

Representation of Slavery and Class in Kafa Proverbs

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Abstract

Slavery and class-based subjugation are key elements of human rights violations. They deprive the dignity of human beings and disrupt the fundamental human rights. This paper argues that violation of human rights is reflected in everyday use of language, such as proverbs in Kafa. Although proverbs maintain accepted socio-cultural values of a given society, they can be deliberately misused to spread prejudices and stereotypes that result in rights violations. Through informal interviews with selected informants from Kafa Zone, this study examined how proverbs in Kafa language serve as a means of communication in the community to show social hierarchy. Proverbs focusing on slavery were collected and translated into English, and then they were classified and analyzed. As the analysis shows, in the Kafa proverbs, people whose roots are traced to “slave” families and to a lower tribal class called *Sheraaro* are considered as those on the lower social strata hence imposing differential treatment. In the traditional Kafa society, there were class differences. These differences were based on economic and political power, and such differences were observed in Kafa proverbs. Other than clan/tribal differences, the Kafa people were categorized into three classes: the royal class (*Iraasho*), the ordinary clans (*Sharaaro*) and the slaves (*Guuno*). Based on these class differences, the *Iraasho* undermines both the *Sharaaro* and *Guuno* while the *Sharaaro* in turn disrespects the *Guuno*. Some of the Kafa proverbs maintain such a stereotypical category and stand against international and national human rights declarations.

Keywords: *class, slavery, proverbs, Kafa, culture, oral literature*

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Introduction

Humans were treated as mere possessions or properties of the privileged under the system of slavery and class-based differences (Kevin 2004). Of course, slavery and socioeconomic-based subjugation have existed since the dawn of civilization. Slave labor was extensively used in ancient Egypt and Akkadian Mesopotamia more than 4,000 years ago. Since that time, most human societies, if not all, have adopted slavery in some form or another (Angele 2011). Slavery is a global phenomenon with a long and strong history associated with sub-Saharan Africa. From the Senegal River to the high plateau of Angola, a sizable portion of the continent specialized in the capture, distribution, and sale of slaves (Angele 2011; Drescher 2011). Consequently, both African and European slave traders engaged in the buying and selling of Africans. The institution of slavery and the slave trade persisted in the eastern part of Africa until the middle of the 19th century, despite the British actively intervening to put an end to it in the middle of the 18th century (Seid 2015).

Ethiopia was one of the African nations where Ethiopian slave traders engaged in the lucrative business. Up until the first half of the 20th century, slavery was firmly entrenched in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The Fiteha Negest ¹¹¹, the traditional legal code of Ethiopia translated from the 13th-century “Coptic” document based on Biblical and Roman Law, gave it legal recognition accepting it on the condition that those who were captured in battle may be enslaved. Numerous Ethiopian emperors, including Emperor Menilek (1889–1913), largely accepted the Fiteha Negest’s teachings. Some of the techniques included capture, whether it occurred during battle or while riding, sentencing criminals to labor, outright purchase, etc. (Ibid).

¹¹¹ The Fetha Negest is the Ethiopian theocratic legal code compiled around 1240 by the Coptic Egyptian Christian writer Abu’l-Fada’il ibn al-Assal in Arabic. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetha_Negest)

Slaves were acquired in different ways in various Kingdoms of Ethiopia. Kafa was one of the ancient kingdoms in Ethiopia (Bekele 2010). In Kafa Kingdom, royal classes/ feudal classes had the right to own slaves. The royalties of the Kingdom, dehumanized their indigenous slaves, and this slavery issue has been reflected in Kafa oral literature in general and proverbs in particular. Proverbs offer unique insights into the social and cultural values of a community, often preserving aspects of history not documented elsewhere. Studying Kafa proverbs can reveal information about the lived experiences of enslaved people, class structures, and power dynamics within Kafa society. In addition to slavery, there were clan and economic-based classes in Kafa traditional society in which subjugation and human rights violations have been depicted. In such class-based differences, the privileged ones dehumanize those in lower classes.

Slavery and Human Rights

There is a close connection between human rights violations and slavery. Slavery can be understood as the possession and control of people as property, depriving them of their fundamental human rights and dignity (Drescher 2011). The dehumanization and exploitation of those under slavery have been a consistent practice throughout history, even though the practice has taken on different forms in different countries. Part of the violations of rights committed under slavery include separation from their families and communities, sexual exploitation, forced labor, and physical and psychological abuse (Kevin 2004; Seid 2015).

