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The Nexus between Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development in Ethiopia: Review of Existing Literature

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Abstract- This article synthesizes the findings from review of existing literature on the links between culture, indigenous knowledge and development in Ethiopia. Culture and indigenous knowledge have paramount contribution to development. It is very recently that culture becomes the agenda in the development discourses. Ethiopia is endowed with hundreds and thousands of tangible and intangible cultural heritages. The influence of culture on politics and economy is significant in Ethiopia and government policy shapes culture in the Country. The review of existing literature indicates that little attention is paid by the majority of the authors to show the links between indigenous knowledge, culture and development. Many of the articles reviewed in this study are not rigor enough to contribute towards development by providing sufficient knowledge on culture and tradition. It is safe to conclude that knowledge production in the areas of culture and indigenous knowledge in Ethiopia is at the infancy stage. Many of the existing studies in the area are not pioneered by Ethiopian scholars.

Keywords: *indigenous knowledge, culture, development, ethiopia*.

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The Nexus between Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development in Ethiopia: Review of Existing Literature

Wassie Kebede [α] & Sebsib Belay [σ]

Abstract- This article synthesizes the findings from review of existing literature on the links between culture, indigenous knowledge and development in Ethiopia. Culture and indigenous knowledge have paramount contribution to development. It is very recently that culture becomes the agenda in the development discourses. Ethiopia is endowed with hundreds and thousands of tangible and intangible cultural heritages. The influence of culture on politics and economy is significant in Ethiopia and government policy shapes culture in the Country. The review of existing literature indicates that little attention is paid by the majority of the authors to show the links between indigenous knowledge, culture and development. Many of the articles reviewed in this study are not rigor enough to contribute towards development by providing sufficient knowledge on culture and tradition. It is safe to conclude that knowledge production in the areas of culture and indigenous knowledge in Ethiopia is at the infancy stage. Many of the existing studies in the area are not pioneered by Ethiopian scholars.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, culture, development, ethiopia.

"Knowledge is the only treasure you can give entirely without running short of it"
African Proverb

I. Background

a) Defining Culture

The term "culture" is derived from a French term, which in turn is originated from the Latin word "colere," which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. Yitbarek (2009, p. 203) describes culture as "…the experiences, knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes that a certain social group constitutes and reproduces in daily life." The same author describes culture as dynamic and the concept is broader than a given language group or even a nation. People who share same culture can have more than one language families and can reside in more than a nation. Culture measures the quality of life, the vitality and the health of the society. Through culture, people develop personal and cognitive growth and the ability to emphasize and relate to each other. Culture is also reflected in the history of a society, in the heritage and in how society members express ideas and creativity. Banks, and McGee (1989) provide a comprehensive definition of culture.

The essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviours in the same or in similar ways (p.8).

b) Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is defined as ways of knowing, seeing and thinking that are passed down orally from generation to generation. The ways of knowing reflects experimentation and innovation in topics like agriculture, animal husbandry, child rearing practices, education systems, medicine and natural resource management, among many others (International Centre for Indigenous Knowledge, 2015). Warren (1995; cited in Sithole, 2006, p.2) defines indigenous knowledge as "local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. [It] is the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through accumulation of informal experiences and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture."

Fenta (2000; cited in United Nations, 2004) describes traditional knowledge is "…embedded in the community's practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. It is the total of the knowledge and skills that people in particular geographic areas possess and that enable them to get the most out of their [social and] natural environment" (p.25).The use of indigenous knowledge for local development is recognized by the international communities such as the World Bank and a lot has been invested to revitalize the contribution of such knowledge to community strengthening. The use of traditional knowledge is expressed in a form of customary conflict resolution, agricultural practices, community mobilization and networking, spiritual

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services, health protection, soil conservation, neighbourhood security, economic support via traditional lending, labour cooperation and philanthropic services.

