

“A WOMAN LIKE A MAN” AND “A STUPID WOMAN”: THE NARRATIVE OF GENDERED VALUE AND THE EXPANSION OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IN MAALE, SOUTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT This article aims to clarify how the expansion of school education in rural Ethiopia influenced the lives and gendered value of women. To this end, the case of a woman without formal education who supported her eight daughters to attend school in Maale, southwestern Ethiopia is examined. In her narrative, I focus on her expressions that represent the ideal livelihood of women and her interpretation of her own life. Specifically, I focus on messages from parents to their daughters at wedding ceremonies, or *elqamitsi* in the Maale language. These messages often touch on the concept of ideal womanhood that mothers try to pass to their daughters. With this message and the life story it distills in the background, I examine how one woman interprets her life and her view of ideal womanhood. In addition, I clarify the impact of the expansion of formal school education in Maale. The spread of school education has at least two social functions for Maale women: It has helped them view their lives objectively and thus resist conventional wisdom; however, it has also strengthened the dilemmas emerging from social categories. The introduction of school education facilitates the reorganization of this self-evaluation by providing the categories of “the educated” and “the uneducated.” Reflecting on themselves as uneducated and comparing themselves to the educated, Maale women are gaining the motivation to learn or to send the next generation to school. In this way, these women generate their own positive life stories based on objectification and the reinterpretation of social categories in terms of the newly introduced device of formal school education.

Key Words: Life story; Girls’ education; Womanhood; Gender; Southwestern Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of promoting the education of girls in Africa is often argued as a way of the empowerment of African women, achievement of gender equality, and social development. On the other hand, some research shows that school education cannot automatically trigger the empowerment process, and indicated the importance of examining this value and the role of school education in local contexts (Stambach, 2000; Vavrus, 2003; Holmarsdottir et al., 2011). The meaning of women’s empowerment or gender equality continues to be questioned and reflected on. Some ethnographic studies argue that gender equality under the Western standard, or the view itself of the empowerment of “oppressed” African women is incompatible with African society (Swai, 2010; Oyèwùmí, 2011). Although many educational development studies and policies regard the concept of gender equality as universal value (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013), it is important to consider how grassroots translate gender equality in relation to local norms

and customs in order to realize gender equality (Østebø, 2015). This article does not examine gender equality at school, but rather explores how formal education relates to local gendered norms and values. I focus on local womanhood from the point of view of individual woman.

Most traditional societies in Africa assign vital roles to both men and women (Afisi, 2010). In rural Ethiopian society, people make a living through the gendered division of labor. Community members are expected to adopt the appropriate roles of men or women under gendered social conditions. Here, social expectations influence how people make a living as men or women in their own community. Womanhood is an example of this socially expected role, including how individual women live as women in their community.

Women in the third world should not be regarded as a homogeneous group and it is necessary to examine the diversity among them (Mohanty, 2003). African women have long been viewed in many quarters in terms of oppression—"the told" in the context of development and modernization (Qunta, 1987; Cornwall, 2005). Thus, focusing on women's voices is important when examining the lives of various women. Life stories contribute towards conveying the voices of women. Life story studies have examined how individuals deal with social change by focusing on the lives of women living in Africa (e.g., Mirza & Strobel, 1989; Davison, 1996; Clark, 2010).

This article attempts to clarify how the expansion of school education in rural Ethiopia is related with the lives and gendered value of women. To this end, the case of a woman without formal education who supported her daughters to attend school is examined. In her narrative, I focus on her expressions, which represent the ideal livelihood of women and the interpretation of her own life.

Over the last two decades, the Ethiopian government has focused on dealing with gender disparity in education. As such, significant strides have been made towards achieving gender parity in terms of the access to the primary and secondary education in Ethiopia (Ministry of Education, 2015). Kodama (2012, 2013) reported changes in the life-courses of young women with reference a case in the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia. According to Kodama, more women now attend school and get jobs in the formal sector, because it is said that they can find better spouses if they are educated. The expected economic benefit from marriage also often increases their parents interest in their education (Kodama, 2012, 2013). Girls' choices regarding schooling have become a vital life stage and impact their life-courses as well as the lives of the people surrounding them.

