Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities (EJOSSAH): V. 18, No. 2
ISSN (online): 2520-582X **ISSN (print): 1810-4487**

The Social Construction of Barefooting in Rural Ethiopia: The Case of Fogera, South Gondar

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Abstract

Walking barefoot is a common practice in the Fogera community. It is associated with social meanings such as masculinity and strength and much less with poor economic conditions. Using the concept of social construction, this article investigates the underlying norms and values that govern the tradition of barefooting among the Fogera rural community. By employing semi-structured interviews with participants of in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focused-group discussions, the study found that the practice is deeply rooted in social norms. Barefooting could be a sign of mourning, strength, braveness, and religious devotion. It could also happen due to perceived unsuitability of shoes for specific farm activities, financial constraints, and shortage of shoes in local markets. On the other hand, there are adverse impacts of barefooting including ill-health (foot injuries and infections) and social problems (discrimination and harassment).

Keywords: Barefooting, Fogera community, norms, social construction
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1314/ejossah.v18i2.1

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Background

Barefoot is a common term for the state of not wearing footwear. Wearing shoes is exclusively a human characteristic, though some animals such as horses, dogs, and cats held by humans are also provided with footwear (Frazine, 1993). According to Reynolds (2019), humans are born to walk barefoot. Our ancestors almost certainly spent far more time walking than jogging, just as modern hunter-gatherers do. Archaeological evidence shows that rudimentary sandals were worn by humans about 40,000 years ago (Reynolds, 2019). Tough skin was believed to provide protection to human feet.

In Ethiopia, various studies were conducted focusing on people's barefoot practices and experiences (Shahvisi et al., 2018; Girmay et al., 2016; Tenaw, 2017; Yordanos et al., 2012; Watanabe et al., 2014; Getahun et al., 2011 & Abebe, et al., 2016). A study conducted in northern Ethiopia by Girmay et al. (2016) indicated that 47.5% of the study participants were not wearing any footwear during their interview. Another study by Tenaw (2017) in rural northwest Ethiopia found that out of the 418 respondents, 66.7% (279) were barefoot during the interview. Yordanose et al.'s (2012) study in east and west Gojjam also found that 23.6% of the respondents were observed to be barefoot, of whom most (65.3%) were women.

A study in the Wolaita zone of southern Ethiopia by Watanabe et al. (2014) revealed that of the 168 children approached for the study, 54% reported consistently wearing shoes. The majority (92%) of those who reported to regularly wear closed shoes had visible sock/shoe imprints suggesting the veracity of their self-report. Getahun et al. (2011), in their study in Gulliso *woreda*, western Ethiopia also found that out of their study participants, 96% had worn shoes at least once in their life, but those who had worn shoes at the time of interview were 91%. Abebe et al. (2016) also observed that a considerable proportion of rural communities do not use footwear or use it only during specific seasons, such as the rainy or hot seasons. Barefooting is thus a common practice in rural Ethiopia despite noticeable changes over time.

Ethiopia is a mountainous country which may not be suitable for wearing shoes. This is especially true in northern Ethiopia, characterized by a high plateau and mountain ranges connected to and descending from the Semien mountain massifs. There is no doubt that physical barriers (e. g. rocks, hills, rough and muddy roads) contribute to people's reluctance to wear shoes. However, the conventional view is that being shoeless is seen as a mark of poverty. This view appears to be supported by the fact that going barefoot is common among rural people who are often regarded as poor (Chandler et al., 2020).

However, the Fogera community in the south Gondar zone does not fit the above description. It differs in two main respects. The landscape in Fogera is plain, comprising paddy fields. It represents one of the intensively irrigated areas of the Amhara region where rice, onion, and tomato are widely cultivated. The introduction of irrigation in recent years has immensely contributed to better economic conditions for the farming community. Despite this, the community still appears to be sticking to the practice of not wearing shoes. Therefore, neither topography nor poverty could provide a sufficient explanation for the widespread practice of barefoot in the Fogera community. A comprehensive explanation must be found in non-material aspects of life, including upbringing and the social meaning of barefoot in the area.

This paper aims to investigate the underlying social norms and values governing the tradition of barefooting among the Fogera community using the social construction of reality as a conceptual frame of reference. More specifically, the paper focuses on (1) the underlying social norms, values, and conventions justifying barefooting and (2) the perceived social, economic, and health impacts of walking barefoot in the study area.

