

# Revisiting the Approaches to Sustainable Development: From the Perspective of Oromo Indigenous Environmental Ethics

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## Abstract

*Oromo indigenous environmental ethics represents a crucial aspect of African environmental ethics. The Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, possess a wealth of indigenous knowledge about environmental protection and conservation, which can significantly contribute to realising most of the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2015. Unfortunately, there has been insufficient inclusion of indigenous African environmental perspectives, such as those of the Oromo, in the formulation of policies and strategies aimed at sustainable development. This study employs a qualitative research method to explore this topic. The primary objective of this article is to reassess sustainable development approaches through the lens of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics. Traditional sustainable development approaches are deeply rooted in the conventional definitions. This research emphasises the importance of not pursuing sustainable development at the expense of acknowledging both past and present generations, as there exists a profound emotional and moral connection among the living, deceased ancestors, and future generations within Oromo society. This interconnectedness resonates with similar indigenous environmental philosophies across African cultures, such as Ubuntu, Ukama, and Yoruba. In Oromo and other African indigenous societies, inter-generational values, reflected in the responsibilities of inheritance and the care for ageing parents, serve as traditional means of social security.*

**Keywords:** Oromo, indigenous environmental ethics, sustainable development

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## **Background**

Oromo indigenous environmental ethics is an essential component of African environmental ethics. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The Central Statistical Agency (CSA) confirms that the Oromo of Ethiopia is the largest ethnic group in East Africa, and the Oromo people account for 34.4% of the total population of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2010, p. 73).

Recent studies have shown that indigenous knowledge of different societies contributes to sustainable development (Sharma & Sharma, 2023; Ziaul & Shuwei, 2022). Although indigenous environmental ethics practices and perspectives are practised and passed down from generation to generation in the Oromo tradition, as elsewhere in Africa, these perspectives and practices are difficult to find in the existing relevant literature.

The conventional approaches to sustainable development recognise only the interests of present and future generations by neglecting the interests of past generations (the living and dead ancestors), which is the backbone of Oromo and other African indigenous societies' development ethics (Kelbessa 2011 & 2014; Murove, 2004).

The approaches to sustainable development have their root in the commonly accepted definition of the term "sustainable development" coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Brundtland Report) with the motto "Our Common Future": "sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Therefore, to address the issue of under-researched and marginalized indigenous worldviews and practices, we need to go beyond the Western-oriented contemporary environmental theories and practices through recognising indigenous knowledge systems, such as that of the Oromo society of Ethiopia's environmental ethics. Accordingly, the main objective of this article is to revisit the approaches to sustainable development from the point of view of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics. The study sheds light on the relevance and connection of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics with contemporary sustainable development policies.

## **Theoretical and conceptual discussions**

### **Environment**

There are two main positions regarding the relevance and importance of environmental ethics (modern and indigenous) in tackling environmental problems. On the one hand, the first inclusive approach of environmental ethics

attributes holistic intrinsic value to humans and non-humans. Indigenous knowledge scholars have established the claim that indigenous environmental ethics, particularly that of indigenous African societies, can contribute to the effort of resolving environmental problems and bringing about sustainable development (Kelbessa, 2011; Murove, 2004). On the other hand, environmental pragmatists claim that the world should be merely concerned with practical environmental problems, instead of dealing with abstract philosophical discourse. Thus, for my study, I subscribed to the first position or the view that dealing with environmental ethics, particularly indigenous environmental ethics, is relevant and important in resolving environmental problems and realising sustainable development.

The argument of environmental pragmatists does not hold water since it would be impractical to directly deal with concrete environmental problems without relying on justifiable principles and values. To do so, first, one must reach an agreement about the values and principles that ought to guide the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, through rational and critical discourse of either indigenous or modern environmental ethics.