In this article, I examine the life story of a woman with eight daughters from Maale, southwestern Ethiopia. The Maale are an ethnic group in Ethiopia characterized by a patriarchal society (Donham, 1999a; Thubauville & Gabbert, 2014). The first public primary school in Maale was established in 1970, although most girls did not attend school in those days. Recently, education conditions have dramatically changed and the number of female students in primary and secondary schools is now almost equal to that of males. I will examine the relationship between the impact of school education and the gendered value of society through this woman's narrative. The informant's name is Ohko. All of her daughters graduated from secondary school and attended higher education such as vocational

training, meaning that their educational background is superior to that of many others in this area. She considers herself uneducated, but supported her daughters in completing school. In fact, Ohko attended school at a Protestant church for a few years in the 1960s as one of the first generation of children to receive formal education in Maale. However, she dropped out and her Amharic literacy deteriorated. Aside from being in the first generation involved in school education in Maale, she was also part of the first generation to ensure their daughters completed secondary education.

In this context, we wonder how the spread of school education in the community has affected the life of an “uneducated” woman such as Ohko. How did this “uneducated” mother consider the following generation of “educated” daughters? What type of womanhood did she intend to generate and pass on to her daughters?

This study is part of a life course study on rural Ethiopian women. In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews about the life stories of 31 women aged from around 20 to 60 years. The informants were selected through snowball sampling. This article focuses on one woman who shared her life story in detail. Her life story is related to the process of infiltrating the school system in Maale society. Thus, her case can teach important lessons about the position of the school in the community as well as the relationship between modern school education and the lives of women in rural Ethiopia. I interviewed her 14 times between December 2013 and June 2015. Each interview was recorded with an audio-recorder and lasted between 20 and 70 minutes. Ultimately, this totaled approximately 400 minutes recorded conversation. In addition to this interview data, I focus on a messages from parents to their daughters at their wedding ceremonies, or *elqamitsi* in the Maale language. These messages often cover the idea of ideal womanhood that a mother tries to pass on to her daughter. Drawing on one such message and the life story it distils in the background, I examine how one woman interprets her own life and how she views ideal Maale womanhood. In addition, I clarify the impact of the expansion of formal school education in Maale.

BACKGROUND

I. The Maale people

The research area for this study was Koybe village (*kebele*), Maale district (*woreda*), South Omo Zone, Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region, Ethiopia. Maale is located in the southwest of Ethiopia, 700 km from Addis Ababa by road (Fig. 1). More than 15 ethnic groups reside within the South Omo Zone, and the Maale are the second largest ethnic group next to the Aari in this area. Most people residing in the research area speak Maale, which belongs to the Omotic language family, as their mother tongue. The residents subsist on agriculture and livestock raising, and many gather honey to generate a cash income.

Maale is considered a patriarchal society, where paternal clans (*tooki*) play important roles. According to Donham (1994), there are approximately 35 clans in Maale. Marriage is virilocal, and traditionally, young men get married after building their own huts on their own in their fathers' compounds. They would create their own compound mostly when they have their first child. For Maale men, marriage and having a wife and children mean an increased workforce (Donham, 1994). Men hold the authority regarding the economic activities of households. For example, only men can become successors to farms and livestock. Similarly, the first son (*toidi*) had the authority to divide the inheritance among his younger brothers if any.

Married women are expected to bear children, especially male children. If they do not become pregnant within a few years of marriage or bear no male children, their husbands can take another wife to bear them sons. One reason they desire sons more than daughters is because daughters cannot become the successor to an inheritance. However, nowadays, some women are distributed property under the national law.

In terms of religion, most people in Maale are Protestant or belong to a local religion. Most Koybe residents are Protestant, because missionaries established the first Maale church in Koybe. Before the dissemination of Protestantism in the 1960s, most people subscribed to local religions. The mission station at Bako, built by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in 1954 and sponsored by fundamentalist Protestants primarily from North America, converted people in South Omo including the Maale (Donham, 1999b).

