‘Adopted’ Marriage: A Case of Child Marriage, its Practice and Status in North Gondar, Ethiopia

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Abstract
This study was conducted in some selected districts of North Gondar (Ethiopia) zeroing in on Early marriage. It is a folkloric study and qualitative in terms of the approach it used. The study used cultural relativism and contextual approach to better develop a grounded analysis of child marriage positing it in the cultural contexts of the people of the selected districts. Data were collected using observation, in-depth interview and focus group discussion. The study participants mainly were married couples of adopted marriage, community elders, and religious leaders. Having interpreted the data collected qualitatively and buttressed it using cultural relativism and contextual analysis; the study found adopted marriage is the type of early marriage children are usually exposed in rural areas of the study districts. Moreover, it found that adopted marriage is practiced as per the choice and wish of parents, not children’s. Though in recent times these types of early marriage and in deed early marriage altogether are officially banned by the government, the people of the study area have not stopped practicing early marriage. They do this convinced that it will ensure the future economic wellbeing of children, widen the social and family ties of marrying families, longevity of married life, and decreased divorce.

Keywords: Marriage, child Marriage, Arranged marriage, North Gondar, Amhara.

1. Introduction
Marriage usually is an institution by which male and female develop partnership for life using legally and socially permissible ways. Marriage types, tradition system, and practice, age of spouses and related things vary across the globe and are culture specific. International organizations like UNICEF strongly assert that children below age 18 should not be legally allowed to get married. However, studies indicate that in some countries early marriage or marriage of children under 18 is practiced. Under age marriage has been the subject of research attracting the attention UNICEF (2005), UNESCO (2002), UNFPA (1991), and UNO (2005). These and related studies have indicated that in many African countries early marriage is customary and describe it as one of the prevalent harmful traditional practices. Similarly in Ethiopia, early marriages have been common in whole Ethiopia, due to the multi-ethnic characteristic of the society consisting of different religions and ethnic groups, many regions have different customs and motives (Mutgan, 2014:12). Women’s rights activists, Non-government organizations, civil societies and health professionals and practitioners have challenged the practice of early marriage claiming that it brings psychological, social and health complications to girls exposed to early marriage (Kerebih and Mulunesh 2014, Bogalech 2007, Erulkar 2013, Eshetu and Dula 2014). On the other hand, owners of this cultural practice promote early marriage on the condition that it advances a family’s social standing and honor, ensures the future economic wellbeing of the girl, helps a girl abstain from sexual interaction before marriage, and helps create good social and family ties with the boy’s family. Amhara land has the highest child marriage rates in the world, according to U.N. and Ethiopian statistics; ‘...in some dusty corners of the ancient highlands, almost 90% of the local girls are married before 15” (Salopek 2004). Early marriage is widely practiced in Gondar, Shewa, Wollo and Gojjam (Rmerick 2004, Guday 2005, Kerebih and Mulunesh 2014). Studies conducted on the practice of early marriage in this part of Ethiopia, without considering the perception and insider’s view of the local populace, stress the harmfulness of the practice judging it based on other countries’ cultures, policies and international laws. However, researchers like Guday (2005) and Mutgan (2012) have tried to look deep into early marriage by taking the reasons for early
marriage, its perceived significances, and its effects on the married children as unit of analysis focusing on the cases of early marriage on Amhara and Oromiya Regions.

This study has tried to explore early marriage which has been viewed negatively by studies conducted by outsiders taking the practice in North Gondar into account to see its socio-economic cultural value.

2. Methodology

This study is folkloric in approach and has adopted qualitative research design. Data were gathered by employing observation, in-depth interview and Focus Group discussion. This field folkloric study was conducted in 2017 in Amhara Region on three purposively sampled districts (locally, woredas) of North Gondar Zone. The study has used cultural relativism and contextual approaches as theoretical frame work to explore deep into the practice and complexity of Child marriage as practiced in the samples woredas of the research site. Cultural relativism helps to study, analyze, interpret and evaluate a society’s folkloric elements and values as per its defined ways of cultural values, traditional accords, and folkloric significance than using parameters borrowed from the cultural markers of another society. Symmetrical to this basic notion of cultural relativism, this study tries to look into the practice of child marriage and the attitude of the society in North Gondar Zone as perspectives of the society of the research site.

