

The role of indigenous rituals in strengthening social bonds: a case study of the *Tiska* ritual practice among the Oromo people of Hidabu Abote woreda

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The role of indigenous rituals in strengthening social bonds: a case study of the *Tiska* ritual practice among the Oromo people of Hidabu Abote woreda

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the profound significance of the *Tiska* ritual and its pivotal role in fostering and fortifying social bonds among the Oromo people of Ethiopia, specifically the Hidabu Abote of North Shewa, Oromia Regional State. The Oromo, a major Cushitic-speaking community in East Africa, make up almost half of the population of Ethiopia. Amid the current global societal challenges, it is important to value different cultural perspectives. One such perspective is the *Tiska* ritual of the Oromo people. This rite of sacrifice is performed to ensure a harmonious relationship between individuals, families, clans and communities as a whole. The study used a qualitative research approach and a descriptive research design. Purposive sampling was used to select the study participants. The primary data was collected through the use of ethnographic data collection techniques such as observation, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and informal conversations. Secondary data

was obtained from published and unpublished materials. Field data was discussed qualitatively and analyzed thematically. The findings of the study indicate that rituals such as the *Tiska* indigenous ritual of the Oromo people play a vital role in strengthening social bonds within communities. Through its rich cultural significance, the *Tiska* ritual fosters unity, cohesion and a sense of belonging among the Oromo people in the study area. Moreover, by gathering individuals together to participate in shared traditions, the ritual creates a space for communication, solidarity and mutual understanding, thereby fortifying social relationships. The study further comprises important recommendations and suggestions for prompt action given the seriousness of the subject matter.

Keywords

Cultural practices, empowerment, Indigenous knowledge, *Tiska*, Oromo society

Introduction

The various indigenous peoples of the world are guided in their livelihoods by the indigenous knowledge they have acquired from their culture and learned from the actual practices in their daily lives (Bayissa 2016). In this regard, the World Bank (1998) states that it is the basis for local decision-making in conflict resolution to strengthen social bonds, agriculture, health and other activities among indigenous peoples.

A particular aspect of indigenous knowledge is indigenous ritual, which is practiced by indigenous peoples for very different reasons at different times and in different

cultures. Like the term 'indigenous knowledge', the term 'indigenous ritual' has a number of definitions that stem from the different purposes for which it is used and from its cultural variability.

Rituals are cultural emblems of the distinctive way of life of different groups or classes. This means that the ideas of a particular group as embodied in its institutions, social relations, systems of belief, mores and customs potentially provide valuable insights into all human interactions and relationships (Gruenwald 2003). Collective rituals exist in all human societies, and while they may differ significantly from one another, they share common social functions in

most communities (Etim 2019).

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), the three main functions of a ritual are to enhance social connection, regulate the emotions of participants, and shape traditions and behaviors that will be passed down through generations.

The *Tiska* ritual is a significant cultural practice observed in Oromo society that is often characterized by its communal nature and symbolic significance. The ritual holds a central place in the social fabric of communities, serving as a means to strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of unity among its participants. Understanding the *Tiska* indigenous ritual and its contribution to social cohesion provides valuable insights into the cultural dynamics and social structures of these societies. However, the ritual has not yet been studied in detail. Therefore, researchers are interested in understanding what the *Tiska* ritual is, where and how the Oromo of Hidabu Abote district have practiced it, and what role it plays a role in strengthening social bonds.

Statement of the problem

Various forms of indigenous knowledge have long been used by societies in Africa and elsewhere for many different purposes (Chikaire et al. 2012). Among these forms, indigenous ritual contributes significantly to fostering and fortifying social bonds in rural communities of developing countries in particular (Sohi, Singh and Bopanna 2017). As noted by Sohi, Singh and Bopanna (2017), rituals may have possible effects beyond social cohesion: participation in ritual is associated with perceived health benefits in various communities, even when the activities involve substantial levels of discomfort and physical ordeal.

Indigenous communities in Africa have often developed a variety of complex religious and cultural practices through which they have fortified their social bonds (Sohi, Singh and Bopanna 2017; Kottak 2002). However, indigenous mechanisms used by indigenous people to strengthen their social bonds are currently threatened by the advent of Western technology, by the growing influence of foreign religions and beliefs, by the lack of modern regulations to enforce traditional rules, as well as by urbanization, resettlement and enormous socio-cultural changes. These changes are also having an impact on the overall bio-cultural diversity of indigenous peoples in every corner of the world (Etim 2019).