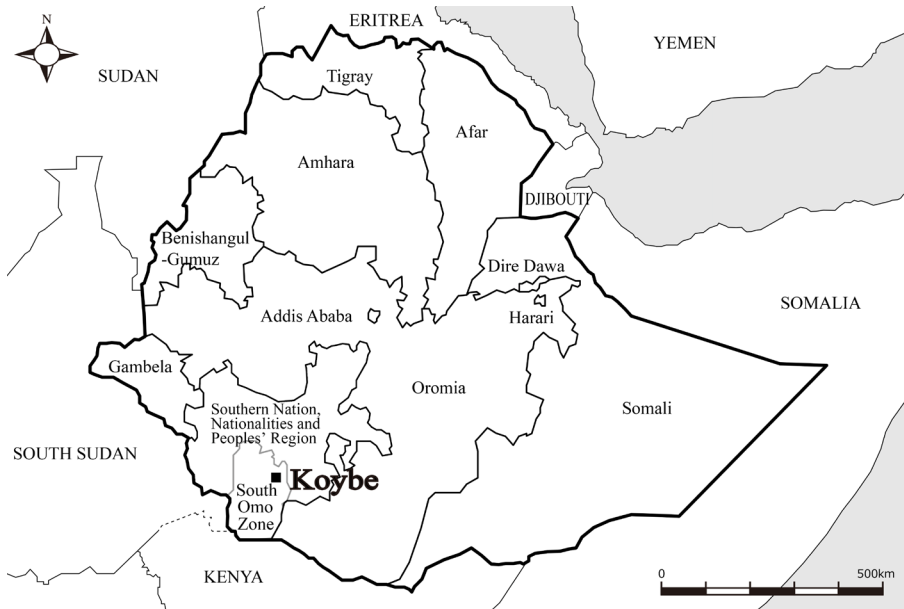


Fig. 1. Map of the research area, Koybe village

II. Education in Maale

The Ethiopian government has highlighted the promotion of female education as a critical issue. It adopted the National Girls Education Strategy in 2005, which aimed to achieve gender parity in both the quantity and quality of education, including the following goals; increasing the number of female students, improving the academic results of females, and preventing sexual harassment (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Compared to other areas in the country, educational development in the South Omo Zone of Ethiopia came late. Recently, however, the number of students in this area has increased remarkably, as it has in other areas of Ethiopia. In particular, the Maale woreda has been highly successful in expanding girls' enrollment in recent years (Arii, 2016), the number of female students in primary schools increased from 1,267 in 2005 to 16,417 in 2015.⁽¹⁾

The first education institution in Maale was located in Koybe. Koybe Primary School, which was founded in the 1960s as a Bible school for the Protestant church, was established in 1980. In addition to Koybe Primary School, there is also a four-year primary school, which was built in 2009. Koybe Secondary School, the second of its kind in Maale, was established in September 2012.

The lifestyle and social values of the Maale transformed in the mid to late 20th century consequent to social changes such as the spread of Protestantism after the 1960s, expansion of school education, and the infiltration of the money economy. When the school was initially built in the mid-20th century, most girls were engaged in farming and housework and did not attend school. However, today, many girls have received some schooling and actively seek employment in the formal sector.

ELQAMITSI: A MESSAGE FROM PARENTS TO THEIR DAUGHTER AT HER WEDDING CEREMONY

Marriage is an important event in the Maale lifecycle (as it is elsewhere). There is no ritual stage such as circumcision to distinguish adults and children in Maale society, but the term for “women” changes with marriage: Maale females are considered girls (*wudoro*) before marriage, brides (*uuto*) for several months after marriage, and then women (*laali*). In general, childbirth is expected after marriage, premarital intercourse is regarded unfavorably in Maale. Childbirth is important for women to establish their status as a wife in the family and a married woman in society.

Maale people negotiate and choose their spouses by their own will⁽²⁾ and there are few arranged marriages. Although abduction was a common form of marriage in earlier times, the practice has nearly disappeared, because it is now prohibited by the government (Thubauville, 2013). Maale society is patrilineal, and women leave their parents' home for their husband's house when they get married. It is possible for their parents or siblings to intervene and in the process leading to marriage. The bride's parents do not always know her plan for marriage in

advance. In fact, in most cases, they know about their daughter's marriage only through the negotiators (*qaysh*) sent from the groom's house.

