



Guddifachaa from the Perspectives of the Best Interests of Child in the Tulema Oromo, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to describe how the best interest of the child realized in the context of customary law of guddifachaa. The study was descriptive qualitative case study at cross sectional design. Out of non-probability sampling, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed respectively. Twenty participants, including adoptive families, adoptees, birth families, Abbaa Gadaa, elders and experts were involved into the study. In- depth interview, key-informant interview, observation and document review were among the data collection techniques used. The study findings revealed that Guddifachaa is a customary adoption, whereupon the best interests of the children's were entertained. Due to the deep-rooted nature of Safuu among the Oromoo people, whoever the center of the benefit of adoption, adopted children were well treated. Adoptive families were fulfilling basic needs; providing education; providing affection; caring for; making them get married; constructing them houses; and providing inheritance the totality of which was considered as the assurance of best interests of the child. The study recommended that as the concept of "the best interests of the child" has vaguely been used in various literatures, including in Guddifachaa, experts like social work professionals need to delve into the community, conduct a thorough assessment and accordingly make informed decision of what is best for the adoptees.

Key Terms: *Best interests of the child, Ethiopia, Guddifachaa, Tuulamaa Oromo*

Axareeraa

Kaayyoon qorannoo kanaa, fedhiifi faayidaan daa'immanii sirna guddifannaa keessatti akkamitti akka bojiirra oolu ibsuu ta'a. Qorannoo kana keessatti akkam ta'aa addeessaatti (descriptive qualitative) dhimma bahuun odeeffannoo barbaachisaa ta'e yeroo gabaabaa keessatti wolitti qabameera. Haaluma kanaan, miti-carraa iddaatoo keessaa mala iddaatteessuu kaayyefataafi darbaa dabarsaatti dhimma bahameera. Af-gaaffii, ragaalee madda lammaffaafi daamwannaan tooftaalee ragaaleen qorannoo kanaa itti funaanamani dha. Ragaaleen kuniiinis kan funaanaman namoota filataman 20 (digdama) irraati. Bu'aan qorannichaa akka agarsiisutti, guddifachaan beekumsa dilbii karaa duudhaa aadaatiin daa'ima guddifachuuf fudhatan akka daa'ima ofii dhalaniifi dhalchaniitti fedhiifi dantaa barbaachisaa ta'e eeguun kunuunsuun mala itti guddisanidha. Daa'imni guddifachaa fudhatame tokko sababni guddifachaa sanaa eenyuuniyyuu giduugaleessa yoo godbateyyuu faayidaan daa'immanii yeroo hedduu kan hin sharafammedha. Fedhiifi dantaan daa'ima gudeedaafi daa'ima guddifachaa wal qixxa kabajama. Nyaata, uffata, bakka jireenyaa, barnoota, jaalala, eegumsaafi kunuunsa, fuudhaafi heeruma, dhaalaafi kan kana fakkaatan mirkaneessuun dirqama hin sharafammedha. Kunis, safuu, duudhaafi sona hawaasichaan dirqama tikfama. Dhimma daa'immanii irratti waanti murtaa'uufi raawwatu hundi fedhiif/ faayidaa daa'immanii (best interests of the child) giddu- galeessa godbachuu qaba. Garuu, wanti fedhiif daa'immanii (best interests of the child) jedhu kun maalfaa akka of keessatti hammatu akka biyyaattis ta'e akka addunyaatti gadi fageenyaan hin ibsamne. Kanaafuu, qaamoleen dhimmi kun itti dhiyeenyaan isaan ilaallatu keessumaa Saayintistoonni Hawaasaa (Social Workers) qorannoo barbaachisaa ta'e gochuun murteen darbu kamuu fedhiifi faayidaa daa'immanii giddu- galeessa kan godbate ta'uu mikaneessuu qabu.