Contemporary globalization often ignores methods traditionally used to strengthen social bonds, as they are considered to be outdated, barbaric and not in line with scientific principles. This neglect of traditional cultural practices has been accompanied by reduced social cohesion and decreased happiness, and by an increase in undisciplined relationships, such as intra-family and early marriages, crime and gender-based violence (Etim 2019).

Oromo communities have their own cultural practices that enjoy greater local legitimacy in terms of religious institutions, belief systems and ritual practices, especially those related to fostering social bonds (Bayissa 2016; Melaku 2016; Kalbessa 2013). The rules of such rituals have crucial implications for social cohesion, gender equality and conflict resolution. However, the relevance and sustainability of various ritual practices have been affected by modernization and limited government attention to indigenous knowledge (Bayissa 2016; Melaku 2016; Kalbessa 2013).

The *Tiska* ritual practice among the Oromo people represents a significant, longstanding aspect of their cultural heritage. However, there exists a gap in scholarly understanding of the specific mechanisms through which the *Tiska* ritual contributes to the enhancement of social bonds among the community in the study area. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to investigate the role of the Oromo people's *Tiska* indigenous ritual in strengthening social bonds in the case of the North Shewa, Hidabu Abote *woreda* (district) of Oromia regional state.

Based on the above accounts, this study addressed the following basic research questions:

- What is the historical origin and cultural significance of the *Tiska* ritual?
- What are the various stages and activities involved in the *Tiska* ritual and how effective are they in fostering solidarity and mutual support?
- What is the significance of the *Tiska* ritual in promoting gender equality?

Objectives of the study

General objective of the study

The general objective of the study is to investigate the role of the *Tiska* indigenous ritual in strengthening social bonds in the case of the North Shewa zone of Hidabu Abote district in the Oromia regional state

Specific objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

- to describe the historical origin and cultural significance of the *Tiska* ritual
- to explore the various stages and activities involved in the *Tiska* ritual and to understand how they contribute to fostering solidarity and mutual support
- to understand how the *Tiska* ritual contributes to promoting gender equality.

Research questions

- What is the historical origin and cultural significance of the *Tiska* ritual?
- What are the various stages and activities involved in the *Tiska* ritual and how do they contribute to fostering solidarity and mutual support?
- How does the *Tiska* ritual contribute to promoting gender equality?

Significance of the study

The *Tiska* ritual is a longstanding cultural tradition of the Oromo people, passed down from generation to generation. By documenting and analyzing this ritual, the study contributes to the preservation and understanding of this important aspect of Oromo cultural heritage, which is under threat from modernization and globalization.

The findings demonstrate how the *Tiska* ritual plays a crucial role in fostering social bonds and community cohesion among the Oromo people. In an era of increasing individualism and social fragmentation, this study provides insights into the value of indigenous rituals in strengthening communal ties and social resilience.

The study's exploration of the impact of the *Tiska* ritual on social connectedness and collective wellbeing has potential implications for community development initiatives. An understanding of how traditional practices can enhance social capital and community engagement can inform more culturally sensitive and holistic development programs.

The setting

Geographically, the study is limited to the North Shewa zone, Hidabu Abote district, Oromia region, Ethiopia. Hidabu Abote district has 19 administrative units, or *kebeles*. Among these, the study focuses on four

kebeles – Yayya Ejersa, Kobi Goddeeti, Machaara and Sire Morose – as it is difficult to conduct research across all 19 districts due to time and resource constraints. Also, the *kebeles* have been selected on the basis of the prevalence of cultural practices such as the *Tiska* indigenous ritual and the presence of knowledgeable elders. Conceptually, the study is limited to exploring the meaning of the *Tiska* ritual, the community's perception of the ritual, and the role it plays in strengthening social bonds.

The Hidabu Abote district is located north of Dera district, south and east of Degem, and west of Warra Jarso district. Ejere, the capital of Hidabu Abote district, has a total area of 454 square kilometers. It is 147 kilometers from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. The total area of the district is 48,600 hectares, of which 32,917 hectares are used for agriculture. The district is known for its high potential area for teff (*Eragrostis tef*) production. The number of agricultural households in the district is 20,406; of which 18,000 are male headed (89%) and 2400 are female headed (11%). The total population of the district is 104,442 of which 51,030 are male and 53,412 are female (HADANRO 2016).

Materials and methods

A qualitative and descriptive research design was used in the study. In order to gain a thorough understanding of the issue at hand, the researcher used a wide range of data collection methods. They did not rely on a single source of data. Primary data was collected through the use of ethnographic data collection techniques such as observation, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and informal conversations. Secondary data was obtained from published and unpublished materials such as reports, books and journals. These were incorporated and used in the data analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select study participants. Field data was analyzed thematically.