The study wishes to contribute to our understanding of barefooting in the face of recent relative economic improvements in the study community and bring fresh insights about barefooting in rural communities.

Understanding barefooting

This part of the paper discusses three issues related to barefooting. These are (1) explanations related to walking barefoot, (2) perceived health effects of barefoot walking, and (3) social construction of the tradition of barefoot as a conceptual framework to understand its continued practice among Fogera community, albeit visible economic progress in the area in recent years.

Explanations regarding barefoot

There are different explanations regarding barefooting. Many of these justifications are socially constructed by those who practice and experience it. Some of them are attached to religious beliefs. In religious scriptures, being barefoot is considered a sign of humility. In some religions, going barefoot is obligatory. For example, in Ethiopia, it is not allowed among Orthodox Christians churchgoers to wear shoes inside the church during religious services (Arnold, 2018).

Lack of adequate income to buy shoes is widely recognized as a cause for not wearing shoes. Here, families are believed to prioritize nutrition and education for their children above buying shoes (Shahvisiet et al., 2018).

Those who can afford shoes often cannot regularly wear shoes, as the shoes they buy are likely of low-quality materials and workmanship that limit their durability, comfort, and suitability for manual work. This leads to inconsistent shoe use, as shoes are made to last by being worn only intermittently or for special occasions.

According to Desta et al. (2013), buying shoes for all children at once may be impossible for some large families, who therefore have to choose who should be the first to receive shoes. Some parents prioritize their older children and, even then, resort to a range of tactics to minimize the wear and tear of the shoes. Sometimes parents hide the shoes from the children. As a result, scarcity of shoes may become a source of conflict, especially between children and parents. Costs related to school fees and education materials might force parents to delay or even completely abandon their plans to buy shoes when the new school year starts in September.

People who walk on barefoot relate different types of shoes to different activities and seasons (Abebe et al., 2016). The different types of farming activities influence the pattern of shoe use in several ways. For instance, during removing weeds from the farm, shoes are not worn so as not to damage crops. On the other hand, if a farmer does not have appropriate shoes suitable for a task or season, he or she is likely to go barefoot. Physical barriers such as rugged landscapes and muddy soils are considered unsuitable for wearing shoes. *Barbasso* (open-plastic plastered) shoes are impractical during '*kiremt*' (main rainy season). Hence, closed rubber/plastic (wellington) boots are commonly worn in the rainy season as they are thought to protect the feet from the cold.

Sometimes, the uses of shoes are limited to special occasions. Shoes are worn for social events and gatherings, including market days, church services, weddings, and funerals. In Desta et al.'s (2013) study both male and female farmers rarely wore shoes while working in the fields, and most did not wear them while gathering wood or fetching water. For rural children in Ethiopia, like Dawaro, where the soil can be thick and sticky, footwear is generally considered unsuitable for outdoor labor (Gardner, 2018).

In some cases, not wearing shoes might be considered a tradition that community members cherish. According to Frazine (1993), barefoot tradition manifests in various ways: in perceptions that shoes are heavy, weaken the feet, or fall outside 'standard' dress. As a result, shoes are given lower priority than clothes, even if economic conditions permit their purchase.

In Ethiopia, shoes might be considered a low-priority item among rural communities. Not wearing shoes does not carry the same level of social stigma or

discrimination as not wearing clothes. Community members would prefer to be without shoes rather than clothes. They fear being considered 'mad' if they do not wear clothes, but the same consequence cannot be attributed to not wearing shoes. Barefoot might be preferred due to the perceived disadvantage of wearing shoes when a person's safety or security is at risk. For example, in a combat situation, a soldier might be at risk because of heavy footsteps the enemy is likely to hear.

Perceived impacts of barefooting

Despite the different justifications, barefooting is perceived as a cause for many health, economic, and social problems. Infrequent use of shoes is particularly problematic in areas with a range of soil-transmitted and foot-related diseases. Soil-transmitted helminths (hookworm, roundworm, and whipworm) are major causes of negative physical, intellectual, and cognitive impacts in most deprived communities. A recent review by Watanabe et al. (2014) showed that consistent footwear use is associated with lower risks of acquiring soil-transmitted parasites.