Jechoota Ijoo: Fedhiif daa'immanii, Guddifachaa, Itiyoophiyaa, Oroomoo Tuulamaa

1. Introduction

The term *Guddifachaa* representing adoption is an indigenous and generations old adoption institution in Oromo society. It can be described as a voluntary system of customary adoption in which birth families and adoptive parents have an arrangement of bringing up an adoptee based on the cultural norms, values, rituals, and obligations (Ayalew, 2002; Legesse 1973). Ayalew (2002) stated *guddifachaa* that it is the customary adoption institution practiced by the Oromo society since the antiquity of *Gadaa* system commencement. Although there is no adequate information when and how it emerged among the Oromo society, it has been one of the known institutions in Oromo culture, which is embedded in the ritual ceremony of the society based on customary rules connected with or deep rooted in the belief, value and moral system of a society.

The purpose of adoption has evolved over time. Historically, adoption occurred primarily to preserve and transmit family lines or inheritance, to forge alliances between families. Adopted persons were usually adolescents or adults who could guarantee the continuation of the family line. The notion that adoption was a means for promoting children's welfare did not take hold until the mid-nineteenth century. Today, the principle of ensuring that the best interests of the child are served by adoption is the paramount consideration (UN, 2009). Dessalegn (2006) similarly defined *guddifachaa* practice as intervention strategy has a child-family reintegration in which the child will get the emotional or psychological, economic and social attachments from the adopting family.

Brodzinsky (1993), Fagan (2002) and Morrison (2004) showed that adoption is highly successful societal solution for the problems of children than living with ambivalent, uncaring, neglectful and abusive biological parents. Fagan (2002) furthered that adoption is a remarkably beneficial act by generous people, who offer their time, attention, affection, and resources to give other people's children a better chance in a life.

Although adoption is one of the oldest social institutions, a debate has been going on regarding whose best interest need to be ensured among the triad parties [birth parents, adoptees and adopted children] of adoption. Stolley (1993), Ittig (2003) and Taye (2021), for instance, showed that adoption is an issue of vital importance for all persons involved in the adoption triangle-the child, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. It was stipulated that adoption is most important for infertile couples seeking children and children in need of parents as well as birth families who are in need of relinquishment of their children.

On the other hand, Sokoloff (1993) exhibited that ancient law was designed to benefit the adopters, and thus benefits to adoptees were considered as secondary. Cantwell (2014) in response

argued that the best interest of the child should be the paramount importance in adoption process, in which a child is the main actor. Similarly, Mendes and Ormerod (2019) suggested that the best interests of the child that is commonly adopted as a principle, doctrine or test to weight decision-making regarding children should be of primary consideration in any situation involving children. ACRWC (1990), Cantwell (2014) and UNCRC (1989) alike assert that there is universal agreement that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in any decisions made about a child's future. Yet, despite the heightened attention to these issues, much of the information on adoption remains anecdotal (UN, 2009).

Nationally, though several studies, for example, (Ayalew, 2002; Alemayehu, 2009; Dessalegn, 2006; Tariku, 2015; & Taye, 2021) conducted studies on *Guddifachaa* related issues, issues related to the best interests of the child were among the possible gaps that were open for investigation. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to describe how the best interest of the child in the context of customary law of *guddifachaa* in Metta Tulama Oromo was safeguarded.

Besides to gap of knowledge that called for investigation, the authors were motivated in studying the issue at hand as it is one of the pillars of child protection in which social work professionals have a stake. An engagement of the professional social workers in ensuring best interests of the child in *guddifachaa* plausibly help adopted children in order for their rights and benefits duly protected. The outcome of the study could also help as clout for the humanitarian organizations and policy makers so that evidence-based actions could be executed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adoption

Adoption is the social, emotional, and legal process in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family while maintaining genetic and psychological connections to their birth family (UN, 2009). It is a process whereby a person assumes the parenting of another, usually a child, from that parent's biological or legal parent or parents, and in so doing, permanently transfers all rights and responsibilities, along with filiations, from the biological parent or parents (Ben-Nun, 2016).

Adoption is a social and legal construction that has been shaped over time by social trends and problems, cultural values and conflicts, historical events and forces as well as public policy and legislation (Carp, 2002; Cole & Donely, 1990; Sokoloff, 1993).