Observation is used from the very beginning of collecting data until the fieldwork ends. The main purpose of field observation was to observe people's practices that could be related to indigenous culture, as well as to observe the different environmental features of the study area. Moreover, *Tiska* ritual celebration was 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, and the audience and their participation. Note-taking was used extensively in order to obtain commentary on the general situation. The researcher clarified incomprehensible words and sounds before leaving the field while the material was still fresh.

Focus group discussion (FGD) was used to gather information because it is useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs about the phenomenon under study. In addition, it is believed that FGD provides an opportunity to assess the common understanding of the group about the case. It is also useful in providing insights into people's thinking and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. Taking these factors into consideration, the researcher conducted two types of FGDs: first, an FGD with groups consisting of elders and religious leaders; and, second, an FGD with scholars from the Office of Culture and Tourism. Both men and women of different ages and statuses participated in all the focus group discussions. Six people from each group make up the total of 12 participants from both groups. The researcher then did a cross-check and

comparison with data obtained by other methods.

The method of in-depth interviewing is designed to help the researcher obtain and quickly understand information about the community studied and the issues covered by the study. Five key informants were interviewed from the study areas. These key informants were considered to have knowledge about the community under study. Also, key informants were pertinent sources of information regarding the subject under study, having first-hand experience of, close proximity to, and an understanding of and involvement in related daily activities. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend these people's experiences, perspectives and values in order to have a better knowledge of the origins and behaviors associated with the *Tiska* ceremonial practices carried out for the protection of natural resources in the studied area.

Data from interviews was transcribed and translated from Afaan Oromo (the Oromo language) into English. The collected data was then organized according to similarities and themes. Both exact and paraphrased phrases and statements were used to present the data collected

Table 1
Lists of informants (peasant farmers, scholars and religious leaders)

Number	Informants' anonymous name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Status	Date of interview	Place of interview
1	Resp 1	M	56	Peasant farmer	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
2	Resp 2	M	81	Peasant farmer	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
3	Resp 3	M	82	Peasant farmer	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
4	Resp 4	M	53	Peasant farmer	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
5	Resp 5	M	57	Merchant	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
6	Resp 6	M	52	Peasant farmer	Married	09.03.2023	Yaayyaa Ejersaa
7	Resp 7	M	38	Scholar	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
8	Resp 8	F	72	Housewife	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
9	Resp 9	F	84	Housewife	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
10	Resp 10	F	58	Housewife	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
11	Resp 11	F	64	Housewife	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
12	Resp 12	F	67	Housewife	Married	10.03.2023	Ejere
13	Resp 13	M	72	Peasant farmer	Married	28.02.2023	Yayya Mukaa
14	Resp 14	M	39	Scholar	Married	01.03.2023	Yayya Mukaa
15	Resp 15	M	69	Scholar	Married	13.03.2023	Machara
16	Resp 16	M	28	Student	Married	20.03.2023	Fiche
17	Resp 17	M	26	Teacher	Married	22.03.2023	Finfinne

M = Male; F = Female; Resp = Respondent.

through interviews. Some pictures were also included to illustrate the data. Finally, the data was the subject of interpretation, consolidation and presentation.

The respondents' right to anonymity was maintained. While the specifics are outlined in Table 1, each respondent in the index was assigned an anonymous identifier, 'Resp', followed by their respective respondent number.

Result and discussion

The concept of the Tiska ritual

Tiska is an Afaan Oromo word and can be translated as 'to protect' or 'to guard'. Data from key informants and focus group discussions indicate that it is a sacrificial ritual to the *Malekaa* to ensure a harmonious relationship between individuals, families, clans and communities as a whole. *Malekaa* is a spirit-like mediator between people and the *Waaqa* (God) and is believed to live in water bodies and indigenous trees such as the *odaa* tree (sycamore) and the *Mi'eessaa* (*Prunus Africana*). The *Tiska* ritual is defined from different perspectives by the Oromo people of the study area.

