

## The Art of Hand Weaving Textiles and Crafting on Socio-Cultural Values in Ethiopian (Review)

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### Abstract

#### Keywords

Textile Handicraft,  
Traditional Clothes,  
Hand Weaving  
Technique,  
Socio-Cultural Values

Hand weaving and crafting sectors are one of the most important nonagricultural sources of income in Ethiopia. Hand weaving is a traditional technology to produce specialty fabrics as well as ordinary fabrics in the rural and semi-urban areas scattered throughout Ethiopia. Weaving is traditionally found throughout Ethiopia but there are clustered hand weaving activities in the Shiro Meda, Adisu-Gebeya, Kechene-Medhane Alem and Guellele in Addis Ababa. In the rural areas, Dorze and Konso in Southern part of Ethiopia are well known for their weaving as is Gondor, Gojjam and Wollo in Amhara. Data were collected through. Qualitative data collection tools like interview, focus group discussion and observation. Interviews were conducted to establish the cultural, social, ecological and aesthetic value. The aim of this paper is to examine the emerging development of hand weaving and crafting sectors with traditional values in Ethiopia. The paper identifies basic traditional values of hand weaving and discusses the development of a competitive textile industry in the world, by looking on the challenges and opportunities to become a new location for traditional clothes production. The paper addresses contribution of textile handicraft activity in Ethiopian socio-cultural life. The local inhabitant prefer products of indigenous weavers, they like and respect it. It viewed as holy and used in ritual celebration. Similarly the skill reveals creative ability, identity, culture and history of weavers and users. Furthermore it plays great role in perseveration of cultural heritage, employment creation, tourist attraction and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been initiating and introduced in the Ethiopian textile handicraft industry.

### 1. Introduction

Traditional textiles in Ethiopia have centered on the country's reputation as a cradle of cotton. Cultivated and hand spun here for thousands of years, cotton has always occupied a central role in rural cultural life. Ethiopian women will grow or buy unrefined cotton, card it by hand and spin it with the so called inzirt[fig 1]. Women twist the inzirt, essentially a free standing

spindle, in one hand while pulling the cotton in the other to make yarn. The inzirt is topped with a kesem which acts as a bobbin to spool the thread. The thread is then given to weavers who are traditionally male. Ethiopian weavers use handlooms that are either raised or suspended in a pit (called a pit loom). All weaving is done by interlacing the warp threads with weft threads. Weavers operate the loom by pressing pedals with their feet alternatively up and down to interweave

the threads. Most handlooms are only 70 – 90 cm wide so that both edges of the warp thread are within arm's

reach. However, this limits the width of the cloth that can be produced. Often, weavers will sew together multiple panels to make larger swatches of cloth.[1]



*Fig 1. Hand spinning [1,2,3]*

The craft designs in traditional society are consist of three dimensional elements such as the object form and the two dimensional features such as patterns, lines and colors (kashim 2013). The visual designs on material artefacts have consistently infused culture-oriented aesthetics, thus adding to their local identity and commercial value (Lam et al. 2006).

Indigenous Hand weaves textiles which are accomplished with technical expertise and covering wide areas of applied art and design, such as jewelry, interior design, ceramics, household wares, architecture, textile designs, leisure goods and woodwork. The Nigerian concept of industrial design embraces the creation of functional designs with intrinsic aesthetic satisfaction.[2-5]

Hand weaves textiles, as made-made objects, are a material medium for the communication of cultural values. The research questions were adopted to test the research aim. Qualitative approach was used as tool of investigation in order to establish the relationship between weaving and its traditional values. Interviews were conducted to establish the cultural, social, tourism, ecological and aesthetic value. They take the form of structured, semi-structured and unstructured questionnaires designed for a census of creative activities using purposive sampling techniques. Apart from interviews, scheduled observation were administered so as to collect in-depth information and data. Lastly focused group discussion was also cried out with selective key informant.[2,6]

It includes objects, processes, services and their systems. Since visual and material objects are part and parcel of such communication which gives rise to

social forms, visual and material socio-culture has emerged from the interaction between man and Hand weaves textiles. Today, design woven fabrics have become an inseparable component of human society, a totem of cultural identity and an important source of reference for modern society. These woven fabrics are instrumental to aesthetic expression and socio-cultural interaction within a local context (Moalosi and Hudson, 2007).

