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## **An Exploration into Socio Economic Value of Yaganuwa as Reflected in Wolaita Cultural House Construction, Southwestern Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

The main objective of this research is to investigate the tradition of yaganuwa and find out its Socio Economic Value for Wolaytta people. This study employed descriptive design with qualitative method of data analysis. Interview, focus group discussion and observation were used to collect primary data from the field and the collected data was qualitatively analyzed and interpreted. Findings of this research indicated that Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction, have great contribution to peoples' identity, culture and co-existence. Yaganuwa is done without any binding law except cultural and moral obligation to return it in a specific time and amount. It was also found that yaganuwa has multiple roles in the society, like making the significant social event, daguwa, possible, supporting the house holder's economy, establishing the relationship between the giver and receiver, and binding the people socially by enforcing cooperation and unity. The researcher came up with some recommendations to sustain Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa. First, elders or families need to inculcate their children about the value of cultural tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction. Youths also, could shoulder a big responsibility regarding conservation of Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction. On top of that, scholars who have great power in influencing the way people think and perceive things can play a great role to safeguard the tradition of yaganuwa.

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Tradition, Culture, Custom and Yaganuwa.

### **Introduction**

Wolaytta zone is found in SNNPR. It is bounded by Kambata Tambaro zone in the north, Gamo Goffa zone in south, Dawuro zone in the west and Sidama zone in the east. Its total area is 438,370 ha. Agro-ecologically, the area is composed of Dega, Woina Dega and Kola, though Woina Dega takes lion's share of total size of the zone. According to the census conducted in 2007, the population of the zone forecasted about 2 million, while

other sources indicate that the approximation is around 2.5 million. Currently the zone is divided in to 16 woredas and six town administrations. Subsistence mixed agriculture is the dominant engagement of people and it is centuries old tradition of the people.

Wolayttas have rich folklore since time immemorial. This folklore has been transferred from one generation to another and is part of everyday life of the society. They have also immense culture that encompasses traditional

house construction, different ways of clothing, production materials, musical instruments, feeding system, collaborating system, and so on.

In the context of Wolaita, ceremonial exchange of items in kind has been deep rooted in the cultural traditions of the people. The ceremonial exchange of items in kind is diverse in type and differs from situation to situation depending on the moral values and social circumstances. The moral values in the culture favor the ceremonial exchange of items in kind, different food items and gifts, than items in cash.

Regarding the role of ceremonial exchange of gifts, Hénaff argued that human beings exist through the reciprocal bond through the mediation of what is exchanged between them (Hénaff: 2010). Gift-giving and reciprocal exchange appears to be prevalent in rural communities, though the reciprocation may be in full or in part; it may come soon or it may never come. The relationship between the parties will be disrupted if there is a failure to reciprocate (Thomas: 2000). Hence, this all possibly can partly define yaganuwa in Wolaita since it is considered to be the norm of the society to give, receive, and return in the appropriate occasion.

In principle, yaganuwa is used as contribution to the family who is constructing house with food items to serve all the gusts that came to cooperate in the construction. In addition, by contributing food items, relatives and neighbors who bring yaganuwa express their belongingness to the respective culture and family. When someone who is expected to bring yaganuwa fails to do so, he or she is socially excluded from the social order. To sum up, bringing yaganuwa supports the owner of the house economically and guarantees social acceptance of the giver.

However, at the present time, most of such traditions are vanishing as a result of 'modernization'. There is no doubt that modernity is vital for civilization. On the other hand, it is contributing to wiping out of indigenous culture.

Traditional practices like yaganuwa are being perceived by some as an act of extravagance. With the consideration of the changes and difficulties in present socio-economic conditions, people are inclining to lead private life rather than cooperation. This shows that the indispensable socio-economic significance of the tradition of yaganuwa is being neglected by the young generation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the issue critically and describe its significance from the perspectives of the society. In doing so, the present time socio-economic conditions will be taken into account to further understand the multidimensional aspects of yaganuwa from different perspectives.

### **Statement of the problem**

People of Wolaytta have their own history, folklore and cultural traditions little of which are mentioned earlier and that have been passed from generation to generation. The heritages of the nation; which are fingerprints for the past civilization of Wolaytta are in danger while many have been already destroyed.

