

Traditional Beliefs, Cultures & Customs

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Overview:

This curriculum was inspired and developed from field-work (interviews, observations, filed notes) conducted in Wolaita-Sodo, Ethiopia over the course of four weeks as part of the 2017 Fulbright Hays Ethiopia Curriculum project in combination with secondary sources. This is intended to be used in Gender Clubs throughout the U.S. and Ethiopia to educate students about the importance and urgency of gender equality.

Learning Objectives:

1. For students to gain awareness about how traditional beliefs, cultures and customs of Ethiopia and the U.S.A (have) inform(ed) and influence(d) gender inequality.
2. For students to gain a better understanding and appreciation of how traditional beliefs, cultures and customs inform cultural norms in their societies and others.
3. For students to become aware of various sources (religious scriptures, religious practices, folktales, customs, and antiquated ideas) of imbedded with gender inequality ideology.

Teacher Preparation: (tools/materials)

1. Familiarity with scriptures from the Christian Bible and/or Islamic Quran that promote gender inequality.
2. Familiarity with Ethiopian and/or American folktales that convey messages of gender inequality.
3. Familiarity with cultural customs, practices, laws and ideas that are rooted in and maintain gender inequality.

Instructions (if using Handout #1):

1. Introduce the lesson by explaining that both Ethiopia and the U.S.A. are historically Christian nations, even though they both are home to a variety of religions. And as historically Christian nations, scriptures from their bibles are revered, considered to be the “word of God”, used to conceive laws, execute justice, inform marriage vows and a long list of things that form the social fabric of these society.
2. Distribute Handout 1: “Bible Verses that Promote Patriarchal Ideology and Gender Inequality” ***WARNING***: **This activity may not be suitable for all groups of learners or cultural spaces. This activity is only recommended for students who, and learning spaces, where religious texts can be freely questioned, discussed and critically analyzed. With people who take religious scriptures as the inerrant word of God and in cultures or cultural spaces where it is not socially acceptable to critically analyze religious scriptures this activity is not recommended.**
3. Ask for volunteers to read each verse. After each verse, check for understanding.
4. Lead an open discussion with the students on what they heard and understood in each verse.

5. Ask students to analyze, deconstruct, challenge and question what the verses were promoting and why.

Instructions (if using Handout #2)

1. Read the Oromo folktale (the Seena) and/or the Oromo proverbs and the researcher's explanation and analysis of them in advance of the lesson.
2. Introduce the lesson by explaining to the class that folktales are stories that can be true or can be fantasy or can be a mixture of both. In some cultures, folktales are taken very seriously as true stories. In some cultures, folktales are forms of entertainment and teaching, even though the details are not to be taken as facts.
3. Decide whether you want to read the story and proverbs to the students or whether you want them to read them as a group, and make the appropriate preparations to do so.
4. After the story or proverbs have been read, explain the deeper meanings as they relate to gender issues and equality, using the explanations and information provided by the researcher, unless you feel fully equipped to provide your own, well-informed analysis.
5. After these parts of the activity are down, lead a discussion on the important elements of the stories or proverbs and guide the discussion towards a critical analysis of the content in light of gender equality issues.

Handout #1

Bible Verses that Promote Patriarchal Ideology and Gender Inequality

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, **as unto the Lord**.

For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. **Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.**” – Ephesians 5:22-24 (KJV)

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” – I Timothy 2:11-12 (KJV)

“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and **the head of the woman** is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” – I Corinthians 11:3 (KJV)

“Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.”
– I Corinthians 11:9 (KJV)

“And if they will learn any thing, **let them ask their husbands at home**: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” – I Corinthians 14:35 (KJV)

“To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.” – Titus 2:5 (KJV)

“Likewise, ye wives, **be in subjection to your own husbands**; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives;”
- I Peter 3:1(KJV)

“For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, **calling him lord**: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.” – I Peter 3:5-6 (KJV)

“Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto **the weaker vessel**, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.” – I Peter 3:7 (KJV)

Handout #2: **Oromo Folktales and Proverbs***

Introduction/Background Info:

“In the Jimma area, women are considered as naturally defective and inferior to men. This assumption is witnessed in various aspects of life and in verbal expressions. Among others, oral narratives play a vital role in justifying, legitimizing and transmitting the 'inferior' nature and subordinate status of women from generation to generation. Oral narratives are used to socialize women to men's dominance, and to make them subservient to men. Similarly, the men are socialized to exercise power over women through oral narratives” (Alemu, 2006: p. 82).

“The Seenaa, which, for common understanding, may be referred to as historical narrative, is the most valued narrative genre of the Jimma Oromo. It is a factual representation of local historical events and great deeds of popular personalities in the good old days. Seenaa, which is conventionally understood as and believed to be true history, consists of factual oral accounts whereby the cumulative and shared socio-political experiences, traditions, ideologies, norms, and values are expressed, validated, and perpetuated” (Alemu, 2006: p. 98).