Maale has a bride seclusion system. Thubauville (2013) described the system and changes to the practice of bride seclusion in Maale. The bride spends a few months in a house or room separate from the residence of her parents-in-law. During this period, she does not engage in household chores or physically demanding work. Although the bride seclusion system does not involve systematic knowledge transfer, a bride is able to prepare for the role of wife by becoming acquainted with her husband and in-laws during the seclusion period. In addition, this seclusion affords brides with time to increase their knowledge of traditional practices and music skills. Recently, the length of seclusion has become shorter, and knowledge on traditional skills has disappeared due to social and cultural change such as the expansion of formal education (Thubauville, 2013). The mother of a bride does not have a dedicated occasion during which to transmit her knowledge or lessons, except through the *elqamitsi* described below.

When a Maale girl marries, her parents give her certain formal messages, or *elqamitsi*—a term whose meaning conveys in part “testament.” It is a message between people who cannot meet easily. People also give *elqamitsi* when they are suffering from a severe disease that may prove fatal. Traditionally, a *elqamitsi* to one's daughter upon her marriage was not imparted in public or shared. Instead, the bride's parents conveyed it through mediators sent from the groom's family to the bride's family home to negotiate over the bride wealth.

Recently, however, Protestant converts have conveyed the *elqamitsi* to the bride in front of an attendant of the wedding ceremony⁽³⁾. In most cases, they tell her how she should live as a Maale woman in her husband's house. There are few occasions where married women are able to speak in front of many people in Maale. The *elqamitsi* at a wedding ceremony represent a rare opportunity in which uneducated elder women can express their own ideas.

OHKO'S NARRATIVE OF WOMANHOOD IN MAALE

I. Life history of a mother of eight daughters

As of 2015, Ohko lived with her husband and three foster daughters in Koybe, the central village of Maale. Her husband was a farmer who obtained additional cash income from building tin-roof houses. He possessed comparatively large fields in Koybe because he was the eldest son (*toidi*) and thus, inherited more than his brothers. In addition, before building tin-roof houses, he had earned cash income from weaving. He was able to sustain the household sufficiently enough to send their children to receive basic education. Two foster daughters attended school: One was in the seventh grade and the other in the fourth grade. The third foster daughter was aged under two years. Ohko's nine children (eight daughters and one son) did not live with her then because of marriage, work, and school. All of her children had graduated from secondary school and were salaried employees, except for the eighth daughter, who was a student at preparatory school.

Ohko estimates that she was born between the late 1940s and early 1950s. She was born in a low-land village in southern Maale and raised in a western village of Maale after her father died, first by her mother and then, when her mother also died a few years later, she moved into her uncle's house. She was the youngest of five children; her four older siblings have all died. She converted to Protestantism under her uncle's influence and keeps her faith. After her conversion, she attended the Bible school established in Koybe and then went to the school in Bako, where the SIM in South Omo is based. She learned Amharic and sewing there.

However, Ohko dropped out of school after a few years. She emphasized that she dropped out because she did not have the needed support to continue her education under severe conditions. The school in Bako was at the top of a mountain, and she needed to walk for half a day to get there, carrying heavy grain to eat. The students, including her, stayed at the school from Monday to Friday and returned home every weekend to farm and do housework. In the face of these challenges, she did not receive the needed support and encouragement—in those days, people had less motivation to educate girls than boys. Maale society is quite patriarchal, and people generally hope for the birth of boys rather than girls, as mentioned. Most people did not think it important to educate girls, because they would leave home, get married, and then take care of their children.

Ohko got married in 1970 and started life in Koybe. Her first child was born in 1971 and her last in 1991. She has eight daughters and one son, an unwelcome imbalance in Maale. When she gave birth to her seventh daughter in the late 1980s, a male acquaintance swore and represented female children as useless beasts. Such views regarding daughters used to be quite common.

In 1984, Ohko's first daughter entered primary school. It was rare to educate female children then, and some people, such as Ohko's elder sister, had criticized her for educating her daughters, because they believed it was useless. Despite these social factors, Ohko's first daughter succeeded in becoming the first Maale woman to complete high school. Ohko said that she struggled to support her children's education by engaging in household work and farming. She felt that she did not benefit from such work, and that school education was the means to enable her children to make a living without engaging in such hard labor. Thus, she supported her children to attend school.

Ohko used to work hard, especially at farming, where she took the lead role in the family. However, she worked less after around 1998, when her first daughter got married, because of ill health. It became difficult for her to perform the farming tasks and household chores she did before. Sometimes, she became severely ill, and was taken to the hospital in the town of Jinka.

