

## A Review on Weaving and its socio-cultural values in Ethiopia

### **Abstract**

*This review research work aimed to comprehend and compile the relevant information in the areas of the traditional weaving and its socio-cultural values in Ethiopia. Different empirical literatures were reviewed on the basis of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The review revealed that creative ability of weavers' maintained identity, culture and history of the different ethnic groups' of the nation. It identified how the traditional woven fabric served as glue for the socio-cultural values in religion, wedding, rituals among others in the country. The sector was facing challenges like raw material shortage and higher cost of input, competition from machine fabrics, poor technological and incentives among others. The sector needs proper care from all stakeholders to sustain its role as symbolic to represent a society. Thus, Practice of conservation and safeguarding of traditional woven fabric as per the protocol of UNESCO and retention of the people engaged weaver with proper incentives should be employed.*

**Key Words:** Weaving; socio-culture; value; Ethiopia; traditional fabric.

### **Introduction**

Ethiopia is an old country and civilization. The earliest hominid, called “Lucy” by foreigners and “Denqenash” (“you are beautiful”) by Ethiopians, was discovered in 1974 in the Afar desert. This female of the human race was dated to three and a half million years ago (Zewde, 1991). The Ethiopians are a proud people, not only because of Lucy. It was the only country in Africa that managed to preserve its independence in the European colonial period. Ethiopia has a population of about 105 million people (CSA, 2016). Ethiopians are ethnically diverse, with the most important differences on the basis of linguistic categorization. Ethiopia is a mosaic of about 100 languages that can be classified into four groups. The vast majority of languages belong to the Semitic, Cushitic, or Omotic groups, all part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. A small number of languages belong to a fourth group, Nilotic, which is part of the Nilo-Saharan language family.

29 The ethnic and cultural diversity has given rise to many unique and dynamic visual traditions.  
30 One of these traditions is the weaving from the Gamu-Gofa Highland; the Dorze weaving and  
31 other parts of the country. Many Dorze weavers live in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, at  
32 "Shiro Meda", which is an area at the foot of Entotto Mountain in the northern part of the  
33 city(Hanna Hofverberg, 2010).

34 The handloom sub-sector in Ethiopia is derived from the cotton sub-sector and is an example of a  
35 traditional-based and home grown activity. Handloom weaving is a simple value chain activity  
36 and is pivotal in the cotton sector as it binds the rural and urban households together and is  
37 grown from the home-based traditional handcraft industry. Handloom weaving was established  
38 to meet household need and demand for clothing, and then gradually grew to be an additional  
39 source of income as a non-farm activity. In fact, handlooms (informal operators) are the major  
40 demanders of raw cotton, and are engaged in weaving and preparation of traditional fibers,  
41 especially woven dresses that are popular both at the rural and urban centers and are also  
42 exported to Ethiopians living abroad(Ayele, et.al, 2009).

43 The craft designs in traditional society are consist of three dimensional elements such as the  
44 object form and the two dimensional features such as patterns, lines and colors (Kashim 2013).  
45 The visual designs on material artifacts have consistently infused culture-oriented aesthetics, thus  
46 adding to their local identity and commercial value (Lam et al. 2006).

47 Culture is that which defines the way of life of a group of people and their interactions with the  
48 environment over a period of time. Moving from the abstract to the concrete and from the  
49 material realm to the immaterial domain, culture could be described as a thread that holds what a  
50 society finds valuable, meaningful and appreciable. Following the models of previous studies  
51 (Moalosi, Popovic & Hickling-Hudson, 2007), culture is firmly observed as being dynamic and  
52 multi-layered. From the perspective of the intangible elements, (Kashim 2013) described culture  
53 as a set of values (conscious and unconscious) evolved by a group of people living in a society so  
54 as to shape that society with specific characteristics, identities, attitudes and behaviors. However,  
55 within the tangible layer, culture could also be understood in the social context of artifacts used  
56 within a particular environment.

57 Many of the weavers live and work in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, and are in general  
58 called Dorze, even if the term originally refers to an ethnic group in southern Ethiopia. Their

59 handicraft tradition is taught from one generation to another. The production takes place in their  
60 homes, using simple looms, and the products are mainly sold within the country (Hanna  
61 Hofverberg, 2010).

62 The relationship among artifacts, culture and society is bolshie. This is also true for the society  
63 engaged in weaving. Few researches have so far been conducted in indigenous artifacts of  
64 Ethiopia. Some of them focused on social status and economy of artisans. The others addressed  
65 the relationship among material, culture and society. Furthermore, cultural values of handicraft  
66 in general and weaving in particular have been studied previously but not well compiled at  
67 national level. Therefore, this review research work aimed to comprehend and compile the  
68 relevant information in the areas of the traditional weaving and its socio-cultural values in  
69 Ethiopia.