“According to certain Seenaa currently told in the area, women initially ruled the Jimma Oromo. In the widespread version of Seenaa mentioned above, for instance, the first ruler of the Jimmas was said to have been a woman called Makka Ware. Makka ruled the five Oromo groupings during and subsequent to the time of their migration to and settlement in the area, which thenceforward was to be known as Jimma. As time went by, however, says the Seenaa, ill feelings grew in the people and they became disappointed at being ruled by a woman so much so that the tribal representatives plotted to overthrow her. Consequently, they succeeded in making a law that defined women as incomplete creatures. They not only removed Makka Ware from power but also disenfranchised the entire female race from leadership. The complete narrative text in English translation runs as follows” (Alemu, 2006: p. 100).

A Seenaa (Oromo Folktale):

*At the time our ancestors first came to settle in this area, a woman called Makka Ware ruled them. The territory of the present day Jimma was uninhabited then. And the Oromo had been living in Bisil, a place east of The Gibe River. Makka Ware was the first ruler** of the Jimma Oromo; Her office was said to have been under the sycamore tree at the place where the flag is being flown now. That was the place where Makka and her law-making officials had a council. The name of that sycamore tree was... what was it?*

* Sourced from Abraham Alemu. “Oral Narratives as an Ideological Weapon.” *Gender Issues Research Report Series*, no. 23. Ethiopia: 2006 Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA)

** The Oromo language does not have an equivalent term for ‘queen.’

'Hulle, Oda Hulle.' [Audience response].

Yes, that is it. And the lawmaking council was similar to the present-day committee meeting. While Makka was ruling the people, Diggo came to power.

'What happened to her?' [Audience request].

Just a minute, she was to be overthrown. They were to have a council under the sycamore tree. Don't you know the sycamore tree, which stands in pair in the place where the flag is being flown now?

'Yes, we know.' [Audience response].

That was her office, you see. That was the place where she had a council; it was from there that all the binding rules and regulations radiated. She held office there, and ruled the people for a long period. As time went by, however, ill feelings grew in the people. They became disappointed at being ruled by a female. Then, the men assembled and counselled secretly. They said, 'It is ridiculous, our being ruled by a woman; it is shame, to be governed by a woman as if there were no men among us.' Having expressed their disapprobation of their female ruler, they plotted to overthrow her. Accordingly, they conspired and agreed to trick her out of chairing a meeting of the legislative council she herself had called and, in her absence, to make a law that would enable them to remove her and the entire female race from power. There and then, a man called Hera volunteered to play the leading role in the plot. Hera was a very tall, handsome man, a kind of man who holds an irresistible attraction for women.

'In the morning of the day our meeting is to be held,' said Hera to his fellowmen, 'I will go to the palace and engage Makka in a long conversation and delay her from the meeting. In the meantime, you are to make a law which prohibits women from assuming authoritative position.' It was agreed, thus, to carry out everything according to the plan.

On the said day, Hera arrived at the palace while Makka was getting ready to ride her horse to the meeting. 'Oh! Hera, what brought you to my place at this early time of the day?' asked Makka. 'Your Excellency,' replied Hera, 'while I was on my way to our law-making meeting, I felt like coming here to pay my respects and escort you there. To be frank with you, I have not had my breakfast. Would you provide me with something to eat and drink, please?' Makka dismounted from her horse, and invited Hera to a lavish breakfast with the best food and mead. Hera took his time, eating and engaging her in a protracted, amusing conversation. By so doing, he was able to hold her back for hours from going to and residing over the meeting. In the meantime, hence, his fellowmen were to make the law. Overcome by Hera's enticing countenance and delaying tactics, Makka arrived at the meeting place long after the council had completed making the law.

Upon her arrival, Makka found the people communing with each other in a relaxed mood. To her bewilderment, they failed to pay her due respect and received her coldly. They remained in their seats regardless of their custom of rising and remaining standing until she was seated in her presidential chair. Shocked by her subjects' unusual

behaviour, Makka was unable to know what to do or to say. She quietly sat down and observed them for a while. Then she asked, 'What has come of our law-making counsel to be held today?'

'We have already made our law,' replied the men. 'Who led you in doing so?'

'No one, we made it ourselves.'

'What laws did you make?'

'The first is a law that prohibits women from assuming administrative positions. We are convinced that all women, including you, are naturally incomplete and defective creatures, who, therefore, should be given no more chance to come to power.'

'So, you declared that we are unfit to be a ruler. That means you have removed me from power.'

'Yes, you are not fit to rule us, because you are mentally and physically inferior to men. Women are not adept at using the spear; nor are they strong enough to fight the enemy. What is worse, women's pregnancy hinders men from being victorious over their enemies, as they neglect their duty of fighting for looking after their expecting wives who may go into labour in a battlefield. As to women's inferiority in mind, Hera's success in holding you back from this very meeting, which was prearranged but by yourself, is a tangible evidence.'

