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Ayehu Bacha, Jimma University, Ethiopia. (e-mail: ayew.bacha@yahoo.com)

Lenin Kuto, Jimma University, Ethiopia. (e-mail: leninkuto@gmail.com)

Dereje Fufa, Jimma University, Ethiopia. (e-mail: bderejefufa@yahoo.com)

Kamil Mohammed, Jimma University, Ethiopia. (e-mail: kamilMoh74@yahoo.com)

Buna Qalaa Ritual of the Boorana Oromo

AYEHU BACHA, LENIN KUTO, DEREJE FUFA and KAMIL MOHAMMED

Abstract

Buna Qalaa (Slaughtered Coffee) is the coffee meal which is prepared from dried coffee berries by cooking them with butter after washing appropriately and cutting the tip off each coffee bean with one's teeth. This study deals with the buna qalaa ritual of the Boorana Oromo. It aims at investigating the worldview, philosophy and symbolisms of coffee which are rooted in the buna qalaa ritual of the Boorana Oromo. To this end, ethnographic field methods of interview, focus group discussion and observation were exploited in order to generate first hand data. The raw data was interpreted and synthesized drawing on the general framework provided by Turner (social drama) and Geertz (thick description) as a theoretical basis. The analysis revealed the procedures followed to prepare buna qalaa, the social actors of the ritual, its social values and the worldviews attached to the practices involved in the ritual, as well as the symbolic interpretations of the actions and blessings. Thus, it is possible to safely conclude that the buna qalaa ritual, which accompanies all ritual performances of the Oromo is beyond meal/consumption and reflects the philosophical outlook of the people. The philosophical viewpoint and worldview of the society ingrained in this ritual depict the strong and time tested attachment of the Oromo to coffee consumption and production.

Keywords: buna qalaa, ritual, boorana, oromo, worldview.



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Introduction

Rituals are ceremonies or performances that enact deeply held beliefs or values. Rituals are the result of group interaction rather than individual skills and performances (Dorson, 1972, p. 3). Investigations in this area are more concerned about the family and community observances of the people living in villages, tribal belts and even industrial areas. Of particular importance are the rites of passage of birth, initiation, marriage, death and similar rites (Sims & Stephens, 2011). Thus, the current study deals with the symbolisms of coffee by which worldview and philosophy of the Oromo is gleamed by focusing on the *buna qalaa* ritual of the Boorana Oromo people.

Even though coffee is influential in all dimensions of Oromo life, little research has been undertaken on some of its aspects. In fact, the interface between coffee and Oromo culture has attracted the attention of a few scholars. Some researchers have studied coffee from an agricultural point of view. For instance, Abasanbi (2010), Beyene et al. (2012), Gobena, Urgessa, and Kebebew (2013), Kitila, Alamerew, Kufa, and Garedew (2011), Shumeta, Urgessa, and Kebebew (2012), Sualeh, Endris, and Mohammed (2014), Worku and Astatkie (2010), and Worku and Astatkie (2014) focused on its agricultural aspect and botanical description. Yet, Wayessa (2011) focused on the *buna qalaa* ritual and particularly on the traditional uses of coffee among the Oromo. However, he treated *buna qalaa* as a subtopic and largely emphasized on the coffee, material cultures related with coffee and the importance of the coffee ceremony; hence, a thick description of *buna qalaa*, which accompanies almost all rituals, is missing in his work. Geremew (2013) emphasized the need to shed light on the origin of coffee by analyzing oral traditions and the literature. Finally, Bartels (1983) and Kelbessa (2001) gave a short commentary on the symbolic meaning of coffee and the *ateetee* ritual. Therefore, research should be undertaken in order to explore the deep philosophical outlook and worldview related with coffee in general and the symbolisms of the *buna qalaa* in particular. This gap makes the current study both timely and reasonable.

Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Coffee and Ritual: Conceptual Definitions

Coffee is one of the most widely consumed beverages and most internationally traded commodities in the world; in good part because caffeine is the world's most popular legal drug (Weinberg & Bealer 2001, p. 198).