## 70 **Concepts and Theories**

71 A standard philosophical definition of “artifact”—often assumed even when not explicitly  
72 stated—is that artifacts are objects made intentionally, in order to accomplish some purpose  
73 (Hilpinen, 2011). This definition is rooted ultimately in Aristotle’s distinction between things  
74 that exist by nature and things that exist by craft. Those that exist by nature have their origin in  
75 themselves, whereas those that exist by craft have their origin in the craftsman—specifically,  
76 in the form of the thing as it exists in the mind of the maker. Both Aristotle and his contemporary  
77 descendants are primarily concerned to distinguish artifacts from objects that occur naturally,  
78 without any human intervention.

79 Social categorization differs from other forms of categorization in that people tend to place  
80 themselves in a category leading them to be partial to members of their own group (in group)  
81 relative to those from other groups (out group) in terms of social preferences, empathic  
82 responding, and resource distribution(Zoa, L, et al., 2017).

83 What determines our intuitions as to which objects are members of specific artifact kinds? Prior  
84 research suggests that factors such as physical appearance, current use, and intended function are  
85 not at the core of concepts such as *chair*, *clock* and *pawn*.

86 The intentional-historical theory of our concept of *art*, is that we determine that something is a  
87 member of a given artifact kind by inferring that it was successfully created with the intention to

88 belong to that kind. This theory can explain why some properties (such as shape) are more  
89 important than others (such as color) when we determine kind membership and can account for  
90 why certain objects are judged to be members of artifact kinds even though they are highly  
91 dissimilar from other members of the kinds. It can also provide a framework for explaining the  
92 conditions under which broken objects cease to be members of their kinds and new artifacts can  
93 come into existence. This account of our understanding of artifact concepts is argued to be  
94 consistent with more general “essentialist” theories of our understanding of concepts  
95 corresponding to proper names and natural kind terms (Poul Bloom, 1996).

96 The contemporary world is pervasively artifactual. Even our most mundane, biologically based  
97 activities, such as eating, sleeping, and sex, depend on engagement with artifacts. Moreover,  
98 many of the plants and animals we encounter on a daily basis qualify as biological artifacts  
99 (Sperber 2007). But unlike language—which also pervades human life from top to bottom—  
100 artifacts as such are not the subject matter of any well-defined area of philosophical research.

101 Building an artifact requires black boxes all the way down: *to design and build anything requires*  
102 *presupposing a whole set of processes that one does not design*, and whose operation beyond  
103 one’s understanding and intention is necessary for building to take place. There is a *gap*, in the  
104 construction of every artifact, between the intention with which the builder acts and the  
105 consequences of her acts, a gap that is ineliminable and indeed constitutive of what it is to  
106 construct something, and in this gap resides something like what I earlier called wildness. (Vogel  
107 2015: 113)

108 **Methodology**

109 The study entirely depended on document review. This involved the identification of written or  
110 electronic documents containing information on issues to be explored. The documents reviewed  
111 include, the national micro and small enterprises development policy and strategy, the first and  
112 second five-year Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I: 2010-2015, GTP II: 2015-  
113 2020), PASDEP, IGAD regional strategy implementation plan volume II, World Bank reports,  
114 ILO reports, UNESCO protocols and various relevant empirical researches conducted in Ethiopia  
115 and developing nations. The review process was conducted via a pre set inclusion and exclusion  
116 criteria as depicted here under.

117

118 **Table 1: The inclusion and exclusion criteria used during the screening process**  
 119

Inclusion Criteria	Parameters
Nature of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English language.</li> <li>• Publication date 2001 (inclusive)- to present.</li> <li>• Studies from any geographical location.</li> </ul>
Types of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study participants should be those engaged in weaving and have a minimum of five years of weaving experience.</li> </ul>
Types of outcome measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those publications, international reports and country reports and line ministerial websites depicting about weaving and its socio cultural values</li> </ul>

120

Exclusion Criteria	
Nature of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non English language.</li> <li>• Published before 2001.</li> <li>• Grey literature such as Thesis not published in a peer reviewed journal.</li> </ul>
Types of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who did not engaged in weaving and those engaged but less than five years of weaving experience</li> </ul>
Types of outcome measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those publications, international reports and country reports and line ministerial websites do not depicting about weaving and its socio cultural values</li> </ul>