The evolution of adoption institution as aspect of social structure in the society can hardly be traced back to specific time and place with precision. But historical accounts reveal that adoption was commonly practiced by many ancient societies. *Guddifachaa*' a word derived from Oromo term '*guddisu*', literally means 'to bring up,' is equivalent to the English term adoption. Primarily Guddifachaa, the traditional adoption practice aims at securing family line getting heir to property and economic support during old age or ill-health. Guddifachaa provides social progeny to childless couples in the same way adoption function in other societies (Ayalew, 2002).

In its early history, adoption was seen as a solution to social problems, and minimal attention was given to its impact on members of the adoption triad. The experience of adoption was thought to parallel genetic birth experience and biological family life. Accordingly, once placement was completed, it was thought that bonding between the adoptee and the adoptive parents would occur that the adopted child would be indistinguishable from a biological child, that adoptive family life would proceed as it does in biological families, and that birthparents would move on with their lives (Cole & Donely, 1990; Hartman & Laird, 1990).

2.2. Benefits and Challenges of Adoption

The goal of adoption is to maximize benefits and minimize risks for those children whose parents are unable or unwilling to rear them (Emery, 1993). Fagan (2002) states that adopted children benefit significantly from adoption compared to even long-term fostering as it provides a greater sense of permanence and familial belonging, more emotional security, and a more lasting psychosocial foundation for life. Hollinger (1993) furthered that adoption is believed to offer significant advantages for three other parties: parents who are unable to care for their offspring, childless adults who want children to nurture and raise, and state governments ultimately responsible for the well-being of children.

Morrison (2004) also showed that the benefits of adoption outweigh its disadvantages because in certain circumstance adopted child is happy, secure, loving, healthy, more psychologically fit and emotionally stable than most non-adopted children. Fitzpatrick (2013) indicated that adoption is also beneficial for adoptive families because they would be taken care of in their old age as insurance or social security. On the contrary, Brodzinsky (1993) finds out that although most adoptees are well within the normal range of functioning, as a group they are more vulnerable to various emotional, behavioral, and academic problems than their non-adopted peers. Moreover, Groza and Bunkers (2014) depicted that adoption is a last resort only when reintegration and reunification alternative childcare is failed.

2.3. Best Interests of the Child

The best interests of the child (BIC) should be of primary consideration in any situation involving children. Thus, BIC is commonly adopted as a principle, doctrine or test to weight decision-making regarding children (Mendes & Ormerod, 2019). Child's best interests expresses the right of children to have their best interests assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that affect them (Beeck et al., 2014).

BIC will always depend on the context of definition and application, which involves many factors, such as the child's characteristics and social environment (family, community, and school). Culture is another factor that can have an impact on the understanding and application of BIC, influenced by local, regional and national cultural processes. Thus, there might be differences in BIC application according to country, culture and language (Mendes & Ormerod, 2019).

BIC is used around the world in fields that involve children, such as health care, education, refugee status, and religious beliefs. However, it is most often applied in the justice system concerning children on matters relating to custody, adoption, neglect, maltreatment, and where a child is orphaned (Mendes & Ormerod, 2019). BIC is human right endowed with more effective protection mechanisms, with priority or supremacy for belonging to a vulnerable group. (Sotelo & Ormerod, 2021).

2.4. Nexus between Adoption and the Best Interests of the Child

The principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3) is one of the four pillars of UNCRC together with non-discrimination (Article 2), survival and development (Article 6), and child participation (Article 12). These four pillars are also included in the ACRWC: the best interests of the child (Article 4), non-discrimination (Article 3), survival and development (Article 5), and child participation (Article 7). In the CRC Article 3(1), it is explicitly shown that in all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Besides, in the ACRWC, a child's best interests are very crucial in all matters concerning the care, support, protection and wellbeing of a child.

Cantwell (2014) stated although there is no universal consensus on who is ultimately responsible for determining what is in a child's 'best interests', nor on what basis the decision should be made, however, there is general agreement that concerted efforts should be in place to protect and ensure the healthy development of children- whether initiated by parents, caregivers, third parties or the state – must be guided by the best interests of those children, in any practice.