A number of fundamental human rights are directly violated by slavery, including the rights to life, liberty, and personal security; freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom of movement; the right to work under fair and comfortable conditions; and the freedom from slavery and servitude (Anton and Joseph 2009). The abolitionist movement, which gained strength in the 18th and 19th centuries, battled against the system of slavery, worked for its eradication and defended every person's human rights. Adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights unequivocally denounces slavery and affirms the intrinsic worth and equal rights of every individual (Angele 2011).

Anton and Joseph (2009) stated that the legacy of slavery does, however, still have an impact on modern society, and this must be acknowledged. The rights of millions of individuals worldwide continue to be violated by a variety of contemporary forms of slavery, including forced labor, debt bondage, and human trafficking. In order to effectively fight slavery and protect human rights, a multifaceted strategy that incorporates legal frameworks, social awareness, education, and economic empowerment is needed (Drescher 2011).

The fight to eradicate slavery, genocide, prejudice, and tyranny by the government gave rise to the contemporary period of human rights. In order to safeguard the most fundamental human freedoms and rights, a number of academics, activists, and even national leaders called for the League of Nations to be established as well as the practice be clearly denounced. The Second World War's atrocities demonstrated the inadequacy of earlier attempts to protect individual rights and limit the authority of governments to infringe upon them. The moment was right for adopting an international agreement that codified these principles. With the creation of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was formed (Kevin 2004; Bayeh 2015), and Article 4 of the Declaration states that 'No one shall be held in slavery or servitude: slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms'. Anton and Joseph (2009) contended that human rights as a legal concept and the codification of human dignity came late to Africa. Yet, the development of human rights in Africa can be related to the internal struggles of African countries during the colonial and post-independence periods. The role of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its successor Africa Union (AU) is also recognized here. Since the establishment of the OAU in 1963, several organizations, instruments and mechanisms have appeared that aim to promote and protect human rights in the continent (Ibid).

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1981 is a milestone in this regard, as well as the establishment of a Commission of the People and the People of Africa people's rights and the related African Court on Human Rights and People's Rights. In addition, regional economic associations created their own organizations and instruments aimed at promoting human rights in their respective territories. These regional and continental regulations should not hide the fact that no country in the world is considered the main factor in promoting and protecting people's rights: the benchmark of any civilized society is the commitment of that state to protect the dignity of its citizens (Anton and Joseph 2009; Seid 2015). Thereby, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights as well as related laws and regulations have been contributing, stimulating, and safeguarding human rights.

According to Bayeh (2015), the introduction of human rights in Ethiopia has undergone a multifaceted and dynamic evolution. Throughout the years, Ethiopia has experienced notable transformations in its approach to human rights, demonstrating both advancements and persistent obstacles. In more recent times, the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 has played a pivotal role in establishing a comprehensive legal structure for safeguarding human rights. This Constitution ensures a wide array of fundamental rights and liberties, encompassing the entitlement to life, freedom, fairness, and respect. Additionally, it explicitly prohibits any form of torture, cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment (Adem 2011). Consequently, provisions of human rights in the current Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia have lifted up the practice and development of human rights protection in the country.

Ethiopia signed various international human rights treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which highlights the country's recognition of the significance of human rights. Nonetheless, there have been instances of human rights violations in Ethiopia, including restrictions on freedom of expression,

assembly, and association, as well as allegations of excessive use of force by security forces (Adem 2011; Bayeh 2015). Bayeh (2015) stated that the involvement of civil society organizations, activists, and international partners is crucial in advocating for human rights and supporting Ethiopia's on-going endeavors.

Class-based Violation of Human Rights

Class-based oppression and infringement upon the rights of individuals is an issue that has a profound impact on numerous societies across the globe. This phenomenon is defined as the circumstance in which individuals or collectives endure oppression, discrimination, or the negation of fundamental human rights due to their social standing or economic status (Anna 2019). According to Vladimir (2012), this form of subjugation can materialize in diverse manners, including but not limited to, unequal access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and political representation. Moreover, it frequently results in the perpetuation of impoverishment, restricted social mobility, and a scarcity of prospects for individuals belonging to lower social echelons.

Violations of human rights based on class differentiation encompass a wide range of transgressions, such as coerced labor, employment of minors, acts of prejudice, exploitative treatment of individuals, and even physical aggression targeting those belonging to lower socioeconomic strata (Anton and Joseph 2009). These actions not only encroach upon their fundamental human rights, but also perpetuate a cycle of impunity and societal injustice. The rectification of class-based subjugation and human rights infringements necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses legal reforms, social policies, and endeavors to enhance awareness and advocate for equality. Governments, international organizations, civil society, and individuals all bear responsibility for addressing these concerns and striving towards a more impartial and equitable society (Anna 2019). Vladimir (2012) also stated that it is of utmost significance to acknowledge and confront the institutional frameworks that sustain the oppression based on social class and violations of fundamental

human rights while advocating for strategies and behaviors that foster parity, fairness, and reverence towards human rights for each individual, irrespective of their societal position or financial standing.