121 **Weaving process**

122 According to Cottage/Handicraft Manufacturing Industries Survey, the textiles industry has the  
 123 second highest number of establishments in the cottage and handicraft manufacturing industry  
 124 (221,848) in Ethiopia. It represents 23% of the total number of cottage and handicraft  
 125 enterprises, with almost 55% of these located in rural areas of the country. Across the nation, the  
 126 textile industries absorb the second highest number of labor force among the cottage and  
 127 handicraft manufacturing industries, following food products and beverages. This industry  
 128 accounts for 23% of the total employment in the cottage and handicraft manufacturing industries,  
 129 and 20% of the rural employment in the cottage and handicraft manufacturing industries.  
 130 Weaving enterprises make up 73.2% of the textile industry in number of establishments, and  
 131 42.8% in total number of workers (CSA, 2003).

132 Hand weaving is a traditional technology to produce specialty fabrics as well as ordinary fabrics  
133 in the rural and semi-urban areas scattered throughout Ethiopia. Weaving is traditionally found  
134 throughout Ethiopia but there are clustered hand weaving activities in the Shiro Meda, Adisu-  
135 Gebeya, Kechene-Medhane Alem and Guellele in Addis Ababa. In the rural areas, Dorze and  
136 Konso in Southern part of Ethiopia are well known for their weaving as is Gondor, Gojjam and  
137 Wollo in Amhara (Alemayehu G, 2018). It is not uncommon to find people engaged in this  
138 activity in Oromia.

139 The major products of the handloom sector can be divided in to semi-finished fabrics and  
140 finished products. While the semi-finished fabrics are usually channeled to the domestic garment  
141 factories for further processing, the finished products are divided into traditional clothing  
142 categories like netella, gabi, kemis, scarf and kuta which are sold mainly in the domestic market  
143 and to Ethiopians living abroad, and home furnishing textiles, which are destined to the  
144 international market (Abdella and Ayele 2008).

145 The first step in weaving is ginning, the removal of the cotton seeds and loosening the bolls by  
146 hand or in rural areas people may use bowing (degan). In order to prepare spun yarn and cotton  
147 yams, the weaver is spinning the cotton fibers using enzert , meaning the spindle. Nowadays,  
148 spinning among the members of the Shiro Meda Dorze is losing its importance because they  
149 easily get mill yarns or factory made yarns for both warp and the weft. If they need cotton spun,  
150 they can get it from market. Winding the dirr (meaning warp threads) involves running the length  
151 of the loom by wogumba and then winding the thread and the weft of meage, meaning threads on  
152 the hollow qesem, meaning reed by a handmade bobbin winder or spinning wheels called diwira  
153 mekina. Once the weaver prepared dirr, the yam he passes the warp threads through each harness  
154 and tooth of memcha, the comb and then the weavers passes the warp. Finally, the extra warp  
155 should be tight and fastened to the right of the weaver, and then he starts weaving by passing  
156 weft threads across, under and above the warp threads. The thread passed out of mewerweria, the  
157 shuttle and the weaver used his/her two hands to throw the shuttle from side to side. He /she also  
158 used his/her two feet in weaving activity and moving feet alternatively raised and lowered the  
159 two reeds or men, harness. Sometimes, the weaver beat up the weft by the comb and windup  
160 shema, the woven on the roller wood (Eskedar Girum, 2008).

161 Women spin the cotton into thread that's loaded onto spools and then strung onto the loom's  
162 warp (lengthwise thread) and weft (the thread that weaves in and out of the warp thread). The  
163 sound of handloom weaving is unmistakable. The shush of the flying shuttle – a small missile-  
164 shaped object, often fashioned from dogwood, that holds the weft thread – as it's thrown through  
165 the shed, or warp threads.



166  
167 **Fig 1: Weaving process**  
168

169 Weavers commonly use two different types of looms. The first is the *meweroria*, where the  
170 weaver throws the bobbin side to side. The other type is the ground loom. With the ground loom,  
171 a hole is dug on the ground and the weaver moves the shuttle with his feet alternately up and  
172 down to interweave the threads.

### 173 **Socio cultural Importance**

174 The physical and intellectual tools that are available in a culture are called artifacts. In a socio-  
175 cultural approach these artifacts mediate the reality to people in a specific context. (Säljö,  
176 2000). The word mediation indicates that a person is not in a direct contact towards the  
177 surrounding world. He or she deals with the world, interprets it with the assistance of the artifacts

178 that are integrated in his or her specific social practices (ibid). The process of learning can  
179 therefore not be understood without taking into account the interrelationship between agent and  
180 mediational means. Language is an important mediational tool for the human being. The  
181 meaning of language is related to how the speaker wants to present a phenomenon, or how the  
182 social setting is formed and therefore affects the speaker's way of presenting it (Säljö, 2000).  
183 Therefore something can occur differently depending on how a person wants to present it or how  
184 the social setting is formed.