Rituals on the other hand are performances that are repeated and patterned and frequently include ceremonial symbols and actions. Perhaps most significant to our recognition of rituals is a frame that indicates when the ritual begins and ends. Most rituals are stylized, highly contextualized, deeply symbolic activities that enable groups to acknowledge, exemplify, and/or act out certain traditional ideas, values, and beliefs. Family and community celebrations, sacred and secular ceremonies, and a variety of other structured performances include rituals. Rituals, then, require a set of beliefs and values that group members accept and want to have reinforced (Sims & Stephens, 2011).

Turner (1967, p. 19) defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers." Likewise, a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific

properties of ritual behavior; it is a “storage unit” filled with a vast amount of information (Turner 1968, p. 1). Symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units.

Coffee Vis-a-Vis Oromo Rituals

The usage of coffee (in fact in different forms) is highly prevalent on rites of passage among the Oromo. *Buna buufachuu* (pouring of the coffee) on the wedding day (Qashu, 2009), coffee bean as a symbol of woman’s ovaries (Bartels, 1983; Baxter, Hultin, & Triulzi, 1996; Wayessa, 2011), coffee as an important item of the *guddifachaa* ceremony (Ayalew, 2002) are the best indicators of the fact that coffee is rooted in Oromo culture.

A request for blessings and the offering of coffee beans to *Waaqa* and *buna qalaa* is ritualized (Wayessa, 2011). Similarly, the “*buna qalaa*” ritual is an indigenous Oromo cultural practice whereby the Oromo people prepare a lavish feast from a combination of roasted coffee berries and melted butter on many popular cultural and religious occasions like the *Gadaa*, *muuduu* (anointment), *Buttaa*, *Gumaa* reconciliation, weddings and other traditional ceremonies. These indigenous rituals have their own entrenched sociocultural and religious implications that should not be configured in the absence of “*buna qalaa*” ceremony. This further implies that coffee is an inseparable entity from popular and deep-rooted Oromo cultural and religious life (Geremew, 2013).

Similarly, Bartels and Workneh placed the ritual and symbolic significance of coffee during the *ateetee* ritual: where an old but healthy cow should be sacrificed in order for the cattle to breed well, for a bull to serve a cow, for a pregnancy to be successful, and for a land to be leveled. “The cherry-like coffee fruits are bitten open and stewed in melted butter.” The butter enters the fruits and reaches the beans inside. These beans which, because of their shape, account for the coffee fruits “use as a symbol of the woman: their shape is reminder of the female organ much as cowry-shells are” (Bartels, 1983; Kelbessa, 2001).

Bartels (1983) also stated that the Oromo people have been utilizing coffee from time immemorial, and that the art of preparing coffee is central to their everyday cultural practices. In Oromo society, coffee has always been used as a medicine, as a food and as a beverage; as well as in ritual performances. It is traditionally believed that the first coffee plant sprouted from the tears of *Waaqa*. Therefore, coffee is always a major feature of every ceremony (Haberland, 1963) and it retains an essential cultural and spiritual element across the diverse range of the Oromo groups (Yedes, Clamons, & Osman, 2004).

From the aforementioned assertions, one can deduce that the usage of coffee is closely associated with worldview and embedded in religious practices. Coffee related customs are outward expressions of inwardly experienced values and beliefs. It has been reported that the beans were eaten by warriors, farmers and merchants faced with hard work or long journeys (Wild, 2005) by which they were able to overcome the problems of hunger and exhaustion.

Generally, the function of coffee is not limited to a beverage among the Oromo; it is interlaced with completing ritual patterns, environmental protection, food, serving as a folk medicine and a source of living. This interrelationship indicates that the Oromo culture and way of life is very much dependent on coffee. Coffee ceremony, presence of coffee at rituals, and its symbolic meanings all reveal that coffee is steeped in Oromo culture from many

perspectives; thus, one can safely say that coffee has always had a very crucial place in the culture of the Oromo.