People of the study area believe that the *Malekaa* has the power to do anything. If the inhabitants do good things, it will be good for them; otherwise, bad fortune will befall them. In line with this, Kenea and Biru (2019) show that the Oromo people practice a variety of rituals that connect them to the divine. These rituals have a place and a time of their own. If people perform the ritual at the right time, their life is smooth; if they don't, it becomes disorderly and filled with misfortune. The FGD participants confirmed that *Tiska* is the primary ritual of the Oromo inhabitants of the study area. The *Gada* system, a traditional system of governance widely used by the Oromo people, is not practiced in some districts of the region – in particular, in the study area. As a result, the *Tiska* indigenous ritual serves as a substitute *Gada* system, as its rules and regulations govern every aspect of people's lives. The *Tiska* indigenous ritual is connected to traditional Oromo governance systems, which aim to strengthen social bonds within the community. These systems often include community-based charity initiatives and customary laws. Rituals like *Tiska* are governed by rules that help establish norms, bringing order to the complexities of the universe, human life, and behavior (Etim 2019; Kottak 2002; Bell 1997:145–155).

The *Tiska* indigenous ritual is a vital aspect of preserving and expressing cultural identity among the Oromo people. The celebration often features traditional dances, music, attire and the telling of stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. By participating in *Tiska*, community members reaffirm their connection to their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of shared identity. The ritual encourages active participation from the community. Collaborative ceremonies, communal feasts and group activities bring individuals together to share experiences. This collective involvement reinforces unity and belonging among members of the community.

Additionally, *Tiska* plays a crucial role in transmitting traditional knowledge from elders to younger generations. This intergenerational exchange helps to preserve cultural practices, values and wisdom. As younger community members engage in these rituals, they not only learn from their elders but also strengthen their bonds with them.

Tiska is an important ritual that has endured over time in the study area. It is a highly specialized and context-specific practice rooted in the Oromo community's cultural and social fabric, reflecting a deep understanding of the local ecosystem. The ritual intertwines social norms and conventional knowledge about resource conservation, highlighting its significance in maintaining the fabric of indigenous societies.

Overall, *Tiska* embodies the practices of indigenous people that are grounded in their history, culture and spirituality. These rituals are integral to their way of life, fostering connections with ancestors and the natural world, and promoting a sense of belonging within the community.

History of the Tiska indigenous ritual

The Oromo people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia, have a rich cultural heritage characterized by deep-rooted traditions, communal values, and a strong connection to their land and ancestors. Historically, Oromo communities have faced various challenges, including political suppression and social upheaval, which have significantly impacted their social bonds and cultural practices.

The Oromo began performing the *Tiska* ritual during times of hardship, such as conflicts, droughts and famines.

The ritual is viewed as a vital means of seeking protection, blessings and guidance from ancestral spirits during difficult times. It serves not only as a spiritual practice but also as a source of resilience, helping the community to navigate adversity and reaffirm their cultural identity. The *Tiska* ritual embodies the collective strength and unity of the Oromo people. By participating in this ritual, community members express their commitment to upholding their traditions, fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that their cultural legacy endures even in the face of challenges.

The informants from Sire Morose and Machaara villages affirm that the communities of Hidabu Abote have performed the *Tiska* ritual since the 18th century. It was suspended during past suppressive political systems in Ethiopia that resulted in the breakdown of many cultural practices, including indigenous religions. However, since 1983, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary and Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power, cultural practices, including the *Tiska* ritual, have experienced relative freedom. Nowadays, *Tiska* is a much-respected ritual whose rules govern all aspects of many people's lives.

Most of the informants and focus group participants from Kobi Goddeeti and Yaya Maramii villages were unsure of when the *Tiska* ritual began to be practiced in their area. Some key interviewees believed it dated from a time of both natural and man-made problems, when it was adopted as a way to overcome these challenges. Today, the *Tiska* ritual is a part of everyday life of people in the study area. They view the ritual as an important part of their cultural and spiritual heritage, and are proud of their traditions. Moreover, they believe that the ritual connects them with their ancestors and the spirits of their land and brings blessings and prosperity to their community.

Participants in the Tiska ritual

Participants in the *Tiska* ritual in the study area vary in sex, age, social status and role. They all participate according to their seniority, or age status. Women have a more significant participatory role than men in the ritual, having been pillars of the practice since earliest times. The wife of the clan leader has an especially vital role when the ritual is performed outside the home at the clan level.

Elders are respected members of the community and their participation is compulsory in *Tiska* ritual

celebrations. They help through leading the ceremony and by providing guidance to younger members of the community. The elders are responsible for passing down to the next generation knowledge that will help them to strengthen the community's traditions and relationships among its members. Young people, too, play an important role in the ritual celebration. They may be responsible for performing certain dances, songs or prayers, or they may assist in the preparation of ceremonial or symbolic objects. They may also be considered as symbols of fertility, renewal and regeneration in many rituals.