185 Handicrafts play important role in representing and preserving culture and traditions of a country  
186 or region of producer and consumer. According to Muller (2011) indigenous handicrafts are a  
187 substantial medium to preserve traditional art, heritage and culture, traditional skills and talents  
188 which are associated with people's lifestyle and history. According to this explanation  
189 handicrafts are unique expressions of both tangible and intangible cultural heritages. The writer  
190 also clearly explained that the handcraft marks identity of specific groups.

191 According to UNESCO (2007), handicrafts are a part of the culture of a nation or ethnic group  
192 and represent a key component of socio-economic life. According to this account, beyond their  
193 aesthetic and cultural dimensions, handicrafts present several interesting socio-economic  
194 characteristics. In addition the UNESCO explained that indigenous handicraft is used to reflect  
195 basic ideas, mental images and culturally prescribed ways to do things. Similarly regular  
196 occurring patterns of different material items represent ethnic groups which formed the  
197 interpretative basis for assigning meaning to material culture and the archaeological record. As  
198 Jena (2010), stated that symbolic representations of handmade object has existed throughout  
199 modern human history and among peoples of the world. According to his research objects have  
200 both tangible and intangible manifestations of cultures. Comparative studies of cultures and  
201 event chronological studies within the same culture, have informed researchers of the complex  
202 cultural interactions that have yielded creations that express, on the one hand, a permanence of  
203 skill in vernacular arts and, on the other, the dynamism and re interpretative ability of artisans  
204 have adapted handicraft skill and forms to match their developing socio-cultural realities.

205 Intangible cultural heritage consists, according to Article 2.1 of that Convention, of practices and  
206 expressions that are handed down within groups and communities from generation to generation,  
207 that are inconstant evolution and that give a sense of identity and continuity to these groups and



208 communities. UNESCO was and has been involved in a number activities related to intangible  
209 cultural heritage in the Horn of Africa, not only in Djibouti and Ethiopia that already ratified the  
210 2003 Convention, but also in Eritrea and Somalia that are considering ratification (Fumiko  
211 Ohinata, 2010).

212 In Ethiopia, hand weaving is an important tradition with deep roots. For generations, all over the  
213 country, many households have depended on weaving to earn income and sustain livelihoods.  
214 Handloom weaving is a demanding trade traditionally done by men whereas the spinning of  
215 cotton in preparation of weaving is often done by women, including elderly women.

216 Artisan people among the Oromo in general and weavers in particular play great role in day to  
217 day life of Maccaa Oromo society. They play decisive role in religious, cultural, social and  
218 economic activities of Oromo society. The artisan provides ritual materials (cloths, ornament).  
219 These materials have both functional and symbolic significances for Oromo society (Waktole et  
220 al., 2016).

221 Weaving activity contributes a lot in the religious life of Maccaa Oromo community. Cloth made  
222 for religious purposes range from those that are used in the qaalluu house to those used for  
223 Oromo religions waaqeffannaa and other ritual ceremonies. Followers of waaqeffannaa religion  
224 and different individual or group who participate in different social event wear cultural cloths for  
225 the purpose of worship. Besides, Limmu, Ebantu and Giddaa ayyaana Oromo people wear  
226 traditional fabrics and jewelries to go to ritual event (Waktole et al., 2016).

227 The woven tibeb are the nettela, kutta, gabi, anguet libs and the ecclesiastical dress with dirib  
228 tibeb worn by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church (Waples, 1998).

229 The Amahara people prefer the native dress, which consists of jodhpur trousers and a long shirt,  
230 covered by a soft, sheet-sized cotton wrap called a *gabi*. This is worn by both men and women,  
231 but the style of these clothes varies according to the gender of the person.

232 Ethiopian cultural clothes are the clothes that are made in a traditional artisanal way and usually  
233 reflect the ethnicity and identity of the person wearing it. There are strong regional styles and  
234 traditional designs related to the traditional woven fabric. There are numerous ethnicities in  
235 Ethiopia, for example the Wolaita people in the Southern Region of Ethiopia. They are known

236 for the red, yellow and black denguza pattern, so Wolaita people are also known and recognized  
237 wearing clothes made from fabrics with this design.