Ohko's life story generally related two topics (Table 1). One was her brave story of finding a way to educate eight daughters despite the background of her own difficulties in receiving an education and social attitudes about women. The other was her episodes of illness.

Table 1. Life story interview with Ohko

	Date	Time duration	Main topic
1	2013/12/29	20 min	Marriage of her daughters
2	2014/01/01	40 min	Marriage of her daughters
3	2014/01/02	40 min	Conversion, schooling, education of children, illness
4	2014/06/25	20 min	Marriage, illness, education of children
5	2014/07/12	40 min	Childbirth
6	2014/07/16	30 min	Marriage
7	2014/07/27	20 min	Illness
8	2015/05/29	30 min	Marriage of her daughters
9	2015/05/31	70 min	Schooling
10	2015/06/01	40 min	Education of children
11	2015/06/03	30 min	Education of children, conversion, illness
12	2015/06/05	40 min	Relationships with her husband
13	2015/06/07	70 min	Relationships with her husband, education of children, illness
14	2015/06/17	30 min	Education of children, child-caring

II. An ideal womanhood: “A woman like a man”

This section examines the *elqamitsi* that Ohko conveyed at the wedding ceremony of her fourth daughter, in July 2014. The daughter was aged over 30 at the time and had worked at the Maale woreda office as a member of the cleaning staff after graduating from secondary school. She then attended at technical training school for community health workers called health extension workers in 2011 and 2012, and worked in a health post in an eastern village in Maale as a health extension worker.

At the ceremony, Ohko’s husband told his *elqamitsi* first. He praised God for allowing them to safely hold the wedding ceremony and explained the bride’s character to her new family. In addition, he told his daughter about the importance of constructing new relationships with her new family and relatives. After his remarks, Ohko started her speech as follows:

Not only to her (the fourth daughter), what I tell as the *elqamitsi* to all my children is that I did not give birth to girls (*wudoro*), but I gave birth to boys (*atinge*). I say that as the *elqamitsi*. (...) Oh, Jesus, you gave me girls. Then, I started to kneel (in prayer) after giving birth to them. Kneeling and delivering, I let them be educated and finished (getting them educated). My boys became many, I thought. (...) She (the fourth daughter) is a man (*atinge*). She is a man who comes to inquire and prepares and feeds (a goat to Ohko) when I get sick. She is a man who carries me and takes me (to the hospital of the town) by car (paying for transport). All my children are like this. Therefore, I gave birth to men. These men give birth and add to my men. (July 6, 2014)

It is remarkable that Ohko represented her daughters as “men” to assert their

value. I interviewed Ohko in May 2015 about her *elqamitsi* at this marriage ceremony. She summarized the message of the *elqamitsi* as that her daughter was a man. Thus, her *elqamitsi* rests on the duality between “men/boys” and “women/girls,” and seems to accept the existing mainstream view of male supremacy. In fact, in the same speech she declared that her only son had succeeded to the authority of the household, conforming to the norms of her patriarchal society.

On the other hand, her speech revolved around an argument for the value of whole women, not only her daughters, which made use of the theory of male supremacy. Her representation of her daughters as men was grounded on the fact that they “were educated” and “inquired” after her by buying goats or taking her to the hospital by car. These responsible, protective actions in the world were those of “men” who were “educated” and had economic power. The logic of her message was thus not based on gender per se—“a man has economic power because he is a man”—but on the actual characteristics of the action involved, figured as masculine. A daughter can be “a man” if she obtains economic power. In addition, through the words “I gave birth to boys,” she represented herself as a woman bearing a child. This implies the strength of women as mothers bearing and raising men.

Through this representation, Ohko expressed a public objection to existing constructions of gender, shaped to consider women’s position in Maale society. Moreover, she explained the difficulty of often being ill, and appealed to her daughter through her *elqamitsi* to take care of her mother. In the interview in May 2015, she explained part of the meaning of the word *elqamitsi* as “saying to ask to take care of me.” Conveying the *elqamitsi* also means calling for caring.

As Ohko mentioned, her fourth daughter bought a goat and sent it to her, and carried her to a hospital in town when she was seriously ill. In Maale, women are expected to cook and prepare for visitors coming to see their parents when they become ill, whereas for men, providing livestock for their ill parents as medicine is viewed as an admirable action. Thus, the fourth daughter’s action equaled that expected of a man.