Cantwell (2014) succinctly addressed that adoption can only be carried out as a uniquely child-centered practice and only if it is in accordance with the best interests of the child.

Similarly, Tariku (2015) indicated that *guddifachaa* promotes the wellbeing of both adopted children and adoptive parents by clearly indicating the rights and responsibilities of the child and the adoptive parent that can promote the desired goal of adoption. There is no contractual agreement in *guddifachaa* as formal adoption rather in Oromo society social value and social contract play a significant role. Dessalegn (2006) stated that *guddifachaa* is undertaken through oath, which is a binding so that it is a mutual responsibility and obligation in that the adopted children get protection and material benefit including inheritance. Taye (2021) exhibited that due to the deep-rooted nature of *Safuu* among the Oromoo people, adopted children are well treated and rarely mistreated. It was further depicted that adoptive families were fulfilling basic needs; providing education; providing affection; caring for hygiene of adoptees; and providing inheritance.

2.5. Center of the Benefits of Adoption

Hollinger (1993) stipulated that since adoption involves legal, psychological, social consequences, there are six principal elements in adoption that the law must gradually reconstruct these elements to better serve the needs of the triad parties i.e., birth parents, adopters and adoptees. These principles are: (1) parental consent, (2) serving the child's interests by placement with suitable adoptive parents, (3) adoption is a gratuitous transfer, (4) adoptive relationships as substitutes for biological relationships, (5) confidentiality and anonymity of adoption, and (6) permanence of adoptive relationships. Emery (1993) further supports that adoption agencies are to benefit the triad parties. This is strong convergent finding for Ittig (1993) by debating that the intersection of the lives of child, adoptive parents, and birth families are crucially needed against child-centered policy. In contradictory, Cantwell (2014) contends that the best interests of the child should be the paramount importance in adoption process, in which a child is the main actor. In other words, adopted children are to be the primary beneficial of adoption process according to the principle of the best interests of child.

To this in mind, the authors of the current study argues that the treatment of adopted children in Oromo society reflects the best interests of the child at least by default although the primary consideration might not always take into account the best interests of the child. In other words, whoever the center of the benefit of adoption, the rights and benefits of the adoptee is, plausibly, maintained.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design

The study employed qualitative research approach as it tends to be more open and flexible in discovering new issues and help to have an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Accordingly, issues were viewed from the subjective experiences of participants of the study, whereupon their feelings, beliefs, behaviors, and opinions thoroughly understood and interpreted accordingly. Case study was employed for the fact that it describes real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of conditions employing multiple data collection methods (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, in-depth interview, key informant interview, observation and document review were used and thus sufficient data were collected and triangulated. Based on time dimension, cross-sectional design was employed as it helped to obtain an overall picture at one point in time as (Creswell, 2012) asserted.

3.2. Study Area

The study was conducted in Tulama Oromo. According to Alemayehu (2009), the Tulama Oromo are a large clan of Booranaa in the Oromo genealogy. This clan inhabits in Central Ethiopia in general and Central Oromia, Shawa in particular. In genealogy of Oromo, Tulama is divided into three sub-clans, commonly known as Tuulamaa Sadeen (the Three Tulama). These sub-clans include Daaccii, Bachoo and Jiillee. These sub-clans are also further divided into *gosas*. Bachoo has been selected in this current study to be further divided. Accordingly, Bachoo as sub-clan is divided into six *gosas*, commonly known as Jahan Bachoo (the Six Bachoo), including Iлуу, Metta, Urru, Garasu, Wajitu and Keku. Among the six *gosas* of Bachoo, Metta *gosas* were selected as cases of the current study. The Metta are currently inhabiting in West Shawa in general and Metta Robi district, which is 114km far away from Addis Ababa (*Finfinnee*), which is the capital city of the Ethiopi. Metta was purposely selected ascribed to the authors' familiarity to that community which helped penetrate into the community.

