preceding section, the major aim of this article is to decipher meanings embedded in the cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo women. Previous researchers in the area (Kassam and Megersa, 1989; Klemm, 2009), have found out that the Oromo people, like many other traditional societies of the world, have their elaborate practice of ornamentation. They make and wear several traditional body ornaments that convey symbolic meanings mainly in the intracultural communication scenario. Being one of the major Oromo groups, the Guji Oromo is not an exception.

Results of the analysis of the obtained data reveal that Guji Oromo women wear several cultural ornaments on various parts of their body, mainly their hair/head, neck, hands, shoulder, and waist. Most of these ornaments are made by local craftsmen from locally available materials mainly beads, cattle skin, and metals. Like many other traditional societies, the Guji Oromo uses beads of various colors to decorate most of
their body ornaments. In addition to their aesthetic value, the cultural body ornaments of Guji Oromo women convey several meanings related to virginity, marital status, maternity, husbands’ achievement/status in the Gadaa system, and social rights of the wearers.

Based on the symbolic meanings that they convey, cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo women could be put under three broad categories. The first category is ornaments that show girlhood and virginity. The two samples, Ficee ‘headband’ and Mijau primarily symbolize the virginity of the wearers. Girls who wear these ornaments are given special respect and privilege among the Guji.

The second category of the Guji Oromo women ornament conveys meaning related to the achievement/status of their husbands in the Gadaa system. As it has been discussed elsewhere in the preceding section, all Oromo men contribute their share in the Gadaa socio-political governance system through their age grades. Though women do not directly take part in the political activity of the Gadaa system, they promote their position as collaborators of their husbands by wearing ornaments such as Midhoo, Guutuun, Saldooqa, Sagaattuu, and Mijoo. Wearing these ornaments grants them higher respect among the Guji society. By wearing these ornaments, Guji Oromo women also sustain the established cultural norms of their society.

The third category of ornaments is worn to convey a message related to maternity and motherhood of the Guji Oromo women. These include Samaxee, Fingallaa, Guji/qanafaa, and hanfalaal. Those women who wear these ornaments get higher respect in their society, especially during the first five to six months of their childbirth. This in turn shows the deep-rooted love and respect that the Oromo people give for marriage and childbirth in the process of sustaining the continuity of the society.

Results of the current study also show that cultural norms and restrictions govern the ornamentation practice of women in the Guji Oromo society. These norms and restrictions mainly emanate from the overarching Gadaa system. Wearing body ornaments against these restrictions may create miscommunication about the identity of the wearer. This in turn could prevent the wearer from harnessing several social respects and privileges. It could also mistakenly put them at risk of sexual harassment.

In general, in addition to their beautification purpose, cultural ornaments of Guji Oromo women communicate meanings related to the wearers’ identity and social status as part of intracultural communication and their Guji Oromo identity as part of intercultural communication. Such utilitarian roles of these cultural ornaments could indirectly play tremendous roles in creating and maintaining peaceful and harmonious social coexistence by properly handling issues related to gender rights. Through the use of these traditional ornaments, the Guji society promotes important cultural values such as virginity, marriage bond, and childbirth while discouraging unacceptable behaviors such as sex before marriage and all forms of gender-based violence. In doing so, the society legitimizes its action by the norms and customary laws that emanate from the Gadaa system. Such practice of ornamentation also reveals the deep-rooted traditional wisdom of the Guji Oromo.

Examining the practice of women’s ornamentation, one could also make several conclusions about the social, economic, and belief system of Guji Oromo. For instance, the common use of animal products such as hides and horn as raw materials for making ornaments and heads of cattle as reward and punishment tools indicate that animal husbandry is still the major economic base of the Guji Oromo life.

Although adornments of Guji Oromo women have been playing the aforementioned roles, this research study also reveal that, nowadays, this long-standing traditional practice of ornamentation has been suppressed mainly due to the introduction of modern ornaments, the assimilation attempts made on the Guji Oromo, and the pressure from foreign induced religions such as Islam and Christianity. This calls for proper documentation and revitalization of these cultural body ornaments in such a way that they can properly serve their utilitarian roles in addition to their aesthetic function. This could be done by encouraging mass production of these body ornaments by strengthening the local small-scale manufacturing industries and doing promotion works through culture and tourism bureaus.

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