The relevant works on the indigenous worldview of Oromo people discussed earlier, particularly (Kelbessa, 2003, 2015a, 2015b & 2022; Megerssa, 1993 & 2005; Ta'a, 2002) have laid the strong foundation for my study. These studies have shown that Oromo society has a common worldview, norms, and values that are environmentally friendly and complementary to sustainable development, in one way or the other, in their respective studies, regardless of their study sites and variables.

Various scholars have defined the term “environment” from their own perspectives. According to Kalavathy (2004), “environment” refers to a complex of many variables which surround human beings as well as living organisms. It includes water, air and land and the interrelationship that exists among and between water, air and land and human beings and other living creatures such as plants, animals and microorganisms. She further suggested that the term “environment” consists of an inseparable whole system constituted by physical, chemical, biological, social and cultural elements, which are interlinked individually and collectively in myriad ways. Kalavathy’s definition of the term “environment” is comprehensive and gives due emphasis to what we collectively call the natural environment, which is relevant to the purpose of my study.

Kumarawsamy (2004), on his part, stated that the “natural environment” consists of four interlinking systems, namely, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere and the biosphere. He also argued that these four systems are in constant change and such changes are affected by human activities and vice versa.

This definition is also vital for the purpose of this study, since it explicitly gives room to the issue of the interaction between human beings and other members of the natural environment.

I use the term in its strict sense for the purpose of this article, mainly to interchangeably apply the term with that of the term “natural environment” by stressing the issues related to the relationship and interaction of human beings and other entities of the natural world.

According to Robin Attfield, the term “environment” refers to:

[T]he surroundings, natural or otherwise, either of an individual for the duration of [his or] her life, or of a society for the duration of its existence...the objective system of nature that encompasses either local society or human society in general, and that precedes and succeeds it. ...the perceived surroundings or familiar milieu of a person or animal, the territory or pathways that give that individual a sense of belonging and compromise [his or] her home (2003,1- p. 2).

Though Attfield identifies three different meanings held by various individuals and groups about the term “environment” in the above quote, he rejects the first and the third meanings and sticks to the second one throughout his book. That is “an objective encompassing system of nature.” Similarly, I would also subscribe to this definition of the term “environment,” since it is comprehensive enough and relevant to the purpose of my article.

### **Environmental ethics**

Environmental ethics is both a theory and a practice. It deals with how human beings ought to behave and act in their interaction and relationship with the natural environment, emphasising appropriate concern for, values in, and duties toward the natural world.

### **Indigenous environmental ethic and indigenous environmental ethics**

An indigenous environmental ethic refers to the views, norms, principles, and practices of a person or a cultural group about the natural environment. Workineh Kelbessa (2011) have shown the differences between indigenous environmental ethics and non-indigenous environmental ethics. For example, according to Kelbessa, “[a]n indigenous environmental ethic is the set of values and beliefs of an individual or group of people relating to the environment. It involves individuals’ or people’s attitudes toward the environment” (2011, p. 2).

Indigenous environmental ethics codifies the duties of humans toward non-human entities such as wildlife, animals, plants, water bodies, etc. In other words, it goes beyond possessing environmentally friendly views and justifies the relevant positions and practices with concrete evidence and sound arguments. “Many peasant farmers and pastoralists critically and rationally evaluate the commonly accepted opinions and practices of their people and thereby develop their own independent views about society and the natural environment” (2011, p. 2).

Therefore, the term “Oromo indigenous environmental ethics” could be used to refer to the worldviews and practices of the Oromo people. Because they do not merely hand over knowledge from generation to generation, but also critically reflect on the relevance and usefulness of their views and practices concerning the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. That is why I prefer to use the term “environmental ethics” in my article to refer to the views and practices of the Oromo relating to the environment.

### **Sustainable development**

According to Attfeld (2003), the concept of sustainable development could be traced back to 1987 and is often identified with the Brundtland Report. He further states that the concept of sustainable development was revitalised by the Rio de Janeiro United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as ‘the Earth Summit’. Following the Earth Summit, many international and regional conventions and agreements were reached in the name of sustainable development goals.