Stages of the Tiska ritual

Tiska rituals take two forms: those performed inside and outside of the home. The ritual involves sacrificing animals, such as a bull if it is conducted outside the home, and a goat or a sheep if it is conducted inside the home. The former is brought to *Malekaa* as an offering by those involved and slaughtered by designated elders who have the authority and knowledge to perform the ritual. As a sign of blessing and purification, the blood of the slaughtered bull is scattered to the participants, who believe that this action will promote their wellbeing and strengthen their social bonds. When the ritual is conducted at the household level, a goat or sheep is slaughtered at the gateway to the family's home.

Tiska at the household level (inside the home)

Every household is encouraged to participate in the *Tiska* ritual, as it is believed to be essential for the wellbeing of the family and the continuity of ancestral traditions. The practice not only fosters a sense of spiritual connection but also reinforces the family's ties to their heritage. By engaging in *Tiska*, community members honor their ancestors and ensure that their cultural legacy is passed down through the generations, contributing to the overall strength and unity of the community.

In performing this ritual, the husband is responsible for conducting activities such as preparing goats (*Bokkuu*) as decorations for the household gates. If he has had a dispute or a conflict with someone, he must settle the dispute by asking for forgiveness and seeking reconciliation. If he is unable to settle the dispute either before or after the ritual celebration, the sacrifice he makes will be meaningless. As two informants in the study described is this:

Tiska ritual is our backbone, because, it's a great ritual celebration that has been passed from



Figure 1
A household slaughters sheep for the *Tiska* ritual at Yayya Ejersa kebele.
Source: Photo by Shemelis Teshome, 25 April 2023.

generation to generation. For example, if *Tiska* is not processed, family as well as life will be disrupted. Various social problems such as conflicts, overgrazing and serious crimes will occur. So, I should have to run *Tiska* to protect my life and family peacefully. (Informants 3 and 4)

***Tiska* at the clan level (outside the home)**

At the clan level, different families come together to collectively perform the *Tiska* ritual in a designated location. Prior to the celebration, the minimum requirements for the ritual are communicated by the elders of the clan (*gosaa*) to the residents of the village in various ways.

One key requirement is that any disagreements among individuals, families or members of the community must be resolved before the celebration. Additionally, families that have suffered losses, such as the loss of resources, should receive assistance from others. This includes debt cancellation and efforts to clean the surrounding environment, all of which are essential for ensuring that the *Tiska* ritual can be performed peacefully.

At the same time, the village elders collect contributions from each family to purchase a bull, which will be slaughtered on the day of the celebration. The person who performs the slaughtering is referred to as the leader of the tribe, or *Abbaa burqaa* (father of the stream). This communal effort not only prepares for the ritual but

also strengthens the bonds within the community. The *Abbaa burqaa* is the first born of the clan; as such, he is considered to be most knowledgeable about values, norms and the rules of various rituals, including *Tiska*. Before the bull is slaughtered, all the participants pray to *Malekaa* to protect them from all man-made and natural problems.

That the *Tiska* ritual is used to protect people and to strengthen their social bonds, as well as to help them cope with various natural and man-made problems that arise periodically, is confirmed by some of my informants.

Tiska is one of the rituals we have here. Tiska' means 'guardian' or 'protector'. This means one clan must pay sacrifices twice a year to the god of property (Malekaa), who protects or sustains the nature around him; this is called the Tiska ritual. In the course of the ritual, all people take care of the people around him and other natural resources. In addition, on the day when the celebration is led, the leader announces purposeful points for the communities that will help to build social bonds. Generally, if Tiska is performed at its proper time, everything will be okay; if it's not, many problems will happen to us. (Informants 6 and 7)

Steps in the *Tiska* ritual

Tiska has certain defined stages, which are time-dependent. I have broken the timeline for the ritual into three steps: appointment weeks, preparation weeks and conduct weeks.

Appointment weeks

One or two months before the day of the *Tiska* ceremony, frontrunners and/or leaders discuss and decide on what will be needed for the ceremony and when it will be needed. The elders then share this information with all residents of the village.

Preparation weeks

During this step, which is known as the 'week of forgiveness', residents prepare themselves for the ceremony by undertaking certain activities. For instance, if they are embroiled in a disagreement or a conflict, they must try to resolve it. The *Tiska* indigenous ritual is focused on reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. As such, it includes practices that promote conflict resolution and harmony within the community. In this way, the ceremony contributes to the overall wellbeing of the community and reinforces the importance of cooperation

and understanding among its members.

During this time, too, traditional foods such as *chuukko* (barley conserved with butter), *enjira* (flatbread), a naturally fermented traditional beer called *Farsoo* and *Daadhii* honey wine are prepared in readiness for the ceremony.