In general, one can understand that the multidimensional nature and significance of coffee has not yet been approached in any great detail. Some academic works given passing comment on the interconnectedness of coffee and Oromo rituals, but still, the way coffee is used in various forms of Oromo rituals has yet to be revealed. Therefore, this current study looks deeply at the philosophical underpinnings of the Oromo that are related with the *buna qalaa* ritual by focusing on the Boorana Oromo.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic anthropology was used as a theoretical framework as it enables the examination of symbols and processes by which humans assign meaning. According to this theory, culture is found in the interpretations of events and things around them and is a system of meaning deciphered by interpreting key symbols and rituals (Spencer, 1996, p. 535).

There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first is that “beliefs, however unintelligible, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning” (Des Chene, 1996, p. 1274). Geertz’s position illustrates the interpretive approach to symbolic anthropology, while Turner’s illustrates the symbolic approach. The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting ideal as well as material activities. Traditionally, symbolic anthropology has focused on religion, cosmology, ritual activity, and expressive customs such as mythology and the performing arts (Des Chene, 1996, p. 1274).

Geertz focused much more on the ways in which symbols operate within culture, like how individuals “see, feel, and think about the world” (Ortner, 1984). He believed that an analysis of culture should “not be an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973b). Culture is expressed by the external symbols that a society uses rather than being locked inside people’s heads. He defined culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973a). Societies use these symbols to express their “worldview, value-orientation, ethos, (and other aspects of their culture)” (Ortner, 1984). For Geertz symbols are “vehicles of ‘culture’” (Ortner, 1984), meaning that symbols should not be studied in and of themselves, but for what they can reveal about a culture. Geertz’s main interest was the way in which symbols shape the ways that social actors see, feel, and think about the world (Ortner, 1984).

Accordingly, the interpretations provided in this research are the result of both the researcher’s and the consultants’ observations. Symbolisms of *buna qalaa*, philosophical meanings of material cultures used and activities performed and symbolic meanings of oral texts are analyzed and interpreted through the lens of Geertz’s and Turner’s symbolic anthropology.

Research Questions

- What is *buna qalaa*?
- What are the philosophical outlooks vested in the *buna qalaa* ritual?
- What are the symbolic interpretations of the activities and practices in *buna qalaa*?
- What are the significances and symbolisms of *buna qalaa*?

Methodology

The general objective of this study is to investigate the *buna qalaa* ritual of the Boorana Oromo.

Specific Objectives

- To define *buna qalaa*
- To explore the philosophical outlooks vested in the *buna qalaa* ritual
- To investigate the symbolic interpretations of the activities and practices in the *buna qalaa* ritual
- To identify the significances and symbolisms of the *buna qalaa* ritual

This research utilized qualitative methodology, in particularly ethnographic fieldwork owing to its exploratory and descriptive nature that allows for the analysis of historical, cultural and economic importance of rituals related with coffee. It is also preferable to examine complex social relationships or intricate patterns of group interaction formed because of the rituals.

As the name signifies, key informant is any person who can provide detailed information and opinion based on rich experience or specialized knowledge on the topic or a particular issue of study. This was conducted through the selection of key informants who are knowledgeable about the ritual performances. Accordingly, elders (n=4), Gadaa leaders (n=3), and the *hayyuus* (n=2) were interviewed for a total of nine key informants.

The interaction of the group in focus group discussion inspires people to think beyond their individual thoughts. The other rationale behind using this method was to mirror what may naturally occur in the setting. Accordingly, five focus group discussions were formed, consisting of two for knowledgeable elders (one male group, one female group) and two for ritual leaders (one male group, one female group). The other group was composed of culture and tourism office experts of the Boorana zone. The focus groups were held in locations convenient to the participants and each group consisted of eight individuals.