c) *The Role of Culture and Indigenous Knowledge to Development*

Culture and indigenous knowledge have paramount contribution to community wellbeing and development. It is, therefore, necessary to devise protection mechanisms to culture and indigenous knowledge. Protection conveys the measures of preserving, promoting, controlling the use and ensuring to the owners' proper share of the benefits from the use of such knowledge (United Nations, 2004). Culture as one of the determinant factors for development has given less emphasis for long times. For example, the cause for underdevelopment of nations in the South was ascribed mainly to external factors such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, and dependency; and internal factors such as poor macroeconomic policy, inefficient economic system and bad political institutions, whereas, in actual facts culture influences the speedup or slowdown of development. It is very recently that culture becomes the agenda in the development discourses. Contemporary writers began to amplify that culture matters for economic and social development (Yitbarek, 2009; Grenier, 1998; Yitbarek, 2009).

d) *The Ethiopian Context*

Coming to the Ethiopian context, the Country's earlier civilization serves as evidence for extent and rationality of traditional knowledge. The domestication of certain crops like coffee, *teff*, *enset*, etc; and the development of bench terrace systems are important cases of achievements in agriculture using the indigenous knowledge of communities in Ethiopia. The Country with written language over 2000 years, owns manuscripts for over 500 years old, is the indications for the long period preservation of traditional knowledge (Fenta, 2000). Ethiopia is endowed with hundreds and thousands of tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Each tribe and nationality is full of dozens of cultural traits and indigenous knowledge. For example, a recently published inventory of five ethnic groups' intangible cultural heritages indicates existence of various social, economic, and cultural practices patented to these ethnic groups as summarized in the table below.

Table 1

No.	Ethnic group	Total heritages	Sub-categories of heritages
1	Waghemra	20	(1) Social rituals/theatre, (2) Oral tails/storytelling and demonstration, (3) Social/cultural arts, (4) Knowledge of nature and practice, (5) Knowledge of embroidery and knitting.
2	Awi	22	(1) Social rituals/theatre, (2) oral tails/storytelling and demonstration, (3) social/cultural arts, (4) knowledge of nature and practice; and (5) knowledge of handicraft and practice.
3	Erob	15	(1) Social rituals/theatre, (2) Oral tails/storytelling and demonstration, (3) Social/cultural arts, (4) Knowledge of nature and practice; and (5) Knowledge of handicrafts and practice.
4	Kunama	15	(1) Social rituals/theatre, (2) Oral tails/storytelling and demonstration, (3) Social/cultural arts, (4) Knowledge of nature and practice; and (5) Knowledge of handicrafts and practice.
5	Ethiopian Somali	16	(1) Social rituals/theatre, (2) Oral tails/storytelling and demonstration, (3) Social/cultural arts, (4) Knowledge of nature and practice; and (5) Knowledge of handicrafts and practice.

Source: Extracted and translated from Authority for Research& Conservation of Cultural Heritage, June 2015, Volume 7.

II. Objectives

The objective of this paper is to make a synthesis of existing literature on culture, indigenous knowledge and development and; identify existing gaps (if any) in terms of thematic coverage, methodology, findings, attentions paid to policy matters and overall qualities of the publications. The review covers (if any) in terms of thematic coverage, methodology, findings, attentions paid to policy matters and overall published materials in a form of journals, books,

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conference proceedings and theses/dissertations. The review delimited itself to materials published from the year 2000-2014.

III. Review Method

a) Screening Process

We applied various techniques to identify published materials on the subject area of culture, indigenous knowledge and development. We used subject index as a main technique to identify the publications from printed and electronic sources. We also consulted annotated bibliographies to identify related topics to the study. The Store and AcademicJournals.com were the two most electronic sources visited from which over 500 journal publications related to the key terms (culture, indigenous knowledge and development) were retrieved irrespective of our focus on Ethiopia. We further filtered the sources to select those materials published on Ethiopia related to the key terms mentioned above. Only 199 materials were found written on Ethiopia. These materials mentioned some cultural, indigenous knowledge or development issues in relation to Ethiopia. We went to a third stage scrutinizing of the articles/books to identify only those which fulfill our inclusion criteria.

b) Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria to select materials relevant for our review include the following: (1) the material should be published on or after 2000, (2) materials have to appear in journal publications, books or workshop/ conference proceedings/theses/PhD dissertations, (3) the title of the material should contain either culture, indigenous knowledge or development or a combination of two or all; and (4) there should be clear author, date and source of publication. Consequently, only 29 of the materials fulfilled the criteria and were subject for detail review and analysis.

c) Review Technique

Upon completion of listing the sources, we continued reviewing each material in accordance to the predetermined set of focuses. We paid attentionto-extract information on issues summarized in the template below.