3.3. Participants of the Study

Triad parties such as adoptive families, adoptees and birth families were participants of the study. Besides, *Abbaa Gadaa*, who is well respected man and a mover and shaker of community, and experts were part of participants of the study as they plausibly are knowledgeable about the issue under study.

3.4. Sampling Technique

Non-probability sampling was utilized in the study. From the common type of non-probability sampling techniques, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. Dejong, Monette and Sullivan (1994) stipulate that investigators use their judgment and prior knowledge to choose people from the sample who would best serve the purposes of the study. Accordingly, some participants from target population, those who can best fit the issue under study were purposively selected. Besides, snowball sampling was employed after some participants were identified based on pre-defined inclusion criteria by purposive sampling. Snowball sampling was chosen because the triad parties who experienced *guddifachaa* might not be easily accessible. More importantly, key informants who have knowledge expertise on this issue could be only reached through this technique. To confirm this, Bhattacharjee (2012) asserted that in snowball sampling a researcher identify a few participants who match the criteria for inclusion in a study, and then asks them to recommend others they know who also meet the selection criteria.

3.5. Sample Size

According to Creswell (2014), sample size of qualitative research method can be influenced by idea of saturation, in which a researcher stops collecting data when the categories (or themes) are saturated: when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties. Accordingly, a number of sample sizes of the study were twenty participants [five adoptive families; five adoptees; five birth families; two *abbaa gadaas*; and three experts]. This actual sample size was determined based on data saturation in relation to richness and thickness of data.

3.6. Methods of Data Collection

While deciding about the method of data collection to be used for the study, the researcher should keep in mind two types of data: primary and secondary. The primary data are those which are collected afresh and for the first time, and thus happen to be original in character. The secondary data, on the other hand, are those which have already been collected by someone else and which have already been passed through different data analysis processes (Kothari, 2004). Accordingly, both primary and secondary data sources were used. From primary data sources, in-depth interview, key informant and observation were utilized. The nature of social interaction among the adoptees and adopted; the adopted children's physical appearance, including their gestures during interview and their physical environment was identified through observation. Written materials such as books, book chapters, journals, articles, master theses, electronic materials and legal framework documents at local, regional and international levels were reviewed as secondary data sources.

3.7. Method of Data Analysis

The study employed thematic data analysis. As Creswell (2007) stated, coding, categorizing and theme are the most common elements of qualitative data analysis. Accordingly, the collected data from field notes, tape recorder and document analysis were attempted to be reduced into manageable themes. In the process, since coding involves a systematic recording of data, codes to cover key themes, ideas and concepts that were collected from the study site were used. Categories and sub-categories for codes were developed and thematically categorized in accordance with their similarities and differences in account of objectives of the study. And finally, headings and sub-headings of the categorized themes were developed and presented accordingly.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Consideration of ethical issue was found very crucial as the study dealt with people as Punch (1998) indicated that all social research involves ethical issues as some qualitative research deals with the most sensitive, intimate and inner most matters in people's lives. Accordingly, ethical issues, including anonymity, confidentiality and consent for the safety, privacy and confidentiality of the study participants were maintained.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Guddifachaa (Adoption) and the Best Interests of the Child

Findings of the study showed, most of the time, that the best interests of the child were ensured regardless of the motives of *guddifachaa*. Although the motives of *guddifachaa* may range from looking for: inheritor of one's property; social protection and security; maintenance of once name and resource; maintenance of continuity of one's family lineage; support/ take care; relatives/extended family and more, the best interest of the child was certainly ensured as *guddifachaa* is taken place through promise which is customarily binding. Similarly, Article 3(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) explicitly shown that in all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. By the same token, ACRWC stipulates that a child's best interests are very crucial in all matters concerning the care, support, protection and wellbeing of a child. The paramount importance of the best interests of the child is clear and unquestionable for the wellbeing of children as the study findings also unveiled.