Celebration weeks

During the 'week of performance', the *Tiska* ritual celebration lasts for at least three days. The first day of the week is Thanksgiving Day, which includes prayers and blessings, and lessons shared by the elders with the aim of strengthening relationships between individuals, families and communities. On the second and third days, village elders visit households that have not participated in the *Tiska* ritual, often due to illness. Additionally, if a household has experienced a misfortune such as a house fire, livestock loss or other social problem, the community comes together to support them by providing financial assistance and help with work.

The key activities held during the celebration days are as follows:

- **Offerings:** Offerings are arranged on a sacred platform decorated with flowers and incense. The platform symbolizes the earth and the natural elements that sustain life.
- **Invocations, prayers and blessings:** The elders lead the ceremony by invoking the spirits of ancestors, deities and natural forces. The prayers acknowledge the interdependence of humans and seek harmony among all beings. A *Qallicha* (ritual expert) leads the prayers. The blessing program then continues by invoking *Abba burqaa* (the father of the stream) as follows:

Hayyee, Hayyee, Hayyee

Well, well, well!

Waaqa gurraacha

O' black God

Tokkicha maqaan dhibbaa

O' the monolith with multiple names

Gurraacha garaa garbaa

Black one with infinite cosmic span

Yaa Waaqa Waaqa hinqabnee

O' God of all gods

Yaa gooftaa gooftaa hinqabnee

O' Lord of all lords

Mooticha giddii hinqabnee

O' king, bounded by no human obligation

Gungumaa garaa roobaa

the roaring one with belly full of rain

Jaarsa garaa dabbasaa

Noble one with woolly chest

Waaqa hundaa ol jirtuu

O' God who exists above all else

Abbaa ifaaf dukkanaa

Master of darkness and light

Si kadhanna nu dhagayi...

We so beseech you to heed our prayers

Nagaan nu bulchite, nagaan nu oolchi

as you did at night, help us pass the day in peace

Irraa-gora nu oolchi, dogoggora nu oolchi

deliver us from evil and committing mistakes

Hamaa nurraa qabi

spare us from dangers

Tolaa nutti qabi

direct good things towards us

Xiqqaa nuu guddisi

let the young grow

Guddaa lubbuu dheeressi

let the old live long

Barri quufaa gabbina

let the year be of satisfaction and prosperity

Gabbisi Waaq.

Make it prosperous, God.

- **Sacrifice and purification:** The most significant part of the ritual is the sacrifice of a goat or a bull. This animal represents the life force and the offering to the spirits. It is slaughtered with reverence. The blood is sprinkled on to natural resources and on the participants as a symbol of purification and vitality.
- **Distribution and consumption:** I have personally observed, after the sacrifice, the cooked meat being distributed among the participants and being eaten as a communal meal. The focus group participants agreed that the consumption of the meat signifies a sharing of blessings and the unity of the community.
- **Performance:** This stage also involves the actual performance of the ritual, where individuals come together to engage in symbolic actions that reinforce their shared values and beliefs.
- **Reflection:** Finally, the reflection stage allows participants to discuss their experiences and to bond over the significance of the ritual, strengthening their connections and mutual support.



Figure 2
Participants celebrate the *Tiska* ritual under an *odaa* tree (sycamore) at Kobia Goddeeti *kebele*. Source: Photo by Shemelis Teshome, 21 April 2023.

From this summary, one can understand that the *Tiska* indigenous ritual has strong ties to spiritual beliefs and practices. The shared reverence for sacred elements and the acknowledgement of higher powers can create a collective spiritual experience. This shared spiritual connection serves as a unifying force within the community, strengthening interpersonal relationships and fostering a sense of shared purpose.

Purposes of the *Tiska* ritual

Each ethnic group or collection of people has its own logic and justification for why it is important to commemorate a particular indigenous ceremony. *Tiska* is a sacrificial ritual performed by the Oromo of the study area. It is an intricate and rich cultural practice that combines spiritual values and social dynamics. My discussions with key informants and focus group participants have identified the following main purposes of the ritual:

1. *Tisgaan tiskee keenya fi akkasumas ibsituu aadaa keenyati kanaaf kabajna*: '*Tiska* is the protector of all of us and it is celebrated for both cultural and religious purposes.'
2. *Tisgaan wal-qixxummaa saalaa mirkaneessuu akkasumas walitti dhufeenya Uummataa cimsuu irratti bu'aa guddaa qaba*: 'The *Tiska* ritual helps us through promoting gender equality and strengthening our relationships.'