Observation helps to gain deeper understanding of human behavior. Accordingly, *buna qalaa* rituals were observed at different stages. Photographs were taken to capture the settings, the visual properties of oral performances, the personality of the individual players and details of the performance such as gestures, facial expressions, the audience and their participation. Notetaking was extensively used in order to obtain get commentary on the general situation. Incomprehensible words and sounds were clarified before leaving the field while the material was still fresh.

In this research, qualitative data collection and analysis were exploited. The data were analyzed qualitatively through descriptive and interpretative method. Finally, the researchers described the phenomena by using symbolic anthropology.

Results

Buna Qalaa (Coffee Slaughtering) Ritual: Concept and Definition

Buna qalaa came from two Afan Oromo words i.e. *buna* (coffee) and *qaluu* (slaughtering). These two words, when come together has a meaning of common coffee meal which is made from coffee by cooking with butter after cutting its husks. *Buna qalaa* is prepared from dried coffee berries or from spilled coffee berries which are washed after cutting the tip of each coffee bean with the teeth.

Among the Oromo, coffee is not considered as a plant and *buna qalaa* is not considered as a food. Coffee looks like grain, but it is said to have been “slaughtered” as if it were livestock. The reason behind this is, even if one has no cattle to slaughter to keep his guests with tallow/*meedhicha*¹, he can slaughter coffee in order to keep them warm. Slaughtering coffee is considered as slaughtering an animal. Those who do not have livestock slaughter coffee for their guests and others. Individuals who do not have animals for sacrifice can use coffee for the same requirement. Slaughtering coffee is equivalent to animal scarification. Even if one slaughters oxen for guests, he first serves coffee. Coffee precedes everything. Guests wash their feet and eat coffee, drink milk and smear butter to go to bed or go out to a meeting. The outgoing guest is also seen off after providing them with slaughtered coffee. To not slaughter coffee for a guest means denying them the respect they deserve. When one slaughters an animal, he cuts its neck; similarly, people cut coffee with their teeth. The symbolism is similar. For this reason, coffee is seen as being slaughtered in the same way that an animal is slaughtered.

Procedures of Preparing Buna Qalaa

To prepare *buna qalaa*, first, *buna duudaa* (virgin coffee beans) are appropriately washed and its husks are cracked with the teeth. Next, the wife of the house in which it is prepared, places *qorii*² under each of the attendants so that they share their part in the cutting of the husks of the coffee bean, which is ritualistic. Everybody taking a coffee bean says inaudibly, “*itti qixeessi Waaqa*” two times and holds it on the third.

Then, the shells of the dry coffee beans are fissured with the teeth so that butter and milk can enter deep in to the inner part. Opening of the coffee bean can help butter to interfuse with the coffee which is used as a flavor to test and also has certain symbolic meaning. As they do this they say “*Afaan sikutee, afaan waan hamtuu narraa kuti*”, meaning “we are cutting your opening, cut our enemies from us.” Cracking the husks of coffee is made to allow the milk and butter to enter deep into the coffee bean which prevents the coffee from jumping out of the pan. It is impossible to prepare *buna qalaa* without cutting the husks of the coffee bean. First and foremost, butter cannot enter deep into the inner part. Coffee beans without butter are burned when roasted, but with butter it is roasted smoothly and becomes colorful. The inner and outer part of the bean is roasted equally with

¹*Meedhicha* is the strip of skin cut from a hide and tied to the wrist. It is a symbol showing that one is a guest of honor and has received the slaughtered cattle at someone else’s house. A strip of skin is cut from a sacrificed animal and worn on the wrist in order to receive blessings from and to show participation in the ceremony.

²*Qorii* is a material in which slaughtered coffee is served. It is prepared from trees not having thorns like *andaraka*, *sukeellaa* (*Delonix elata*), *sangayyii*, *hagarsuu* (*Commiphora erythraea*), *hudhaa* (*Flacourtia indica*) and *waleensuu* (*Erythrina abessinica*).

the help of the butter. On the other hand, if coffee beans are not fissured, they will jump out of the coffee frying pan.

