

# An Overview of Ageing and Culture in Ethiopian Context

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**Abstract – Ethiopia is a country with lowest literacy rate of old people/age above 60/. With least social welfare, only people working at public employees are guaranteed with secured income upon retirement. On the other hand, those who never had the opportunity of formal employment and those self-employed individuals do not have a guaranteed income where there is no provision by the state. Meanwhile traditional values in Ethiopia assume care for the elderly people is given by their younger family members. Families such as, children and relatives are expected to take care of elderly people and hence caring of these people is considered as a blessing and a good chance for children. However, with the influence of westernization/globalizations, and the struggle mount for younger generation, there is gradually fading for caring of elderly people by their children and relatives. As the result the key essential component of Ethiopian culture, that is, caring for elderly, seems to fade away. There are great concerns on who will take the responsibility of caring the elderly and there is a change in valuing of caring of elders as it is a key moral value. Therefore, this paper explores the culture of caring for elderly people and how to cope with these challenges when traditional patterns of care for the elderly fail.**

**Key Words: Ageing, Culture, Ethiopia**

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## INTRODUCTION

Older people in Ethiopia face different challenges of life. For instance, they are in continuous confrontations of health problems, lack of balanced diet, shelter, and unsuitable residential areas, absence of family and community support, limited social security services, absence of education and training opportunities, limited employment and income generating opportunities. However, older persons should be able to live in dignity and benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with society's cultural values.

In Ethiopia, People over the age of sixty make up around five percent, which is 3.6 million (CSA, 2012). From this number 1.5 million people are over the age of 70. Most of them have no reliable source of income. Currently, only half a million older people have regular public sector pension (Assefa & Frehiwot 2003). This remarkable increase in the country's old age population seeks the attention of all stakeholders in terms of considerations in policy making, social recognition and community participation for the needs and concerns of elderly people in their plan of action (CSA, 2012).

'Ethiopia is one of Africa's fastest growing economies, with ten years of double-digit growth'. Despite the high rate of economic growth, welfare is still a neglected issue where the government has paid more attention to agriculture, energy sectors and roads. The government's negligence of welfare has had negative impacts on the lives of elderly people whom the majority is without secured means of income in the later stage of their lives. The form of reciprocal relationships which elderly people's best hope of survival is being threatened and piling more pressure on them (Abdi, 2012).

In Ethiopia, there was no social welfare policy until very recently, and this has negative implications especially on senior citizens. It is the combination of families, governments and non-state actors that try to alleviate the hardship that elderly people face. The government provides pensions to employees of the public sector. But this excludes those that are self-employed and those who never had the chance to be public sector employees. The role of culture which considers caring for elderly people as a core value plays a great role in

alleviating the hardship that elderly people face (Assefa, 2003; Getnet, 2015; Segniwork, 2014).

There are sectors of the society that can be thought of as providing income for the elderly. The first sector is the individual himself. The individual can support himself by continuing his employment or by any other informal means. The individual, himself is however vulnerable on the regular job market because of age and diminished work capacity. The second area of support can be kin. The kinship relationship has been the traditional manner of supporting the elderly in Ethiopia. The responsibility was seen as a part of a reciprocal relationship within the kinship network. Parents take care of children when they are too young to support themselves and in turn children take care of their parents when they no longer can support themselves. This is referred as the reciprocal relationship of kinship (Abdi, 2012; Assefa, 2003; Getnet, 2015; Mengesha, 2002; Segniwork, 2014; United Nations, 2011).

However, a mutual obligation which is considered as a core value in Ethiopian tradition is breaking down gradually. As the result it is mandatory to design and implement actions for supporting the elderly. This can be done through increasing social service and basic pension schemes on the side of the government for those who had government employees. The other is advocacy and awareness creation that can restore the tradition of caring for elderly people especially those who have children and relatives.

Generally, the increase in the number of elderly people in the Ethiopia is not accompanied by real socioeconomic development; consequently, large segments of the population in general and that of the elderly in particular continue to live at the margin. Furthermore, the traditional forms of care and support available to older people until very recently are under threat.