To strengthen social bonds

The findings highlight that the *Tiska* ritual is a community-based ceremony that involves the gathering of

villagers, religious leaders and elders. It is performed to address conflicts, heal wounds and restore harmony within the community. The ritual incorporates various elements such as prayers, symbolic offerings and storytelling. Participants engage in dialogue, express grievances, seek forgiveness and work collectively towards reconciliation. In addition, the ritual builds peace and reconciliation among the Oromo people by serving as a platform for dialogue, allowing community members to openly express their grievances, frustrations and aspirations. By providing a safe and inclusive space, the ritual encourages honest communication, and fosters understanding and empathy among the participants. Participants engage in acts of forgiveness, seeking to repair damaged relationships and to rebuild trust. The ritual emphasizes the importance of community cohesion and the shared responsibility for maintaining peace.

The *Tiska* ritual facilitates the healing of collective trauma by acknowledging the pain and suffering experienced by individuals and the community as a whole. Through storytelling and shared narratives, the ritual enables the processing of emotions and the restoration of psychological wellbeing.

By preserving and practicing their indigenous rituals, the Oromo people of the study area aim to promote a sense of unity through mending broken relationships and bridging divides. The ritual provides a structured framework for individuals to come together, express their beliefs and support one another, ultimately contributing to a sense of unity and cohesion among community members. For example, a household that has problems such as the sickness or death of children, or the loss of cattle through disease, will confess all their sins to the elders leading the *Tiska* ritual, who will pray to the angel *Malekaa* for forgiveness and mercy. Additionally, people who are close to the troubled person or family will make promises to the angel to help that person/family cope with their problems. For example, they may offer a prayer such as: 'Oh, angel of this place, if you get our brother/sister out of this trouble, we will slaughter a goat and feed everyone who is here to honor you.'

The *Tiska* indigenous ritual is a holistic approach that promotes the social, psychological and spiritual aspects of the community. It is focused on protecting and maintaining strong relationships among individuals, families and communities. For example, a rule of the *Tiska* ritual is that

community members regularly donate a small amount of money that can then be provided to families facing an unexpected emergency to ensure the family's wellbeing and help them from falling into poverty and desperation. Bayissa (2013) and Tiruneh (2019) affirm that indigenous rituals are often based on shared cultural values and beliefs; therefore, by participating in these ceremonies, individuals strengthen their sense of community and commonality with others who share those values.

Tiska is also very important in reconciling family or clan members who are fighting, so that they may live together in peace. As Lenin and Dejene (2016) have pointed out, the *Tajoo* ritual of Arsi Oromo has a similar real significance in intercommunity peace-building and sustaining social solidarity, integration and reintegration. For example, under the marriage code, a person is punished for taking or giving a dowry that is in excess of a certain amount. The *Gumaa* ceremony is another indigenous conflict resolution and peace-building mechanism of the Oromo society, used mostly in cases of homicide to achieve justice for the victim and restore peace (Negesa 2022; Aregash 2019; Jeylan 2017).

According to our focus group discussions, the following are some ways in which the *Tiska* indigenous ritual can strengthen social bonds:

- **Expression of shared values:** The ritual is based on shared cultural values and beliefs. By participating in the ceremony, individuals strengthen their sense of community and commonality with others who share those values.
- **Community involvement:** People can participate in the ritual both as individuals and collectively as a community. These provide opportunities for people to come together, to share experiences and to engage in collective decision-making.
- **Sense of belonging:** The ritual is a way to reinforce a sense of belonging to a group, which can increase feelings of security and social support.
- **Multigenerational involvement:** The ritual involves community members of all ages, giving young people opportunities to learn from their elders and to pass on the community's traditions to the next generation.

The *Tiska* ritual is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual practices of this indigenous community. According to Henry (2020), 'indigenous rituals can strengthen social

bonds by providing a space for sharing and learning from similarities that exist in shared experiences'.

To promote gender equality

The *Tiska* ritual also plays a key role in promoting gender equality in Oromo society. A female informant explained:

Women have an important role in the Tiska ritual, especially during the ritual conducted inside the home. The wife prepares food, decorates the house, and holds the head of the goat for her husband when he slaughters the animal. In general, a husband cannot lead a Tiska without a wife. Interestingly, even if the husband and wife have separated, the Tiska ritual reconciles them and creates a great opportunity for them to return to their original lives. (Informants 1 and 3)

This is to say that, in the *Tiska* ritual ceremony, women are given equal opportunities with men to participate in the performances and to showcase their talents, opinions and experiences. This enables women to gain confidence and self-esteem, which they can use to challenge gender inequalities in their daily lives. In *Tiska* performances, men and women work together in harmony and with mutual respect. This challenges the traditional notion that men are superior to women and women are subordinate to men. It promotes the idea that men and women have different but complementary roles in society and that both are equally important.

