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## September 2011 Newsletter

### ***Buna Qalaa: A Quest for Traditional Uses of Coffee among Oromo People with Special Emphasis on Wallaga, Ethiopia***

By Bula Sirika Wayessa\*

#### **Abstract:**

Coffee is used among Oromo of West Wallaga as traditional medicine, food, and beverage. It is also a core part of almost every daily ritual practice in the society. The Oromo also link coffee traditions with traditional pottery technology. Presently the Oromo follow different religious denominations. Regardless of their religious background, the Oromo practice coffee ceremonies in the same manner, because it is a marker of their common ethnic identity. Traditionally the people believe that coffee is different from other plants because it grew out of the tears of *Waaaq* (God). In this society, the coffee ceremony is a forum for social networking and it is where elders pass onto their children the norms and values of the society that sustain social identity of the group members.

#### **Introduction**

Food is a focus of symbolic activity about social life and our place in our society. A growing number of studies have contributed to the study of food and culture (Counihan 2005). This is because the study of cuisines is an important research path to understanding human culture and history of the societies (Counihan 1999; Gosden 2003; Lovejoy 2001; Kalcik 1984; Pilcher 1996; Fox 2003; Rodriguez-Algeria 2003). Nevertheless, most studies have focused on food ways of the politically dominant groups and cross-cultural cuisines (Cusak 2003; 2000). This has certainly limited our knowledge of small scale culture specific cuisines like *buna qalaa* (slaughtering coffee).

Coffee is a crucial commodity used around the world in different ways. It has been a fundamentally important social, economic, political, and ritual artifact for several centuries. Although there is currently nothing to substantiate such beliefs it is acknowledged that coffee is indigenous to Ethiopia and it is presupposed that the Oromo were the first people to recognize its stimulating effect (Baxter 1991; Haberland 1963; Wild 2005; Yedes *et al.* 2004).

Oromo people have been utilizing coffee from time immemorial, and the art of preparing coffee is a central element in their every-day cultural practices. In the society coffee has always been used as a medicine, a food and a beverage, as well as in ritual performances. It is traditionally believed the first coffee plant sprouted from the tears of *Waaqa* (Bartels (1983). Therefore, coffee is always a major feature of every ceremony of the people (Haberland 1963) and it has an essential cultural and spiritual element across the diverse range of Oromo groups (Yedes et al. 2004).

Although coffee has great economic, ritual and medicinal significance among the Oromo, to date the diverse uses of coffee among the community have not been systematically documented. Presented here are the traditional uses of coffee among Oromo coffee farmers in Wallaga, the linkage between the indigenous coffee tradition and the pottery technology and symbolism.

### **Physical Setting**

This study was conducted in west Wallaga, which is located between 8°12'N and 10°03'N latitudes and 34°08' E and 36°10'E longitudes (see Figure 1). West Wallaga is one of regions of the Oromia Regional National state, Ethiopia. The region experiences tropical climate because of the relatively high angular position of the sun. The mean annual temperature of the region varies from 15<sup>0</sup>c to 25<sup>0</sup>c. The mean annual rainfall of west Wallaga ranges from 1200 to 2000 millimetres. In the region four agro-ecological zones have been outlined based on temperature and elevation. These are *Diilalla* (Cold highland), *baddaa* (humid highland), *badda daree* (temperate), and *gammoojjii* (hot humid lowland). In the region, areas with elevation between 500 and 1500 meters experience tropical humid and hot climate (*gammoojjii*) with 20-25<sup>0</sup>c mean annual temperature. On the other hand, major high plateau of west Wallaga have mean annual temperature between 15 and 20<sup>0</sup>c. This area falls in sub-tropical (*badda daree*) climate zone.

The data for this study was drawn from field work held in 2005 in selected villages in west Wallaga districts (*Aanaalee*) such as Lalo Asabi, Haru and Ayira-Gulliso. The data was collected through interviews, observations and consultation of relevant literatures. In the interview system, both structured and semi-structured interviews were used because their integration yields insight that neither approach would produce on its own.