Accordingly, the objectives of this systematic review of literature are:

- To investigate how aging is perceived in Ethiopian culture and compare with theories of aging.
- To assess the opportunities and challenges of old people in Ethiopia in line with social welfare policy of the country.
- To draw conclusions and to forward recommendations based on the systematic review of literature.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The bibliographies and reference lists of resources related to aging and culture in Ethiopian context from

data bases via google scholar specifically, Addis Ababa university electronic library were potential resources. In addition, government/association websites, conference papers, and policy documents in the area were also searched. All these, articles, government websites and policy documents containing culture and old age/aging in Ethiopian context were identified by the search processes. Finally, critical review and discussion were made by the researchers to meet the objectives of systematic review of literature on aging and culture in Ethiopia.

## RESULTS

After a preliminary screening carried out by the researchers, 4 theses, 7 organization report, 1 workshop paper and 1 policy document were included in this review. Therefore, the search ended up with critical review of major findings, conclusions and recommendations of 13 literatures related to old age/aging and culture in Ethiopia.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic review could not find studies that specifically and critically focused on the concepts of aging and culture in Ethiopia. From this, it can be said that studies related to aging in general and culture and aging in particular are few in Ethiopia. As the result, the researchers tried to relate studies, official reports of government and organizations, workshop papers and policy documents with theoretical frame work of aging. Accordingly, the discussion is organized in line with three issues. These were: theoretical framework about aging, perception of people towards old age and policy documents related to aging in Ethiopia.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Different theories help to answer questions in the relationship between the young and the old as to why reciprocal relations are breaking down and how the elderly cope with it. Two major theories will be discussed in this article. The first is activity theory. This theory emphasizes that in order for society to continue to function it is important to keep old people active in order to integrate them in to society. This theory also states that by making the elderly active they will be able to generate their own income and support themselves longer. Further, the theory asserts that, being active helps people to be happy, psychologically adjust to ageing and maintaining relationships and roles so that is it possible to achieve successful ageing. Elderly people in Ethiopia are actively engaged in advising, conflict resolution, for example, between families, husband and wife, neighborhoods, religious and traditional activities, and arranging and facilitating marriage. This makes it easier for the elderly to build up a reciprocal relationship within the kinship network as the elderly can

perform services for the young people and family and the young family can provide housing and other services.

The second theory to be discussed is modernization theory. This theory argues that the status of older people declines as society modernizes. Within this framework, the elderly is not seen as capable of providing his/her own economic support. Even a healthy elderly person would face a reduced status in the job market making it difficult to maintain employment (Help Age International, 2013).

Ethiopia as one of the developing countries is experiencing high rate of urbanization and population movement both within and outside the country. The elderly are forced to look after grandchildren for various reasons such as migration of parents to different cities and death of parents and due to family breakdown as a result of divorce (Mengesha, 2002). In addition, the elderly are losing their traditional roles as advisers, arbitrators and community leaders due to the increasing impacts of modernization. The most understandable impact of modernization among this group of elderly people is in two main areas. The first is that, since they no longer have any economic power, they have lost their status as decision makers. The second is that, since the vast majority of the Ethiopian elderly are uneducated their skills are becoming outdated. Therefore, modernization puts more burdens and presents tougher future for Ethiopian elderly who are already living in poverty (African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, 2012).

Due to the negative impacts of modernization, the traditional forms of care and support available to older people are being eroded. Here, it is worth mentioning that this is not because families no longer care about the elderly; it is in large part the consequence of social changes such as urbanization, the trend towards nuclear families, the participation of women in the workforce and the increasing mobility of the young generation from place to place in search of education and better job (Assefa, 2003; Getnet, 2015; Segniwork, 2014). This time some people believe that they have to live for themselves accepting that life is competitive. They sometimes consider that if relatives, children or families help the elderly, they will ignore/leave some of their plan/material which they think they are out of their plan/competition (Ibd).

