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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A SURVEY OF OROMO POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS WITH REFERENCE TO SELECTED DISTRICTS IN BALE ZONE

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ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry that attempted to explore popular superstitions among Bale Oromos. The rationale behind this research was the fact that there is no former endeavor to study the Bale Oromo community popular superstitions. Four woredas were selected for this study from Bale zone by purposive sampling. The inquiry was expected to play its part in helping us preserve the cultural heritage of the Oromo people. The popular Oromo superstitions were collected primarily from the elders of the selected districts of Bale Robe through a semi-structured interview. Simple random sampling was used to select the kebeles from each selected woredas. And snow ball sampling technique was used to select local elders from each selected kebeles. Also questionnaire was used to collect data from the informants who were identified as educated. Those educated categories were selected high school students and the woredas culture and tourism officers. Relying on the semi structured interview, several superstitions which are practiced amongst the rural communities have been collected. The quantitative part of the study showed that the educating youths in general are fairly superstitious. While the degree of being superstitious among different genders was not significant; nonetheless, females appeared to be slightly more superstitious than males. In light of education level and their tendency of being superstitious, the woredas culture and tourism officers were more superstitious being followed by those students in grade nine and ten.

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INTRODUCTION

The word *superstition* is first used in English in the 15th century, modelled after an earlier French *superstition*. The French word, together with its Romance cognates (Italian *superstizione*, Spanish *superstición*, Portuguese *superstição*, Catalan *superstició*) continues Latin *supersticio*. While the formation of the Latin word is clear, from the verb *super-stare*, "to stand over, stand upon; survive", its original intended sense is less clear. It can be interpreted as "standing over a thing in amazement or dread", but other possibilities have been suggested, e.g. the sense of excess, i.e. over scrupulousness or over-ceremoniousness in the performing of religious rites, or else the survival of old, irrational religious habits. From its use in the Classical Latin (1st century BC), the term is used in the pejorative sense it still holds today, of an excessive fear of the gods or unreasonable belief, as opposed to *religio*, the proper, reasonable or explainable fear of the gods (<http://www.wikipedia.encyclopedia>).

So far it appeared that there is no single brief way to understand superstition. Especially, the attempt to differentiate it from and relate to religion seemed to have made the matter quite tougher. Greek and Roman polytheists, who modeled their relations with the gods on political and social terms, scorned the man who constantly trembled with fear at the thought of the gods, as a slave feared a cruel and capricious master. Such fear of the gods was what the Romans meant by "superstition". Diderot's *Encyclopédie* defines superstition as "any excess of religion in general" (Veyne, 1987). According to Robert Ingersoll, superstitions are: believing in phenomenon that there is no experimental evidence for them, estimating a mystery by another mystery; believing that the world is directed by chance; offering the thoughts, desires and intentions with reference to their original nature; belief in the supernatural, miracle, magic and divination (Inglehart, 2002). According to him, superstition is based on ignorance and its infrastructure and origin are false hopes. To avoid possible social biases that can be found in expressions like 'false beliefs' folklorists use 'folk beliefs'. Superstitions are social phenomena and product of social context and conditions. Amongst the factors which provided the emerging field of social phenomena is the fear of human being from spiritual and material circumstances, precautions reactions, and human

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ignorance of reality during the history and transmission of superstitious ideas. A large part of folklore beliefs are devoted to believe that some of them are regional and some national or international ones. For example, unalterable speed, fate, nature, luck, eye sore, ominous of number thirteen, number four etc. are so widely present in most human societies. Actually they are formed opinions that have been passed on from generation to generation, changed in the passage of time and place, and added or removed. People usually do not believe them in the same value. These beliefs are changeable and vary from total dependency to lack of belief. Some consider them superstition and some believe them firmly. Superstition believes grow in the context of ignorance, and nearly all human societies have some superstitious tendencies. Commonly people tend to superstition, because wisdom is usually difficult and troublesome. Therefore, humans prefer superstition to reasoning and imagination to the truth. However, religion has always called them to reasoning (Jahovda, 1992).

Superstition is a common tradition of almost all people around the world. But what is a superstitious behavior is relative to local culture. Experiences tell us that it is not uncommon in Ethiopia and many other nations to come across people or individuals who consider a black cat crossing their path as bad fortune, those who hate black colored domestic animals, those who consider goats as malevolent, those who consider the call of a bat as a signal for the death of somebody etc. In this study we will take a look at Oromo superstitions taking Bale zone as case study. The Oromos are one of the various nations and nationalities in Ethiopia. According to the 2008 census, it was approximated that about 28 million people are Oromos. The region is very vast and for that matter it's difficult to manage the superstitions of all parts in one inquiry like this. So, the current study focused on the collection and descriptions of the Oromo superstitions in Bale district.

