

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Contextualization of Maria Theresa Thaler Coin in Amhara Culture, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the case of contextualization of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Amhara culture. In order to meet the aforementioned objective, primary and secondary data sources were used. The main data collection tools used in the study are observation, interview and document analysis. The study mainly draws from “performance” and “narrative” theories in order to analyze the data gathered. The findings of the study reveal that Maria Theresa Thaler coin was first used in Ethiopia for transaction purposes and only was attributed with other values, especially among the Amhara society, when it was no longer serving as international currency. The new values popularized the coin using mainly two methods. One way is through performance; using the coin to practice traditional medicine as a raw material to make jewellery. The other one is through narratives or using the coin as a means of symbolic production that guides the society on the socially accepted way of living. Generally, through its cultural process the Amhara society has contextualized the Maria Theresa Thaler to accommodate new values in to its culture.

Keywords: Maria Theresa Thaler coin, Contextualization, Amhara, Performance, Narratives.

Introduction

Background of the Study

This study focuses on the material culture of Amhara society. Amhara regional state is located in the North Western and North Central part of Ethiopia. It consists of 10 administrative zones, two special zones, 105 woredas, and 78 urban centres. The State shares common borders with the state of Tigray in the North, Afar in the East, Oromiya in the South, Benishangul/Gumuz in the South West, and the Republic of Sudan in the West. The capital city of the regional state is Bahir Dar, and Amharic is the working language (Ethiopian Government Regional State, 2021). The region has plenty of material and spiritual wealth. It is the home of diverse folkloric wealth. Among them, traditional paintings, folk costumes, handicrafts, traditional foods and traditional houses are some examples of material culture of the society (encyclopedia.com, 2018).

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According to Dorson (1972, p.1) “Material culture responds to techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generations and subject to the same forces of conservation tradition and individual variation verbal act.” Humans build houses for their need of shelter and protection; they prepare food for their hunger; for their necked body they weave clothes; for their aesthetics need they create paint etc. Generally, in order to meet their needs and adjust themselves to their environment, human beings make countless objects by using folk techniques and from the raw materials collected locally. Such objects constitute folk material culture in folklore studies.

In folklore studies, material culture is understood by studying the living and non-living methods, techniques, and styles of handmade items. The study of material culture is not limited to artefact and technology of the folk but it also studies how the traditionally oriented groups and tribes build their houses, settlement patterns, cooking procedures, symbolic and religious arts, ornaments, hairstyles, tattooing and so on as objects of material culture. The study of material culture is based on studying the material itself and the meaning the material is bearing (Woodward, 2007).

Different writers maintained that human beings have prepared their material culture by using folk techniques and from the raw materials collected locally. But sometimes a group can contextualize a culture by taking it from another culture. Maria Theresa Thaler coin is an example of the concept of contextualization. The focus of this study is also to show how this material is contextualized in Ethiopia, especially in Amhara culture.

As far as the researcher’s assessment is concerned, there are few research works on this specific study area and the related to the current study are reviewed as follows. The first research to be reviewed is Richard Pankhurst’s work entitled “The Maria Theresa Dollar in Pre-war Ethiopia” (Pankhurst, 1963). Pankhurst describes the circulation of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Ethiopia before the time of World War I (1914 -1918). He described the traditional way of shopping materials before Maria Theresa coin’s advent in the country, but also mentioned that it is impossible to ascertain the exact date when the coins were first imported into Ethiopia in significant quantities. In his research entitled “Historical development of money and banking in Eritrea from the Axumite Kingdom to the Present”, Rena (2007) discusses the origin of banking system in Eritrea. The study highlights the historical evolution and growth of money and banking in Ethiopia and Eritrea. It also provides the chronological development of money and banking from historical times to the post-independent Eritrea. Tschoegl (2001) is another researcher who also conducted a study on Maria Theresa Thaler coin. In his work, he presented rich description of the commercial use of the coin.

When we evaluate the above studies, we can claim that the major themes of research works on the area adhere to the historical perspective of Maria Theresa Thaler coin, and the researchers were more concerned with the commercial (business) history of the material. Although the aforementioned studies pointed out the fact that the coin has stopped its function of currency a long time ago, they did not discuss what happened to it after that. Due to these reasons, the researcher was inspired to conduct this study concerning the contextuality of the coin in Amhara culture. By bearing its cultural values and norms on the material, the society makes the coin its own property. Given this rationale, this study has attempted to explore the contextuality of the coin by taking the living tradition of the society.