When slaughtered coffee is added to the prepared milk, there is a reaction called *tooruu*, which is the sound it makes. This sound is followed by “*Nagee! Nagee! Nagee!*,” the words of imploring peace by all attendees. Fresh butter is added to the coffee beans while it is on the fire. When the supply of butter is diminishing, oil is used as a replacement for it. When there is no milk in the house, *aanan hoolaa gurraachaa*³ with its literal meaning of “the milk of black sheep” is used for the preparation of *buna qalaa*.

After that, a salt bar is added to the mixture in order to make it sweet though today it is largely being replaced by sugar. It is then slaughtered and divided into two. When it is cooked, butter is added to it. When it cools, that is the point at which the coffee bean is separated. After the milk, butter, the slaughtered coffee is digested well, and it is added to *qorii* for the attendants.



Figure 1. Buna qalaa ready to be eaten

Tasting of Buna Qalaa, Blessing and Social Values

Buna qalaa (coffee slaughtering ritual) is accompanied by blessing of the *Gadamoojjii*⁴. At the absence of *Gadamoojjii*, every person who is fluent can perform the blessing except for bachelors. Before the ritualized tasting, the headman of the family performs the blessing. The blessing is as follows:

For each blessing, the attendants response is “Nagee” (peace)

The following are the blessings for the one administering it, along with literal translations:

Eelee gurraattii	(Black pan)
Buna Gurraacha	(Black coffee)
Nagaa nu guuti	(Fill us with peace)
Kumi kunuu nagaa	(This Kuma is peace)
Manat qalanii manni kunuu nagaa	(It’s slaughtered at home let this home be peace)
Mana kana nagaa guuti	(Fill this house with peace)
Biyyaa biyyeen nuu nagaa	(Make the country and its land peaceful for us)
Gochi kunuu nagaa	(This clan is peace)

³*Aanan hoolaa gurraachaa* is an euphemistic expression of “water” which replaces milk in the preparation of *buna qalaa* especially during *bona* (summer) when there is shortage of milk.

⁴ Terminal and sacred age grade in the Gadaa system

Warri kunuu nagaa	(This family is peace)
Fulaan nu jirru kunuu nu nagaa	(The very place we're at is peace)
Ardaan nagaa	(The locality is peace)
Dheedi nagaa	(The pastures are peace)
Reeri nagaa	(Cluster of village is peace)
Ollaan nagaa	(Let our neighbors be in peace)
Tiksaan nagaa	(Let herders be in peace)
Tiksaa uleen nagaa	(Let herders and cattle be in peace)
Gaadiin nagaa	(Let cow milk be in peace)
Karraan mijaa'i	(Be brimful in kraal)
Ilmaan mijaa'i	(Be brimful in offspring)
Warraa ollaan nagaa	(Let the neighborhood be at peace)
Eleleen nagaa	(Let women be at peace)
Elemtuun nagaa	(Let the milk container be at peace)
Bobbaan magratti qajeela	(Let cattle released to pasture be at peace)
Marroon karat qajeela	(Cows come to grass)
Ilmat abbaat qajeela	(The son resembles the father)
Niitiit dhirsat qajeela	(The wife and husband feel comfort)
Sugaa bokkaat nut qajeela	(Let the prosperity and rain come to us)
Barbadaa maddi sifa abundant)	(Let small pasture & small water suit/ be abundant)
Bokkaan sifa	(The rain will suit)
Kosiin qumbii	(The backyard smells good)
Raadaa jibichi hormaata	(Let the heifer and the young bull be fertile)
Ilmaa intalti hormaata	(Let the young women and young men be fertile)
Horaa bulaa	(Prosper and live long)
Horaa nagaan gala	(Return from watering in peace)
Kankee elmadhu	(Milk your own)
Kankee ergadhu	(Send your own)
Dhaddacha ta'ii	(Be upheel)
Jalaan kosaa'i	(Be fertile from underneath)
Gubbaan daraari	(Blossom from up)
Tulluu namdur ta'i	(Be the mountain of early man)
Gamaa gamasit mul'adhu	(Be visible from all directions)
Horii buli deebani	(Be prosperous, live long and multitude)

