

Weaving and its socio-cultural values in Ethiopia: A Review

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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 the 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 is facing challenges like raw material shortage, higher cost of input, competition from machine fabrics, poor technological support and incentives among others. The sector needs proper care from all the relevant stakeholders to sustain its symbolic role 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 in weaving 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 [26]. 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 [4]. 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.

The ethnic and cultural diversity has given rise to many unique and dynamic visual traditions. One of these traditions is the weaving from the Gamu-Gofa Highland; the Dorze weaving and weaving from other parts of the country. Many Dorze weavers live in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, at “Shiro Meda”, which is an area at the foot of Entotto Mountain in the northern part of the city[9].

The handloom sub-sector in Ethiopia is derived from the cotton sub-sector and is an example of a traditional-based and home grown activity. Handloom weaving is a simple value chain activity and is pivotal in the cotton sector, as it binds the rural and urban households together; it is grown from the home-based traditional handcraft industry. Handloom weaving was established to meet household need and demand for clothing, and then gradually grew to be an additional source of income as a non-farm activity. In fact, handlooms, the informal operators, are the major demanders of raw cotton, and are engaged in weaving and preparation of traditional fibers, especially woven dresses. These are popular both at the rural and urban centers and are also exported to Ethiopians living abroad [3].

The craft designs in traditional society consist of three dimensional elements such as the object form and the two dimensional features such as patterns, lines and colors [11]. The visual designs on material artifacts have consistently infused culture-oriented aesthetics, thus adding to their local identity and commercial value [12].

Culture is that which defines the way of life of a group of people and their interactions with the environment over a period of time. Moving from the abstract to the concrete and from the material realm to the immaterial domain, culture could be described as a thread that holds what a society finds valuable, meaningful and appreciable. Following the models of previous studies [13], culture is firmly observed as being dynamic and multi-layered. From the perspective of the intangible elements, [11] described culture as a set of values (conscious and unconscious) evolved by a group of people living in a society so as to shape that society with specific characteristics, identities, attitudes and behaviors. However, within the tangible layer, culture could also be understood in the social context of artifacts used within a particular environment.

Many of the weavers live and work in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, and are in general called Dorze, even if the term originally refers to an ethnic group in southern Ethiopia. Their handicraft tradition is taught from one generation to another. The production takes place in their homes, using simple looms, and the products are mainly sold within the country [9].

The relationship among artifacts, culture and society is bolshie. This is also true for the society engaged in weaving. Few types of research have so far been conducted in indigenous artifacts of Ethiopia. Few of them focused on social status and economy of artisans. The others addressed the relationship among material, culture and society. Furthermore, cultural values of handicraft in general and weaving in particular have been studied previously but not well compiled. Therefore, 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.

Concepts and Theories

A standard philosophical definition of “artifact”—often assumed even when not explicitly stated—is that artifacts are objects made intentionally, in order to accomplish some purpose [8]. This definition is rooted ultimately in Aristotle’s distinction between things that exist by nature and things that exist by craft. Those that exist by nature have their origin in themselves, whereas those that exist by craft have their origin in the craftsman—specifically, in the form of the thing as it exists in the mind of the maker. Both Aristotle and his contemporary descendants are primarily concerned to distinguish artifacts from objects that occur naturally, without any human intervention.

Social categorization differs from other forms of categorization in that people tend to place themselves in a category leading them to be partial to members of their own group (in group) relative to those from other groups (out group) in terms of social preferences, empathic responding, and resource distribution[27].

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

The intentional-historical theory of our concept of *art*, is that we determine that something is a member of a given artifact kind by inferring that it was successfully created with the intention to belong to that kind. This theory can explain why some properties (such as shape) are more important than others (such as color) when we determine kind membership and can account for why certain objects are judged to be members of artifact kinds even though they are highly dissimilar from other members of the kinds. It can also provide a framework for explaining the conditions under which broken objects cease to be members of their kinds and new artifacts can come into existence. This account of our understanding of artifact concepts is argued to be consistent with more general “essentialist” theories of our understanding of concepts corresponding to proper names and natural kind terms [15].