Statement of the problem

The prevalence of superstitions in almost all societies indicate that they are acceptable beliefs and values of people and make some values of society. So when it comes to the Oromo superstitions we don't have any scholarly attempt that tried to identify what popular superstitions may prevail among the communities, which group of the community might be more or less superstitious, what historical, social, cultural or any other narratives or causes might have gradually brought about the superstitions. For these reasons the researchers put forward the following research questions to be guided by while going through the study.

- What popular superstitions are there in the selected districts?
- Is there any significant difference in being superstitious between those groups of the people (male/female, youngster/elder, educated/uneducated) in the districts?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were

- To collect superstitions commonly known among the Bale Oromo communities
- To analyze if there was a difference in the tendency of being superstitious among the community groups

(male/female, youngster/elder, educated/uneducated) of the community

Research Design

Qualitative approach with descriptive study design was be employed to describe and interpret the degree of practicality of superstition among the people to be studied, significant difference in being superstitious between those community groups (male/female/, youngster/elder, educated/uneducated...) the natural, social, or other factors which might have been known for bringing about those popular superstitions.

Source and study population of the research

Employees of Bale zone culture and tourism offices and Sinana, Gololcha Dawekachan and Madda walabu woredas culture and tourism offices were included. Community elders from the twenty kebeles of the four woredas were part of the study. Further, culture and tourism office workers and high school students were selected from the community as the study population

Sampling Techniques

First, purposive sampling technique was employed to select the four woredas namely Madda Walabu, Dawe kachen Gololcha, and Sinana weredas of Bale zone for these woredas are relatively better and have been known for practicing and preserving their indigenous custom and culture compared to other woredas of the zone. Then simple random sampling was used to select five kebeles from each selected weredas. Then, the snow ball sampling technique was used to select local elders from each selected kebeles of the four woredas. Accordingly 100 local elders (5 elder informants from each kebele) participated in the study. In addition to that the woredas culture and tourism officers were selected purposively. Further, systematic random sampling was employed to identify sample high school students.

Data Gathering Tools

Taking the instruments' respective purposes into consideration, three instruments were utilized: interview, questionnaire and observation.

Interview

As the main objective of this study was to collect and analyze Oromo popular superstitions from the four selected districts of Bale zone, interview was a principal tool for the study, because it is a relatively a better instrument to provide information about practices, beliefs, attitudes and anticipations of the subjects studied. Therefore, it was administered to identify the superstitions, and to identify if there were any natural, social, or other factors which might have been known for causing those popular superstitions. Accordingly, semi-structured interview was administered for the selected elders of the locality.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire was also the other tool that was used to support and crosscheck the data gathered through the main tool of the study.

No single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective (Patton, 1990). Hence, to collect the common superstitions of the selected kebeles and to see if there was any significant difference in being superstitious between those communities groups (male/female/, youngster/elder, educated/uneducated...). Interviewer – administered open ended and closed ended questionnaire of different kind and themes, were prepared in English and later translated to the local language (Afan Oromo) and distributed to the culture and tourism offices workers of the selected woredas, and to the high school students.

Data Analysis Techniques

The study was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. It is qualitative in that there are some aspects that provides qualitative data and adds richness to data qualitatively and quantitative in that there are some descriptive statistical data. Thus the data obtained through qualitative method were grouped and thematically analyzed whereas the data obtained quantitatively were analyzed using descriptive statistical data analysis (frequencies and percentages) in order to minimize personal bias.

Data Analysis and Findings

Analysis of data gathered through interview

Snow ball sampling technique was used to select local elders from each selected kebeles of the four woredas for the interview which has been the principal method of data collection for this study. The interview result for the popular superstitions held or practiced amongst Bale Oromo revealed several popular superstitions of the communities among which the following ones are worth mentioning.

Coming across a woman during a journey as a bad omen

If a man goes out from his home for journey, and suddenly comes across a woman, he will reject that journey.

Empty pot, firewood being carried by a woman, as a bad omen

A parade or elders who are walking for candidacy for the first time feel sad if a woman carrying wood comes across them whereas they feel happy ,and they drink some of the water if a woman carrying pot full of water.

A Fox entering into a village at daylight signals danger

Wild animals such as fox entering into a village at daytime are believed to signal likely danger in the near future in that village.

An owl foretells death of someone

Especially, it is believed that owl tells a death of someone. Likely, if a group of dogs and a cackle of hyenas shouting or crying being around a home of a sick person, it is believed that the person will die soon.