After this detailed blessing, he sips and dyes the butter, and then shares to the attendees to do the same. This blessing includes sprouting, prosperity, female, male, pasture, wetness, children, the naïve, the matured, elderly women and men as a whole. Tasting of the *mijuu* (full) is started by the household and passed on to other attendants. Seniors taste the slaughtered coffee and juniors then follow. It is just for the sake of taste and is consumed symbolically. Whoever is elder/senior, the head of the household (husband) is the person to taste first. But his tasting is simply symbolic and he does not eat before the elders/seniors. Even if his father is attending, the son, the head of the household, tastes the slaughtered coffee first. During *buna qalaa*, the elders/seniors sit at the front and eat the coffee first. Seniority is not according to age only, as it can also ranked in terms of clan.

Coffee is not slaughtered during the night except for the days of *gubbisa*⁵, weddings, and other rituals/ceremonies which are conducted during the night. The other only day on which coffee is slaughtered during night is the day the *qaalluu*⁶ has died⁷. Similarly, even if the husband comes home during the night, the wife slaughters the coffee during the day and heats it, although for this not everyone is invited.

Coffee is highly respected and considered as good fortune. Even if one is in an extreme hurry, it is wrong to leave the coffee being prepared without tasting it. In the case of an emergency which forces one not to wait until it is prepared, *ibsachuu*⁸ is performed. However, even if one is in a hurry, he/she smears the forehead before leaving. This practice is believed to protect one from disasters and difficulties in one's future and activities. Let alone in your own home, whenever one comes across the preparation of *buna qalaa* when traveling, it is obligatory to perform *ibsachuu* or stay and enjoy *buna qalaa* if possible. If one ignores the coffee being slaughtered and leaves to attend to his business, "*Karaan sin lakkisuu sagalee hin lakkisin*" is said, which means "Way does not leave you, don't leave food!" – food is coffee here. On the way, such a person faces bad luck. The person is believed to fail in his/her intention. People say, "We have warned him, he ignored our warning and faced misfortune." He fails in his purpose. Thus, overlooking the blessing of coffee makes one fail in whatever is being done. Therefore, where there is slaughtered coffee, there is peace and success.

Still if there is an enemy on the society's land, the forecasters look to the coffee as it tells of one's future life. Those who can foresee forecast the future, see the problems and disasters ahead. There are also experts who understand the messages of the smoke of coffee by reading its shape and direction.

In the case of seeing some dreadful dreams during the night, *buna qalaa* is prepared early in the morning before all members of the family leave for their daily chores. Then, the dream is interpreted and the misfortune is averted by the smoke of the coffee and the prayers of the elders which accompany the coffee ceremony.

If cattle are lost in the pasture, coffee is slaughtered early in the morning before going out to search for the cattle. Similarly, if a donkey is lost, some individuals look at the coffee in order to know of its whereabouts. One who has lost his cattle says, "*kuma!*" (take coffee) three times and gives it over to such individuals. Forecasters even add coffee into a container, saying "This animal is at that and that place, it is in those herds, you'll find it there."

⁵*Gubbisa* is the naming ritual of the eldest son. The naming of younger sons is called *moggaasa*. *Gubbisa* naming is highly ritualized and conducted with great festivity, while *moggaasa* is performed more simply at the household level (Ayalew, 2002).

⁶*Qaalluu* is the supreme hereditary religious leader of the Oromoo. There are certain clans eligible to be *qaalluu*.

⁷Death of *Qaalluu* is euphemistically expressed as "*qaalluun hancufa seene*," "*qaalluun gaangee yaabbate*" or "*qaalluun fagaate*," which literally means "the *qaalluu* mounted the mule or went far" instead of uttering directly.

⁸*Ibsachuu* is the practice of smearing one's face, legs, hands and stick by *buna qalaa* as a symbol of being blessed and averting bad luck from one's own future.