In sum, although efforts have been made to end the multifaceted human rights violation at the international level as well as in the Ethiopian context, incessant work should be done devotedly to create a world in which human rights are fully functioning, and every human being irrespective of sex, color, nationality, economic and social status, and so on should be dignified and respected. The violation of human rights is not only exercised in action but also in everyday language use like in proverbs. Despite proverbs are used as essential summaries of experience and are very effective in exercising social control as well as convenient standards for assessing the nature and quality of behavior of the approved norms, they can be deliberately misused to propagate prejudices and stereotypes (Mesfin 2012) that lead to violation of human rights. In light of this, the research at hand aims at collecting and analyzing Kafa proverbs that deal with slavery and class issues.

Brief Conceptualization of Proverbs

Proverbs are brief, humorous and persuasive sayings so that they can be easily memorable, and contain some important fact of experience that is taken as true by many people. However, it has been evidenced that a thorough definition and categorization that might include all-important characteristics of proverbial phenomena cannot be verbalized in a single description, despite efforts by researchers from throughout the world to do so. Folklore academics have made an effort to define it, though.

A proverb is a brief, widely understood utterance of the people that “contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and is handed down from generation to generation.” (Mieder 1993, 5). Proverbs were described as “a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably

with figurative meaning” (Norrik 1985, 78). Similarly, Finnegan (1970, 49), defined proverb as “a saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it”. According to Fasiku (2006, 51), a proverb is “a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs”. Dundes (1975, 103) also defined proverb as “a traditional saying that sums up a situations, passes judgment on a past matters, or recommends a course of action for the future”. It can be inferred from the definitions given above that proverbs are succinct, amusing, and persuasive sayings. They contain some significant experience-based facts that many people consider real and are concise and readily recalled. Proverbs are, in essence, terse, succinct, indirect, enigmatic, and relatively fixed rhetorical devices that are rich in wisdom.

Proverbs are one of the oldest and most intimate genres of oral literature (Daskin and Hatipoglu 2020). They do not always come with formulas. There are no rules as to when they should be used (Mesfin 2012). Therefore, the place and time for performing proverbs are unstable. Likewise, a proverb can have many different functions. For example, a proverb used to advise can be used to criticize. In short, proverbs do not have special occasions and can have many functions. However, collectors should note its original intended use, but go beyond that and think of other potential uses (Bascom 1965; Mieder 1993).

When language is utilized for communication, whether as an art or a tool, proverbs have been observed to occur on all occasions (Daskin and Hatipoglu 2020). They can be used for counseling, instruction, complaints, and protests. The main benefit, according to Bascom (1965, 297), is that they perform “a specific and important intellectual function that of subsuming the particular under the general”. Proverbs typically play a significant role in daily interpersonal communication. They make speeches engaging and stunning by strengthening human interaction by being cited in regular sociocultural gatherings of people. Beyond their literary function, proverbs have frequently served as a vehicle for didacticism and,

more generally, the presentation of widely held beliefs and pearls of wisdom. They preserve the cultural heritage of a people, their traditions, their history, their wisdom and their ethics.

However, apart from the aspects already mentioned, proverbs bear to some extent, rather serious dimensions when they are deliberately misused to propagate certain views and beliefs. Thus, proverbs may contribute to the spread and reinforcement of prejudices and stereotypes of any kind (Mercy 2021). Similarly, Jeylan (2009) argued that proverbs in general should not be taken as signs of wisdom. Some proverbs especially in Africa have been used to maintain slavery and class-based subjugation. Likewise, Mercy (2021) confirmed that folk ideas or worldviews as expressed through folklore, particularly through proverbs, have their negative sides regarding ethnic, sex, minority and national stereotypes. In *Kafi Noonoo* (the language of the Kafa people), some proverbs deal with slave and class issues. Proverbs can express both dominant ideologies and subtle forms of resistance. Analyzing how slavery and class are represented in proverbs can uncover how power operated and how individuals navigated their positions within the social hierarchy. However, such proverbs have not been analyzed yet. Thus, the central point in this research is how Kafa proverbs represent issues of slavery and class. In other words, the current research aims to reveal the ways that the Kafa proverbs represent slavery and class differences.