Critical elements of Ohko’s daughter’s ability to support her economically were their educational background and jobs as salaried employees. As Ohko told me later, it is important not only to have economic power but also to make use of it to help others. Ohko’s fourth daughter bought a goat for her mother out of her small salary. In Ohko’s *elqamitsi*, not only her son but also her daughters, like “men,” were regarded as playing an important role in taking care of her. She explained the idea of a “woman like a man” to me as follows:

There are women (*laali*) who can think more than men if their minds are girls’ (minds). Some girls exceed men and think widely. (...) A woman (*laali*) or a true woman, who is said to be (one), is said to be an idiot. A woman like a man, who is said to be (one), can work with him together equally. (May 30, 2015)

Ohko thus presented two contrasting views of womanhood in Maale; “a woman

like a man” and “a stupid woman.” She explained that a woman like a man was “a useful woman,” “a woman making a home well,” “a cultivating woman” “a woman who can control her own home,” and “a woman who does not sit down.” In contrast, a stupid woman was a lazy person and “a woman who does not create a job.” “Creating a job” means doing something for the household based on her own initiative.

These expressions present a unified idea of gender. Essentially, a man manages the home based on his own initiative, while a woman is subordinate to him. Ohko argued her ideal womanhood as a woman like a man by taking advantage of the concept of a gendered role.

III. The other side of womanhood

How did Ohko consider herself, and what type of woman is she? She told me about her own life and compared it to that of her daughters.

If I ate a salary (had a salary) like my children, I (would) widen my home away and it (would) be better soon. Although it was, I look at another’s hand. I cannot take good cups, good food, and good materials to make (my) home better. This is because I did not get educated, is it not? I say nothing (*zutto gaane* “not do anything”) now. A little, others giving me a little money, while I say nothing after taking a little money, and then inside of the home is getting to be stupid (*booza*), I think. (July 27, 2014)

Ohko expressed her ideal livelihood with the expression “widen my home away”. This expression also means improving the conditions of the household in addition to making the house literally larger.

The expression “look at another’s hand” here refers to the conditions of Ohko’s life. She cannot live without depending on others—her daughters and husband. The ideal livelihood she imagines requires economic resources, which Ohko cannot secure because she cannot work effectively on the farm since becoming ill and does not have an education. She feels that this dilemma owes to her lack of educational background, comparing her uneducated self to her educated daughters. The binary categories here are the educated (*tamare asi*) and the uneducated (*tamaribaa asi*).

It should be noted that “stupidity” here does not refer to her lack of education. Ohko describes her present life as “inside of the home is getting be stupid (*booza*).” In this narrative, she does not attribute stupidity to herself or any person, but to the condition of her home and by extension, her life, which makes it difficult to realize her vision of improving her life and home.

Why I feel so sad is that I think I would not live like now if I had got education and study. I am stupid (*booza*). If I had studied, I am not like so. Now, it is others’ hands. It is others’ pockets. (I make my life depending on others.) You know, I do not have any educational knowledge. My children give me something. If I missed, it is missed. And then, you know,

I just stay after getting that. I take your salary and put it in the pocket. “Somebody should give it to me.” “That kid may give it to me.” If someone give to me. (I will be able to get it.) All of my life I rely on others’ pockets, is it not? If I had studied and had a salary, I would not get sad behind them (her children) like this. (June 3, 2015)

In Ohko’s opinion, as expressed here, being stupid (*booza*) means producing nothing. She survived through the support of her daughters, but this was not enough to have the things she wanted. She feels sad and laments this situation, and reflecting on herself, finds herself “stupid.”

DISCUSSION

Gender construction seems evident in these excerpts, which categorize women as stupid (*booza*) in Maale society. *Booza* means ignorant and incompetent. It can also be used about oneself when expressing a diffident or humble attitude. For example, when I asked Maale women questions, many replied, “I am stupid. So I don’t know anything.” However, if I continued to ask my questions, they told me the many things they knew. In Maale, women are regarded as subordinate to men, who have economic power and the ability to act on their initiative. This subordinate status is also expressed in the conception of *booza*. Ohko’s narrative seems to function in part as a way of trying to shift this conception and generate another womanhood.