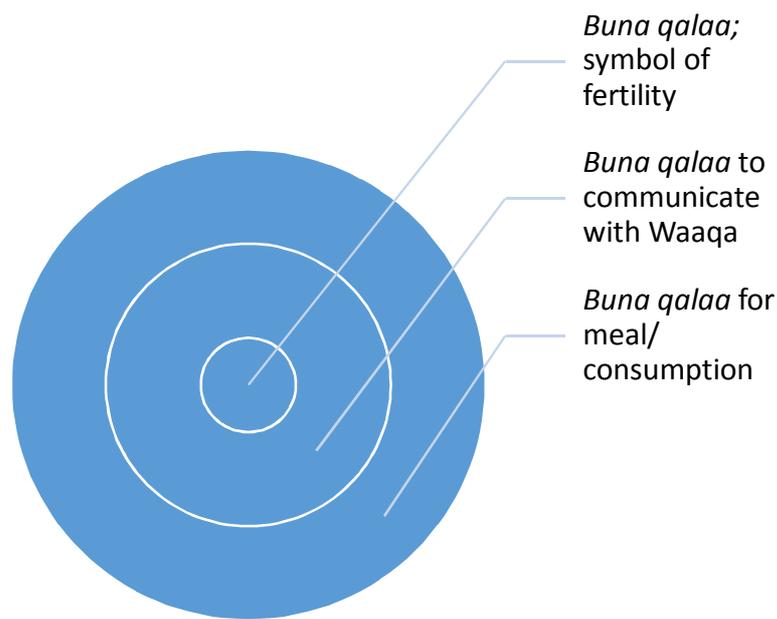


Figure 2. Buna Qalaa Ritual (Boorana, April, 2016)

Discussion

Turner (1997) asserts that culture, like an onion, consists of layers. The outer layer is the level of explicit culture and what people primarily associate with the culture such as the visual reality of behavior, clothing, food, language, and housing etc. The middle layer consists of norms and values held by the community. This is what is considered right and wrong (norms) or good and bad (values). Norm is often external and reinforced by social control. Values tend to be more internal than norms. Values and norms structure the way in which people of a particular culture behave. But they are not visible, despite their influence on what happens at the observable surface. The inner layer is the level of implicit culture. The core consists of basic assumptions, a series of rules and methods applied in order to deal with regular problems that are faced. They are so basic that, like breathing, we no longer think about how we do it.

Explication comes from “thick description” or careful analysis of ethnographic detail. The goal of thick description is to interpret multiple levels of meaning attached to human sociocultural phenomenon.



The butter from which the *buna qalaa* is prepared is smeared in the pursuit of peace. They consider dyeing their hands, feet, and foreheads as relieving bad luck or chasing away evil. Always coffee is slaughtered by married women. Girls who wear the *gaammee*⁹ style of hair do not slaughter coffee as coffee represents family, and second it represents issues of reproduction (sexual intercourse). Unmarried men also do not slaughter coffee since they would not have their own home, and therefore has nowhere to perform the ritual. As mentioned, girls abstain from cutting the husks of the coffee bean because the act is symbolized as the deflowering of virginity; thus, girls are not to witness the act because of the symbolic meaning. Boys too do not engage in sexual intercourse before marriage; therefore, they do not partake in the cutting of husks of coffee beans, which would be the equivalent to taking the virginity of a girl before marriage. For instance, when boys come home from herding, watering or taking cattle away, their mother will perform the ritual for them. – only others can do it for them, and they cannot do it for themselves. If they are taking cattle away, going off to war or another purpose, it is prepared at home and given to them so that they can consume it there in small amounts over time. Thus, through slaughtering coffee, womanhood and motherhood is ensured. As a social group, only women are eligible to slaughter coffee as girls not yet exposed to fertility are disallowed from taking part. The coffee bean, because of its shape typically represent the womb in which children are impregnated and life is sustained. As a result, *buna qalaa* is not eaten by one individual, rather it is tasted together for the symbolism that one cannot enjoy sex alone.