In the absence of foot protection, barefoot walkers are likely to be vulnerable to cuts, bruises, or puncture wounds from glass, nails, rocks, or thorns, as well as poisonous plants, animals, or parasites that can enter the body through the cuts on an injured barefoot (Frazine, 1993). Frazine further states that people get infected with athlete's foot by fungal spores coming into contact with skin that has been weakened and made moist. Wearing shoes such as flip-flops or sandals in these areas can reduce the risk. As such, the fungus is very unlikely to develop on a person who goes barefoot all the time.

Barefoot walking has long been considered an essential risk-triggering factor for podoconiosis, a non-filarial, geochemical form of lymphoedema and elephantiasis that results in bilateral swelling of the lower legs (Geleta, 2009; Kibur, et al., 2018; Abebayehu, et al., 2017 & Getahun, et al., 2011). The disease imposes on the patient huge economic burdens that worsen the prevailing poverty including the social exclusion of individuals and their families, e.g. school dropout, lack of marriage prospects, and exclusion from community events (Chandler et al., 2020).

On the positive side, with adherents of back-to-nature and green movements, barefoot symbolizes the close connection between people and nature. The view that walking barefoot helps to get closer to nature has impacted people in different walks of life, including musicians (e.g., barefoot movement) and farmers (e.g., barefoot farms). The music industry has embraced barefoot as a way of life, and most live performers of the barefoot movement have been barefoot walkers. On the other hand, barefoot farmers are engaged in organic farming and produce health-

friendly foods that fetch attractive prices in local shops and supermarkets (Dobbs, 1998; Biswas, 2015). For some, barefoot farms have become brand names for marketing farm and garden products. In some developed countries, barefooting has become a sign of environmental awakening, with further benefits of facilitating greater feelings of nature connectedness and psychological restoration (Rickard & White, 2021).

Social constructionist view of barefooting

According to Andrews (2012), social constructionism is a theoretical viewpoint that explores how individuals and groups create their perceived reality. It is a dynamic process in which people continuously interpret and re-interpret what they perceive as true and real. This is consistent with the view that reality refers to the subjective experience of everyday life, how the world is understood by those involved in interaction rather than the objective reality of the natural world (Berger & Luckmann, 2011).. Here, the agency of individuals or groups of individuals is a key to the social construction and subjective interpretation of a given reality (Andrews, 2012).

Applying social constructionism to individuals' and communities' understanding and justification of barefooting, it is argued that walking barefoot has a socially constructed meaning in the study communities. Some socially constructed explanations include economic, cultural, environmental, work condition, spiritual, historical, or any actors' explanations, which may be specific to time and space. Socially, wearing shoes can be a status symbol of good social standing in the community, and consequently, lack of it might be associated with low social status. In a community where many people do not wear shoes, those with shoes can be easily identified and recognized. For example, in the 15th century, Turkish-made shoes became popular in Europe, revealing wealth and social standing (Gardner, 2018). Similarly, in 16th century England, high-heeled shoes were worn by women of royalty and by men with authority.

The economic aspect of walking barefoot can be attributed to a situation where in a relatively less-affluent farming community (e.g., Fogera community), families may not afford to buy shoes for each member. On the other hand, parents might promote the socially constructed view that strong people should walk barefoot. This might find reinforcement from historical/cultural narratives including the following: "our ancestors fought wars barefoot", "barefoot emperors", "barefoot runners", and "barefoot monks" who have dedicated their lives to monastic life. Walking barefoot is associated with strong personalities, like being a king/emperor, a runner, a village doctor, or a hardworking farmer. The

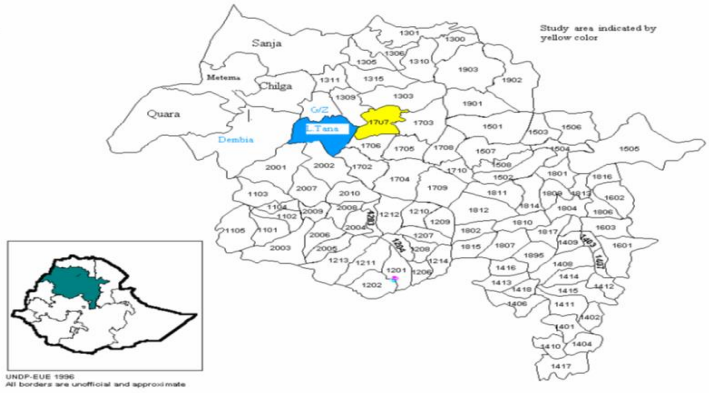
Fogera farming communities exhibit a combination of these and related attributes, which underpin the tradition of walking barefoot.