The contemporary world is pervasively artifactual. Even our most mundane, biologically based activities, such as eating, sleeping, and sex, depends on engagement with artifacts. Moreover, many of the plants and animals we encounter on a daily basis qualify as biological artifacts [19]. But unlike language—which also pervades human life from top to bottom—artifacts as such are not the subject matter of any well-defined area of philosophical research.

Building an artifact requires black boxes all the way down: *to design and build anything requires presupposing a whole set of processes that one does not design*, and whose operation beyond one’s understanding and intention is necessary for building to take place. There is a *gap*, in the construction of every artifact, between the intention with which the builder acts and the consequences of her acts, a gap that is ineliminable and indeed constitutive of what it is to construct something, and in this gap resides something like what I earlier called wildness [22].

Methodology

The study entirely depended on document review. This involved the identification of written or electronic documents containing information on issues to be explored. The documents reviewed include, the national micro and small enterprises development policy and strategy, the first and second five-year Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP(Growth and Transformation Plan)) I: 2010-2015, GTP II (2015-2020),PASDEP(Participatory Approach for Sustainable Development and Eradication of Poverty), IGAD(Intergovernmental Authority on Development) regional strategy implementation plan volume II, UNESCO(the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) protocols and various relevant empirical researches conducted in Ethiopia and developing nations.

The terms “weaving” “traditional fabric of Ethiopia” and “socio-cultural values” as key words were searched in Science direct, Scopus, and general Google search and yield 80 results. The search was refined by the focus of the research area (eliminating 25 results), then assessed for relevance to weaving, traditional fabric and the socio cultural importance of the sector for Ethiopia. Following this, the review process was conducted via a pre set inclusion and exclusion criteria as depicted here under.

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

Inclusion Criteria	Parameters
Nature of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• English language.• Publication date 1996 (inclusive)- to present.• Studies from any geographical location.
Types of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Study participants should be those engaged in weaving.
Document screening criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Those publications, international reports and country reports and line ministerial websites depicting about weaving, traditional fabric and its socio cultural values

Exclusion Criteria	
Nature of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non English language. • Published before 1996. • Grey literature such as Thesis not published in a peer reviewed journal.
Types of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who did not engaged in weaving
Document screening criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those publications, international reports and country reports and line ministerial websites do not depicting about weaving, traditional fabric and its socio cultural values

Weaving process

According to Cottage/Handicraft Manufacturing Industries Survey, the textiles industry has the second highest number of establishments in the cottage and handicraft manufacturing industry in Ethiopia. It represents 23% of the total number of cottage and handicraft enterprises, with almost 55% of these located in rural areas of the country. Next to food products and beverages, the textile industries absorb the highest number of labor force in the country. Weaving enterprises make up 73.2% of the textile industry in number of establishments, and 42.8% in total number of workers [5].

Hand weaving is a traditional technology to produce special as well as ordinary fabrics in the rural and semi-urban areas. Weaving is traditionally found throughout Ethiopia. There are clustered hand weaving activities in the Shiro Meda, Adisu-Gebeya, Kechene-Medhane Alem and Guellele in Addis Ababa. In the rural areas, Dorze and Konso in Southern part of Ethiopia are well known for their weaving as is Gondar, Gojjam and Wollo in Amhara [2]. It is not uncommon to find people engaged in this activity in Oromia.

The major products of the handloom sector are divided in to semi-finished and finished fabrics. The semi-finished fabrics are usually channeled to the domestic garment factories for further

processing. The finished products are divided further into traditional clothing categories such as Netella, Gabi, Kemis, Buluko, Hade, Giteto, Scarf and Kuta which are sold mainly in the domestic market and to Ethiopians living abroad [1].

The first step in weaving is ginning, the removal of the cotton seeds and loosening the bolls by hand. In rural areas, people may use bowing (Degan) loosening the bolls. In order to prepare spun yarn and cotton yams, a person has spun the cotton fibers using Enzert (spindle). Nowadays, spinning among the members of the Shiro Meda Dorze is losing its importance because they easily get mill yarns or factory made yarns imported from Chain [6].

As thread passes out of *mewerweria*, the shuttle, the weaver uses his/her two hands to throw the shuttle from one side to the other. He /she also uses his/her two feet in weaving to move alternatively raising and lowering the harness. Sometimes, the weaver beat up the weft by the comb and windup shema, the woven on the roller wood [6].