Moreover, analyses presented in this paper are very much indicative of the importance of employing contextual approach and how it can be hugely significant in helping create better analytical image of folkloric practice by situating it in its own cultural and social contexts. Bauman (1986:363) and Ben Amos (1993) in order to analyze the contexts and meanings of folkloric data gathered from the field suggest the need to take into account “What systems of Belief and value… symbolic relation & other sematic dimensions as give shape to folkloric expression?”. Flowing from the same argument, this study thus has also opted to apply contextual analysis.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Definition of Child marriage

In Rural Ethiopia, especially in northern Ethiopia, there has been a marriage tradition which has for long been practiced when two young children coming from different families were made to enter into marriage arrangement as per the will and promise of their parents. This arranged marriage locally is better known as “My child for your child marriage” or simply ‘child marriage’. As this marriage arrangement has been practiced by the will of the parents only when the children were at their early age and as it usually is not officially endorsed by official government institutions and other organizations, it has usually been dubbed as a harmful cultural practice. Due to such widely circulating official perception, this marriage has been given the name ‘early marriage’ to show that children rather than pursuing child-based activities are forced to enter into marriage responsibilities which are well beyond their age and maturity.

For instance, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Revised Family Code Proclamation No. 213/2000 clearly stipulates “A valid marriage shall take place only when the spouses have given their free and full consent.” (Article 6) and “Neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude marriage.” (Article 7). As per this law, a family or parent who has been found transgressing this law in North Gondar Zone sometimes has been subjected to legal questioning.

Even though the law gives such protection for children not to be subjected to early marriage, the researcher while collecting data in the field had observed that early marriage practice has been undergoing camouflaged in the name of other traditional practices as Christening, death commemorating activities (locally Tezkar, Zhaka), religious coming together ceremonies and even in the name of the wedding of adults. Child marriage has thus continued to be practiced masked by such
activities and the local people from whom data was collected took pride from and place huge value on such early marriage practice.

Child marriage has been customary and is still being practiced in this part of Ethiopia. In north Gondar Zone, marriage is the result of parents’ will and accord that it is dictated by the personal preference, intimacy and decision of children. Accordingly, parents arrange marriage relation to their unborn or born children based taking into account the long period of friendly and strong socio-economic ties they have with the aspiring parent who wants act in the same way. Such an act has been taken as a way of lifting someone’s social standing or maintaining the existing strong social bonds between or among families. The age and ways of arrangement for child marriage varies from place to place. There are different types of child marriage arrangements: Promissory marriage (yäqalkidangabəčča), Baby Carrier Marriage arrangement (yanqäləbbagabəčča), and Adopted marriage arrangement (Yämadəgəbabəčča).

Promissory marriage is a marriage arrangement made before the children are even born (Guday, 1998). Expecting parents, believing that they need to sustained their strong social and other ties they have to one another, would enter into a promise that if they gave birth to children of opposite sex, then they would be future spouses and promise to keep that happen. Baby carrier marriage, on the other hand, is an arrangement made when the baby girl is in the age of 1-4 years. This marriage arrangement is marriage of a female child who is still on the back of her mother and is fed her mother’s breast, or marriage of a girl-child between the ages of one and four (Guday 2005). The third arrangement is referred to as Adoption Marriage. It is arranged between a girl (5-10 years old) and a boy (10-19 years old). Children wed locked through this arrangement will be allowed to grow up together in one of the homes of the spouse parents. It is because the children until they come of age grow up in the same house that the arrangement is given the name adoption child marriage arrangement.

3.2. The Criteria of selecting Children for Marriage

In the communities of North Gondar, the practice of early child from selecting a spouse to getting wed locked and living under one roof has to pass through some rigorous techniques and customary traditions. The selection tradition in early marriage usually is dominated by the tastes and preferences of parents and family members, not by the will of the children in question. The boy’s or girl’s parents select their child’s husband or wife taking into account their society’s social psychology and cultural values. Here, it should be clearly stated that in north Gondar in particular and among the Amhara in general it is the boy’s parents who always send the marriage proposal to the girl’s parents (Augustyniak, 2009:3; Remnick, 1976; and Leslaw, 1973:39).It is at least a pan- north Ethiopian tradition that the parents of the girl, even though their daughter is unmarried, will not seek a husband for her. Always they are not ones who ask.

Hence, in north Gondar the parents of the boy and his relatives do not consider the girl’s behavior, capability and good nature to make a marriage proposal on behalf of the boy. They rather give due credence to the social status of her parents and their family. The cliché ‘examine her mother and then be married with her daughter’ (እና ይ ተ ህል ጅ ቷ ንአ ግ ባ) aptly expresses how the selection of a spouse for the boy is made among the communities in North Gondar.

This society’s social psychology has its own extended influence in shaping the way a family raises a child and how the child’s social and personal behavior evolves. It is usually believed that a child brought up as per the acceptable moral and social traits of a community is supposed to be well mannered, hardworking, God-fearing, and other widely considered qualities of a good nurtured child. It is thus socially believed that proud parents would raise their child/children in line with the good values, customs and traditions of the society they live in. Such a responsibility put on the parents is
assumed to be the necessary condition for bringing up good-behaved children which in turn is believed to bring good and healthy marital life for them.