238



239

**Fig 2: Traditional hand woven fabric dressed at church**

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242 In general, the traditional hand woven fabrics in Ethiopia are usually dressed during wedding,  
243 gada ceremony, national holyday, marriage, church, various rituals in all ethnic groups in  
244 Ethiopia which clearly reflect the cultural mosaic and the beauty of diversity.

245

246

### 247 **Challenges**

248 The reasons for the significance of cultural values are complex and many advocacy groups have  
249 not successfully provided clear explanations for and convincing arguments in favor of  
250 prioritizing cultural values related to artifact in the development processes.

251 One of the Ethiopian proverbs says that “*Gold in one’s hand is like copper*” which can be  
252 translated to mean that individuals should not undermine or forget the beauty and value of  
253 everyday life experiences (Silverman, 1999).

254 Weavers were suffering from inadequate contemporary technology and scarcity of working  
255 capital, which were mandatory to maintain the smooth flow of production. Most of the time,  
256 weavers acquire their working capital from their own and sometimes they acquire capital from  
257 their relatives. They were suffering from financial shortage to properly run their business in  
258 Ethiopia ( Ayele, et al 2009; Yesuneh G, 2019).

259 Raw material mainly the price of the thread was highly expensive which could threaten the  
260 traditional weaving sector as depicted by researcher (Yesuneh G, 2018; Rakhin, 2015;  
261 Muhammad, et.al, 2016).

262 Another challenges for weavers identified by different scholars were lack of promotional and  
263 advertisement activities and no direct communication is there with the customers or end users to  
264 sale their products (Ayele, et al 2009; Singh and Joshi, 2017;Rakhin, 2015)

265 Scholars have also been identified training was one of the expected institutional supports where  
266 inadequate training to upgrade skill might hinder the innovativeness of weavers. (Rakhin, 2015;  
267 Muhammad, et.al, 2016). Modernization and global textile markets could have the potential to  
268 affect the marketability of the hand woven fabric that might discourage traditional weavers to  
269 continue their duty.

## 270 **Opportunities**

271 The 2008 TVET strategy and PROCLAMATION NO 391/2004 of Ethiopia aim to provide more  
272 opportunities to a wider range of different target groups. In addition to school leavers, the TVET  
273 system has been planned to address school drop-outs, people without formal education, including  
274 illiterate or least educated people; farmers and their families; unemployed people who need  
275 initial TVET or retraining to support their reintegration into the labor market; people with  
276 disabilities, people from marginalized ethnic groups. Besides, tailor made training module on  
277 weaving is taken as an opportunity for people engaged in weaving to acquire the skill required  
278 for the sector. The existence of textile, garment and leather department with the relevant  
279 professional at different Poly Technique Colleges and universities, microfinance institutions for  
280 credit provision, cooperative office, appropriate zonal departments and non-governmental  
281 organizations is taken as a golden opportunity if they were working in collaboration to support  
282 prisoners engaged in weaving.

283 The current market demand for the traditional clothes such as netela, gabi and scarf is high in  
284 local market, big cities like Addis Ababa and abroad. This was one of the opportunities for  
285 weavers to manufacture the fabrics locally (Yesuneh, G. 2018).

286 Availability of different National and International Events such as various events in different  
287 cities of the country with the support of government and corporate in the form of CSR  
288 (Corporate Social Responsibility) to promote the cultural/traditional cloths can be a great  
289 opportunity for people engaged in weaving. These events might create an opportunity to innovate  
290 the design of traditional cloths for fashion show and can be categorized for economy class to  
291 premium customers including tourists (Yesuneh, G. 2018).

## 292 **Conclusion and recommendation**

293 The reasons for the significance of cultural values are complex and many advocacy groups have  
294 not successfully provided clear explanations for and convincing arguments in favor of  
295 prioritizing cultural values related to artifact in the development processes. Ethiopians are  
296 ethnically diverse, with the most important differences on the basis of linguistic categorization.  
297 Ethiopia is a mosaic of many languages and culture. Weaving is part of the culture of a nation or  
298 ethnic group and represents a key component of socio-economic life in Ethiopia. The traditional  
299 fabrics out of the weaving dressed during wedding, gada ceremony, national holyday, marriage,  
300 church, various rituals in all ethnic groups in Ethiopia clearly reflect the cultural mosaic and the  
301 beauty of diversity. This intangible assets that serve blue prints to describe the culture and attract  
302 tourists were facing challenges like raw material shortage, competition from machine fabrics  
303 among others. Thus, in line with this the following recommendation forwarded:

- 304 • Practice of conservation and safeguarding of traditional woven fabric as per the protocol  
305 of UNESCO and retention of the people engaged weaver with proper incentives should  
306 be employed.

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