The notion of "the best interests of the child" concomitant to findings of the study has vaguely been used in various literatures. For this fact, there is no universally accepted definition

provided for this phrase, or it lacks a formalized definition, which is supposed to be universally agreed. In other words, the best interests of the child have vagueness and lacks clarity. It does not clearly show what components/criteria/indicators to be incorporated within it. Moreover, it fails to include the most beneficial advantages and the least beneficial advantages to be considered on the basis of benefiting child development in general and *guddifachaa* process in particular as a benchmark. Likewise, Cantwell (2014) stated that there is no universal consensus on who is ultimately responsible for determining what is in a child's best interests, nor on what basis the decision should be made; however, there is general agreement that concerted efforts should be in place to protect and ensure the healthy development of children – whether initiated by parents, caregivers, third parties or the state – must be guided by the best interests of those children.

The study findings correspondingly unveiled that both Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Hague Convention(1993) as whole and legal instruments in Ethiopia in particular fail to provide precise requirements on what must be considered when determining the best interest of the child in any practices/ events. To this end, Rotabi and Bunkers (2011) stressed that social work professionals can look toward common values shared by social work, the CRC, and the Hague Convention in order to relinquish children for adoption. In other words, social work professionals have to thoroughly conduct assessments guided by the social work core values and ethical principles, CRC, and the Hague Convention to ensure the best interests of the child in any decisions affecting children as the benefits of children are often required to be placed at the center.

Similar to findings of the study, Kelly (1997) interpreted the best interests of the child from concepts of continuity, stability and parental involvement. For Kelly, continuity refers to “uninterrupted succession” in the changed family structure. This is to maintain a smooth relationship between caregiver and child. Stability is to refer as a child needs one home base; and it is achieved through relationships, reliable and responsive attentions, and the availability of child's caretakers as well as extended family. Parental involvement refers to physical caretaking including feeding, bathing, providing safety, obtaining medical care and performing bedtime rituals by primary caretaker. Another dimension of parental involvement is emotional involvement, which is critical for children's well-being including nurturance, expression of love and acceptance, support for the child's interests and activities and the promotion of positive self-esteem. Emotional involvement also involves provision of social, moral and behavioral guidance such as appropriate disciplining, modeling of socially acceptable behaviors and imparting of values. The study findings correspondingly exhibited that adoptive parents provide intellectual stimulation encompassing

different activities like play and recreation to promote the adoptees social and motor development, sense of competence, learning the meaning of rules and sportsmanship and sharing pleasurable experiences; and assisting children with their work to be successful in their work in addition addressing their basic needs.

Cantwell (2014) unveiled that adoption can only be carried out as a uniquely child-centered practice and only if it is in accordance with the best interests of the child. Tariku (2015) and Dessalegn (2006) further indicated that *guddifachaa* promotes the wellbeing of both adopted children and adoptive parents by clearly indicating the rights and responsibilities of the child and the adoptive parent that can promote the desired goal of adoption in which both the adopter and the adoptees are expected to be fairly benefited. Correspondingly, the study findings revealed that *guddifachaa* is undertaken through customarily binding promise between adoptive parents and birth families in which the adopted children are expected to get protection and material benefit including inheritance. In other words, oath is carried out in *guddifachaa* practice to maintain best interests of the child exactly the same as to their or as if their biological children. Ayalew (2002) also asserted that in Oromo culture, children in general and *guddifachaa* children in particular are considered as an asset so that these children must be well treated, protected, cared and brought up properly by adoptive family as well as by society at large.

4.2. The Nexus among *Safuu*, the Right of the Child and the Best Interests of the Child

The study revealed that *Safuu* is all the underlying values and principles that guide the behavior/practices of Oromo society. If *Safuu* is broken, it can be considered as immoral and it is believed that *Waaqaa* (God) gives His back to that individual. The society also marginalize and single out a person who breaks *it*. Accordingly, *Safuu*, protects children in general and adopted children in particular from maltreatment. It is realized that *Safuu* maintains the best interests of the child in fulfilling basic needs and ensuring property inheritance. This is supported by Ayalew (2002) as customary adoption is guided by customary rules, regulations and principles that is maintained, controlled, sanctioned, and enforced by traditional community leaders, the clan leaders, and *Abbaa Gadaas*.