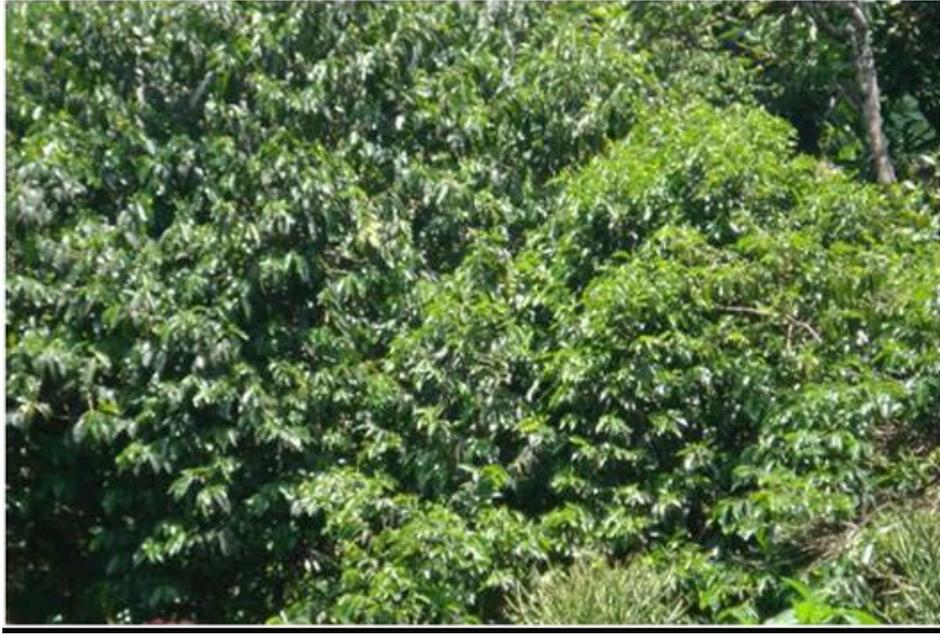
(*Coccinia abyssinica*), Oromo potatoes (*Plectranthus edulis*) and yams. In addition, the role of craftworks in the socio-economic life of the people is immense.

The major dietary staples of the society are *buddeena* (thin bread baked from soured dough of teff, maize or other cereals), steamed tuber crops and porridge. Liquid substances like local beer and mead are also common. In the community, coffee is used as part of daily meals and for medicinal and ritual purposes.

## **Coffee**

The year-round overhead sun, moist environment and moderate altitude of west Wallaga have created a suitable environment for coffee cultivation. Every household in rural west Wallaga has coffee plantation (see Figure 2). Peasant farmer cultivate coffee for several interlinked reasons. First coffee is served as a principal component of daily meals. In the morning, for breakfast, rural society takes two to three cups of coffee along with roasted cereal grains. Coffee is also served with lunch and dinner every-day. This practice is reflected in rural-Oromo daily conversation and the three regular dinning hours are referred as *buna ganamaa* (breakfast), *buna guyyaa* (lunch) and *buna galgalaa* (dinner). Coffee is also a major source of income. The income generated from coffee is used to pay taxes and to supply children and the rest of family members with resources which are not produced by the household. Rural people also believe that planting coffee is one of the means to control more land and pass it onto the children because it helps establish long-term land ownership.

In Oromo tradition green symbolizes fertility (IUOSA 2009) through which a supreme god, *Waaqa* manifests himself to the people. In Wallaga, coffee is ever-green cultivated crop plant. Since a green color symbolizes *Waaqa*'s blessing through fertility and coffee is ever-green, Oromo traditional farmers plant coffee trees even next to their compound gates to take pleasure in the presence of *Waaqa* with them which reflects itself through the coffee plants. Furthermore, they believe that coffee plants provide shade for domestic animals and shelter for the wild ones. Thus, although coffee trees avoid yielding fruits after some year, traditionally the Oromo usually do not prune to maintain a source of new fruiting wood because they take care of coffee not only for economic benefit but also linked socio-cultural factors.



**Figure 2. Peasant owned coffee plantation.**

The Oromo who traditionally personalize the earth always wish it to be covered with plants. They equate land without plant cover with a naked person. In their tradition, land void of vegetation results in cracks which is metaphorically become mouths by which it speaks to *Waaqa* the fact that the people are violating *safuu* (norms) and *feedha Waaqaa* (will of God). Furthermore, the cracks are considered as cracking baby's body due to lack of clothing and butter (traditional body oil). Planting trees including coffee plantation is believed to be clothing the earth and appeasing *Waaqa*.