Table 2

Year of publication	Author/s	Title and source of publication	Research questions	Objectives & scope of the study	Research method/s	Findings & discussions	Conclusions and recommendations

Our data analysis passed through the following sequences. The first task was extensive reading of each material, followed by extraction of basic information in accordance to the focuses presented in the template above, and developing a source data that comprises the necessary information. Once the necessary data were generated from the desk review, such data were regrouped under the major themes/topical statements we identified in advance. The topics include: (1) profiles of reviewed materials, (2) topical focuses, (3) methods used and objectives set in the studies, (4) research question, (5) findings and (6) conclusions/ recommendations made. Following review and analysis of the publications we made a critical reflection on the gaps identified within the publications (thematic focus, content, objectives and question formulation, methodology, and comprehensiveness).In the final section, we make our own conclusion.

d) Limitations

The first limitation was lack of well organized database from which we could retrieve published materials. We applied a free search engine which might not be strong enough to explore all possible publications in the subject area we conducted the review. Therefore, the sources we relied for review may not be as inclusive as we expected to explore all available materials. Some retrieved materials lacked clear focus for which we dropped them from considering in the review process. Many resourceful materials were omitted since they were not published in journals/books or were not presented in conferences. The materials selected for review were heterogeneous in terms of method, content, focus/objective and scope of their geographic and population targets. This made the review to become cumbersome. In order to make the review process more rigorous and trustable, we were careful enough to rely only on those materials which fulfilled our inclusion criteria.

IV. Findings

e) Profiles of the Reviewed Materials

Among the total of 199 published materials on Ethiopia in relation to culture, indigenous knowledge and development, only 29 of them were found relevant for review and analysis. These materials were published during 2000-2014. Among the selected materials, the highest number of publications retrieved were published in 2005 and 2013 where six and four materials, respectively. The following table illustrates year of publications of materials which were subject for review and analysis.

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Table 3

Year of Publication	No. of publications on culture, indigenous knowledge and development in Ethiopia accessed for review
2000	2
2001	2
2003	1
2004	0
2005	6
2006	3
2007	1
2008	1
2009	2
2010	3
2011	1
2012	1
2013	4
2014	2
Total	29

Publication status of the 29 materials indicates that 24 were journal articles, three conference/workshop proceedings and two Master theses. Another focus of presenting profiles of the publications was to indicate who the authors of the materials were in terms of national origin and solo-co-authorship. Out of the 29 publications,14 were published either by Ethiopian authors or published in co-authorship with other nationals. The remaining 15 were exclusively published by foreign authors. Eighteen publications were found to be solo-authored out of which only eight were published by Ethiopian authors. From the remaining 11 publications which were co-authored, only two were co-authored with Ethiopian authors.

f) Focuses of the Publications

The topics of the 29 reviewed materials indicate that 16 of them were dedicated to pronounce indigenous knowledge in connection to other focus areas to study. Only six of the materials have culture as their topic of study. The remaining seven had combined topics where culture and indigenous knowledge or culture and development are merged with other issues such as religion, politics, policy or other macro-concepts such as society. Whereas, development was less pronounced in topical sentences; indigenous knowledge was presented as major topical phrases in majority of the publications, within which culture is being quoted in some sections of the publications.

g) Methods and Objectives of the Publications Used

A critical observation of mentioning the term "method" or "methodology" was used as a parameter to specify the presence or absence of this important section of scholastic writing. In addition, the extent of describing the method used was applied to measure the attention given by the authors to present clear research method/methodology. Our overall impression in relation to the study methods is that, there is a problem of clarity to describe the specific method/approach used in many of the reviewed materials.

A tally of each of the reviewed articles indicates that authors of the 14 articles never mentioned at all the term "method" or "methodology" in their publications. Other 15 at least mentioned method/methodology in the texts they wrote. A further investigation of the level of clarity of methods/methodologies indicate that out of the 15 publications which mentioned the method/ methodology, nine of them simply mentioned the type of method applied, such as qualitative or quantitative and never described what it means or why they have chosen such method. This is considered in our review as lack of clarity of a method in the publications. Some authors also used study designs as alternative to describe method. For example, terms and phrases such as ethnographic study, participatory rural appraisal, or ethno-botanical approach are used as terms to describe research methods. In our view, the above listed terminologies are study designs falling either under qualitative, quantitative or a mixed method being used ina given study.