The Study Setting and Methodology

The Kafa people are currently located in the Kafa Zone of the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples Region¹¹². Kafa Zone is bounded by the Sheka Zone in the northwest, by Bench Sheko and West Omo Zones in the southwest, by Illuababor and Jimma Zones of Oromia Regional State in the northeast and by the Konta Zone in the southeast. It has a total area of 80816 square kilometers with an average altitude of 500 meters above sea level (Zegeye 2017) the

¹¹² Before the establishment of Southwest Ethiopia Peoples Region in November 2021, Kafa had been ruled under South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region.

current average temperature of Kafa rests between 21 to 25 degree cent grades. Although most parts of Kafa is highland, locally called *Angesho*, it is an area with mixed altitudinal range including an area of mid altitude called *Guddifo* and low land called *Worefo*. These three type of whether conditions are suitable for growing various types of plants that serve for making folk medicines, constructions, agricultural equipment, furniture, and fuel consumption. In addition, the weather condition of Kafa is convenient for different types of animal and bird species (Mesfin 2012). Kafa Zone has twelve districts (woreda administrations) and five town administration. While there are many ethnic groups residing in the area, Kafecho, Naa'o, and Chara ethnic groups are considered indigenous.

The *Kafacho*¹¹³ ethnic group is divided into more than 238 tribes. These tribes are also classified into various categories based on their social status and occupations (Bekele 2010). According to Tekle (1993), based on the nature of their language, the people of Kafecho, Shekacho, Bosha (Garo), Enarya, Anfillo (Bushashe), and Shinasha (Boro) are put under the umbrella of Gonga. The legendary roots of these people were in Egypt and Yemen. Citing Beber, Johnson and Lange, Bekele (2010) stated that this set of emigrant Gonga population first settled in the northern part of Ethiopia following the valleys of the Abay River. Later, due to the Oromo expansion and Ahmed Grag'n's war, part of these people separated and moved to southwest part of Ethiopia, except for the Shinasha people, who are now found in the northern Ethiopia, in Metekel Zone of Beneshangul Gumuz Regional State (Bekele 2010)¹¹⁴. Of the South Gonga peoples, Anfillo (Bushashe) are currently found in Oromia Regional State, West Wollega, Bosha (Garo) and Enarya in the eastern and northern parts of Jimma, and Kafecho and Shekacho in the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples Regional State (Bekele 2010; Tekle 1993).

¹¹³ The people are called Kafecho and their language is called Kafi Noonoo which is grouped under Omotic Language Family

¹¹⁴ See Bekele Woldemariam (2010)

The Kafa people had very strong political, historical, social and cultural values until the downfall of the Kafa Kingdom in 1897. Lange (1982) stated, "Kafa strongly influenced nearly all major historical developments of the Gonga and other peoples south of the Blue Nile...To fully know Kafa is to gain an invaluable insight into the culture-history of all Africa." (Lange 1982, 180). In addition, the Kingdom of Kafa had a well-organized and powerful military force, which had strongly survived Minlik II's force until 1897. In line with this, Marduak (1959) quoted in Bekele (2010, 190) noted "...with the exceptions of the Great Wall of China and possibly a few sections of Imperial Rome's frontier defenses, no other people have lavished such effort in military protection". However, due to the expansion of Minlik II to the south and southwestern parts of Ethiopia, Kafa lost its political and cultural power (Bekele 2010; Zegeye 2017). Nevertheless, these days, there are attempts to restore the lost cultural values in accordance to the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which gave the people the right to develop their indigenous culture.

The Kafa livelihood is predominantly based on agriculture (Tadesse 2020). The farming practices of the Kafa are connected to forest-based farming techniques including forest coffee , *inset* (Uuxo¹¹⁵), and spices cultivation. The Kafa people's main source of food is *inset*, and Kafa is known for being the birthplace of coffee. Additionally, *teff*, barley, wheat, and maize are the main crops grown in Kafa. In addition, in Kafa many domestic animals like cows, horses, and sheep are also herded (Bekele 2010; Mesfin 2012). Furthermore, the Kafa people are well known for their production of forest honey. According to Bekele (2010), a competent farmer can harvest honey three times a year. Due to these reasons, the Kafa people highly value and consider forests to be one of their most precious assets. Writers and visitors to Kafa such as Beber and Max Grul (as quoted in Bekele 2010, 22), noted the landscape saying: "Kafa is the pearl of Ethiopia" and "Kafa is an alpine terrain with the palm trees."

¹¹⁵ Uuxo in Kafi Noonoo refers to the plant from which the common food of the Kafa People called qocco which serves to make various kinds of dish is made.