## **PERCEPTION TOWARDS OLDER PEOPLE IN ETHIOPIA**

The societal perception of aging in Ethiopia has both positive and negative reflection and presumptions attached towards aging and old age peoples. On the positive, older people are most commonly seen as wise, worthy of carrying responsibility, resolvers of conflicts (peace makers), community advisers,

persons with great experience and authority and a lot more positive traits. What comes to mind when we hear the Amharic word “shimagile” (literally, old man) is often a person who would resolve conflicts and make peace. Accordingly, the process of resolving conflicts other than through arbitration has come to be called “shimgilina”. Furthermore, old age was often highly valued, with older persons representing a source of knowledge and experience in Ethiopia. The elderly are the head of the family and the community and are treated with respect. They play enormous social and cultural role that contribute to the well-being of the society as a whole. Because of this, the traditional support mechanism and reciprocal relationship is still exercised in Ethiopia. Ageing is considered as a blessing in Ethiopian society. Hence there are a number of support mechanisms, the biggest and most important one being the family followed by religious organizations like Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Islam, protestant and catholic churches, and traditional social organization like “idir”, “senbete” and “maheber”.

On the contrary, alike in other parts of the world, ageing and older people are also perceived negatively. The Amharic word shimagile (old man) or Arogit (old woman) may imply physically fragile persons, easily susceptible to diseases, persons who could have little or no involvement in certain kinds of work, especially menial work, persons who need and deserve to be supported, etc. In extreme cases, there are also sayings that portray older people as no longer useful, as expressed in the Amharic saying “kareju aybeju” (HelpAge International 2013).

Currently, older people are seen as burden to the family and society. The decline in elder status becomes widespread as the result of change of lifestyle of children and relatives. The recurrent emergency situations connected with war and draught has enormously threatened the traditional role of the family. This situation coupled with the general poverty in the country is aggravating the livelihood of older persons and the situation to take a new dimension. Emerging factors signifying the deterioration of intergenerational relationship is observed in some parts of the country. Some older persons perceive the young as agents of depleting the traditional values and norms. On the contrary the young view older persons as reactionaries of change. This has a negative impact for mutual understanding and support (Abdi, 2012; Assefa, 2003; Getnet, 2015; Mengesha, 2002; Segniwork, 2014; United Nations, 2011). Hence, unless immediate and maximum effort is exerted to control the emerging challenges, elderly people will face irreversible problems.

## Current Ethiopian Social Policy and its implementation with Respect to Older People

There was no social welfare policy until very recently. As the result social welfare and social services are found at infancy in Ethiopia. The social welfare policy has documented the following major interventions capable of improving the welfare of the elderly people through community participation. They are:

- Appropriate social and cultural climates shall be created to ensure that society benefits from the accumulated wealth of the social and cultural experiences of the elderly as well as to assist them to adjust to changing situations in the country;
- All effort shall be made to strengthen and reinforce all positive elements in our culture and society, especially the integrity of the family, that are aimed at guaranteeing the security and welfare of the elderly;
- In order to guarantee the material and social well-being of the elderly, social security programmes shall be extended to groups hitherto uncovered, and appropriate laws and regulations shall be promulgated and enforced;
- A follow-up mechanism shall be created to ensure that services that are aimed at ensuring the security and well-being of the elderly are comprehensive;
- All effort by non-governmental organization, voluntary association and community action-groups desiring to establish services to assist and support the elderly shall be encouraged and supported.
- Despite different policies and strategies in Ethiopia, older persons are not singled out to be considered as beneficiaries. They are entertained together with the general population. The big challenge however is that older persons are not given much attention when services are provided: they are invisible. The only initiatives targeting older persons in the process of poverty reduction are the pension scheme. Even, payment for pension is not given on time and bureaucratic for the elderly people. Hence older persons are still the most disadvantaged portion of the population (African Commission on Human and People Rights, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Older persons living in Ethiopia are challenged in achieving good quality of life as a result of unreliable

sources of income, instability in their livelihoods, lack of diversified livelihoods opportunities, and limited access to social and health services. Social change in Ethiopia such as urbanization and migration of children and relatives of elderly people to towns and cities is high. Moreover, the tradition and core value of caring for elderly people is gradually fading away. This will be worst even in the future as the country is expected to be economically changed. In the past, older people in Ethiopia used to be treated with respect and love, and they received support from their families, relatives and the community. Nowadays, older people without means are forced into begging for lack of family and community support. Urbanization and “modernization” are also eroding the traditional culture of inter-generational solidarity and support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage the participation of older people to make use of their accumulated knowledge and rich experience in bringing about development.
- Create awareness programmes aimed at strengthening the positive traditional norms in the society of supporting older people and building their positive image.
- Expand and strengthen services for older people based on community participation.
- Providing sufficient pension and provident funds by the government and private companies.

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