Sustainable development was defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” ... Thus, sustainability appears merely to concern refraining from impeding future generations' meeting their needs rather than introducing and establishing benign practices which they could maintain and pass on to their successors (2011, p. 130).

Ziaul also argues that “[e]nsuring an environmentally sustainable society for the common benefits of present and future generations is indispensable. Practising environmental sustainability helps create a healthy planet for the current generations and saves natural resources for future ones.” (2023, p. 625).

However, conceiving sustainable development within the context of African indigenous environmental ethics in general and that of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics in particular goes beyond this human-centred approach. Various studies have shown that African indigenous environmental ethics, including Oromo environmental ethics, possess several non-anthropocentric

elements. In other words, according to the relevant indigenous knowledge, sustainable development considers the well-being of other non-human beings such as animals, wildlife, plants, etc. and that of the natural environment itself as well (for a fuller account, see Kelbessa, 2011 & 2015; Murove, 2004; Ramose, 2003).

Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the indigenous environmental ethics pursued by the Oromo and other indigenous African communities can be considered a powerful vision of sustainable development. That means these indigenous worldviews go beyond meeting the needs of current and future generations to include environmental well-being in the realm of sustainable development by upholding intergenerational values.

### **Indigenous knowledge and sustainable development**

Various recent studies have shown that indigenous knowledge of different societies contributes to sustainable development (for a fuller account, see Izah & Ogwu, 2023; Mbah et al., 2022; Sharma & Sharma, 2023). For example, according to Mbah et al:

Indigenous knowledge has been identified as an underutilised resource for the development of problem-solving strategies. Thus, if sustainable development is to be actualised, indigenous perspectives must be researched, and outcomes used to fuel the paradigm shift, as well as utilised in policy around sustainable development. This must be done using decolonised indigenous methods, ensuring that indigenous knowledge is treated with respect and considered equal to knowledge that has been generated via Western methodologies (2022, p.25).

Mbah et al. (2022) also state that indigenous knowledge of different communities can be applied to revitalise and enhance humanity through the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). “The SDGs were adopted by the UN ... as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere, UN, 2015” (2022,p.25).Therefore, indigenous knowledge of the Oromo concerning environmental protection and conservation, as one of the indigenous African societies, can contribute to the realisation of sustainable development goals set by the United Nations.

## Materials and methods

The study area is the Oromia National Regional State of Ethiopia, particularly the Kellem Wollega and Illu Abba Bora zones. I purposively selected the Kellem Wollega administrative zone of Oromia for two main reasons. The first reason is that, as far as my knowledge of relevant previous studies is concerned, there has been no research specifically conducted on the site with an emphasis on the role of the indigenous Oromo environmental ethic in sustainable development. The second reason is that I was born and raised in the Kellem Wollega community of Oromo, which will enable me to analyse and interpret my personal observations and lived experiences that are relevant to the purpose of my study. In addition to this, it is also easy for me to win over the participants as I may be familiar with some of them. I purposively selected the Illu Abba Bora zone of Oromia as the second study site, since I was working as an Assistant Lecturer at Mettu University (located at the heart of the Illu Abba Bora zone) from 2015 – 2017, and as a Lecturer and Researcher from 2019 – 2021. This opportunity to work there enabled me to visit and explore several districts and villages in the Illu Aba Bor zone to conduct research, community service, and weekend and evening teaching projects at the satellite campus of the University of Mettu. At the time, I wondered about the potential for local communities' worldviews of the natural environment to be relevant to my research focus, and this really inspired me to delve deeper into the site.

The qualitative research method has been applied to undertake this study. Methods of data collection that have been employed to conduct this research include key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and participant or personal observations. Key informants and group discussants were selected using a purposive sampling technique.