The study presented that there is no dichotomy between adopted and biological children, or Oromo people do not abuse adopted children because they have deep values and entrenched *Safuu* for human beings in general. It was further stipulated that raising children does not necessarily mean providing food rather it has totality concept which involves fulfillment of spiritual and affection so that bringing up children is all about emotions and materials invested on the adopted children by adoptive family. Adoptive parents are not only abided by *Safuu* in bringing up the adoptees but also

they teach the adoptees the underlying values and principles of it. Furthermore, the study found out that adoptive families help adoptees to train to ride horse, play riddles, throw spear and swim river in order to make them socially and psychologically capable. Moreover, the adoptive parents bring up the adoptees fulfilling their basic needs, providing education, making them get married, constructing them houses, and teaching them their extended families, neighbors, and clan the totality of which is considered as the assurance of best interests of the child.

Correspondingly, ACRWC (1990) and UNCRC (1989) implied that the best interests of the child are very crucial in all matters concerning the care, support, protection and wellbeing of a child. In addition, Kelly (1997) confirmed the best interests of the child is seen from parental involvement denoting physical caretaking, including feeding, bathing, providing safety, obtaining medical care and performing bedtime rituals by primary caretaker. Another dimension of parental involvement is emotional involvement, which is critical for children's well-being including nurturance, expression of love and acceptance, support for the child's interests and activities and the promotion of positive self-esteem. Emotional involvement also involves provision of social, moral and behavioral guidance such as appropriate disciplining, modeling of socially acceptable behaviors and imparting of values. From the discussion, it is noted that everything is fulfilled for adopted children similar to biological children from all aspects ranging from economic, social, psychological, spiritual, and physical to intellectual.

The study findings unveiled that adoptive families consider their adoptees as a substitute of their biological children because adoptees have strong relationships, attachment as well as feeling closeness and belongingness. Adoptees were also thought and felt their adopters as their biological families due to caring/treatment, attachments, love, affection and unreserved support they were provided with. In the same way, Kelly (1997) indicated that the relationship and ties between adoptees and adoptive families would completely replace the biological family and replicated within adoptive families in all aspects of an original parent-child relationship.

The study findings also indicated that there is a permanent relationship between adoptive families and adoptees that is why the introduction between biological families and adoptees is rarely existent. It was also deliberated that discharging responsibilities is not that of biological father's rather it is the responsibilities of the adoptive parents to bring up and care for and fulfill what is deemed necessary for the adoptees. Thus, adoptive families can play equal roles that can be played by biological families in their parental roles. In line with this, Kelly (1997) defined stability is achieved through relationships, reliable and responsive attentions, and the availability of child's

caretakers as well as other significant others. This is to mean that *guddifachaa* is final and irrevocable as well as sustained and stable like that of original relationship of natal family-child. It was supplemented that in customary adoption, adoptees do not only belong to adoptive families but also he/she belongs to clan; and they have everything in Oromo society as per to *Safuu*, which binds together both adoptive families and adoptees as a result of which the best interests of the child gets inevitably assured either advertently or inadvertently as both adopted and biological children are treated in the same eyes without any discrimination.

Furthermore, it was widely described that blessing ceremony, which is an asset has a great value when *guddifachaa* undergoes because Oromo people believe that everything happens by blessings, which strongly ties together both adoptive families and biological families. The blessings and oath undertaken on ritual day is respected and feared not to be broken as it has a kind of psychological “warfare.” Moreover, as the ritual event of *guddifachaa* is attended and witnessed by elders, neighbors, community and clans, the likelihood that the rights of adoptees get bridged is very low. In other words, rather than valuing evidences on paper like that of legal adoption, Oromo people give crucial place for blessings and oath carried on ritual day of *guddifachaa* in which adoptive families promise to assume solemn roles and responsibilities to take care of and protect the adoptees appropriately fulfilling what is deemed necessary, whereupon the best interests of the child were believed to be ensured.