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



Fig 1: Weaving process

Socio cultural Importance

The physical and intellectual tools that are available in a culture are called artifacts. In a socio-cultural approach, these artifacts mediate the reality to people in a specific context [17]. The word mediation indicates that a person is not in a direct contact with the surrounding world. He or she deals with the world, interprets it with the assistance of the artifacts that are integrated in his or her specific social practices [17]. The process of learning can therefore not be understood without taking into account the interrelationship between agent and mediational means. Language is an important mediational tool for the human being. The meaning of language is related how the speaker wants to present a phenomenon, or how the social setting is formed and therefore affects the speaker's way of presenting it [17]. Therefore, something can occur differently depending on how a person wants to present it or how the social setting is formed.

Handicrafts play an important role in representing and preserving the culture and traditions of a country or region of producer and consumer. According previous study [21], indigenous

handicrafts are a substantial medium to preserve traditional art, heritage and culture, traditional skills and talents which are associated with people's lifestyle and history. According to this explanation, handicrafts are unique expressions of both tangible and intangible cultural heritages. The writers also clearly explained that the handicraft symbolizes the identity of specific groups.

According to UNESCO [20], handicrafts are a part of the culture of a nation or ethnic group and represent a key component of socio-economic life. According to this account, beyond their aesthetic and cultural dimensions, handicrafts present several interesting socio-economic characteristics. In addition, the UNESCO explained that indigenous handicraft is used to reflect basic ideas, mental images and culturally prescribed ways to do things. Similarly, regular occurring patterns of different material items represent ethnic groups which formed the interpretative basis for assigning meaning to material culture and the archaeological record. The symbolic representations of handmade object have existed throughout modern human history and among peoples of the world [10]. According this researcher, objects are both tangible and intangible manifestations of cultures. Comparative studies of cultures and event chronology within the same culture, have informed researchers of the complex cultural interactions that have yielded creations that express, on the one hand, a permanence of skill in vernacular arts and, on the other, the dynamism and re interpretative ability of artisans have adapted handicraft skill and forms to match their developing socio-cultural realities.

Intangible cultural heritage consists, according to Article 2.1 of UNESCO (2007) Convention, of practices and expressions that are handed down within groups and communities from generation to generation; those are in constant evolution and give a sense of identity and continuity to those groups and communities. UNESCO was and has been involved in a number of activities related to intangible cultural heritage in the Horn of Africa, not only in Djibouti and Ethiopia that already ratified the 2003 Convention, but also in Eritrea and Somalia that are considering ratification [7].

Guilds of specialist weavers, embroiderers and tailors worked for religious and political elites. One of the most significant garments in Ethiopia's cultural history is the white cotton Shamma, a toga-like shawl worn by both men and women that was made in several types. A lightweight shawl worn by women over a Kemis (dress) sometimes had a red border indicating rank and status. The Shamma, made in two heavier weights, was worn by men, used as a blanket and even

as shrouds for the dead. The manner of wearing the Shamma could communicate mood, attitude and intention.

In Ethiopia, hand weaving is an important tradition with deep roots. For generations, all over the country, many households have depended on weaving to earn income and sustain livelihoods. Handloom weaving is a demanding trade traditionally done by men whereas the spinning of cotton in preparation of weaving is often done by women. It has tourism, socio cultural and stimulating power for the local economy.