The first study site, Kellem Wollega zone, has twelve (12) *aanaas* or districts. Therefore, three (3) *jaarsa biyyaa* or community leaders/elders/sages were purposively included as my key informant from each district, since these elders are supposed to be knowledgeable and well experienced due to their leadership role and old age about the indigenous environmental ethic of their respective local communities. That means, there were a total of thirty-six (36) key informants from this zone. Out of these key informants of the Kellem Wollega zone, half of them, or eighteen (18) participants, were women, and the remaining half or eighteen (18), were men, to entertain the relevant voices of both male and female representatives.

When it comes to the second site of my study the Illu Abba Bora zone, it has fifteen (15) *aanaas* or districts. Accordingly, three (3) local community

leaders/elders/sages were purposively selected as my key informant from each district, since these elders are supposed to be knowledgeable and well experienced due to their leadership role and old age regarding the indigenous environmental ethic of their respective local communities. That means, there were a total of forty-five (45) key informants from this zone. Out of these key informants of the Illu Abba Bora zone, twenty-three (23) key informants were women, and the remaining twenty-two (22) will be men to make sure that the relevant voices of both male and female representatives of the local community would be heard.

Hence, totally, there were eighty-one (81) key informants representing both study site zones, where forty-one (41) of them were women, and the remaining forty (40) were men.

All the key informants' interviews (semi-structured) were conducted in *Afaan Oromoo* or the Oromo language, which is the local language of the communities in the study sites. I took notes, used a tape recorder, and a photo camera to compile the responses of my informants with the help of assistant data collectors and supervisors. Then, the results, findings, and suggestions of the key informants' interview were carefully interpreted into English without being distorted, to be critically analysed and assessed.

Members of the focus group discussions were experts from the Agriculture and Environmental Protection Office (EPO), Tourism Office (TO), and Sport and Culture Office (SCO) of Kellem Wollega and Illu Abba Bora zones of Oromia, respectively. The experts were selected from these offices using a purposive sampling technique. The reason for selecting them purposively is that they are supposed to possess the technical expertise and knowledge of the local community's worldviews and practices, and how that contributes to sustainable development.

The first FGD was organised for experts from the first study site, or Kellem Wollega zone, and it had six (6) members, three (3) male and three (3) female participants. Accordingly, one (1) male and one (1) female experts from Agriculture and Environmental Protection Office (EPO); one (1) male and one (1) female experts from Tourism Office (TO); one (1) male and one (1) female experts from Sport and Culture Office (SCO) of Kellem Wollega were respectively selected.

The second FGD was arranged with experts from the second study site, or Illu Abba Bora zone, and it had six (6) members, three (3) male and three (3) female participants. Accordingly, one (1) male and one (1) female experts from Agriculture and Environmental Protection Office (EPO); one (1) male and one (1) female experts from Tourism Office (TO); one (1) male and one (1) female experts

from Sport and Culture Office (SCO) of Illu Abba Bora were respectively selected. Hence, a total of twelve (12) participants or members were in both FGDs, where six (6) of them were female, and the remaining six were male participants.

Members of the remaining six FGDs were model peasant farmers from Kellem Wollega and Illu Abba Bora zones. That means there were three FGDs in each zone. Each FGD consisted of eight (8) members. In each group, half of the members, or four (4) of them, were women, and the remaining half, or four (4), were men. The peasant farmers' members of the FGDs were selected using a purposive sampling technique by obtaining the list of model peasant farmers from the agriculture and environmental protection offices of both zones.

All relevant discussions of both FGDs were done in Afaan Oromoo, which is also the working language of Oromia National Regional State. So, the above-mentioned offices also do their regular job in Afaan Oromoo. I took notes, used a tape recorder, and a photo camera to compile the responses of my informants with the help of assistant data collectors and supervisors. Then, the results, findings, and suggestions of the FGDs were carefully translated into English without being distorted, to be critically analysed and assessed. The sample selection and data interpretation might have been affected by the inadequacy of the English version to exactly capture the suggestive and contextual components of the vernacular language speakers.