### **Buna Qalaa (Slaughtering Coffee)**

The eating of coffee among the Oromo people goes back to the time immemorial when it was eaten for the energizing effect (Kraft 1856; Weinber and Bealer 2001). According to oral traditions, Oromo ate food processed from coffee berries. They collected the ripe coffee berries from wild coffee trees, ground them with stone mortars, and mixed the mashed seeds and pulp with butter from which they formed small balls that they carried for subsistence during long journeys. It is believed that this ball is rich with caffeine, sugar, fat and protein (Bartles 1983; Baxter 1991; Weinber and Bealer 2001; Wild 2005). It has been reported that the balls were eaten by warriors, farmers and merchants faced with hard work or long journeys (Wild 2005) by which they were able to overcome the problems of hunger and exhaustion. For example, as cited

by Weinber and Bealer (2001: 4-5), in his book, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790), James Bruce describes that the Oromo warriors' use of coffee during their 16th century expansion as:

The [Oromo in their long distance travel or on a campaigns] traverse immense deserts, carrying nothing to eat with them but the berries of the coffee tree roasted and pulverized, which they mix with [butter] to a certain consistency that will permit of its being rolled into masses about the size of billiards balls and then put in leathern gags until required for use. One of these balls, they claim will support them for a whole day, [during travels or] in active war, better than a loaf of bread or a meal of meat, because it cheers their spirits as well as feeds them.

Coupled with several folk traditions which this study has recounted from Wallaga, Bruces' account of Oromo's traditional attachment to coffee could have pointed to the fact that this plant species has a distinctive position among the society. For the society, it is not merely viewed as beverage sustenance waiting formal recognition for further cash earnings. It is rather more of a unique insignia which came into existence through insightful detection of its place in most popular traditional dietary.



**Figure 3. Dry coffee berries.**

The Oromo use of coffee as a meal continues to this today (Bartles 1983; Baxter 1991; Weinber and Bealer 2001; Wild 2005). The common coffee meal that has continued to the present time is known as *buna qalaa*. Buna qalaa is prepared of green or dried coffee berries, which are washed and opened by the teeth (see Figure 3). Opened coffee berries are added and toasted in a pot on fire on hearthstones. Pure butter is added to the toasted coffee beans while still on fire. Thus, buna qalaa is not just a distinctive marker of Oromo food habit, but a unique achievement of the society in the sphere of utilizing coffee for dietetic use.

Coffee berries are also one of the important components of Oromo traditional food known as *Qorii*. *Qorii* is prepared from toasted coffee berries and barley, which is mixed up with refined and spiced butter are used along with the regular coffee. Coffee is also used as a medicine among the Oromo. Primarily it is used for the treatment of discomfort and illness such as a headache. In this regard, a person suffering from a headache is advised to drink cups of coffee. During long journeys, a traveling person takes with him/herself toasted coffee berries. In case the traveler encounters any illness he/she first smells the coffee berries, placing the berries in his/her nose for the betterment of health. If this does not bring change the berries are chewed and swallowed.



**Figure 4. A. Buna qalaa being prepared**

**B. Buna Qalaa ready for eating**

Traditionally coffee is also an important source of food. Roasted and ground coffee is believed to be a medicine that treats wounds. When a person gets injured, coffee powder is dusted on the wounded part and covered with the leave of croton. Roasted coffee powder mixed with honey is also believed to treat a person with diarrhea. Moreover, coffee is viewed as a

preventive medicine that protects people from any illness and the smoke produced from its burning is said to kill vectors and eliminate any cause of sickness. It is also believed that the smoke goes to and appeases the spirit (*ayyaana*) that guards person's well being.

### **Symbolism of Coffee**

Coffee is incorporated into the cosmology of the Oromo people. Oral tradition on the origin of coffee indicates that once upon a time *Waaqa* ordered a man to do what he ordered him. The man refused to fulfill the will of *Waaqa*. Eventually *Waaqa* became disappointed and annoyed with him which resulted in his death. When *Waaqa* visited the area the next day, he found the corpse of the person lying in the grave, and tears burst from his eyes. At that very moment, a coffee plant sprouted from the spots where his tears had dropped. According to this tradition, from among the trees, coffee is believed to be sprouted from the tears of *Waaqa*. This prompted the community to believe that other trees grew from rain while coffee trees grew of the tears of *Waaqa* (Bartels 1983).

The growing of coffee from tears of *Waaqa* at the man's grave has implications. They believe that it reflects the love of *Waaqa* to his people and how much he is concerned about them regardless of their unwillingness (Aguilar 1995; 2000; Duressa 2002; Taye 2002). They believe that whenever the coffee ceremony occurs *Waaqa* comes nearer to them (Bartels 1983); hence coffee is a crucial component in every ceremony and any occasion associated with coffee is ceremonial.