Ohko’s story presents dual aspects of womanhood, namely a woman like a man and a stupid woman. As a woman like men, she told her brave story of raising her daughters to be educated, arguing that this is important in a society that sometimes looks down on women. She also discussed how she had become ill a decade ago and needed care from others. Comparing her current lifestyle with that of her educated daughters, she considered herself incompetent at seeking care. This prompted her to question her own conventional female “stupidity”, and revise her interpretation of her life by viewing herself not only as “a stupid woman” but also one struggling to live with agency and intentionality.

Nishi (2014) explored this dual womanhood by referring to the case of a woman with HIV in the Gurage provincial town in southern Ethiopia. According to Nishi, ideal “traditional” values and “modern” ones often become entangled over the course of a woman’s life (Nishi, 2014). To some degree, “a stupid woman” is a “traditional” woman while “a woman like a man” is “modern.” These cases show that their lifestyles do not change in a single line from a traditional woman to a modern woman. School education can be considered a modern symbol. Thus, it may be possible to think that the uneducated follow traditional values and lifestyles, while the educated adopt modern values and lifestyles. However, Ohko indicated dual womanhood as more symbolic of uneducated women.

The new categories of an educated person (*tamare asi*) and an uneducated person (*tamaribaa asi*) were generated by the expansion of formal education. These categories have an affinity to gendered binary categories. For example, the

saying “women are stupid” implies that “men are smart.” Ohko’s *elqamitsi* presented her daughter’s womanhood as that of a woman like a man, and signaled her intention to help her children exceed traditional womanhood through education. On the other hand, this process of generating an alternative womanhood and helping her daughters achieve it left her stuck in the traditional role of a stupid woman.

Ohko can be considered a pioneer for sending her daughters to school, because she did this before and more often than did others in Maale. These days, a general discourse arguing the effectiveness of girls’ education has emerged. Moreover, even married women attend school under the expectations of and reliance on school education (Arii, 2016). The meaning of formal education in society in Maale and the lives of women are changing. Although not many women currently argue their views or openly consider gender, an increasing number may publicly state their ideology in the near future, like Ohko did. The change in the way the *elqamitsi* is presented can contribute to this ideal. Previously, there were few occasions where women could deliver a public speech. These days, some young educated girls have occasions for speech through preaching at church. The transformation of the *elqamitsi* from an indirect private message to a direct public one could become a new occasion at which even uneducated women can raise their voices. Some women could take advantage of the *elqamitsi* as a way to argue their discontent and express their desires, and this would have much more meaning than just a message to and lesson for their daughters. Women may have more potential to generate various ideals of womanhood.

CONCLUSION

The empowerment and generativity that education may bring to girls’ lives may also affect their parents. The expansion of school education serves at least two social functions for Maale women: It helps them view their own lives objectively, and thus helps them to resist conventional custom. However, it also strengthens the dilemmas emerging from social categories.

This does not mean that Maale women lacked opportunities to view themselves objectively before the expansion of school education. They have long been able to experience and express their agency thorough negotiations over their choice of spouse and the conditions of their life after marriage, a process leading towards empowerment that enables examination and reformation of their surroundings. However, the introduction of school education facilitated the reorganization of this self-evaluation by providing the categories of “educated” and “uneducated”. Reflecting on themselves as uneducated and comparing themselves to the educated, Maale women are gaining the motivation to learn or to send the next generation to school. In this way, they are generating their own positive life stories based on objectification and reinterpretation of social categories in terms of the newly introduced device of formal school education.

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NOTES

- (1) These data were provided by the South Omo Zone education office and the Maale woreda education office.
- (2) It is not always possible to marry the one they want to marry. For example, one cannot marry maternal relatives or those from the same clan. In addition, women are prohibited from marrying someone from their grandmother’s clan. It is not easy to identify the appropriate lineage for marriage. Thus, some couples make a promise of marriage without determining if each other’s lineages are appropriate. In that case, their families usually disapprove of their will to marry, and most break off their engagement. However, in a few cases, the marriage goes ahead despite rejection from the surrounding people.
- (3) Recently, wedding ceremonies are held only if a couple first asks their parents’ permission to marry. If they do not tell their parents, or do not obtain approval to marry, they can elope. In that case, the parents of the bride invite relatives to the party, which is similar to a wedding ceremony, a few months after the marriage and usually before the birth of the first child. At this party, the parents of the bride convey the *elqamitsi*.

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