## Results

Based on my fieldwork notes and analysis of relevant studies, I would like to identify the following five aspects of Oromo environmental ethics as reflected in the above-mentioned and other relevant works on the subject: (1) Animal Rights; (2) Protection of Natural Forest; (3) Protection of Wildlife; (4) Water Ethics; and (5) Biodiversity Protection. Now, I would present the details of each one of these five aspects that, in one way or another, inspire us to rethink, redefine, and revisit the conventional approaches to and definition of the term “sustainable development.” According to my informants, indigenous Oromo environmental ethics has several non-anthropocentric elements that intrinsically value nature in general and human and non-human beings in particular. Though several distinct indigenous worldviews and practices of different communities of Oromo greatly contribute to sustainable development, there are also some shared ethical principles and values that are environmentally friendly. A local Oromo community leader, Obbo/Mr. Moti Wayessa relates:

Oromo people's respect for and relationality with nature arises from the deep conception of relationship with *Waaqaa* [God]. We believe that taking care of nature and its habitats is part of our duty as human beings that we are entrusted by Waaqaa to discharge for the sake of our mutual continuous existence. For example, the Oromo people believe that famine and droughts are punishments from God for not properly taking care of nature and its living and non-living entities (Obbo Moti Wayessa, 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2024).

In the local community where I was born and raised, those who unfairly treat animals would be excluded or suspended from participating in traditional social institutions such as *afoosha*, *walargee*, *quuqubee*, etc., until the person would take the rights of animals seriously. Afoosha is a traditional association of local community members formed to provide its members with services such as organising and managing funerals, weddings, and rehabilitation after man-made and natural disasters/accidents. Walargee refers to a traditional association of local community members, established for the purpose of having a get-together at every member's home, turn by turn. The gathering aims to discuss and address socio-economic issues while sharing some food and drinks prepared by the host family. Quuqubee is the traditional financial association of the Oromo people. A local peasant farmer, Obbo Tola Badane, says:

I consider the calf of my cow as my own child. For example, I often give advice and make sure that my wife saves a sufficient amount of milk for the calf while milking. It is obvious that we rely on milk to feed our infant children; however, at the same time, we are also very much concerned about the well-being of the cow and its offspring (Obbo Tola Badane, 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2025).

Though this research was conducted at different study sites with varying theoretical frameworks, they all share the view that natural forests were protected and deeply cared for by the respective local communities of the Oromo of Ethiopia for so many years, even before the government began to pay sufficient attention to the issue. For example, among others, according to their findings, only trees that dried up or stopped growing for various reasons, such as natural disasters, are supposed to be utilized for different purposes, like firewood, shelter, etc. According to my informant, Obbo Gemechis Daba:

It is inevitable that members of our local community utilize trees for various purposes, such as firewood, construction, furniture, etc. The elders and sages in the local community consistently raise awareness that people should cut down the dried trees for firewood, and in case they need to cut down the still green trees for construction purposes, they are expected to plant at least ten plants of the same species (Obbo Gemechis Daba, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2024).

The informants further mentioned that according to the environmental worldview of the Oromo, it is believed that forests are shelters for wildlife. Hence, it is immoral to cut down trees and set fire to forests, as it puts wild animals at risk. In addition to the above-discussed intrinsic value that Oromo people have for wildlife, some of the Oromo communities also protect the rights of wild animals for extrinsic value. For example, indigenous Oromo communities don't intentionally hunt hyenas; instead, they keep cattle and other animals out of the hyenas' reach. A local Oromo sage, Obbo Dingata Dabala, says:

The Oromo people have due respect for other members of the natural environment. Let alone domesticated animals, there are also moral rules that apply to the rights and well-being of wildlife. For example, if we go hunting the wildlife, we strictly refrain ourselves from hurting female, pregnant, and infant animals to make sure the species continue to exist (Obbo Dingata Daba, 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 2024).