Study setting and methods

Study site

The study was conducted in the Fogera district, which is located 55 Km north of the Amhara region's capital city, Bahir Dar (Figure 1). Its geographical coordinates are 110041 -1100 53' north latitude and 370041-1100 53' east longitude. The district's altitude lies between 1774 and 2415 meters above sea level, with 76% of the area being flat. The area receives unimodal rainfall that ranges from 1103 mm to 1336 mm per annum, and the annual temperature ranges from 19-20 degree Celsius and is characterized by humid and semi-humid climate conditions (Fikadu, 2020).

Figure 1: Location map of Fogera community (shaded in yellow)



Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional qualitative design where participants' lived experiences and knowledge regarding barefoot constituted the primary source of data. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focused-group discussions. The qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews (25), key informant interviews (10), and 3 focused-group discussions (18). The participants for in-depth interviews and FGDs were selected using purposive qualitative sampling, where gender, age, and wealth were considered. Women represented 47% of all the study participants.

In-depth and key informant interviews were held with religious leaders, village elders, health and cultural experts, and *kebele* (sub-district level) and *woreda* (district level) officials to understand the social, cultural and health aspects of barefooting. Focused-group discussions were organized and conducted to get a sense of the community's shared understanding of the long-standing barefooting practice in the area. In this way, diverse voices were expressed and reflected on the issue of barefooting.

Data were collected from three study communities/*kebeles*: Quahir Michael, Tiwaza Kana, and Kokit. Data collection was undertaken as part of the MA thesis project of the first author. The fieldwork took place in March-April 2020.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed and interpreted thematically to meet the study's objectives, considering the theoretical framework adopted in this study and also in line with the reviewed literature. Information obtained from IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs has been voice-recorded (with consent obtained from the study participants) and then organized into themes that emerged from the literature and during conversations with the study participants. These themes consist of words/concepts/phrases that helped us understand barefooting from the perspectives of the study participants. By applying a qualitative analysis, we can gain deeper insights into the study participants' diverse voices without preempting any predetermined answers.

Findings of the study

Practice and experience of barefooting in the Fogera community

In the three study communities, many people are seen walking barefoot. Most informants did not wear shoes at the time of the interview. Shoe-wearing is either totally ignored or inconsistently used by individuals in the communities. According to the study participants, the level of people's shoe-wearing practices and experiences can be categorized into three (3) groups. These include -- those who never wear shoes in their life, those who wear them occasionally, and those who wear them constantly.

The first group includes people who have never used shoes in their lifetime. According to informants from FGDs, these people had never bought, owned or worn shoes in their lifetime. They never considered shoes as a basic necessity. They saw other people wearing shoes but never had their own. Many of these people cannot read or write and are older farmers – 60+ years old. When asked if

they will ever try to wear shoes in the future, they said they do not plan to wear them in their remaining lifetime.

> *I have never worn shoes, and will never wear them for the rest of my life. Emm…I am too old! And I am worrying about my life after death, not shoes. My God hears my prayer when I am barefoot* (67-year-old woman, FGD member, Quahir Michael *Kebele*).

The above informant further said that despite pressure from her children to wear shoes, she had resisted it. She feels much freedom when she walks barefoot.

For this group, wearing shoes is not an issue, not because they might not be able to afford them economically, but because it is not part of their lifestyle. A 45-year-old *kebele* official in Abua Kokit explains that there is a farmer in the *kebele* who is economically better off but does not wear shoes: "He produces 70 to 80 quintals of rice every year. He has never worn shoes in his life. He is always walking on barefoot". Such farmers are inclined to lead an ascetic life with a religious orientation about the future. Because of their advanced age, they appeared to be worried about life after death rather than seeking material comfort.