Coffee also symbolizes women (Bartels 1983; Baxter 1990; Guyo 2009). *Buna qalaa* designates killing at which blood is shed. A coffee-bean also metaphorically represents a female reproductive organ. The coffee fruits are bitten open and stewed in melted butter. The opened coffee fruits are a symbol of the female organ. This biting open of the coffee fruits is a symbol of the first sexual intercourse on the wedding day (Bartels 1983). The butter is a symbol of the cow which in turn is a symbol of female fertility. In addition when the berries, in the end, split open they represent childbirth. The opened coffee fruits are added with melted butter to a pot called *waciitii*. The butter is a product of the cow, which in turn is a symbol of female fertility. The opened coffee fruits are added with melted butter to a *waciitii*. The butter added to the *buna qalaa* has a strong symbolic relation with women and women fertility. The *waciitii*, which is shaped from several handfuls of clay, symbolizes lineage cohesion.

## Coffee and Pot

In Wallaga, pottery vessels are personified. In this manner, wet pots and pots under fabrication are liked to baby. As a human being does, a pot is born, grows old and dies. Breaking of pots is also associated with the death of a person. The breakage of pots after serving enough is equated with the death of aged person.

Potters do not like the process to be observed while forming pots. According to local tradition, eyes of strangers (*horma*) are powerful and can break wet vessels or vessels being molded, which are metaphorically considered to be like a baby. A ‘stranger’ in this context refers to anybody who is not a member of the potter’s family. Even a potter from one village can be considered as a ‘stranger’ in another pottery-making village. According to the local tradition, babies are unable to endure the eyes of strangers, which are said to possess the power to do harm. For this reason children are not shown to strangers and metaphorically *durjii* (wet pottery vessels and vessels being shaped) must be protected from passersby. If pots being formed or wet pots are viewed by strangers, it is believed that they will break. Thus, any person out of the village of pottery-making is not allowed to look at an unfinished pot. However, if a stranger should come by, then they must spit on the ware and say *haa ofkalu* (which literary means ‘let it be spared from eyes’). If a person is not familiar with the tradition surrounding pot-making, the potter tells him/her to say: *ha ofkalu jedhi durjiin ija hin baatuu* (which literary means ‘say let it be spared from eyes for a ware cannot survive eyes’).

Pottery vessels are also considered as a house of the spirit (*ayyaana*) that guards people against bad fortune. Pottery vessels are widely used utensils and traditional pottery making is persistent to date. Of the several pottery vessels, *waciitii* (small bowl), *beddee bunaa* (coffee griddle) and *jabanaa* (coffee pot) have strong utilitarian and symbolic link with coffee and its ceremonies.

### **Waciitii (Bowl)**

One of the forms of pot that has a link with traditional ritual is *waciitii*, a bowl shaped pot used for serving *buna qalaa* (see Figure 4). As stated above, *waciitii* symbolically represents an image of lineage cohesion because of the fact that it is shaped from many pinches of clay and that every pinch in its turn is made of several handfuls of clay (Bartels 1983). As discussed above, the split coffee beans are added to the *waciitii* and then mixed with melted butter.

Splitting the fruits represent childbirth. The opened coffee fruits are added with melted butter to a *waciitii*. The *buna qalaa* is served often by the same vessel and all participants eat together. Having *buna qalaa* from the same *waciitii* is also a reflection of social cohesion. The tears of *Waaqa* (coffee) cleanse the person (pot). Cleansing in the Oromo traditional religion results in blessing from *Waaqa* that manifests itself in the fertility of human and animals, good harvest, peace and understanding among the society.

Coffee is also important in other ritual practices such as childbirth, in celebration for the birth of a calf, sacrifice for the spirit of a deceased, *ateetee* (female ceremony in which they pray for health and fertility), *moggaasa* (naming newly born baby). It is worthy to note that the coffee beans are eaten in the context of prayer and in memory of the tears of *Waaqa* from which the coffee plant sprouted. A request for blessings and the offering of coffee beans to *Waaqa* and *buna qalaa* is ritualized.

Ritual practices are influenced by socio-political and economic life of the followers (Heilman and Kasiser 2002). Today the Oromo are following different religions with their specific doctrines. In spite of this, however, the society holds common perceptions on the ritual significance of coffee. This supports the notion that in establishing new religions and individual conversion, there is usually a high degree of cultural continuity among the Oromo (Osteba 2005). For example, *buna qalaa*, which finds its root in *Waqeffannaa*, remains a popular practice among Christian and Muslim Oromos of Wallaga.