Behind every man-made object is a valuable concept, beliefs, customs, rituals, habits and ideas that shape its perception within a socio-cultural environment. Visual culture has been described as the artistic tastes and interpretation of what is aesthetically pleasing to an individual depending upon the surroundings and the environment. However, it is not just artistic differences that are influenced by environmental differences. In addition, there is the practicality of the visual statement (Lee, 2004).

Many historical references refer to cotton, cloth trade and the loom in this area of east Africa. Excavations at Axum in northern Ethiopia by a team led by David Phillipson show indirect evidence for textiles. Documentation of specific weave structures and design vocabulary for the woven tibebe as well as other textiles remains sparse. Taboos associated with weaving vary in different areas of the country. Weavers in many areas of the country could provide a wealth of research information. In Addis Ababa today and the significant Diaspora outside of Ethiopia and Eritrea *Yehabesha Lib's* or national dress with the woven tibebe is worn predominately by women but also by men for special occasions. It is considered to be traditional, elegant, comfortable, versatile and modest.[3,8,26]

Thus the relation between handweaving and societies are intractable relationship. Their study is mainly focus on social status and economy of artisans. However the relationship between material culture and society was addressed in a fairly limited way. Cultural values of handicraft in general and weaving in particular selected areas were studied in detail. For example, traditionally made for the dowry, the bride's family must give the groom a buluko before marriage. These cloths are also used by village chefs during important village meetings to illustrate their leadership. Also most part of Ethiopia traditional cloths were worn during special occasions and public holiday. Even if there are diverse religion, culture and ethnicity they have a blood tie relationship among the peoples that make Ethiopia different from any other place and countries, the most interesting things in our country is that ,the wearing style of traditional cloth like gabi and netela of Muslim and christen are different. Thus, this paper aims to fill the existing literature gap of Ethiopian textile handicraft in socio-cultural values.[9,10,18,28]

## 2. Historical Background of Hand Weaving Textile Products in Ethiopia

### 2.1 Traditional Clothing in Ethiopia

Handweave-textiles the gabi, netela, kuta, and qemis are the key pieces of traditional dress that are worn throughout the country. The gabi is a large (Fig 2 a), heavy, white wrap used by both men and women to protect themselves from the cold air during nighttime and the chilly rainy season. Its thick cotton weave helps to keep out the chill. During warmer month or on special occasions, men will wear a kuta(Fig 2b), a thin, gauzy shawl. The netela worn by women is a large(Fig 3a), white stole made of fine and delicate gauzy cotton. Usually, the netela has beautiful bands of multicolored jacquard design on the edges, often with silver or gold metallic threads, called the tibeb(Fig 3b). More recently, weaver have incorporated the tibeb design and concept into larger patterns for home decor and fashion accessories. The traditional dress for women is the qemis(Fig 3c),a long, white robe decorated with tibeb on the edges and waist band. [4,7,11,12,28]



Fig 2.(a) Gabi and(b) kuta[2,28]

These dresses are made from shemm along strips of woven fabric sewn together. Recently, innovative designers have been creating modern styled dresses with dyed shemma cloth and tibeb. Finally, the buluko(Fig 4a) holds a special place in Ethiopian clothing. *Meqenet* (Fig 4b), is a piece of cloth used as a belt twisted around the waist on the *Qemis*. The cloth is about 3 m in length, and its width is approximately 70 cm.Once the woman has put on the *Qemis*, the