Most importantly, one of the main tea plantation sites in Ethiopia, Wushwush tea, and other spices are found in Kafa Zone.

The Kafecho speak a language referred to as *Kafi Noonoo*. This language is grouped under the Omotic language family which embraces the Shinashigna, Shekigna, Garo and Mao languages (Mesfin 2012). Until the downfall of the Kafa Kingdom, this language served as the working language of the kingdom. However, later it was replaced by Amharic and became considered the language of a non-literate rural population until the downfall of Derg regime (Bekele 2010). In 1994, using the opportunity given by the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which gave the people the right to develop indigenous culture and to learn in one's language, Kafi Noonoo became the medium of instruction in elementary schools and has been taught as a subject in secondary schools as well as in colleges. Kafi Noonoo has been established as an academic department at Bonga College of Teachers' Education, offering diploma in the language. Besides, it is also being established as department at Bonga University.

This study used a qualitative method of literary analysis engaging a thorough discussion of the Kafa proverbs from the perspectives of class and slavery. Since it discusses how slavery and class issues are represented in the texts of Kafa proverbs, it can be classified as a method of textual analysis. The proverbs were gathered from the Kafa Zone through informal interviews with informants who were identified based on their knowledge of the oral traditions, and social, cultural, and historical realities of the Kafa people. The communicative approach was used to translate all of the amassed proverbs into English to make them readable for readers who do not speak Kafi Noonoo. Because Kafa proverbs emerged from Kafa cultural environment and are metaphorical and symbolic in nature (Mesfin 2012), the communicative approach to translation was used to translate the proverbs into English. The proverbs were translated into the target language (English) using the same or related messages. Because of this, words in the target language retained their original meanings (Kafi Noonoo). Following that, the translated proverbs were classified into themes according to

the Kafa socio-cultural context in which they were used. After that, interpretations and analyses were made.

Proverbs Dealing with Slaves (Guuno)¹¹⁶

Proverbs serve as a mirror to the values, beliefs, and experiences of a society. They possess the ability to offer a glimpse into the problems of slavery and human rights violations. Although not explicitly addressing these matters, proverbs can still reveal the repercussions and ethical implications of such actions. Hence, there are Kafa proverbs that deal with the issues of slavery in the given socio-historical context. This is exemplified in such proverbs as: “*Guuno itteyaache/ buuxo dukkeeyaache.*” (“It’s impossible to feed porridge with someone else’s hand, as it’s impossible to respect a slave.”)

This proverb underscores the inequality of slaves with an average human being stating that slaves not deserving dignified treatment as average human beings. The message violates Article 24¹¹⁷:1 of the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995, 8) that states “Everyone has the right to respect for his human dignity, reputation and honour”. According to an informant from Saylem¹¹⁸, given the fact that porridge is served warm, one can only use their own hand to eat it. In the culture of Kafa, while eating together, one can feed another (putting food in other’s mouth, in Amharic known as *gursha*) as an expression of love and care; but this cannot be normally done for porridge. According to the proverb, respecting a slave is as culturally impractical as feeding porridge to other. This is due to the fact that when a slave is respected, they become proud and believe that they are on par with other members of the community.

¹¹⁶ Guuno means slave in Kafa Language (Kafi Noonoo)

¹¹⁷ Article 24 of the 1995 Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia declares “Right to Honour and Reputation”

¹¹⁸ Beshu Cheneto (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021.

People believed to be descendants of slaves in Kafa society are looked down upon and badgered without taking into account their current intellectual or social standing. The proverb thus exposes the class prejudice that ignores slaves. Such proverbial expressions are violations of human rights. Article seven of Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.” Thereby, such proverbs, violating the above declaration, reinforce the discrimination and disrespect towards people who are attributed to be slaves or are their descendants. For instance, “*Guunoch mulloo aalle/ akashooch damoo aalle.*” (**“A slave has no a thinking mind/good heart as an ant has no blood.”**)

The proverb maintains the subjugations of slaves in Kafa socio-cultural realities that extend to their intellectual immaturity. By counting the forefathers and foremothers of people, particularly the Kafa people who belong to non-slave ancestors pester and vanquish those whom they consider from slave background. The prejudice extends to such domains as intellect as the proverb above clearly shows. The above proverb compares slaves with ants as it metaphorically states that slaves did not have human hearts and minds as ants lack blood because if they had human hearts and minds, they would not have been bought and sold as commodities by human beings. In addition, as an informant¹¹⁹ noted, if the slaves were wise, they would have not submitted themselves to serve another human being throughout their lives, hence referring to the submissive nature of slaves and their lack of agency. Even though they were sold vehemently, they would have struggled to free themselves if they had a thinking mind and strong heart. Therefore, this proverb serves as a tool to deny human rights declared both in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of Ethiopia. Specifically, such expression stands against Article 18 of

¹¹⁹ Abebe Archao (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, May 2020.

the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia¹²⁰. Slaves were represented as animal in some Kafa proverbs as it can be referred from the following popular proverb.