The second group comprises people who wear shoes infrequently, as determined by occasional events or social gatherings. For this group of people, shoe-wearing is an on-and-off practice. This type of shoe-wearing can be described as situational – they wear shoes during market days, weddings, attendance of religious services, and celebration of major religious holidays. On the other hand, such people do not wear shoes during specific farming activities such as plowing in muddy conditions, weeding, and threshing. Also, they do not wear shoes at home and during the rainy season, as explained by a 45-year-old male informant from Tiwaza Kana *kebele*:

> *I wear shoes in rare situations, particularly during የገበያ ቀናት (market days), 'ጥምቀት በዓል' (Epiphany), 'ገና' (Charismas), and 'ሰርግ' (wedding ceremony). In these social events, I wear shoes constantly. But during weeding and threshing time, I do not wear shoes because it is uncomfortable for these activities. Sometimes during the weeding season, I wear shoes when I go to the farm and take them off while weeding, and then as I finish, I wear them again to return to my home. Similarly, I do not wear shoes when I go to church because I have to pray barefoot so that God hears my prayer.*

The third category is those who constantly wear shoes regardless of the situation. A 30-year-old man from Abua Kokit *kebele* explains how he came to wear shoes, thanks, in large part, to the improved economic situation resulting from irrigated farming of cash crops such as rice:

> *Some years ago, I walked barefoot, but things have changed. Walking barefoot has many health problems, so why should I walk barefoot? Thanks to irrigation, I am productive in my farming. I cultivate onion, rice, and tomato, and getting money and buying shoes is not a problem.*

According to the firsthand information obtained from the informants and field observation, this type of shoe-wearing is observed and experienced by a few people. It is common among people who completed primary and secondary education or those who are still in school, mainly younger men under 40 years of age and individuals who earn better agricultural income. For this group, "walking barefoot is considered something embarrassing, a sign of backwardness, and a manifestation of poverty." For them, shoe is a basic necessity like clothes.

However, it should be noted that the community is apparently undergoing changes and continuities with respect to shoe-wearing practices. In this regard, informants indicated that their attitudes towards shoe-wearing have changed.

> *Today, the practice of barefoot walking has changed. I have made many changes in footwear practice compared to the past years. Now, I wear shoes regularly as much as possible. As far as I am concerned, I consider shoe-wearing mandatory for my life* (37-year-old male informant from Kokit *Kebele*).

Through time shoe wearing is becoming normal and seen by the wider community as a basic necessity as clothes. As a result, the number of people seen walking barefoot has recently decreased.

Health extension campaigns undertaken by the Ministry of Health have contributed to changes in peoples' attitudes toward wearing shoes.

> *The recent change in shoe wearing among the farmers has been dramatic in comparison to the situation some ten years ago. Today, our people are obsessed with the modern way of living. Health extension workers provide intensive health education on personal*

> *hygiene to every farmer. People walking barefoot are labeled as 'back ward'. As a result, people's experience of shoe-wearing in our community has increased from time to time* (42-year-old Quahir Michael *Kebele*, chairman).

The above informant acknowledges the contribution of health extension workers to the changing shoe wearing practices of the Fogera community. The health extension programme consists of 16 packages that include lessons about the importance of wearing shoes to prevent diseases such as foot-related infections. Schools are also teaching their students about wearing shoes as an aspect of maintaining personal hygiene, and they, in turn, positively influence their parents and other villagers. Residents are also influenced by what they see in urban areas during visits to urban areas and markets, and due to increased economic transactions between rural and urban dwellers resulting from the Forgera community's shift to more market-oriented production of crops like onions, rice, and tomatoes.

Justifications behind barefooting in Fogera community

Religious justifications

Some people attribute barefoot walking to spiritual beliefs, saying the right way to communicate with God is to pray barefoot. There is a belief that "God gives healthy feet to people"; hence, wearing shoes is considered against His will. According to Orthodox Christianity followers, the time for being barefoot is limited to specific religious events such as the time of 'ሰሞነ ህማማት' (a week that memorizes God's pain to scarify His son for humanity), 'ክፍለት' (the last days of lent), when going to churches on Sundays, when there is a pilgrimage to holy places like Lalibela and Gishen Mariam, and also during the time of praying. A 53-year-old woman from Kokit *kebele* articulates the religious aspect of not wearing shoes in the following way:

> *I do not wear shoes when I go on religious journeys to holy places. For instance, I went to ክርስቶስ ሰምራ (a church found in Fogera locality) nine times on barefoot. When I pray barefoot, God hears my prayer. Moreover, I do not wear shoes during 'ሰሞነ ህማማት' (a week that memorizes God's pain to scarify His son for humanity) 'ክፍለት' (the last days of lent), when going to churches on Sundays to look into righteous. In these times, I always try to keep aside my cursed*

> *behavior by praying barefoot. God scarify for me, so that I must pray barefoot. Since life is too short on earth, I do not care about shoes.*

In sum, the religious justification given to barefooting could be seen as an aspect of social construction as believers extend the religious justification of not wearing shoes in churches beyond church grounds. Thus, barefoot walking is considered to have high religious value and meaning for those who believe in it.