*Meqenet* is folded in half lengthwise and twisted around the *Qemis*, and it connects in the front. Cloth for the *Meqenet* also features the thin stripes and simple geometric patterns. Traditionally made for the dowry, the bride's family must give the groom a buluko before marriage. These heavy wraps are also used by village chefs during important village meetings to illustrate their leadership.[4,13,17]



Fig 3 (a)Netela , (b) Tibeband (c) Qemis[4,17]

According to Hudson & Spring (1995) the finest cloth in Ethiopia is today produced by two ethnic groups who live close to one another in the southern highlands of Ethiopia: The Konso and the Dorze. The Dorze migrate to the large towns in search of other outlets for their products, which the Konso people rarely do (ibid.). In this paper I will focus on the Dorze[23,27,28].

In Ethiopia the horizontal treadle loom is used in weaving the cotton, silk and synthetic fibres.[7,17,25]

There are numerous regional variations of the treadle loom. The “pit looms” is the one Dorze use. Hudson and Spring describes it as: The weaver is sitting on the edge of the pit above which the loom is mounted and in which he operates the treadles with his feet. Alternatively, the weaver may sit upright with his feet operating the treadles at ground level (1995, p. 38).

Male craftsmen predominantly operate the weaving and the women are cleaning and spinning the cotton (Pankhurst, 1968).

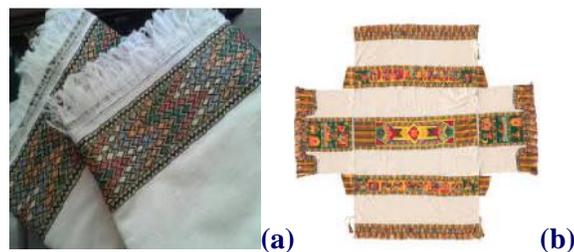


Fig 4 (a)Buluko and (b)Meqenet[1,2,3,4]

The weaving process can be described as follows: The first part is the warping and it is done outside. The factory-made warping threads are placed on a handheld warping reel and the weaver unrolls the threads around eight warping wooden posts that are placed into the ground in two parallel rows. When the weaver unrolls the threads a zigzag pattern is created between the posts(Silverman, 1999). When the warping is finished it is ready to be put on the loom. Cartledge describes the process like this: The weaver takes one end of the warp threads and ties this to a post located at the front of the loom near the weaver’s seat. The warp threads are then brought around a second post, which is 2,5 meters beyond the back end of the loom. Next the weaver takes the warp threads and pulls them through the harnesses. When this is

finished, half of the warp threads will be on each of the harnesses. Then each warp thread is pulled through a small space of reed. Finally the warp threads are tied onto the beam at the front of the loom (Silvermann, 1999, p. 248)

After the loom is dressed the wefts threads are prepared on small hollow pieces of bamboo, using a wooden apparatus called bobbin winder (ibid.)

The weavers use three kinds of raw materials: *Dir*(yarn), a factory produced warp (which is locally known as *komtare*), *mag*, a weft which is spun by women mostly in the house and *tilet* (Thread), factory produced coloured threads used for decorative borders (Freeman & Pankhurst, 2003).

## 2.2. Previous Research

There is a limited amount of literature concerning weaving in Ethiopia, but there are some which I will present below. After that I will present number of ESD research and ESD research focusing on TKS. I have not found any research about ESD concerning textile handcraft.[23,28]

Richard Pankhurst (1990), *A social history of Ethiopia*. Pankhurst writes about the Ethiopian social history from the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century. In his chapter on *Handicraft workers* weaving and spinning are presented and explained. Pankhurst's book is an overview and gives a good background.

Julie Hudson & Christopher Spring (1995), *The North African Textiles*. The authors give a more detailed description of the treadle loom used in Ethiopia as well as what fabrics are produced in the country. Furthermore, some habits, colours and raw material of the Dorze weaving are described[17,18,18].