The Oromo traditional religion, *waqeffannaa*, is the pillar of Oromo coffee rituals. Following the introduction of Christianity and Islam in the region, the Oromo traditional religion has declined. The Oromo who embraced Christianity and Islam have encountered challenge regarding the practice of coffee rituals. In these religious organizations, coffee ritual is considered to be worshipping idol. The clergymen of the new religious doctrines eventually denounced the practice of coffee rituals as unlawful. The Oromo who have been practicing the coffee rituals from the time of immemorial however could not accept this notion warmly. Instead they began to blend together Christianity and Islam with the elements of *waqeffannaa*. This practice has opened a new avenue for the continuity of coffee rituals.

The Oromos pray to *Waaqa* whereby they ask for the presence of *Waaqa* in order to continue as community. Prayers can be done at any moment at the family level. However, there is one special occasion in which families become united in a chain of prayer, offering and

sacrifice. In this occasion, the coffee ceremony provides the community with a moment of unity and brings members back to their tradition, their own roots and their own identity. The coffee ceremony is also referred to as a school of socialization because it is during this occasion that the youths are told proverbs, stories, as well as thoughts, customs, and norms of the community. Furthermore, as the coffee ceremony is dominated by women it is an avenue for them to come together, discuss and handle social issues, and share ideas.



**Figure 5. A potter at market for selling *wacitii*.**

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that coffee is used as a symbol of peace keeping among the Oromo. Coffee is a symbol of peacemaking among the Oromo not only because its ceremonies bring together different communities but also because quarrelled individuals are reconciled at the ceremony. Furthermore, avoidance of an invited person from taking part in the ceremony is also a symbol of ignorance or disappointment of invited individuals with the family holding the ceremony. Having the coffee ceremony therefore creates intimacy among the participants. The Oromo traditionally believe that eating from the same dish is a core of social integration. One of their sayings says, '*kaan waliin nyaate wal-hin nyaatu,*' which literally means 'those who eat together do not harm reach other', confirm this reality.

### ***Beddee* (Coffee griddle)**

Another ceramic vessel linked to coffee tradition is *beddee* (coffee griddle). The griddle is formed by moulding technique. Shaped vessel is dried in the sun and fired after which it is used to toast coffee. Before toasting coffee berries are split up by mortar using pestle. Thereafter the seeds are roasted separately. Griddle is preferred to toast coffee because it allows heat gradually that result in proper roasting. The amount needed for one preparation is toasted hard on a moderately heated griddle.

### ***Jabanaa* (Coffee pot)**

The other useful pottery vessel in the coffee ritual is *jabanaa* (Figure 5). In rural areas coffee beans are toasted for making coffee. Normally, it is toasted on a small sized griddle known as *beddee bunaa*. The roasted coffee is then put in a wooden bowl (pistil) known as *mooyee bunaa* for the grinding and thereafter it is ground by small mortar, *muka mooyee bunaa*. Eventually the powdered coffee is added to boiled water in a clay pot as (*jabanaa*), which is over fire on hearthstones. When the *jabanaa* is still over fire, an appropriate amount of salt is added. The use of *jabanaa* for making coffee has continued in both rural and urban areas. As stated above, one of the reasons for the continuity is that *jabanaa* has no equivalent substitute.



**Figure 6. Potters selling *Jabanaa* at market place, Guyyi, West Wallaga.**

The traditional coffee ceremony is inseparable from the coffee pot in both rural and urban areas where residents invariably use the coffee pot for making ceremonial coffee. The coffee ceremony follows the coffee ritual steps strictly, giving enough time for the clay pots to boil the coffee gradually. Metallic kettles do allow rapid boiling that believed to not give the desirable flavor at coffee ceremonies.

### **Coffee Gathering: Avenue for Socialization and Social Meeting**

The coffee used to be served with a small cup, formerly fabricated from clay although presently imported as ceramic cups, are used. Around the place where the woman who serves the coffee sits is covered with green grasses. Grass symbolizes life and prosperity, and it is an element present in all their public rituals, including funerals, and a prayer of remembrance, during which grass is spread on the grave and the green color of the grass, represents fertility and hence manifestation of blessing of *Waaqa* as stated above.