Obviously, traditional houses are the results of the collaboration of many people over many generations as well as the collaboration between makers and users of buildings and other artifacts. As it is seen in the case of Wolaytta cultural house, tradition has the force of a law honored by everyone through collective assent. It is thus accepted and obeyed, since respect for tradition gives collective control, which acts as a discipline.

As long as the tradition is alive, this shared and accepted image operates. When tradition disappears, the picture changes. Without tradition, there can no longer be reliance on the accepted norms. Different factors contributed for alteration of tradition. Among these, urbanization and globalization take the lion's share. According to (Ranjith Dayaratne,) during the 20th century, accelerated development, urbanization and globalization have impacted heavily upon the traditional buildings. This equally impacted traditional ceremonies like yaganuwa. Numerous as they are, rural urban migrations, information revolution, improved transportations, modern construction technologies and changing values and attitudes have been seen as major forces of such change. Indisputably, the intimate relationships between traditional houses and the cultural values of those who build and inhabit them have been fractured.

It is unquestionable that modernity is important for civilization. However, it is contributing to wiping out of indigenous culture. The current generation, especially younger age group is more inclined to receive whatever new ideas and fashions of west without setting apart the useful from harmful. This resulted in ignorance and negligence of indigenous culture and traditions including yaganuwa.

Yaganuwa is mainly practiced during cultural house construction. However, cultural houses are almost being replaced by modern houses all over Wolaytta. This shows that they are at the risk of extinction, which in turn means traditions associated with cultural house including yaganuwa are at risk. This is because the prominent occasion in which yaganuwa is practiced is cultural house construction. If left untreated, this may result in the extinction of the tradition of yaganuwa. It is obvious that immediate counteraction is urgent to save this essential cultural tradition of Wolaytta people. This is why the researcher initiated to investigate *The Socio Economic Value of Yaganuwa in Wolaita Cultural House Construction*. This study tries to answer the following questions:

What is yaganuwa?

What are the items used in the practice of yaganuwa?

What are the roles of yaganuwa to the society?

How is yaganuwa practiced in the current socio-economic context of Wolaytta?

What should be done to sustain the tradition of yaganuwa?

## Research Design and Methodology

### Research design

To come up with critical understanding and comprehensively explain the issue under study, qualitative approach was more preferable than quantitative approach. Because, the researcher believed that qualitative approach is more responsive than quantitative parameters to figure out the social obligation, values, and moral dimensions of giving and receiving yaganuwa in the culture of the Wolaita people. Hence, qualitative techniques of data collection were employed to generate the society's inner most feelings, perceptions, and understanding of the issue. Relevant data had been collected from primary sources. Interview, focus group discussion and observation were used to collect primary data from the field. The collected data was qualitatively analyzed and interpreted.

### Research setting

The research was conducted in Wolaytta Zone which is one of 13 zones found in SNNPR, Ethiopia. It has 16

woredas and 6 administrative towns. Among these, four Woredas, namely, Kindo Didaye, Boloso Bombe, Damot Pulasa and Ofa were purposively selected. The reason for selecting these Woredas was that it was the researcher's belief to obtain ample information from these areas as they are peripherals and among the top areas retaining indigenous cultural traditions.

### Research participants

The research was proposed to carry out in Wolaytta Zone SNNPR. The participants of this study were 40 elders, 10 elders from each Woreda and 8 officials from the Culture, Tourism, and Government Communication Office of the selected woredas. This means 2 officials from each woreda were participated. Hence, a total of 48 members participated in the study. All of the elders were selected purposively, based on their experience, and all of the officials were selected by using availability method. The head and his or her vice from each Culture, Tourism, and Government Communication Office of the selected woredas were nominated.

### Tools for data collection

Three instruments were used to collect data for this study. These were interview, observation and focus group discussion.

### Interview

Interview is one of the qualitative methods of data collection in social sciences in general and in the fields of humanity studies, like language, anthropology and sociology, in particular. The researcher believed that through interview the society's perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards the tradition of yaganuwa would be generated. In interview informants were asked for the required questions and probed as much as possible in line with the objectives of the study. Interview members (informants) were selected purposively from the ordinary members of the society based on their experience and exposure to the issue under study.