Raymond A. Silverman (1999), *Ethiopia - traditions of Creativity*. The book is based on research of cultural traditions in Ethiopia edited by Raymond A. Silvermann. One of the cultural traditions the book focus on is the weaving in the Gamu-Gofa highland. The loom, the dressing of the loom, weaving, the market and the surrounding neighbourhood are issues

presented in the book. For example you can follow two weavers from the Gamu-Gofa highland which makes the descriptions very colourful.

Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst (2003), *Peripheral People – the Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia*. The authors seek to explain why minorities of Ethiopia, such as craft workers and hunters, are marginalised. Weavers are one of these minorities and the book gives an overview of the weavers' habits. That is, for example: What they produce, their livelihood and their social interaction.[4,14,24].

## 3. The Weaving Techniques of Ethiopian Traditional Cloth

Handcraft Cloth production follows six processes: spinning the weft thread, warping, starching the warp thread, setting up the loom, test weaving, and weaving the final order. [23]

Loom is a manual machine that produces different types of textile clothes from warp and weft yarns (threads); this is a principal machine used for weaving. The basic purpose of any loom is to hold the warp threads under tension to facilitate the interweaving of the weft threads. Ethiopian manual loom machine has the following parts as shown in the Figure 5.[21,22,28]

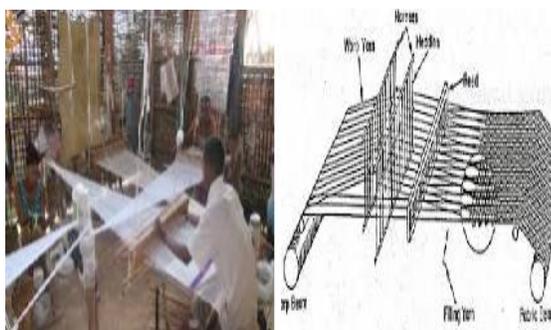


Fig 5 Manual loom machine[7,15,17]

Handcraft Cloth production follows six processes: spinning the weft thread (Fig 6), warping (Fig 7a),

starching the warp thread (Fig 7b), setting up the loom, test weaving, and weaving the final order[5].



Fig. 6. Woman is spinning a weft (left), and the other woman is winding cotton weft (right).[3]

Warping thread entails fixing cotton thread (approximately 15 hanks) onto a bamboo tool (*Qwoshere*) to hank it. The tips of the thread are taken from each hank and twisted into one strand, and the tool is rotated to create the hank.[5].

**Starching the Warp Thread/sizing/:** During the warping process, the thread is treated with tef starch to

protect it from the tension and friction of weaving work. To create the starch, one handful of tef powder is added to 10 L of hot water (80–90°C) and boiled. The warped thread is dipped in the mixture and boiled for approximately one hour. Then excess moisture is pressed out and the thread is laid out to dry in the sun, and the dry warp is tied in the shape of a ball.[17,23,28]

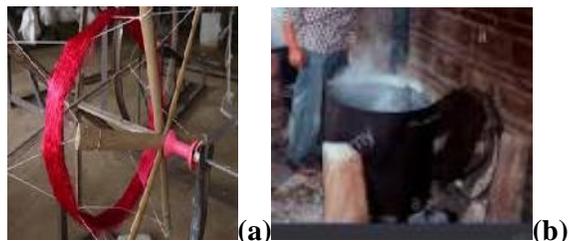


Fig. 7.(a) Warping thread with two sticks, (b) Starching the Warp Thread/sizing/ warped thread[28]

**Weaving (*Shemene*):** The tension of the warp is checked after the thread is placed in the loom. Then, using the surplus warp as weft, the weaver weaves several centimeters to test the weave. Weaving the final piece of cloth begins after the weaver checks and adjusts warp, heddles, and reed.[16,18,28]

## 4. Methodology (Case study)

### 4.1. The Research Site

The ethnic and cultural diversity has given rise to many unique and dynamic visual traditions. Generally all part of Ethiopia like Oromiya, Amhara, Siltie, Hararyetc has their own traditional fabric styles which show their socio-cultural values. One of these traditions is the weaving from the Gamu- Gofa Highland; the Dorze weaving. Many Dorze weavers live in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, at "Shiro Meda", which is an area at the foot of Entotto Mountain in the northern part of the city , Saris Abo and Guellele.