Coffee is believed to be of the woman. First of all, coffee slaughtering requires the presence of women as they are the slaughterers. In a house having no wife, the fire is not set as it believed that it requires a wife to have a fire. Terms such as “his fire is extinguished” or “his fire went far” means that a man’s his wife has died. A married man and an unmarried man even have different burial grounds to signify their marital status.

In short, cutting the husks of the coffee bean is highly symbolic as the practice holds deep cultural meaning. For instance, virgin girls cannot be become miraculously

⁹*Gaammee* is the hairstyle of girls symbolizing virginity.

impregnated. Pregnancy only comes after virginity is broken and sperm is ejaculated into the womb of the girl. The shape of the coffee bean is like a bead (or cowry shell) and is seen as similar to the female organ. It signals fertility in a sense that an untouched coffee bean is cracked and a life giving item is entered in order to change its status, size and color. This signals the first day of sexual intercourse when the virginity of the girl is broken (cracked in this sense) and sperm enters the womb of the girl to alter her status (from girl to womanhood), and brings about pregnancy and later on a child (life). Life is produced when sexual intercourse between the two sexes is performed. Similarly, *buna qalaa* is not tasted alone; likewise one cannot enjoy sexual intercourse alone. *Muduunuu*¹⁰ (the wooden cup in which *buna qalaa* is prepared) too represents the female organ while the stirring stick symbolizes the male organ.

Similarly, numbers have great symbolic meaning to these coffee related rituals. Although numbers are attached to certain philosophical outlooks among the Boorana Oromo, the number three, seven and eight hold special significance in the Gadaa system. This is backed by the saying “*Sadii Waaqi ergatee, torba Waaqi eebbisee, saddeet Waaqi kenne,*” which roughly means God sent three, blessed seven and gave eight. For instance, a typical blessing takes place with three individuals. Similarly, there are seven important rituals in the Gadaa system. With regards to eight, the transfer of power takes place every eight years. When a child is born, the Boorana bless the child by saying “*saddeet bobbaasi, saddeet mogggaasi,*” meaning herd/lead out eight cattle (symbolically indicating “many”) and beget eight (to mean many) children. Everything is structured around the number eight. As a result, *kumaa kumisa* (coffee reserved and kept in each and every Boorana Oromo’s home) should be seven or its twofold, fourteen which is sanctified by *Waaqa*. Among the Boorana Oromo, *Kumaa*¹¹ which literally means thousand is an idiomatic expression for coffee. As coffee first flourished on Kuma’s *irreessa*¹²(grave) for the first time, the Boorana Oromo swear by saying “*bunni naa Kumaa kiyya*” which nearly means “I swear to Kumaa” when they want to prove that a single coffee bean is not available in their house.

Conclusion

In general, since coffee is common in rituals, philosophies, social life, ecological knowledge and the religion of the Oromo, it is safe to conclude that the Oromo live their lives with coffee and they the two are inseparable. Currently, the Boorana Oromo follow different denominations other than their indigenous religion, *waaqeffannaa*. However, *buna qalaa*, which is deep-rooted in religious worldviews are an integral part of their ritualistic and daily life and practiced by each and every family of the Boorana Oromo. On the other hand, the physical environment which is occupied by the people is largely arid and which is obviously not conducive for coffee production. Like other Oromo groups, however, the cultural values of coffee are highly valued despite the fact that weather condition of the area are not favorable for coffee cultivation. This shows the time tested presence of coffee related cultural practices in general and for the *buna qalaa* ritual in particular for the Oromo nation.

¹⁰ *Muduunuu* is a wooden cup used for serving the fried coffee beans in milk at the coffee ceremony.

¹¹ *Kumaa* is something big or great. When someone offers coffee beans they say, *hoo kumaa* meaning have something big or have some coffee

¹² According to Boorana Oromo myth, coffee plant was flourished on Kuma’s grave for the first time

Notes

Corresponding author: AYEHU BACHA

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