Another informant *told me:*

Women can play an important role in the Tiska ritual ceremony, both outside and inside the home. For example, there is a term 'Muuda', which means 'to anoint butter on the head of the participants' and this is done only by women. (Informant 2&1)

Similarly, UNESCO (2001) has acknowledged that certain cultural practices can be a powerful yet often underutilized tool for promoting gender equality and fostering more sustainable and inclusive societies. By recognizing and harnessing these cultural elements, communities can work towards creating environments that support equal opportunities and social cohesion for all individuals.

Symbolic interpretation of the Tiska ritual

It is obvious that there are a number of possible symbolic interpretations of indigenous rituals, including the *Tiska* ritual. *Tiska* is performed twice a year. The ritual involves various activities such as chanting of traditional hymns, offering of prayers and sharing of communal meals. These activities serve to deepen the participants' spiritual connection and to create a sense of belonging within the community. The chanting of hymns invokes a sense of reverence and unity, while the offering of prayers symbolizes collective aspirations and intentions. Sharing communal meals promotes amity and reinforces the idea of mutual support among participants. This indicates that the *Tiska* ritual is highly effective in fostering solidarity and mutual support within the community. By engaging in the various stages and activities of the ritual, participants strengthen their bonds, reinforce their shared values and develop a sense of collective identity.

The grass used in the ceremony, called *Coqorsa*, represents 'wet and green', symbolizing the survival of the Oromo peoples and their culture during periods of drought or when faced with other challenges.

For this ritual, butter is used to anoint the heads of participants in the ceremony. It is a symbol of wetness and desire. Preferably, the butter should be made from the milk of cattle that have just started to be milked. Accordingly, the cattle and their owner are blessed by the 'father of the spring', and a woman's strength is measured by how much butter she has and uses.

The symbolic interpretation of *Tiska* is rooted in the people's worldview and cultural values. It represents their relationship with the natural world and reinforces their identity as a community. The ritual has deep significance for the Oromo people and is an important aspect of their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of indigenous rituals in strengthening social bonds among the Oromo people of Ethiopia, with particular reference to the *Tiska* ritual. The study revealed that every indigenous ritual performed by the Oromo people has its own symbolic representation and significance within the framework of Oromo culture. *Tiska* has a strong unifying force, bringing community members together to participate in collective rituals. The ritual often

involves communal activities such as singing, dancing and sharing meals, which foster a sense of togetherness and reinforce social bonds.

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the *Tiska* ritual provides a platform for individuals to connect, communicate and support each other, thereby strengthening the social fabric of the community. Moreover, the ritual serves as a means of passing down knowledge, values and beliefs from one generation to the next. Through this ritual, community members learn about their history and traditions, which creates a sense of continuity and shared understanding. This transmission of cultural practices helps to reinforce social bonds by providing a common framework for interaction and cooperation among community members.

Overall, participating in indigenous rituals can promote empathy, respect and cooperation among individuals within a community. The *Tiska* ritual emphasizes reciprocity, mutual support and respect for nature, which are essential values for maintaining harmonious relationships within the community. By reinforcing these values through ritual practices, community members develop a deeper appreciation for one another and are more likely to work together for the common good.

Recommendations

To ensure the continued preservation and promotion of the *Tiska* ritual practice among the Oromo people of Hidabu Abote *woreda*, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop educational programs within the community to raise awareness about the significance of the *Tiska* ritual and its role in strengthening social bonds. This could include workshops, cultural festivals or community gatherings where the importance of indigenous rituals is discussed and celebrated.
- Encourage research and documentation of the *Tiska* ritual practice to create a comprehensive record of its history, meaning and cultural significance. This can be done through collaborations with academic institutions, local scholars and community members, ensuring that the knowledge is preserved for future generations.
- Foster intergenerational engagement by creating opportunities for younger community members

to actively participate in the *Tiska* ritual. This could involve organizing youth-centered programs, workshops or mentorship initiatives that promote the transmission of traditional knowledge and encourage the younger generation's active involvement.

Establish collaborations between community organizations, local authorities and cultural institutions to support the preservation and promotion of the *Tiska* ritual. By working together, these stakeholders can provide resources, funding and expertise to safeguard and revitalize this important indigenous practice. 🇳🇵

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