### 4.2 Data Collection

The methods used to collect data depend on their power to bear upon the research questions asked. Qualitative methods are often used to capture the experiences and lived meanings of the subject's everyday world (Brinkmann&Kvale, 2009). This

approach is located in a context of discovery, in contrast to a context of justification that uses the quantitative methods in which theories are proved or used to measure a phenomenon (Kullberg, 2004). Consequently and considering that this study aims at discovering the learning process and to highlight the subjects' experiences I make use of a qualitative methodology which is suitable for my field study. So, qualitative approach was used as tool of investigation in order to establish the relationship between weaving and its socio-cultural values. Interviews and observations are the primary methods when collecting data in a qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Interviews were conducted to establish the cultural, social, ecological and aesthetic value of traditional cloths. They take the form of structured and unstructured questionnaires designed for a census of creative activities using purposive sampling techniques.

## 5. Analysis

Common hand woven fabrics in Ethiopian society are used for different purposes ranging from day-to-day and ceremonial use, as in for religious purposes. They are woven materials produced in attractive designs with rich colours and made for male and females. Various designs are folded into the material before dyeing and the fabric is often beaten to achieve its shiny, attractive appearance.

### 5.1. Weaving and Its Socio-Cultural Implication

Weaving is not simply a particular way of making cloth but is inextricably bound up with structure value history and identity of the community in which it practiced.

#### *Netela:*

The way to wear the *Netela* differs depending on the religion of the wearer and also on the occasion. The Ethiopian Orthodox wear the *Netela* at church, on public holidays, at weddings and funerals, and also as everyday wear. Muslims wear the *Netela* only at weddings and funerals; for funerals, the *Netela* is opened horizontally and wrapped around the body, and the remaining cloth may be hung from both shoulders. The Ethiopian Orthodox use a different wrapping style for funerals. For these occasions, the *Netela* is wrapped to cover the head first, whereas Muslims arrange theirs so that the pattern hangs from the upper to the lower part of the body. In general, the people of Amhara vary hanging their patterns horizontally or vertically depending on the occasion.

#### *Qemis:*

The *Qemis* is formal wear for women regardless of their religion. The cloth for the *Qemis* uses machine-spun cotton thread for warp and hand-spun cotton thread for weft. There is no standard for length or width of this cloth, and the woman orders her cloth from the weaver according to her form and height. On the *Qemis* of Ethiopia, the areas around the collar, the chest, the back, and part of the skirt have embroidery. Moreover, the patterns embroidered on each part of the *Qemis* differ according to religion—the Ethiopian Orthodox use a pattern of the cross and Muslims use a star and crescent pattern. Embroidery of the *Qemis* is done after the garment is sewn.

#### *Gabi:*

The length of the cloth used for the *Gabi* is 50 Kind (about 25 m). The cloth for the *Gabi* is cut into 3 m and stacked, and these stacks are sewn together on one side for both men and women. Among the people of Amhara, the *Gabi* is widely worn irrespective of religion. Men wear the *Gabi* as formal wear at funerals, during worship services, and as everyday wear, and women wear them as winter clothing at home. In addition, at funerals, the *Gabi* is used to wrap

the bodies of the dead, and at weddings, the *Gabi* is given as a gift to the groom.