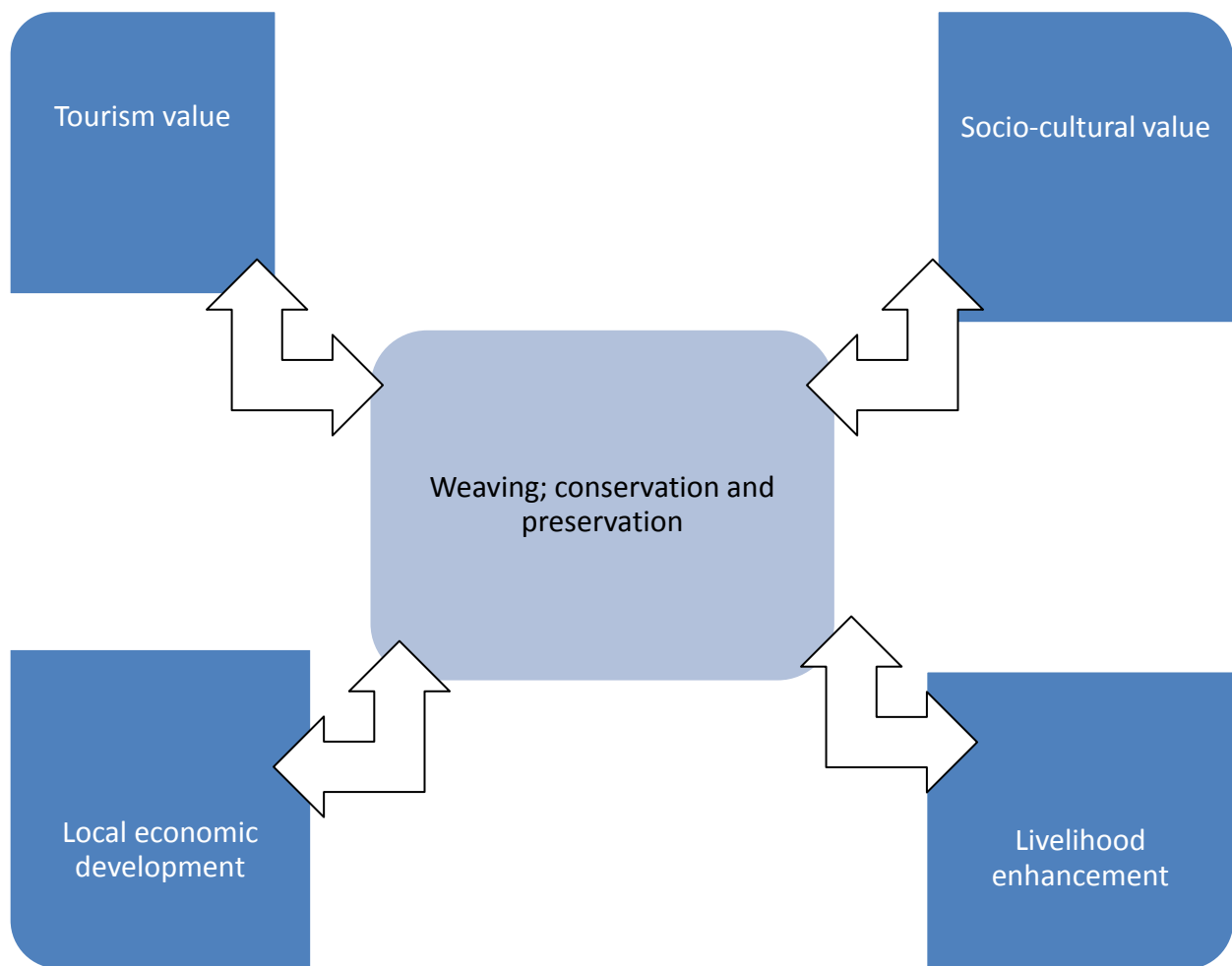


Fig 2: Schematic representation of contribution of weaving in Ethiopia

The learning experiences of the Dorze are integrated with a day-to-day personal and professional life which gives them the opportunity to maintain weaving for their generation. Being a weaver, is part of their life. As a weaver, they will produce items that are demanded by the society. To

have an identity as a craftsman, creating products that others need and want to pay are of significant immaterial intrinsic value and generate self-confidence for the craftsman [9].

Artisan people, among the Oromo in general, and weavers in particular play great role in the day to day life of Maccaa/Mecha Oromo society. They play decisive role in the religious, cultural, social and economic activities of Oromo society. The artisan provides ritual materials (clothes, ornament). These materials have both functional and symbolic significances for Oromo society [23].

Weaving activity contributes a lot in the religious life of Maccaa Oromo community. Cloth made for religious purposes range from those that are used in the Qaalluu house to those used for Oromo religions Waaqeffannaa and other ritual ceremonies. Followers of Waaqeffannaa religion and different individuals or groups who participate in different social events wear cultural cloths for the purpose of worship. Besides, Limmu, Ebantu and Giddaa ayyaana Oromo people wear traditional fabrics and jewelries to go to ritual event [23].