It is also widely noted that beyond shaping a society’s and an individual’s psychological make-up of the family is considered as the first place where children get schooled on diligence and love for work, love, home chores, property management and housewifely responsibilities (for girls). As a result, it is assumed among the peasant communities of the study area that a diligent and hardworking peasant raises his boy/s in his working image and personality while a mother raises her girl/s as accomplished in house chores with impeccable personality.

Added to the social and individual psychological make-ups of ethical and behavioral ways of finding a match girl for a boy, marrying families also take into account equivalence in status as determined by wealth and social standing of the families. Among the Amhara, informants revealed, status match has been considered as one of the mandatory qualities marrying families should have to ensure that the families get into the marriage process seamlessly. Leslaw (1973:39) further advances this by stating that “the betrothed must be Equal in wealth, the lineage must be pure and they must be the same Faith”. Hence, social class, economic standing, religion and multi-family relativeness, this study has found, are used as markers of ensuring there is status match between marrying families.

It has been a tradition that marriage is arranged between families with equivalent or similar economic and/or wealth status. That is, rich families look for rich ones and poor ones will be left for poor. Moving up the social ladder via marriage by getting married with rich families for the poor ones has almost been difficult. This indicates that marriage economically has been a closed and exclusive exchange system of persons and resources and this in turn has resulted in the little or no leveling effect marriage brings in terms of resource redistribution. Informants indicated that it has been a proper tradition for the marrying family to ask the economic resources (such as land, cattle, money, etc) of the other marrying family before deciding to proceed to the formalization of the marriage process. Looking for economic match between marrying families is not an exception to Gondar, it rather is a widely practiced belief among the wider Amhara people. In this regard, Dejene & Birhanerselase (2006) stated that “such economic interests are factored in to secure a better match and an economically better future both for themselves and for their children.”

Among the Amhara, social class is determined based on descent, occupation and livelihood. This runs the same for the peoples living in Gondar area. Such social categorization has resulted in centuries old practice of excluding the craftsmen and their families from getting married with other families that derive their livelihood from cultivation. It is thus a social taboo for the larger and dominant cultivation-based people to see their children married to the children of the craftsmen, for they have been considered socially pollutant and hence, despised.

In North Gondar the extent and wideness of a family’s size largely determines the probability of a family to get married with another family. This is due to, as per the information relayed by the informants, the thinking that in times of good or bad, a family with an extended size of relatives can be a dependable one. Providing a child as a spouse to another family is considered as an act of creating strong relation with another family. Hence the wider the family and its relatives, the greater the chance of cooperation in times of good or bad for a family, for it is believed that the wife’s family and the husband’s will under a normal condition be supportive of one another.

In addition to the above frequently cited criteria for inclusion and exclusion of a family for marriage relation, blood relation or belonging to the same family descent line has been taken as a means of permitting the marriage request to proceed or not. It is traditionally believed that for a marriage relation to be permissible there should be no blood relation when counted up to seven lines of descent. If a marriage relation is effected with total disregard to such counting of descent and if the
spouses happen to belong to the same family blood, then it is believed that the married couples will be afflicted with curses resulting physical and psychological damages. Moreover, it is believed that their marriage life will be a troubled one and the children they beget will be disabled. Therefore, informants strongly stated that so much attention is given to these criteria to determine whether the marriage relation is permissible or not.

It is after the complete assessment of all the above criteria that formal request to the girl’s family will be sent for betrothal by organizing a betrothing group formed by the boy’s family. It should however be noted that betrothing families may not be acquainted of one another.

3.3. **Child Marriage’s Socio-economic and Cultural Function**

Traditions indicate that when the two families decide to make the marriage of their children happen, and then they promise to pool resources such as cash, land, cattle, etc. witnessed by a group of elders. The gifts in marital exchanges among the Amhara people are given to the new couple by both sides of the family (Erulkar, 2013:7). After the consummation of the wedding ceremony, the resources promised to be pooled for the wedded children will be their private properties to be overseen by the marrying families until the children come of age to start their independent couple life. This tradition is called betrothal resource pooling or marriage gifts. Marriage gifts will be arranged based on the common understanding. For example, if the boy’s family gives an ox, the wife’s family may give cow. This is done to ensure that when the children come of age, they will have the necessary number of cattle. A family with large tract of land can also promise to give a plot of land as a marital gift which the wedded children will cultivate as their land when they are mature enough to lead life independently from their families. This economic marital gift/s can be considered as an indigenous system for ensuring the future economic wellbeing of marrying children.