Social norms as a factor

In the Fogera community, some social norms discourage shoe-wearing, including gossip, mocking, and verbal abuse against people who wear shoes. Though such normative constraints affect many people, their impact is different, especially for women who are conscious of the community's attitude towards those who wear shoes. As the views of the 38-year-old female informant from Tiwaza Kana *kebele* show, various labels are attached to women who dare to wear shoes; though, on a positive note, women are no longer passive to such abusive reactions from some community members.

> *I have three pairs of shoes and wear them regularly. My children and my husband also do the same thing. When I wear shoes, some people mock me even with direct verbal abusive words like 'ሸሌ' (prostitute),ሞልፋጣ' (spoiled) – all are likely to discourage wearing shoes. But, I no longer care whatever they say and whoever says it.*

As part of the existing social norms, peer pressure also plays an important role in the continued practice of barefooting. For example, in a village where most members subscribe to walking barefoot, a person who wears shoes may be considered 'deviant'. Thus, fear of gossip, insults, and sometimes open confrontation of people who wear shoes are likely to discourage wearing shoes, and because of this, some women may prefer walking barefoot.

Shoes are considered hindrances to farm work by contributing to slow mobility. There is also a belief that wearing shoes is a typical trait of weak people. Only lazy people prefer to wear shoes and are not good at effectively discharging their farm duties since shoes are likely to reduce speed and dexterity. Thus, the barefoot tradition is justified on the grounds of effective use of time and maintaining human agility, which are vital in farm work.

Another cultural tradition is its association with the occurrence of misfortune or sorrow in a person's life. People who lose their loved ones due to death might

lack interest in worldly/material things, including shoes. The following excerpt from a 28-year-old woman from Kokit *kebele* shows this:

> *I used to wear shoes regularly a year ago. I lost my younger sister last year in an unexpected death. Her death was heartbreaking, and I felt very sad and did not know what to do. Since then, I have become careless with my life and no longer bother to wear shoes because wearing shoes has become senseless.*

As has been discussed, this also finds religious support in which mourners walk barefoot out of respect for a recently passed away family member or relative.

Shoes not suitable for specific situations

Shoe-wearing is found to be unsuitable for specific activities/situations in rural areas. Barefoot walking is preferred during the rains (June-September) when Fogera becomes flooded and swampy. Shoes are unsuitable for farming activities such as plowing, weeding, and threshing seasons. For example, plastic boots often become stuck in the mud, hence are not suitable for farming during the wet season. Most farmers do not wear shoes while plowing because the soil enters between the foot and shoes, and, thus not comfortable to walk freely. Here, being shoeless is imposed on farmers because of the nature of their farm work. A 37- year-old informant describes this from Tiwaza Kana *kebele:*

> *Some specific situations are uncomfortable to shoe wearing. I do not wear shoes during the weeding time, and irrigation work, as the muddy moisture in the soil does not allow me to wear shoes and walk freely. Similarly, I do not want to wear shoes during crop threshing because shoes should not touch the crop.*

For some people, certain clothes do not match with shoes. For example, short pants are considered not fitting for wearing shoes. This is especially true for young people who are conscious of their dressing styles. "I am a grade 8 student, and I always wear shoes with my uniform whenever I go to school. But, I do not want to wear shoes with short pants. Shoes do not match with shorts" *(*19-year-old woman, Tiwza Kana *kebele*). In some cases, wearing shoes with short pants can be censured in the community – it is considered impolite if a person wears shoes with pants above one's knee.

Some socially constructed justifications exist for not wearing shoes during certain farm activities. For example, the reason for being barefoot during crop threshing is guided by the belief that "crops should not be touched by shoes*"* – crops as a source of human life should be respected. However, this is not necessarily related to the unsuitability of wearing shoes during the occasion; it is rather a matter of sticking to moral principles as foundations of the social construction of barefooting in rural areas.