The woven fabrics have different name and purpose. The woven tibebe are the Nettela, Kutta, Gabi, Anguet libs and the ecclesiastical dress with dirib tibebe worn by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church [24]. Besides, Giteto, Hade, Buluko among others are popular in Wolaita.

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

Ethiopian cultural clothes are the clothes that are made in a traditional artisanal way and usually reflect the ethnicity and identity of the person wearing it. There are strong regional styles and traditional designs related to the traditional woven fabric. There are numerous ethnicities in Ethiopia, for example the Wolaita people in the Southern Region of Ethiopia. They are known for the red, yellow and black Dunguza pattern, so Wolaita people are also known and recognized wearing clothes made from fabrics with this design.



Fig 3: Traditional hand woven fabric dressed at church

The weaving activity play great role in interlinking different nations, those having different culture, language, color and environment. It helps that Oromo and Gumuz live together, Gamo and Wolaita; Amahara and Tigre; among others in peace by respecting the diversity exist among them. While spinning at home or village level, females gather and discussing about issues relevant for their households as well as for their community. This situation also creates an opportunity to share local information among the females.

In general, the traditional hand woven fabrics in Ethiopia are usually dressed during wedding; Gada, Lika and Gimuwa ceremonies; national holyday, birthday, marriage, church, various rituals in all ethnic groups in the country which clearly reflect the cultural mosaic and the beauty of diversity. Therefore, the socio-cultural value of weaving products is colossal in Ethiopia.



Fig 4: Ritual ceremony of Wolaita

Challenges

One of the Ethiopian proverbs says that “*Gold in one’s hand is like copper*” which can be interpreted to mean that individuals should not undermine or forget the beauty and value of everyday life experiences [18].

Different scholars came across that weaving is suffering from inadequate contemporary technology and scarcity of working capital, among others to maintain the smooth flow of production. Usually, they acquire their working capital on their own and sometimes they acquire capital from their relatives. They suffer from financial shortage to run their business in Ethiopia [3 and 25].

Raw material mainly the price of the thread is highly expensive which could threaten the traditional weaving sector as depicted by some researchers [14, 16, and 25].

The other challenges for weavers identified by different scholars are lack of promotional and advertisement activities and absence of direct communication with the customers or end users to sale their products [3 and 16]

Scholars have also identified that training is one of the expected institutional supports where inadequate training to upgrade skill may hinder the innovativeness of weavers [14 and 16]. Modernization and global textile markets could have the potential to affect the marketability of the hand woven fabric which may discourage traditional weavers to continue their duty.

Opportunities

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

The current market demand for the traditional clothes such as Netela, Gabi and Scarf is high in local market, big cities like Addis Ababa and abroad. This is one of the opportunities for weavers to manufacture the fabrics locally [25].

Availability of different National and International events, such as various events in different cities of the country with the support of government and corporate in the form of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) to promote the cultural/traditional cloths can be a great opportunity for people engaged in weaving. These events may create an opportunity to innovate the design of traditional cloths for fashion show and to attract tourism [25]

Conclusion and recommendation

The reasons for the significance of cultural values are complex and many advocacy groups have not successfully provided clear explanations and convincing arguments in favor of prioritizing cultural values related to artifact in the development processes. Ethiopians are ethnically diverse, with the most important differences on the basis of linguistic categorization. Ethiopia is a mosaic of many languages and culture. Weaving is part of the culture of a nation or ethnic group and represents a key component of socio-economic life in Ethiopia. The traditional fabrics out of the weaving dressed during wedding, gada ceremony, national holyday, marriage, church, various rituals in all ethnic groups in Ethiopia clearly reflect the cultural mosaic and the beauty of

diversity. These intangible assets that serve as blue prints to describe the culture and attract tourists were facing challenges like raw material shortage, competition from machine fabrics among others. Thus, in line with this, the following recommendation is forwarded:

- Practice of conservation and safeguarding of traditional woven fabric as per the protocol of UNESCO and retention of the people engaged in weaving with proper incentives should be employed
- Promotion of weaving as enterprise and real business to encourage youths' engagement in the sector to maintain its socio-cultural value should be practiced

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