It is socially sanctioned that the marital gifts will be administered by either one of the families. Moreover, the resources are never subjected to sell and consumption in the case of the ox and cow. Even in time of famine, which has been a recurrent feature of the communities in northern Ethiopian economy, it is a social taboo for the overseer family to sell or consume the marital gifts. However, produce from the land and products from the cow such as milk can be sold or consumed to look after the immediate needs (such as cloth and shoes) of wedded children. When the children come of age, the marital gifts of this adopted marriage will be handed over to the children when they become mature enough to live in their own homestead. The marriage gifts will thus be initial capital for them. Sometimes, through such adopted marriage marital gifts, married children may become richer than their families.

Social bonding and increased societal role is one of the socio-cultural values married children get from child marriage. Among the Amhara such marriage practice has been one of the ways by which strong social ties and networks are created and recreated for societal use. Augustyniak (2009) and Gossaye, et.al(2003) further elaborate that marriage in Ethiopia is not just an individual act, but it has also the role of bonding two different families or communities. Especially, the wife’s families give huge respect to the husband’s family. In north Gondar, in addition to paying regular unreserved respect to the husband’s family, if the wife’s family children all females or if the father of the wife’s family dies, then a male from the husband’s family has to start living with them and support them by becoming a kind of overseer. This shows how much increased social bonding and family tie accrues from this adopted married for both families. Moreover, in times of trouble such as economic shock a marrying family will shoulder the responsibility of raising and looking after the children of the other family. This marriage practice therefore has also the chance of increasing the social insurance of a community in times of trouble, social and economic shocks.

On top of this, such child marriage helps maintain peaceful relation between marrying families in particular and the community in general. For example, families with a history of blood feud can
overcome it by getting engaged in adopted marriage. This helps sustainably resolve their blood-feud based conflicts. Families who create social bonding via adopted marriage, studies indicate and informants further elaborate, that they have a high probability of settling conflicting issues peacefully. Sometimes, if the marrying families are hugely respected in the community and have high social standing, the practice of adopted marriage if it occurs among them will help them further boost their social standing and maintain it for long.

Coming to its socio-cultural values for the married children, informants indicate that this marriage practice help newly-wed couple to draw so much from the strong social bonding of their families to settle individual differences and navigate through marital challenges successfully. The researcher in the field found data that indicate that married children of adopted marriage at least for the sake of the honor of their families try to settle their differences easily and do not resort to unwanted conflicts. Some focus group discussants also indicate that because of their adopted marriage they have not experienced divorce because of the strong social bonding and family ties this marriage type gives.

Focus group discussants also gave revelatory comparison between this traditional marriage and the so-called ‘modern’ marriage practice taking in to account social significances. These days, marriage relations affected in urban centers without the due prior recognition of families is much more individual centered than it has been the case with adopted marriage. They argue that the ‘modern’ marriage practice is more individualized than societal. Marital problems that arise from such a marriage practice are difficult to manage and resolve. This has resulted as per their view high rate of divorce compared to adopted marriage relations. They aptly surmise this marriage as ‘they marry at will and divorce at will’.

It is also indicated by the in-depth-interviewees and group discussants that child marriage helps protect the girl from any sexual abuse. As recognition is given to early marriage by members of the community, everyone will have a watchful eye on the girl and her supposed suitors. A girl married through adopted marriage is not usually vulnerable to rape even if she goes to school or a market alone, for it is socially sanctioned that she should not be looked at by any boy other than hers. This is because the fact that abusing the girl sexually means dishonoring her marrying families in particular and the owners of the practice (i.e., the community) in general. The girl also is watchful of her steps for she knows since childhood who her future husband is. Sexually abstinence also helps her not to be exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, discussants revealed. It is a must that a girl groomed for adopted marriage keep her virginity until the wedding day comes, for her virginity is a source of pride and honor for the marrying families. A girl who is not virgin on her wedding day will be a source of shame for her family in particular. In this regard, Guday (2005) has stated the following:

At her first marriage, a girl is expected to be virgin. If a girl is found not to be a virgin during her first intercourse with her first husband, it is a disgrace for her parents and for herself. In this context, the preservation of a girl’s virginity until marriage is primarily a concern of the parents responsible for “watching” the girl properly, and then it becomes a moral, as well as social issue with respect to the girl. The local community blames parents more than the girl for the loss of her virginity. (Guday: 2005, 93)

From the above expositions, it can thus be understood that adopted marriage, a type of early marriage, has been practiced in North Gondar for the sake of satisfying social, economic and cultural worth the practices espouses to bring as per the argument of the local population of the study area.

In general in society point view child marriage has the following general significances: ensuring the future economic wellbeing of betrothed children, creating strong relation between marrying families and buttressed social ties, ensuring the sustainability of the children’s future married life and diminishing the probability of divorce.
Reference