'Okay! You declared that women would not be rulers. What is the other law you have made?'

'We have also declared that honey makers, blacksmiths, tanners, and itinerant traders should be treated as outcasts.'

There and then, Makka Ware was removed from power and replaced by a man called Abba Qiriphe. Thenceforth, women were not allowed to be rulers. While eight kings reigned over Jimma, there was no single woman in it. This is why women cannot hold positions of leadership or administration at all levels.

Explanation and Analysis of the Seena:

“The Seena of Makka Ware seems to be men's formulation, though it contains commonly shared traditional conceptions of both women and men. Actually, it is told to justify and legitimize women's inferior 'nature' and subordinate status. To this effect, it depicts women from men's point of view, and presents the exclusion of women from power as a justifiable “making of the wise ancestors.” This patriarchal theme is especially evident in terms of both the female and male behaviours that stand in direct opposition.

The woman in the story, Makka Ware, is a stereotypical representative of Jimma Oromo women. True to the patriarchal ideal of the female sex, thus, she is portrayed as a passive,

submissive, helpless, politically naive and vulnerable woman who lacks the strength, commitment, self-control, seriousness of purpose and rational judgment required of a political leader. Unable to resist Hera's intruding and enticing physique, Makka falls into his trap and completely neglects her public responsibility and misses the law-making counsel, feeling moral obligation to pander to his whims. She neither protests against nor makes any effort to arrest the plot and the law of disenfranchisement of women from being passed. In so doing, she behaves in conformity with the deep-rooted gender norms and prescriptions. The dominant male figure, Hera, on the other hand, behaves cunningly and confidently. He not only takes the initiative in planning and executing the plot against Makka Ware, but also plays a leading role and succeeds in establishing the patriarchal order by way of bringing Abba Qiriphe to power. In conformity with and justification of the prototypical image and societal expectation of a man, Hera ventures upon and succeeds in extracting compliance from Makka, hence exhibiting courage, commitment and seriousness of purpose, in sum, superiority and dominance over the female figure" (Alemu, 2006: pp. 102-103).

"Concisely, the story reveals the male ideal of women and the patriarchal ideologies and stereotypes that have been accepted as representing the whole society. To this end, it defines women as having 'natural' attributes that make them less worthy than and inferior to men. What is more, it reinforces the traditional assumption that women lack the character traits required to fill positions of leadership. It provides 'correct' models of maleness and femaleness, socializing both men and women into behaving in gender-normative ways as the only 'proper' modes of behaviour, and thereby, contributes to maintenance of the patriarchal system. By producing and reproducing various versions of this and other Seena narratives, the men narrators make sure to justify and legitimize the subordination of women" (Alemu, 2006: p. 104).

Introduction to the Oromo proverbs:

"The story of the cruel woman is one of the many oral narratives and sayings that emphasize the irrationality and futility of women as the bases for their subordination to men who, on the other hand, are described as rational, duty-minded, composed and resourceful. Of course, Oromo orature abounds with proverbs and metaphorical expressions depicting women as irrational, thoughtless, and absurd. The following examples suffice to illustrate this point" (Alemu, 2006: p. 105).

Some Oromo proverbs:

- *Motummaan dubartii karra cufaatti oshiti.* The government of women leaves the cattle shut in their corral.
- *Motummaan dubartii bishaan ol yaafti.* The government of women demands for water to flow upward.
- *Dubartiin hamma harmi rarraate takka, qalbiin rarraate.* The mentality of women is like their breasts, it is hanging in mid-air.

- *Dubartiin dheertuu malee beektuu hinqabdu.* A woman may be tall, but never bright in her thinking.
- *Dubartiin furdoo malee guddoo hinqabdu.* There is no a great woman, but a fat one.
- *Sareen fira namaati, nadheen dina isaa.* Dog is the best friend of man, woman his cruellest enemy.
- *Garaa jabina akka haadhakee, jagnummaa akka abbaakee.* Be cruel as your mother, and brave as your father.

Explanation and Analysis:

“Women and their faults or shortcomings are among the most pervasive themes in Oromo oral narratives of the Jimma Oromo. A number of stories and sayings depict the female race as creatures with negative traits that make them ‘naturally’ distinct from and inferior to men. These narratives transmit the stereotyped conceptions and male ideals of women from generation to generation. In so doing, they provide evidence that the commonly held views and attitudes towards women are true. Furthermore, they reinforce gender normative behaviour by way of socializing both women and men to the traditional gender roles and works they are expected to perform. Specifically speaking, these stories influence women to act and behave in conformity with the socially sanctioned gender norms. It is a socialization process which works via stories to make women what they are expected to be and what they actually are as well” (Alemu, 2006: p. 107).