"Guunonaa kuroona ikkoone." ("**A slave and alike a donkey.**")

The donkey in this proverb is compared to a slave because the donkey works hard for its owner rather than for itself. Likewise, slaves are prone to abuse by their owners like donkeys. The person or owner benefits from the donkey's laborious work. Similarly, a slave must work arduously to serve the interest of its master. Drescher (2011) claims that the dominant social groups in slave societies relied much more on the wealth produced by slave labor. It was more difficult for enslaved people in their large-scale production facilities to free themselves, let alone join the slave-owning class. Even if this proverb attests to the severe mistreatment of slaves by their masters, it can be used to dishonour people from their slave ancestors. Indeed, in the Kafa dominant social group, slaves had been disrespected and such diminishing acts can be seen these days as a general truth as the following proverb indicates. *"Gumooch neexeetaache; Guunoch nooreetaache."* ("It is unrealistic to offer a seat to a slave, as it is land in the sky.")

According to the cultural etiquette of the Kafa as it is the case in most parts of Ethiopia, it is often considered politeness to stand up when someone who is highly respected or of higher status enters a room.¹²¹ This is done for people who are elders or whose tribe belongs to the respected class or those who are wealthy. However, such respect cannot be offered or extended to those people believed to be of slave origin regardless of their economic class and age. Hence, the proverb metaphorically conveys that as it is impossible for people to stand on the top of the sky, there is no room to respect slave in the traditional Kafa socio-cultural context. As a result, this proverb is used to represent the positions of slavery in the traditional

¹²⁰ Article 18 of the 1995 Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia declares "Prohibition against Inhuman Treatment"

¹²¹ Besha Cheneto (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021.

Kafa society and maintains the denial of human right in this case the cultural right that other members of the society enjoy.

“Gonnee toommo bi doonji toommo.” (“**A slave does not have their own clan, they take the clan of their owner.**”)

This proverb is related to the clan or identity of slaves. According to Mesfin (2012), the Kafa people are categorized into about 238 clans, and each clan has a leader who belongs to the royal family. As an informant¹²² described, every person takes the clan of their father and identifies their identity based on that clan. Most slaves in the Kafa Kingdom were not natives to the kingdom or are not originally from Kafecho ethnic backgrounds (Ibid). Nonetheless, because slaves were sold to people who lived far away from their parents, those who were sold into slavery did not have the right or access to connect with their respective families, so they did not inherit their clan identity from their biological fathers/mothers. In the view of the proverb, a person whose ancestry could be traced to a slave family is considered only a member of their slave master’s clan. As a result, those with a slavery background are believed to be people without identity and hence are named after the clans of their respective masters. Even though such assimilation allows the slaves to integrate into the clan of their owner, it may create identity crises. This disregard in society denies people of slave roots the cultural right to define their own identity to have their own true clan. The following proverb also further maintains how the traditional Kafa society disregarded and affronted slaves.

“Baakke aafoo qelloch, guuch mullo gabiyooch.” (“**A hen sees only what is in front of it as a slave always wants to go to the market.**”)

The above proverb accents the view that people with slave descent are viewed as being foolish and slothful in Kafa society. Farmers in the Kafa culture are expected to work hard in their fields rather than wasting time elsewhere. The diligent farmers spend a lot of

¹²² Aboge Shawo (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021.

their time in the field and are believed to be farsighted in terms of planning their farm activities ahead of time and saving for the future. They never visit the market for purely recreational purpose unless they have important tasks to complete there. Strong farmers work hard to ensure a bright and prosperous future for themselves, and they are aware that such a future is only possible through hard work. On the other hand as it is accented in the proverb, a hen is short sighted and only looks for a grain to fill its belly. People with slave backgrounds are believed to be lazy spending their days at a marketplace rather than working in their farm fields because they lack wisdom and are short- sighted like a hen. As a result, they frequently continue to live in poverty and are unable to secure a bright future for themselves and their families.

As the central messages of the six proverbs quoted above clearly state, in traditional Kafa, social inequality existed between those who are believed to be slave decedents and those believed to be of non-slave background. The level of inequality is believed to extend to intellectual capability as it is accented in proverbs number five and six above. In some cases the level of inequality is framed along a social respect extended to individuals as it is connoted in proverbs number 4 and 3 which is an exclusive cultural right extended to those with non-slave backgrounds in traditional Kafa.