The invasion of locusts informs the hunger of the dead people

It is believed also that locusts inform that the dead people in the grave are feeling hungry, so people in the near place should prepare food and eat around the graves.

Pouring prepared coffee on cattle brings productivity

If a man is not successful in rearing cattle, he should prepare coffee and pour it on cattle. In the same way, he slaughters sheep in byre and fries meat. Then he makes cattle to inhale the smoke from the meat.

A fox that crosses someone on his/her right a bad fortune

It is considered that a fox that comes to a person in his right hand side while he is on a journey is a sign of bad fortune.

A person who does not have cattle is considered to be having evil eye

Livestock fights foretell prosperity

The quarrel of livestock is taken to be an indicator of next season prosperity.

Qararu protects crop from rust

In order to protect crops from rust a plant that is locally called qararu is planted inside the farm land of crops like wheat, barley, teff, etc.

Fugno is believed to tell the direction of lost things or persons

A rope that is locally called fugno is used to tell the direction of lost things. It is also used to tell whether missed persons are alive or not. During Derg regime (especially at the time of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea), parents whose sons have gone to the war used to go to people who are skilled in this to check whether their sons are alive or dead

Slaughtering a goat saves children from death

If parents constantly lose children because of death, a husband slaughter a goat before the birth of a new baby.

A hyena scratching a house foretells a likely flight

If a hyena scratches a house, it's believed that people are about to flee because of war in the near future.

Hyena's Screaming foretells deaths

Two or three screaming of hyena is considered to be the death of children whereas five up to six screaming of a hyena is believed to be the death of a woman and seven screaming of hyena is thought to be the death of respected man; more than eight screaming is a signal of peace and rain.

Analysis and findings of Questionnaire data

Firstly, the tendency towards superstition of 70 selected grade nine students has been analyzed like the following.

The first question the students had been asked was whether they believe that *if a sharp material pokes them while they are going to school is believed to have a bad luck on their exam result?*

And 38 (54%) students responded that they believe in the above superstition while 32(45%) said that they don't believe in the above superstition. When we consider such tendency gender wise, we see that from those who appeared to uphold the superstition 18 (47%) were males and 20 (53%) were females. This shows that the tendency of being superstitious among both genders is common while females relatively appeared to be more superstitious. The second question posed to the students was whether they agree that shaking (frightening) of their abdomen while they are going for exam is an indicator of good luck.

Vis-à-vis to that, 36 (52%) said that they believe in that while 34 (48%) said they don't. This shows that the students are somewhat superstitious. If tested against gender, out of the 36 who appeared to maintain the superstition, 22(61%) were females and 14 (39%) were males once again indicating that females are more superstitious than another question posed to the students was *if they see an open toilet, while they are ready to go school is a signal of good fortune?*

Regarding this, 37(53%) said that they believe in it while 33 (47%) said that they don't- which indicates that the students are somehow superstitious. While seen in relation to gender, out of those 37 who said they believe in the above superstition, 21(57%) were males and 16 (43%) were females- indicating that relatively males are more superstitious than females.

Another question was “Do you agree that if the first answer is ‘A’ or True, it is good luck?”

For this, 36 (56%) replied ‘yes’ they believe in the above belief while 34 (44%) said they don't agree or they don't believe in that. From that, we can affirm that the students are superstitious somewhat. Gender wise, from those who said they believe in the above superstition, 20 (56%) were females and 16 (44%) were males. And this shows that males are less superstitious than females. Furthermore, the students were asked *if they agree that coming across a woman carrying empty pot while they are going to school indicates bad fortune.* In their response to that, 36 (51%) said they believe in it when 34(49%) said they don't. And time again this indicates that the pupils are somehow superstitious. While seen in light of gender divergence, from 36 students who said they believe in, 20 or (55%) were males, and 16 or (45%) were females.

This shows that males are more superstitious than females. And similar analysis have undertaken on the responses of the rest questions for grade nine, ten and culture and tourism officers. The summarized account of the study has shown the following.

The current study has shown that there are many commonly known superstitions mostly known to the local elders of Bale area. The elders' responses showed that superstition is just part of their daily life. And based on the semi-structured interview several popular superstitions have been identified and have been made part of this study. There is a relatively higher tendency of being superstitious among the grade nine students when compared to those in grade ten. Grade ten students appeared to be fairly less superstitious in comparison to those in grade nine. However, those elderly who are more senior and those culture and tourism officers who are more senior and more educated than the high school students appeared to be more superstitious. Moreover, in all level there was no significant difference between men and women in being superstitious. But the study has shown that women are somewhat more superstitious (3 in every five were highly superstitious) while in the case of men the case appeared to be (three in every five appeared superstitious)

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