Meager means and large family size

Lack of cash to buy shoes forces people to barefooting in rural areas like Fogera. It is especially difficult for families with larger family size (eight and above) to buy shoes for all the members. Shoe prices in local markets (e.g., Woreta town) have sharply increased recently, and a pair of good quality/durable shoes may cost from Birr 1500 to 2000. Informants indicated that shoes available in local shops are of inferior quality, lasting for four months if worn regularly:

> *I buy and wear shoes inconsistently, but the shoes' duration is too short. Sometimes, I get irritated when my shoes are worn out quickly (serving for two months only), and because of this, I do not intend to buy another soon… for me, short durability of shoes is a problem* (39-year-old female informant from Tiwaza Kana *kebele*).

Due to a shortage of money, people could not always own or wear shoes, and when they have, they often save them for special occasions such as holidays or weekends. For some families, shoes are not on the priority list, as meeting family members' consumption needs takes precedence over all other needs. A young man (23-year-old) from Quahir, Michael *kebele*, attributes his inability to wear shoes to large family sizes:

> *My parents have a small plot of land. The crop produced is not enough to feed the entire family of nine members, and it is not easy to find money to buy shoes for all of us. Moreover, there are other basic necessities like clothes and educational materials rather than buying shoes.*

Similarly, a 69-year-old *kebele* official (who had 11 family members) said he could not afford to buy shoes because of big family size.

It should be noted that some of those who do not buy shoes are not necessarily poor, but their families' priorities lie in necessities like food and clothes. Besides, other competing economic necessities include providing educational materials for school-age children, acquiring chemical fertilizers and improved seeds, and maintaining and running costs of water pumps. These and related costs are difficult to meet regularly for a farming community like Fogera, where cash might be in short supply.

Environmental considerations

The study area's environmental and ecological conditions, particularly in the low land parts of the woreda, are characterized by flood, swamp, and muddy soils. Many farmers are engaged in irrigation involving constant flow of water and muddy soils, unsuitable for working by wearing shoes. Especially during the rainy season, plots are covered with water and mud, sometimes reaching a farmer's knee. An informant describes the environmental aspect of walking barefoot in Fogera community from Quahir Michael *kebele*:

> *Our area is not convenient to wear shoes. It is very difficult to wear shoes in the rainy season and during irrigation work … Unlike other highland kebeles our kebele is swampy throughout the year. Due to this, we are forced to work barefoot.*

The above view also finds support from a 38-year-old *kebele* official from Tiwaza Kana *kebele* who participated in a focused-group discussion:

> *The environmental conditions of our woreda contribute a lot to the practice of walking barefoot. It is particularly difficult to wear shoes, especially in lowland kebeles of the woreda like Nabega Giorgis and Quahir Michael, which are flooded and swampy throughout most of the year*.

Barefoot is a sign of strength and braveness

Barefoot walking is also considered a sign of strength and braveness. A person's strength and fitness are measured by the long journey he/she covers. It is believed that wearing shoes diminishes endurance, agility, and speed. These traits are needed to fight an enemy or escape from danger and attacks by wild animals. In the area, people also associate walking barefoot with braveness by linking it to historical victories in battle. For example, informants highlighted how Menelik's

barefoot army marched more than 1000 KM and became victorious at the battle of Adwa.

> *Barefoot walking makes me effective in most of my activities. You can see many people walking barefoot to Lalibela and Gishen Mariam with greater strength than those who wear shoes. I can go to Bahir Dar and Gondar barefoot. Do you know the history of the battle of Adwa by our forefathers? They fought with enemies barefoot; for me, it is also a sign of braveness. Those who wear shoes constantly are impotent and hence cannot escape from enemies during times of war* (52- year- old male informant from Quahir Michael).

Being shoeless can also be associated with masculinity. Barefoot men who crush soil particles during tilling land and conquer darkness by journeying long distances at night are considered strong and brave, held in admiration and respect. Only tough and physically-nurtured people can endure physical hardships by walking barefoot, and traversing rugged landscapes is a view shared among Fogera residents.