Many authors have paid attention to describe objectives compared to explaining their study methods. Although the authors did not give specific topic to state their study objectives, as long as they describe in a form of statements anywhere in the background of their articles, we considered the publications as having stated their objectives. In this regard, 22 publications stated their study objectives, out of which 19 have described such objectives clearly. The level of clarity could be subjective depending on how we analyze the views of authors in presenting and explaining their objectives. The level of clarity both for the objectives and methods was measured against whether or not the authors explained these issues in detail or were presented in scanty manner.

h) Research Questions

As far as the publications we reviewed are published in a form of journals, books or presented in conferences/workshops, we believed the studies have clearly stated research questions and followed scientific inquiries. In actual fact, only12of the 29publications have stated research questions in one way or another. Authors of some materials explicitly listed their research questions while others simply described in a form of statements. In this regard, nineof them have listed the research questions clearly and the remaining three articles have presented ambiguous questions. Out of the 12 publications that presented their research questions, eight of them have attempted to respond to a single research question and four paid attentions to answer multiple questions.

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i) Main Findings

It is not easy and simple to summarize and present findings of already published articles in a concrete and consolidated manner, where the quality of the materials is found to be anomalous. Major constraints to summarize the findings emanated from the huge number of reading materials to cover diverse style of presentation of findings and ambiguities in presenting such findings so that it could be easy to communicate to the reader. Despite these limitations, we have exerted at most effortto develop common themes where findings of the 29 articles can be grouped and synthesized. Our findings are summarized as follows.

i. *Findings on Culture*

One major finding of a study conducted by Keeley and Scoons (2000) indicates the strong influence of cultural networks on political decision making. This same paper continues to explain the influence of cultural traits on protection of environment as well as agricultural and natural resources management. This paper tried to explain how culture contributes to facilitate or deter development in general and political decision making and natural environment protection in particular. Culture is defined in a broader term by some authors and used as lenses to study political ideologies. Tronvoll (2001) describes three forms of political culture that were practiced by some groups in Ethiopia. According to the author, accommodationist, assimilationist and secessionist are three political cultures used to exist in Ethiopia of which the accommodationist political culture got the upper hand.

Culture and religion is another major focus that draws the attention of authors considered in this review of existing literature. Kaplan (2004, 2009) describes the influence of culture in the process of conversion to a specific religion. According to the author, for someone to be considered converted to a specific religion (Islam, Christian) the person has to pass through culture rites that approve the immersion to that particular religion. For example, in old days, receiving a Christian name was the essential rites for those wishing to join a Christian community.

Despite its long existed heritages within a society's way of life, culture is found to be reshaped by a state policy. As described by Abbink (2000), a significant factor that is reshaping local cultures and group relations in Ethiopia and elsewhere is state policy. On the other hand, culture can also be influenced by some gift of nature. Cultural practices and rituals can be shaped by nature including plants, mountains and other sort of topographic features. For instance, plants, especially those medicinal plants can shape cultural elements of a given society (Bahiru, Asfaw & Demissew, 2012).

ii. *Indigenous/Traditional Knowledge*

Indigenous/traditional knowledge is pronounced by scholars as source of strength for natural resource conservation practices. Some Ethiopian writers such as Amsalu Aklilu (2001) notes that "making good use of and building upon indigenous knowledge and practice of the land users in the development and implementation of conservation technologies could bring about effective technological transfer and sustainable land use." Some traditional practices and indigenous knowledge are considered as part and parcel of cultural values in many communities in Ethiopia. The soil conservation practice in the Konso community has, for example, contributed for the change of survival mechanisms in the face of climatic changes. Mulat (2013) underlines that in the Konso community; the deep indigenous knowledge on soil conservation mechanism is deeply embedded in their culture.