Proverbs Dealing with Class Issues (Iraasho and Sharaaroo)

In a traditional Kafa society, there were class differences. These differences were based on economic and political power. Other than clan differences, the Kafa people were categorized in to three classes. These were the royal class (Iraasho¹²³), the ordinary clans (Sharaaro¹²⁴), and the slaves (Guuno¹²⁵). The Iraasho were the

¹²³ Besha Cheneto (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021 said "Iraasho in Kafi Noonoo stands for the ruling classes of various hierarchy of power including clan leaders in the Kafa Kingdom"

¹²⁴ Ibid, Sharaaro in Kafi Noonoo means ordinary clans who have been engaged in occupational works such as black smith, pottery, tanner and the like

¹²⁵ Guuno in Kafi Noonoo stands for slaves

landlords who controlled both the economic and political powers. The Sharaaro were poor peasants but led their independent life cultivating crops on the lands of the lords from which more than half were given to the lords. The Guuno were the servants of the lords and lived in the compounds of the lords. Although the Sharaaro were inferior to Iraasho, they had better positions than the Guuno. Based on these class differences, the Iraasho undermines both the Sharaaro and Guuno while the Sharaaro in turn disrespects the Guuno. Besides, every Kafecho clan is categorized under either the Yiito,¹²⁶ Hinnaaroo¹²⁷ or Maawoo¹²⁸ clan group. Hence, among these groups there are always stereotypical views of one another. Analysis of proverbs dealing with these class issues are presented below.

“Sharaaree baakkee bashoo/ shabaatte giyooch waayeehe.” (**“An ordinary man’s slaughtering of a cock is heard by his seven neighbors.”**)

Literally, this proverb means that when an ordinary family wants to eat chicken, the family cannot afford to buy all the necessary spices that are needed for preparing the chicken. As a result, the family is forced to get help from the neighbors and thus the story can easily be heard to neighbors. However, even if a man from the royal class slaughters a bull, the story cannot be heard by anyone because of their ability to afford all the necessary materials. Beyond its literal meaning, the proverb praises the royal classes and disregards the ordinary ones.

“Sharaaro showoo qeejjaache/ hicewoo shaacoo bayaaache.” (**“An ordinary person never administers a land just as much as a salt never fills an empty stomach.”**)

The aforementioned proverb is related to the royalties’ depiction of the lower class. The majority of ordinary members of the clan

¹²⁶ Aboge Shawo (a key informant who knows the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021 stated that Yiito in Kafa culture means clans recognized as wise and prophets.

¹²⁷ Ibid, Clans under the Hinnaaroo group are associated with the Enarya tribes of the Gongga people.

¹²⁸ Ibid, Maawo is also an umbrella term for certain clans in Kafa Society.

have been ruled by a leader (the *Iraasho*). The *Iraasho* consider themselves as having exceptional leadership qualities (Tadesse 2020). So the proverb says that an individual from an ordinary (the *Sharaaro*) background never acquires leadership qualities and thus can never be given an opportunity to rule as much as one would not pick on salt when feeling hungry. This proverb thus emphasizes the supremacy of the royal family to administer land and property and in contrast it undermines people from ordinary background regardless of their personal talent and economic class. However, these days, such an attitude and stereotypical view of the *Sharaaro* class has vanished so that many individuals from ordinary classes have granted the right to rule though the proverb still functions to undermine even those from the ordinary class, but upholds political and economic power in the community.

“Taateeno kexooch giyati amoona ketate biya giyaane amoona gibate iyane wonee.” (**“One who lives in a palace wants to leave while one who has never lived wishes to get into the king’s house.”**)

This proverb illustrates that it is believed that the king’s family or royal family leads a very comfortable life. Thereby, every ordinary person wishes to live in such a house and serve the royal family so as to share from such a comfortable life. However, in reality a house of the king/ royal family is not comfortable for slaves or other servants of such a family. In other words, the proverb literally means that outsiders always think that the king’s house is comfortable for servants, and they wish to lead such life, but the one who practically resides in the royal house as a servant wants to leave the house. This is due to the fact that servants cannot be treated as proper people by the family of a king, and one who serves the king’s family does not have the right to get their personal needs met. Hence, those who have such experience do not want to stay with royal family. Therefore, the proverb exposes how ordinary people who served the royal family were exploited and disregarded in the traditional feudal system.