The environment of the ceremony has played its part towards the continuity of the tradition. Coffee ceremony is held at least three times a day in the morning, noon and evening. Coffee is given to breastfeeding mothers as it is believed that it helps them to provide more milk to babies. This is partly because coffee is drunk with salt that may encourage having more water. Children have exposure to the ceremony from an early age. In the Oromo tradition, it is up to Oromo mothers to teach their daughters to make coffee and undertake the ceremony, and every daughter at the age of making coffee (roughly childhood six to nine) is expected to run all of the ceremony independently. If she fails to do so her mother will be blamed for failing to serve as a custodian of local tradition that may affect her reputation in the society. This is part of the interwoven customs that place women in the heart of coffee ceremony (either religious or secular) and its intended purpose.

Furthermore, the children have exposure to the ceremony because it is a forum where the elders tell them proverbs and the legends of the society. In doing so, the parents customize their children to coffee ritual that ensures the reproduction of the traditions and maintains the continuity the social practice. The children who have grown up in this environment find themselves tied to the coffee tradition that of course sustains the practices to date.

During the ceremony, elder participants often recite the prayer:

*Bunaa fi nagaan nuuf kenni*, give us coffee and peace;

*Manaana fi ollaana nuuf toli*, bless our home and our neighbours.

In addition, the women who are hosting the ceremony often hold up hot *jabanaa* on their palms and pray:

*Gubaana siif baadha gubaa nu oolchi*, I am carrying hot for you  
glory, protect us from hot;

*Guutuu siif dhaabna guutuu nuuf godhi*, we raise full for you make  
us full.

Religious rituals involve the interaction between the deity and humans in the form of giving and receiving, reward and punishment (Strak 2004; Tremplin 2006). The central theme of the above prayer supports the notion that religion involves interaction between deities and humans. Carrying hot for the sake of a deity is a self-punishment while having protection for the hot thing is the reward. The same is true with raising coffee full of *jabanaa* is in demand of being full in all sectors of life. In the Oromo tradition hot is associated with anything in life which does not happen under normal condition. In other words symbolically hot means bad fate. On the other hand, in the community, full refers to completeness in every sector of life (e.g. having health, wealth, children, and cattle). In general, the prayer comprises the three fundamental themes: the wish of having coffee and its inseparable element-peace. The second one is the fertility prayer, which is the core in traditional Oromo prayer. Family well-being includes mutual respect between husband and wife, children and parents, parents and children.

The other prayer recited during the coffee ceremony is: *Jabanaan jabaa miti yaa Waaqi situ jabaadha daba dubbii fi jabaa dhukkubaa nu oolchi* -- Jabanaa is not strong O God defend us from inequitable judgment and deadly disease. This prayer helps us conceptualize the view that clay vessels symbolically represent human beings who could not endure inequitable judgment and deadly disease, which are believed to be beyond an individual capacity to deter. Here the concept 'Jabanaa is not strong' refers to the fact that human beings are not strong by themselves and their strength believe to come from *Waaqa*.

The coffee ceremony which seems to have evolved among rural coffee farmers community and practiced as integral to Oromo traditional religion, *Waaqeffannaa*, remained to be important

among Christian and Muslim Oromos. The tradition has also been integrated with the daily life of urban dwelling Oromos both in Ethiopia and abroad. In addition to the usual ceremony held with intimate neighbors on some days of a week, the Oromo have religious gathering after which they serve coffee each other after their congregational programs. They also undertake *buna qalaa* on special occasions like community meeting, marriage ceremony, and fund raising programs.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Oromo believed to use coffee as a stimulant as well as food. The Oromo warriors, farmers, and merchants used to use snatch, prepared of coffee fruits and butter. Presently, the Oromo occupy different physical environment from the dry to all year round rainfall. They also practice from sedentary agriculture to semi-pastoralism economic activities. The Oromo also embraced different religions such as Christianity, Islam and *Waaqeffannaa*. In spite of these significant environmental, religious and economic variations observable among the society, the Oromo practice *buna qalaa* and the coffee gathering ceremony that find its root in *Waaqeffannaa*. The society link coffee tradition with symbolically loaded pottery technology. In their tradition the Oromo believe that coffee sprouted out of tears of *Waaqa*. Coffee is also believed to be the ever-green crop that peasants cultivate. A green color represents fertility in the Oromo tradition. Healthy fertility is the manifestation of *Waaqa*'s blessing. The peasants also link coffee plantation with their environmental ethics. Planting coffee is means clothing the earth and appeasing *Waaqa*.

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## Note

\* Bula Sirika Wayessa is a PhD student in archeology at the University of Calgary, Canada.

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**Return to September 2011 Newsletter:**  
**<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0911/news0911.html>**