### Focus group discussion (FGD)

FGD is one among the other crucial techniques of qualitative data collection in social sciences. Its members (discussants) were selected to discuss freely on the selected issues in line with the desired objectives of the study. It enabled the researcher to elucidate and cross check the relevance of information gathered from

individual interview members and other methods. Generally, two FGD sessions were conducted. One FGD session with elderly ordinary community members and the other with the required officials from the Culture, Tourism, and Government Communication Office of the selected woredas. For each FGD session, 8 members (discussants) were selected on the basis of their consent, the researcher's purposeful selection, and their knowledge towards the issue, as well as on the basis of their positions and roles in the entire society.

### Observation

As different sources have shown in social science studies, observation has indispensable roles in generating deep qualitative insights from the natural setting (the original context).

Fortunately, to this study it was believed that observation had essential contribution to understand the settings of the cultural tradition of yaganuwa and examine the issues with the consideration of society's attitudes toward it. The actual settings of ceremonial practices of yaganuwa were observed purposely that helped the researcher to get realistic data to exert prospective realization of the issue in line with the ongoing socio-economic realities of the society.

### Procedure of data collection

The collection of first-hand data was undertaken in two phases of field work among Wolaita people of the selected Woredas in the zone. The first phase was a preliminary survey which was conducted on carrying out a field survey, specifically gathering base line information and getting to know individuals who would play important roles in arranging and facilitating contacts with key informants among the society. The second and major part of the field work was carried out to gather actual data. The researcher discussed with the selected informants in selected venue for the safety of information and other issues.

### Methods of Data analysis

In this study, qualitative method of data analysis was employed. That was because qualitative data was gathered from elders and officials from the Culture, Tourism, and Government Communication Office of the selected woredas. The data gathered through interview, observation and focus group discussion was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively.

### Analysis and Discussion

As mentioned in the statement of the problem part, this research focused on *The Socio Economic Value of Yaganuwa in Wolaita Cultural House Construction*. It examined the issue critically and tried to describe its significance from the perspectives of the society. In doing so, this research took the present time socio-economic conditions of the society into account. Since yaganuwa is mainly practiced during cultural house construction, endeavor was made to gather data associated with cultural house construction and yaganuwa. The data collected through interview, focus group discussion and observation was combined for analysis. That was because the questions raised for interview respondents were more or less similar with the points raised to focus group discussants and used as observation checklist.

### Sociocultural background of yaganuwa

As one of the objectives of this study was, revitalizing Wolaytta culture related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction, this study tried to examine different aspects of cultural tradition of yaganuwa exercised in the occasion of cultural house construction. More specifically, cultural feeding and drinking ceremonies and tradition of cooperation are critically scrutinized in this regard.

Wolaytta people have a culture of cooperation from time indefinite. What does Wolaytta's tradition regarding feeding and drinking ceremonies look like during cultural house construction? People support each other economically during different social circumstances like cooperative work (daguwa), funerals, house construction and wedding. During cultural house construction they support each other by providing all the necessary food items in the form of gift which is called yaganuwa.

According to my respondents yaganuwa is part of life in Wolaytta culture. This is to mean when a person intends to build a house, he simply tells the people that he is going to do so and with the consent of the people they appoint a specific date to build the house. In the same time the neighborhood and relatives start preparation to bring yaganuwa on that special occasion. They do not wait to be asked by the house holder because it is commonly understood or it is a cultural norm that whenever there is a house construction there is obligation of bringing yaganuwa. The house holder need only to tell the people the exact time of the construction, not to bring

yaganuwa. Every one brings it in common understanding.

In the culture of Wolaytta, people bring yaganuwa in different situations, like daguwa (cooperative work), keettaa (house construction), bullachchaa (wedding), funerals, circumcision ceremonies, and etc. Among these, daguwa and keettaa (house construction) are very common occasions in which yaganuwa is practiced. However, keettaa (house construction) is a unique event in this regard; because it incorporates a multitude of people and hence a bulky amount of foods and drinks in the form of Yaganuwa is needed.

As Wolaytta cultural house construction is totally done by common people, it needs a multitude. And in the culture, the house holder is expected to feed all these people. Therefore it is unquestionable that a bulky amount of foods and drinks is needed. The importance of yaganuwa comes here. As to my respondents, all the neighboring people are expected to bring yaganuwa. Moreover, the householder's relatives and special relatives in law such as jaalaa (one who covered the person's eye during circumcision) and bolluwa (son in law) bring yaganuwa even though they are at distant locations.