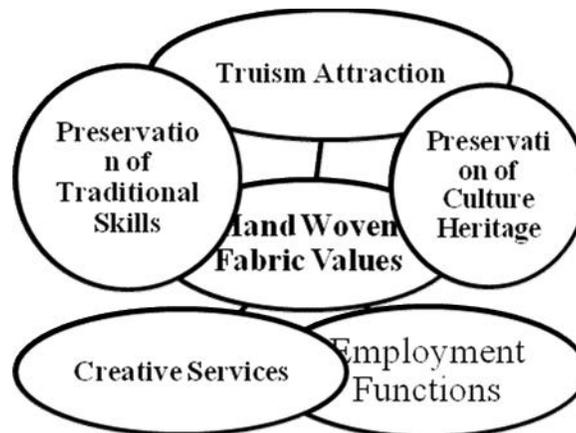
#### *Meqenet:*

The *Meqenet* is a piece of cloth used as a belt twisted around the waist on the *Qemis*. The cloth is about 3 m in length, and its width is approximately 70 cm. Once the woman has put on the *Qemis*, the *Meqenet* is folded in half lengthwise and twisted around the *Qemis*, and it connects in the front. Cloth for the *Meqenet* also features the thin stripes and simple geometric patterns. It is widely worn irrespective of religion.

In Oromo, hand weave just like other clothes their products protect cold from the skin. The interviewed weavers said that their customers view their products in especial way by separating from normal clothes. Apart from being clothes their products are inextricably linked with Oromo philosophy and identity. In social event like burial, market, wedding ceremony adult men and women wear *bale* and *bullukkoo*. *Bale* is dressed by women whereas *bullukkoo* is worn by adult men. One of my informants said on marriage ceremony family prepares different cultural clothes. Especially *bullukkoo* and *bale* are things that do not left. Even if girl's family is very poor one *bullukkoo* for father in law and one *bale* and *sabbata* for mother in law are mandatory. On this day family relative and friend give her *bullukkoo* or *bale* which are called *gumaata* (gift).

The girl family should prepare *bullukkoo* for husband and father in law (*abiyyuu*) and *kulaa* and *sabbata* for mother in law (*amaatii*). Number of *bullukko* and *bale* given for girl on wedding day indicate her parent status and strength. On wedding day relative bring cloth and other as gift which is called *gonfa* (gift). Five days after marriage there is ritual ceremony performed at boy house. This ritual ceremony is called *gadbaasaa*. On this ritual ceremony different food and drink are prepared and people invited. On this ritual ceremony her *qarree* is shaving by her husband. *Qarree* is hair which symbolize unmarried girl. Shaving of *Qarree* marks the transformation of girl from child hood to motherhood.

## 5.2. Tourist attraction



*Fig 8. The role of Hand weaving*

## Conclusion

Hand-woven cotton textiles and garments are artisanal traditional crafts and craftsmanship which differ from region to region, and group to group with hundreds and thousands of different material traditions in evidence. Hand-woven cotton garments also called shemma were traditionally worn by the Christian and Muslim populations of the northern and central highlands of Ethiopia and the central and southern highlands of the country. Today the hand-woven cotton garments are found nearly everywhere in all part of the countries and are not only used for garments but also for household products like blankets, cushion covers and table covers. Traditional hand woven fabrics show different socio-culture values. The fabrics also show the religions of the society, the nations and nationality of the groups, the age of the society also the cloths show the socio-economic level of the group. Traditional Weaving has various socio-cultural, economic and religious significance and values. Costumes that participant wear in ritual activity, religious, political and in different cultural event are provided by local weavers. Their products are more preferable than the modern factory production, which has great contribution for the development of textile and fashion sectors. The local products are cost effective, durable, thick, and propend as socio-cultural context of users. In blessing and praying like for God every individual in society come to God by wearing cultural cloth. All ritual ceremony has their own cultural cloth. Therefore the cultural clothe are mandatory on ritual and taken as pure. On the other hand the production does not pollute environment or nature. Like modern industry,

it does not release burnt air to the environment which negatively affects biodiversity.

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