“Gochit gattoo bu’oo maatee/ goyaanee kunaanee kosho maahan.” (“The ox that tills the land eats straw/ the dog eats bread”).

In this proverb, the speaker takes the truth, which he sees explicitly that the crop product that an ox is permitted to consume is straw. However, the dog, that makes little/no contribution to the growth of crops, consumes bread because it has an access as it lives close to its owner’s homes. As a result of their reliance on agriculture and the ox’s role in plowing land for cultivating crops, the Kafa people value ox as a very valuable asset. Beyond its literal meaning, the proverb was meant to make a statement about unfair taxes that landlords during the feudal system unfairly collected according to an informant¹²⁹. The landlords (Iraasho) were extremely autocratic and made little/no contributions to crop cultivation. The ox is a prized possession in Kafa society and is treated with respect, and it is not permitted to leave its owners yard. Dogs, on the other hand, are less significant and are permitted to enter in houses other than their owners in search of food. Thus, the proverb implies allegorically that the peasant (represented by the ox), who is essential to the crop’s production, received a meager supply of inferior goods. Despite playing little or no role in the production process, the landowners (referred to as “dogs” in this case) received a large quantity of high-quality products.

Moreover, the landlord, represented by a dog, had the right to use both his own property and those of other peasants., In contrast, a poor peasant, represented by an ox, had no right to use even his own property. . In Ethiopian history, the Kafa peasants were obligated to perform physical labor for the landlords in addition to paying high taxes. According to the informant from Saylem¹³⁰, the peasants were in charge of preparing food, collecting wood for fuel, and plowing the lord’s land at least twice a week. A peasant would be punished by the lord if they skipped such work. The Kafa people use a symbol from their perceptions of domestic animals in this proverb to convey their political and economic views on feudalism.

¹²⁹ Abebe Archao (an informant who discerns the Kafa socio-cultural realities well) in discussion with the author, March 2021.

¹³⁰ Ibid

This proverb is still in use when the Kafa people wish to criticize those who irrationally want the property of others.

Conclusion

Class-based human rights violations and slavery are intertwined issues that have been around for centuries. As it is shown in the everyday lives of the Kafa, slavery is the practice of owning and controlling people as property, depriving them of basic human rights and exposing them to different forms of abuse and exploitation. The social hierarchy among the Kafa is coined around historical socio-economic inequality whereby people from lower or marginalized social classes were considered inferior to people from higher social classes. The class-based oppression deprived people of basic human rights such as freedom, dignity, and independence. Although slavery has been abolished in most of the world, its effects continue to affect societies today. Class-based violations can take many forms, including forced labor, trafficking in human beings, debt slavery, child labor, and other forms of human rights violations that disproportionately affect people of lower social classes.

Slavery and class-based human rights violations in contemporary society with a long history of slavery must be addressed through the enforcement of basic legal frameworks, and furthermore, there needs to be a major intervention targeting existing social norms. Part of the potential legal interventions that can be taken to bring about meaningful change include: strengthening laws and regulations to fight these practices, punishing perpetrators and supporting victims. It is also important to raise awareness and pro-motivational education about the history of slavery and the effects of class-based oppression to challenge social norms and attitudes that sustain these violations. In places with long history of slavery, addressing the underlying causes of slavery and advancing a worldwide culture that upholds and defends the rights of every person are imperative. The promotion and protection of human rights necessitate a collective commitment from all stakeholders to foster a society that upholds the dignity and rights of every individual.

The sociocultural values and ideologies of the society as argued in this paper are embodied in the Kafa proverbs. This means, the Kafa proverbs are a reflection of the people's wisdom, moral principles, and life experiences. Not all Kafa proverbs, though, can be regarded as indications of wisdom and positive ideas. In other words, some proverbs are examples of racial and social stereotypes. By intentionally fostering class disparities, such proverbs undermine those with enslaved ancestry and those from lower classes. The examination of the aforementioned proverbs demonstrates that, regardless of their personalities and intellectual standings, people whose ancestors were slaves were oppressed and relegated. Proverbs of these kinds violate human rights declarations at both national and international levels. Likewise, some of the Kafa proverbs carry discriminatory meanings in a way that subjugates people whose family backgrounds have been regarded as inferior. Such proverbs, beyond suppressing undignified classes are disagreement instigators among various classes of the society.

Literature in general and oral literature in particular plays an important role in communicating societal norms and traditions as well as transmitting cultural values to newer generations. However, some elements of such literature can also serve as a tool of exploitation. Furthermore, as the case material from Kafa presented in this paper clearly shows, proverb/oral literature maintains a violation of human rights in many aspects.

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