### **Items exchanged in the practice of yaganuwa**

What about items exchanged for yaganuwa? According to the respondents, there are innumerable types of traditional foods and drinks in Wolaytta. These traditional foods and drinks are prepared for different purposes such as daily consumption, cooperative work times or "daguwa", weddings, funerals, circumcision ceremonies, and etc. Among these, foods and drinks during cultural house construction fall under cooperative work times or "daguwa" foods.

Of course, in the events like wedding and circumcision, the house holder prepares special cultural foods such as muchchuwa, loggomuwa, beef and etc. Since the purpose of yaganuwa is to support the house holder by providing food items for immediate use, the neighbors and relatives also provide such quality food items as yaganuwa.

But when we come to yaganuwa of cultural house construction, it is somewhat different. House construction day is a day when the pillar or big pole "Tuussaa" is carried towards the building site and erected on its position. It is also a day in which the whole building process except the covering part of the house is completed. The number of voluntary workers is very

high; therefore the amount of food is in concurrence to the amount of workers. The types of food prepared during this time include, "kokkaa" from maize, bean and wheat, "oyttaa" (bread) from maize or millet, "unccaa" prepared from inset. The neighborhood and relatives also bring "Yaganuwa" (a freely provided gift of readymade foods and drinks to support construction of the house). Yaganuwa can be any type of food that an individual can afford including daily consumables.

Drinks can also be provided as yaganuwa. Drinks provided for this day are milk which is collected in a big pot and "Parssuwa/Borddee from maize, millet, barley, and 'karebo' (local soft drink). The drinks are put in a specific place in a big pot called "tossabaattaa" (extremely big and unmovable), each person gets his share with 'xuu'aa' or 'bixxiriya' (a small-pot). Specially, relatives and or especial relatives like jaalaa and bolluwa are expected to bring drinks, specifically tossaa as yaganuwa.

There is no specification to the size or type of food items to be brought as yaganuwa. A person can bring whatever type and amount of food he or she could afford. But in return the person is expected to bring somewhat better or at least equivalent to what he had been provided with.

Of course, there is no binding law to return yaganuwa in a specific time and amount. But as mentioned earlier, there is cultural and moral obligation to return it because everyone in the society perceives yaganuwa as part of life. However, there is no due date to return it. People are expected to return yaganuwa when the giver experiences similar occasion. And in return, at least equivalent or better is expected if the person in charge is capable of doing so.

### **The socio economic role of yaganuwa**

According to the respondents, there is a concrete socio economic issue behind the practice of yaganuwa. If we consider the specific occasions people bring yaganuwa, its role is very clear. As we saw earlier yaganuwa is brought during daguwa (working together) or Keettaa (house construction. These are peculiar social events when Wolaytta people help each other. During these times, a lot of people gather and work together to share the burden of the house holder. The house holder on the other hand, shoulders the responsibility of feeding this crowd. This becomes beyond the house holder's economy. Here, the role of yaganuwa is double. First, it makes the significant social event, daguwa, possible. Second, it supports the house holder's economy.

In addition, yaganuwa has significant social and economic implications both for the giver and receiver. It establishes the relationship between the giver and receiver by realizing mutual benefit. The receiver gets economic support as well as confirms his or her social acceptance; whereas the giver guarantees belongingness and social recognition.

People prefer giving yaganuwa, which is providing items in kind than contributing money. This is because in Wolaytta's culture yaganuwa is a question of socio economic support, not trade or profit oriented. This is to mean things for immediate use are expected because the purpose is feeding the crowd gathered for house construction. Of course, money can be used to accomplish this purpose, but it takes time and additional effort in the part of the receiver. This means, money can't solve immediate problem, since purchasing, transporting and preparing demand extra time, energy and even money. But yaganuwa is a readymade food that can be consumed without additional process.

Yaganuwa has social and economic benefits beyond the individual giver and receiver. How? Since individuals who are benefited are part of the society, it can be generalized that the society in general is beneficiary.

Economically it solves the house holder's immediate problem and socially it binds the people by enforcing cooperation and unity.

What is very important is that yaganuwa benefits all members of the society regardless of their economic status. Of course, if we compare the less and higher income families, the tradition of yaganuwa favors less income families. The cultural tradition obliges the rich to give, not to expect from the poor. The poor have privilege of returning yaganuwa based on their capacity. They are expected to return neither better nor equal. Even they can support only by their labor(preparing food in the householder's family)instead of providing yaganuwa.