### **Water ethic in indigenous Oromo environmental ethics**

According to my informants, the fourth essential part of the indigenous Oromo environmental ethic is its place for water security and ethics. Water ethic within the Ethiopian society, like the value of ethics elsewhere in the world, is founded on the conventional motto that “water is life.” I also subscribe to the common belief that water is life, which is a very deep and ticking concept. This means that no living thing can survive and exist without water. Another implication of this view is that water gives life to amphibians such as fish, frogs, toads, etc. They cannot exist without water. A local peasant farmer, Obbo Lata Ifa, says:

Our local community members are very well aware that water sustains life not only for human beings, but also for all living things. That is why we take turns to clean water bodies such as

streams, rivers, and lakes; surround them with fences; and categorize them according to their purposes. That means we reserve some for our animals; some for irrigation, and some for drinking, of course. Therefore, it is a taboo in our community to use a water body reserved for a particular purpose for a quite different purpose. It is also strictly forbidden to pollute the water bodies with garbage and other wastes; otherwise, it is punishable by community moral codes, such as being excluded from social life, like gathering during funeral ceremonies and wedding at the home of the person found to be guilty of misusing or polluting the water bodies (Obbo Lata Ifa, 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2024).

Traditionally, in much of rural Oromia, water has been divided into different categories based on its use. For example, some streams are protected and reserved only for human beings to fetch drinking water from. Typically, this is accomplished by building a fence around a stream for all members of the local community who depend on that stream to meet their drinking water needs.

Furthermore, in most households, where I had unstructured and random observations, there is a good practice of reusing water for multiple purposes, like washing clothes and cleaning the floor with the same water, washing vegetables and fruits before eating and using the same water for watering outdoor flowers and other plants.

### **Preservation of biodiversity in indigenous Oromo environmental ethics**

The fifth very important aspect of Oromo environmental ethic, according to the respondents, is its recognition of the value of biodiversity. As a large portion of Oromo society earns its livelihood from agriculture, seeds of crops, plant species, a variety of animal species, and so on are of paramount importance for the success of the agrarian life. That is why Oromo people, particularly Oromo peasants and pastoralists, have due respect for seeds of crops, plants, and animal species. A local Oromo sage, Obbo Tasisa Garoma, says:

We strongly believe that the elders of the local Oromo community are responsible for teaching their children and younger siblings the importance of protecting and preserving biodiversity. For example, it is taboo for Oromo people to eat crops that are exclusively reserved as seeds for the next farming season, even during famine. It is also morally wrong to slaughter cows and other female and young animals for the purpose of eating their meat to avoid biodiversity loss (Obbo Tasisa Garoma, 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2024).

Therefore, it is not about getting benefits from one or a few seeds; however, Oromo communities do so because they have due respect for biodiversity. And this indicates the Oromo conception of work, sustainable development, and life in general. By the same token, different sections of Oromo society do the same to continue to keep as many cattle, sheep, goats, hens, dogs, cats, and other animals as possible.

### **The major pillars of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics**

According to the data I gathered from the majority of my informants the following are the major pillars of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics in contrary to the conventional concept of sustainable development: relationship with *waaqaa* or supernatural being; farming and livestock rearing as predominant means of livelihood; *safuu* or ethical principle, *Gadaa* system or indigenous Oromo democratic political system; inter-generational values among the living, the ancestors, and the generations to come through commitments to keep promises to the past generations; inheritance system; wise use of resources considering the fate of the future generations; and strong parenting roles. They further added that natural disasters are strongly believed to be punishment from *waaqaa* for not respecting nature.

### **Limitations of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics**

This study further found out that the following are the major limitations of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics despite its contribution in sustainable development: it lacks adequate literature, as it has been transmitted orally from generation to generation; some scholars also criticize Oromo indigenous environmental ethics for not addressing the issue of gender equality since most of the activities related to protecting the natural environment were supposed to be performed by girls and women; in some local communities of Oromo people,

hunting and killing some wildlife such as buffalo is considered as the confirmation of being brave and hero. Group thinking and judgment of actions and behaviors are predominant, which in turn may jeopardize creativity and erode individual freedom and privacy.