Shoes for specific social gatherings

In the rural community of Fogera, there is a widespread thinking that shoes are vital and mandatory for special and highly valued social gatherings or events. Among these, some are religious, and others are social events/celebrations. These include Epiphany, Christmas, and Easter celebrations among Orthodox Christians and '*Eid Alfeter'*, '*Arefa*', and '*Mewulid*' celebrations among Muslims. During these social gatherings, people are expected to wear shoes regardless of their economic and social standing in the community. Wedding ceremonies, market days, and attendance at *Idir* and *Iqub* meetings are also some of the social events people consider wearing shoes more important than other days. This finding indicates that people associate wearing shoes with events that are socially and culturally accepted in the community, and these events span several generations of the socially constructed meanings of the importance of wearing shoes.

Impacts of walking barefoot

Barefoot walking is a cause of different health, social and economic problems in the study area. The impacts of barefoot walking can be either perceived or actual. In both cases, the health problems of barefooting cover from low leg injuries to severe physical ailments. People walking barefoot are hammered by stones, dead

wood, and rugged surfaces, all of which are likely to contribute to foot-related health problems like fractures and dislocations on their toes and toenails. Hookworm, podoconiosis, snake bite, and leg injury are some of the medically recognized health problems caused by walking barefoot. Residents are acutely aware of the negative health impacts of barefoot walking, as the following excerpt shows:

> *Starting from my childhood period, I always walk barefoot. Three years ago, a large acacia thorn entered my left foot, and consequently, I became very sick for almost two months. My foot became wounded. I was walking by, scuffing my leg. My sons took me to the health center, and there I got treatment, which cost me Birr 2000. Since then, I have got better but still not fully recovered* (67-year-old male informant from Quahir Michael *kebele*).

Health workers also recognize the health impact of walking barefoot and advise residents to wear shoes. In 2019, the Fogera woreda health center treated 11 patients for hookworm and 17 for different kinds of leg injuries, both of which are preventable by wearing shoes. Not wearing shoes exposes people to various kinds of diseases, according to a 37-year-old health extension worker, from Quahir Michael *kebele*:

> *In our woreda, barefoot walking is a cause of many health problems. People come to our health center for hookworm treatment caused by barefoot walking exposure. They also come to our health center because of snake bites on their feet. On top of that, we treated many people for leg injuries. Most of these cases were due to barefoot walking practice, including a flea that penetrates human feet resulting in mutilated and deformed fingers.*

Another foot disease common in the area is jigger flea. It attacks the human feet's fingers and inner parts, resulting in mutilated and deformed feet. Affected people, especially children, are likely to face difficulty walking due to wounds, and in some people, this might last for relatively extended period, especially if not treated early by regularly washing their feet. People also encounter social problems like discrimination and verbal harassment because of visible physical foot injuries. Health problems resulting from barefooting could also lead to medical expenses.

Conclusion

As discussed in this article, the reasons for barefooting in Fogera are regulated by norms which are socially constructed. Some social meanings of walking barefoot (e.g., strength, agility, discipline, and modesty) appear far more critical than associated health risks. The tradition of walking barefoot is firmly established in environmental conditions (waterlogging of Fogera plains during most of the rainy season makes wearing shoes difficult) and a strong sense of awareness about physical fitness. With barefooting, people-nature connectivity exists, which enhances the residents' adaptation to nature, including walking barefoot on muddy and water-logged soils.

The science also supports optimum foot development without shoes (Moore, 2019). Some studies indicate that shoes interfere with the foot's ability to do its job, such as moving around in muddy and water-logged farms. Another study by pediatrician Kacie Flegal ("Going Barefoot Benefits Your Child's Brain Development", 2020) shows that barefoot stimulates brain development in children thereby encouraging their problem-solving, social, language, and communication skills**.**

Fogera residents earn their living by working on soils flooded with Rib and Gumara rivers. In particular, the planting season is unsuitable for wearing shoes since people are likely to get stuck in the mud and wet conditions. For many Fogera farmers, tilling water-flooded rice and teff fields barefoot is necessary, not an option. This has become a part of their continuing farming tradition which finds strong support from social and religious justifications for walking and farming barefoot.

Moreover, the widely held view in the community that barefooting brings strength permits the continuity of the tradition. One major insight that emerged from this study is barefooting in rural communities is complex and is beyond economic problems. Suffice to end the article by saying in addition to economic conditions; social, religious, and cultural factors underpin the continued practice of barefooting in Fogera.

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