### **The contemporary condition of yaganuwa in Wolaytta**

As indicated in the background section, the current condition of yaganuwa is distressing. Since yaganuwa is mainly practiced during cultural house construction and the fate of cultural houses is at risk, the tradition of yaganuwa is at risk of extinction.

The influence of 'modernity' is high in this regard. Modern buildings are rapidly replacing cultural houses. In modern house construction, paid experts accomplish all the duties of the society. There is no responsibility of feeding these workers, hence, no need of yaganuwa.

Besides, in current globalization, the younger generation is inclined to lead individual life style rather than cooperation. This resulted in ignorance and negligence of indigenous culture and traditions including yaganuwa. Generally, the practice of yaganuwa is vanishing as a result of modernization and individualism.

Currently, the term yaganuwa is fading with all its associated meanings and social and economic implications to the society. The 'civilized' generation considers it as extravagance. They think paying for experts is the simplest way than expending on yaganuwa. It is lamenting seeing that, in respondents' terms, missing Wolaytta cultural house means not only missing the house, but also missing the culture of peoples' harmonization and supporting each other, that now we can't get even by payment.

### **Findings**

Findings of this research indicated Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction, have great contribution to peoples' identity, culture and co-existence. This study tried to examine different aspects of cultural tradition of yaganuwa exercised in the occasion of cultural house construction.

The result of this research also showed that Wolaytta people have a culture of cooperation from time indefinite. People support each other economically during different social circumstances like cooperative work (daguwa), funerals, wedding and house construction.

During cultural house construction they support each other by providing all the necessary food items in the form of gift which is called yaganuwa. "Yaganuwa" is a freely provided endowment of readymade foods and drinks to support construction of the house. From this we can conclude that Wolaytta people had a surprising culture of supporting each other willingly.

Moreover, yaganuwa is part of life in Wolaytta culture. All the neighboring people as well as the householder's relatives and special relatives in law such as jaalaa (one who covered the person's eye during circumcision) and bolluwa (son in law) bring yaganuwa even though they

are at distant locations. This is done without any binding law except cultural and moral obligation to return it in a specific time and amount. It can be concluded that Wolayttas have a tradition of cooperation and unity initiated by love and compassion, which is a very strong bond of coexistence.

The findings of this research also showed that yaganuwa has multiple roles in the society. First, it makes the significant social event, daguwa, possible. Second, it supports the house holder's economy. Third, it establishes the relationship between the giver and receiver by realizing mutual benefit. And finally, it binds the people socially by enforcing cooperation and unity.

### Recommendations

We have comprehended that Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction has great contribution to peoples' identity, culture and co-existence. During cultural house construction they support each other by providing all the necessary food items in the form of yaganuwa; and this indicates that Wolayta people had a surprising culture of supporting each other willingly.

Moreover, yaganuwa which is done without any binding law except cultural and moral obligation to return it in a specific time and amount, is part of life in Wolaytta culture. And this is atypical implication of Wolayttas' tradition of cooperation and unity initiated by love and compassion, which is a very strong bond of coexistence. On top of that, yaganuwa has multiple roles in the society: makes the significant social event, daguwa, possible; supports individuals' economy; establishes the relationship between the giver and receiver by realizing mutual benefit; and binds the people socially by enforcing cooperation and unity. Therefore, it is undeniable that we need to conserve Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction.

As most of the respondents of this research were elders, they bitterly regretted on the fate of Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction. They determined to inculcate their children about the value of cultural tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house construction.

In the researcher's view, youths also, could shoulder a big responsibility regarding conservation of Wolaytta's tradition related with yaganuwa and cultural house

construction. Respondents and focus group discussants of this research also elucidated that young generation can have a lion's share responsibility regarding preserving this tradition. They can start thinking about its role, and sharing their opinion to others. Even more, they can start applying yaganuwa whenever they construct even modern houses.

In the same way, Culture and Tourism Offices at different levels are responsible of developing and conserving people's culture. Hence, they can help sustain the tradition of yaganuwa by inducing its importance through training and awareness creation.

The researcher also thinks that scholars have great power in influencing the way people think and perceive things. Therefore, scholars can play a great role to safeguard tradition the of yaganuwa by teaching people, especially the young generation, the socio cultural and economic implications of tradition of yaganuwa and its connection to peoples' social bond and coexistence. On top of that, scholars can promote the tradition of yaganuwa to global community through their researches and scholarly deliveries.

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