## **Discussion**

### **Oromo indigenous environmental ethics and respect for nature**

As is the case in most African indigenous societies' worldviews and practices in their relationship with the natural environment, Oromo ecological worldviews and practices accord intrinsic value to nature. This has been manifested through the five components of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics that this study found. These are: animal rights; wildlife protection; water ethics; maintaining biodiversity; and biosphere/natural forest conservation.

To have a clear overall understanding of Oromo environmental ethics, I think it is important to understand the different components of indigenous Oromo environmental ethics. Several previous studies have shown the place of nature in the indigenous Oromo worldview in general and the harmonious relationship between humans and non-humans in particular (for example, see Kelbessa, 2003, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2022; Megerssa, 1993, 2005; Wako, 2011).

### **Animal rights in indigenous Oromo environmental ethics**

As stated earlier, there are different worldviews and approaches to recognizing and respecting animal rights across the country. But that does not mean that these world views and practices are exclusive; rather, they could overlap with and reinforce each other with those indigenous views and practices of other cultural groups of Ethiopia that recognise, respect, and deeply care for animal rights (Birhanu, 2019a & 2019b; Eshetu, 2016; Merawi, 2020).

### **Protection of natural forest in indigenous Oromo environmental ethics**

Different related studies conducted in different parts of Oromia (see; Kelbessa, 2005, 2015 a, 2011 & 2018; Ta'a, 2002; Takele, 2018) confirmed that local communities of Oromo in different parts of the country deeply care for and protect the natural forest, since they value it both intrinsically and extrinsically. That would in turn increase production and productivity. The people might rely on natural forests to obtain organic food and traditional medicines for themselves and their animals. For instance, coffee plantations, ginger production, beekeeping, and other related agroforestry activities are highly interdependent with the protection and sustainability of natural forests. The different cultural groups of Ethiopia do

protect the natural forest, not only for its extrinsic values, but also for its own good. Some sacred trees are believed to be holy.

The place of the *Odaa* tree in the Oromo society could be one of such sacred trees. *Odaa* is considered the symbol of the Oromo people's unity; an open-air conference hall for the Gadaa system (socio-economic, administrative, and spiritual organisation of the Oromo). One could insist that the people prefer the *Odaa* tree for the sake of its usefulness as a shelter or traditional conference hall. But this is not the primary reason, because in the first place, *Odaa* was selected. After all, people believe that it is sacred. In other words, according to the Oromo worldview, not every tree deserves this role of being the symbol of peace, unity, obedience, respect, reconciliation, and identity.

### **Protection of wildlife in indigenous Oromo environmental ethics**

The Oromo recognise and protect the interests and rights of wildlife (see, for instance, Kitessa, 2018). According to Kelbessa, “[t]he Oromo in Borena and Illuababorra hold that the destruction of a whole species, even when it has no resource value, is morally wrong. They refrain from needless destruction of female and young animals” (2011, p. 99). Kelbessa (2011) further stated that in some communities, like the Borana Oromo of Ethiopia, people make sure that enough amount of water is available for wild animals, even for harmful animals, before leaving the place where they provide water for their animals. Based on these relevant previous studies, the proposed study will emphasise the interdependence of the Oromo people with non-human entities and how this can contribute to sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

One of the major findings of the study is that Oromo indigenous environmental ethics has the following five essential aspects: (1) animal rights, (2) protection of natural forest/biosphere, (3) protection of wildlife, (4) water ethics, and (5) preservation of biodiversity. The conventional definition of sustainable development, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) held with the motto “Our Common Future”, recognizes only the needs of the present and the future generations, though it serves as the root of contemporary approaches to sustainable development whereas each of these five aspects Oromo indigenous environmental ethics gives unique approaches to sustainable development.