There exists controversial agreement between modernity and preservation of traditional/indigenous knowledge. Some argue that while people continue to attend modern education and start to live modern way of life, they start to forget the existed indigenous knowledge that passed through generation to generation. This seems a valid argument as documented by Legesse, Teferi and Baudouin (2013). In their study of the Gedeo community on the use of indigenous knowledge on agro-forestry, the authors found that those young Gedeo's who attended formal education and who engaged in off-farm activities were found to be less knowledgeable on the existing indigenous knowledge.

iii. *Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development*

Among the authors whose works are reviewed in this article, it is fair to say that majority the of them paid little attention to link culture and indigenous knowledge with development. The concept development is rarely mentioned although elements of development such as soil conservation, natural resources management, and preservation of important plant species are mentioned in their reports. The only famous article out of the 29 reviewed works that directly stated the connection between culture, indigenous knowledge and development is the one written by Unasho (2013).

Unasho (2013) states "development that does not pay attention to culture and environment cannot produce fruits. The author, in the study of the Zaysitelanguage quoted the comments given by the respondents of the study and described that there was a direct link between linguistically encoded indigenous environmental knowledge and biodiversity conservation.

iv. *What did the Studies Recommended?*

Although many of the authors are lacking to provide recommendations in their works, very few

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recommended that in the study of culture and indigenous knowledge, deeper studies with comprehensive nature that apply both quantitative and qualitative methodology and encompass wider social groups within a cultural setting are needed to better understand the contemporary nature of culture and indigenous knowledge. Some specific recommend-dations given by few of the study inclined towards giving the assignment to the Ethiopian government to conserve existing cultural practices that contribute towards conservation of natural resources (Bahiru, Asfaw & Demissew, 2012; Unasho, 2013).

V. Identified Gaps

It may not be fair to use a review of only 29 articles written on such huge areas of culture, indigenous knowledge and development and try to speak boldly about gaps. However, admitting our own limitations of the small sample size of publications, it is still possible to mention some gaps we identified. The gaps we want to describe are related to the following areas.

a) *Emphasis Given to Study the Links between Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development*

Our review clearly tells existence of only few published materials that paid attention to study culture and indigenous knowledge. Studying the link between culture and indigenous knowledge to development is a totally missing agenda by many of the articles we reviewed. While culture and indigenous knowledge are two sides of a coin, which can directly affect development, lack of attention given by researchers to show their importance for policy consideration is a serious flashback.

b) *Limited Sense of Ownership of Studying Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development*

The review process makes it clear that study of culture and indigenous knowledge is predominantly conducted by foreign researchers. If Ethiopians are participating, in most cases, they are co-authors. Studies conducted by Ethiopians are mainly post graduate theses which remain unpublished; otherwise, our argument would have been reversed.

c) *The Qualities of the Reports*

Regarding the qualities of the materials we made review, we tried our best to see the quality of each article in terms of content, methodology, research questions, objectives, and conclusions/ recommenda-tions the authors made. As we presented in the findings of this report, a significant number of articles have suffered from lack of clear objectives, ambiguity/ absence of methodology, and unable to describe their research questions. In the absence of clear research questions, objectives, and methods, it is very difficult to witness whether findings of the studies are reliable or not. With such doubts reliability is compromised. We can't be confident that findings from such study with less quality can be useful for policy and programme design.

Another element of the articles subject for comment is the contents/findings. Findings of many of the articles suffer from insufficient presentations of data. Even those with clear data do not witness whether such data respond to the research questions or meet their objectives due to absence of clearly stated research questions and objectives as stated in the previous sections. In sum, many of the studies are not rigor enough to contribute towards development by providing sufficient knowledge on culture and tradition.

VI. Conclusion

From our observation of the literature review, it is safe to conclude that knowledge production in the areas of culture and indigenous knowledge in Ethiopia is at the infancy stage. Similarly, researchers in the areas of culture and indigenous knowledge have paid no or very little attention to magnify the contribution of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge to development. Another critical observation is many of the existing studies are not pioneered by Ethiopian scholars. On the other hand, studies conducted by Ethiopians are not published that widens the gap on knowledge transmission.

The lack of appropriate storage and retrieving systems for existing publications informs that available resources are not in a proper use. As a result, it is very difficult to make a concrete statement which areas of culture and indigenous knowledge should get priority attention for research and knowledge production.

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