Similarly, Dessalegn (2006) asserted that *guddifachaa* is undertaken through oath, which is a binding and unbreakable law on both adoptive parents and birth families. Thus, the likelihood that the adoptees get maltreated was unlikely. Tariku (2015) and Taye (2021) also indicated though there is no contractual agreement in *guddifachaa* as that of formal adoption, social value and social contract play a significant role to promote and protect all aspects of the wellbeing of the adoptees.

5. Conclusion

Guddifachaa is an indigenous childcare practice, which has been practiced in a ritual way by the Oromo society. It is a voluntary system of customary adoption in which birth families and adoptive parents have an arrangement of bringing up an adoptee based on *Safuu* in general and cultural norms, values, rituals, and obligations in particular. The practice of *guddifachaa* as a form of adoption has existed long period in Ethiopian societies. Particularly, in Oromo society, *guddifachaa* practice has a long history and started during the time of *Gadaa* system commencement. *Guddifachaa* is a system of moving a child from his/her biological parents to other family members through ceremonial rituals of the *guddifachaa* institution.

Guddifachaa is one of societal solutions of alternative childcare in which children as whole and orphans and other vulnerable children in particular are integrated with their adoptive families, who may provide them love and care for their adopted children. It was indicated that infertile parents may adopt child from their relatives, tribes and non-tribes to get inheritor for their properties; take care of them after they get old and keep their genealogical line. Regardless of whose motive it was, *Guddifachaa* was found very advantageous for the triad parties, adoptive families, adoptees and biological families. Best interests of the child, however, were safeguarded at least most of the time.

Due to deep-rooted of *Safuu* among the Oromo people, adopted children are well treated and rarely mistreated. It was further depicted that adoptive families were fulfilling basic needs, provision of education, fulfilling spiritual, affection and caring for hygiene of adoptees; and property inheritance is also provided or shared for them. The relationship of adoptive families with adoptees has successfully substituted the already existing relationship of biological families with biological children. It was also uncovered that the relationship of adoptive families with adoptees is irrevocable and sustained in Oromo culture as far as customary adoption is fitted into the best interests of the child.

Therefore, *Safuu*, which is all about ethical values, morality, norms, mores, obligations, duties and roles that guide the behavior of Oromo society, plays a key role to ensure the best interests of the child in the practice of *guddifachaa*. It safeguards, protects and respects the rights of adoptees in the fulfillment of basic needs and ensuring property inheritance instead of legal binding like that of formal adoption. Because of this *Safuu*, there is no dichotomy between adoptees and biological children in all aspects of benefits.

6. Recommendations

Guddifachaa is a gratuitous transfer of childcare practice through indigenization that should be nurtured, promoted and implemented for the wellbeing of children. It was found out that Oromia regional state is at the top in undertaking customary adoption. It was noted, for this reason, that *guddifachaa* is not only indigenous childcare practice but also it can be considered as best practice. Thus, this best practice should be scaled-up beyond the regional state.

As the study findings reveal, so as to avoid any maltreatment that at times inflicted upon children attributed to some exceptional occasions, customary adoption-*guddifachaa* and formal adoption should go hand in hand in order to decisively guarantee the best interests of the child than ever. To this end, first, customary adoption need to be undertaken based on ritual practice of *guddifachaa*. Then, this customary adoption should be given recognition by court.

The study implied in Sub-Saharan African countries in general and Ethiopia in particular indigenous childcare practice like guddifachaa should be supported. Policies of Sub-Saharan countries most of the time parrot those in many Western societies albeit there are enormous contextual differences. Indigenization of childcare practice has paramount importance if it is integrated and adapted into legal instruments of the country for children as a whole and orphans and other vulnerable children in particular, which should eventually help ensure the best interests of the child.

All pertinent literatures exhibit that child's best interests, which expresses the right of children to have their best interests assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that affect them need to be guaranteed. However, questions like: What factors to be considered when determining a child's best interests? Who are these people to determine the best interests of the child? And more were not clearly answered. Therefore, as social workers intervene at the points where people interact with their environment, social work professionals need to delve into the community, conduct a thorough assessment and accordingly make informed decision of what is best for the child along with parents, caregivers, or legal guardians.

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