It is unrealistic to strive to achieve sustainable development by leaving behind the living and the dead ancestors or past generations as there is strong

emotional and moral connection across the past (living and dead ancestors), the present, and the future generations in Oromo society like elsewhere in the case of indigenous environmental philosophies of African societies such as Ubuntu, Ukama, Yoruba, etc. For example, inter-generational values manifested through inheritance and taking care of one's aged parents are considered traditional means of social security in Oromo and other African indigenous societies.

According to my informants the following are the major pillars of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics in contrary to the conventional concept of sustainable development: relationship with waaqaa or supernatural being; farming and livestock rearing as predominant means of livelihood; safuu or ethical principle, Gadaa system or indigenous Oromo democratic political system; inter-generational values among the living, the ancestors, and the generations to come through; commitments to keep promises to the past generations; inheritance system; wise use of resources considering the fate of the future generations; and implementation of strong parenting roles. They further added that natural disasters are strongly believed to be punishment from waaqaa for not respecting nature.

Relevant recent studies confirmed that local communities of Oromo in different parts of the country deeply care for and protect the natural forest, since they value it both intrinsically and extrinsically. The people rely on natural forests to obtain organic food and traditional medicines for themselves and their animals. For instance, coffee plantations, ginger production, bee-hiving, and other related agroforestry activities are highly interdependent with the protection and sustainability of biospheres.

According to the environmental worldview of the Oromo, it is believed that forests are shelters for wildlife. Hence, it is immoral to cut down trees and set fire to forests, as it puts wild animals at risk. For example, indigenous Oromo communities don't intentionally hunt hyenas; instead, they keep cattle and other animals out of the hyenas' reach.

This study further found out that the following are the major limitations of Oromo indigenous environmental ethics, despite its contribution in sustainable development: it lacks adequate literature, as it has been transmitted orally from generation to generation; Some scholars also criticize Oromo indigenous environmental ethics for not addressing the issue of gender equality, since most of the activities related to protecting the natural environment were supposed to be performed by girls and women; In some local communities of Oromo people, hunting and killing some wildlife such as buffalo is considered as the confirmation of being brave and hero; Group thinking and judgement of actions and behaviours

are predominant, which in turn may jeopardize creativity and erodes individual freedom and privacy.

Oromo indigenous environmental ethics is an essential component of African environmental ethics. Recent studies have shown that indigenous knowledge of different societies contributes to sustainable development (Sharma, & Sharma, 2023; Ziaul & Shuwei, 2022). Although indigenous environmental ethics practices and perspectives are practised and passed down from generation to generation in the Oromo tradition, as elsewhere in Africa, these perspectives and practices are difficult to find in the existing relevant literature. As one of the indigenous societies in Africa, the Oromo people's indigenous knowledge in environmental protection and conservation can contribute to the achievement of most of the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2015. There has not been adequate room for indigenous African environmental worldviews and practices, such as those of Oromo society, in the process of devising policies and strategies for sustainable development.

The conventional definition of sustainable development recognizes only the interests of present and future generations by neglecting the interests of past generations (the living and dead ancestors), which is the backbone of Oromo and other African indigenous societies' development ethics (see Kelbessa 2011, 2014, & Murove, 2004). The conventional approaches to sustainable development have their root in the commonly accepted definition of the term "sustainable development" coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Brundtland Report) with the motto "Our Common Future": sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. therefore, to tackle global challenges such as the climate crisis, we need to go beyond the Western-oriented contemporary environmental theories and practices through recognizing indigenous knowledge systems, such as that of the Oromo society of Ethiopia's environmental ethics. Hence, one of the implications of this study is that Oromo indigenous ecological worldviews and practices need to be incorporated into the national environmental and climate policies of Ethiopia and into other relevant regional and ecological and sustainable development policy documents.

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