Statement of the Problem

For obvious reason, any society has made its culture from the environment in which it continuously intact with. At the same time, it contextualizes a culture of foreign origin by the process of cultural diffusion and contextualization from other societies. Like any other people in the world, the Ethiopian people in general and the Amhara society in particular, have rich vernacular and contextualized culture. In Amhara region, there have been many research made on folklore covering various areas and themes. However, studies on contextualizing of Maria Theresa Thaler coin to the Amhara culture are rarely conducted. Due to the aforementioned facts, the present researcher wants to fill this knowledge gap in this particular research and to achieve the following objectives.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate how Maria Theresa Thaler coin comes to life through narratives and performance in Amhara culture. In the light of the general objective, the specific objectives are:-

- ♣ To describe the concepts of narrative and performance makes contextualized Maria Theresa Thaler coin.
- ♣ To identify the contextual functions of Maria Theresa Thaler coin.
- ♣ To analyze the contents of the narratives about Maria Theresa Thaler coin.

Significance of the Study

It is believed that the output of this research benefits many people. First, this study will have importance to understand the historical and cultural feature of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in the Ethiopian context in general and the Amhara context in particular. This may help readers to conceptualize the dynamics of culture across societies as the result of contacts that led to interactions, integration and assimilation. Furthermore, other researchers may use this study as a stepping stone to make further investigations on the topic under the study and related issues of cultural importance.

Scope of the Study

This research mainly focuses on the contextualization of Maria Thersa Thaler coin, which is commonly called, in Ethiopia, Tegera Birr. This study was conducted in selected places in Amhara region, particularly in Bahir Dar, Zegie Peninsula, Dangila, Injibara, Azena, Ankesha, Shindi, Gonder, Addis Zemen and Rib. The reason as to why the researcher selected these sites is, as far as the researcher observation and informal discussions shows that the coin still has high value and an important material asset and it is source of wealth in the selected places. These places have a strong tradition of using Maria Theresa Thaler coin as a cultural symbolic material. The study is therefore, only focused on those places, which are convenient to the researcher in terms of location, time and opportunity cost.

Research Method

Corresponding to the nature of research topic, the research approach to this study is qualitative. Though the main data gathering technique was qualitative field technique, which was done in the field, other methods were also used, targeting on document analysis. Thus, the research techniques employed in this study were based on primary and sec-

ondary data sources. The primary sources include the Maria Theresa coin itself and the informants, who have direct relation with issues raised for investigation. As such primary data sources are usually used in order to get accurate and first-hand information for the study. The primary data was collected from the selected key informants through snow ball method based on their knowledge of culture and some aspect of history of the community in the study area. Writings about the coins and some other by-products of the coin were also collected to substantiate the data collected from the primary sources.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study employed a non probability sampling technique, which is defined as a sampling technique in which the researcher selects samples based on his/her subjective judgment. Accordingly, the research sites are selected through convenience sampling technique, whereas the interviewees by using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The researcher assumed that the selected techniques are very compatible with the nature of the study.

Data Collection Instrument

Observation and interview were used as major data collection instruments. Observation was used to collect the performing data from day to day activities, weddings, holidays and ceremonies. Observation was the major fieldwork instrument in qualitative studies. The basic reason behind undertaking fieldwork is that it helps to look at what is going on in the natural setting where the study community lives; the performances (means the places where the coin has served), interactions, situations of livelihood in general and the prevailing geographic environment. The researcher observed the functions, melting process and values among the society and in the market. Interview was used to collect narratives; while conducting the interview the data was saturated after nineteen informants, since it became redundant.

Data Analysis Technique

The researcher employed qualitative methods of data analysis, which is found to be helpful in describing, explaining and examining the issue under discussion. The qualitative data gathering strategy mainly requires descriptive and analytical tools in bringing the information at hand into meaningful and sound results. In this study, the data is categorized into similar or related categories. The categorized data is then converted into themes. In accordance with qualitative research data analysis process, the researcher followed thematic analysis technique to make sense of the data.

The Physical and Historical Features of Maria Theresa Thaler Coin

In this section, the study will present the contextualization process of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Amhara culture. To provide contextual background, the study has presented the physical and historical features of the coin.

Physical feature of Maria Theresa Thaler Coin

As described by Tschoegl (2001, p.456), Maria Theresa Thaler coin is a historical international currency which is made up of silver. Its shape is a circle with a diameter of 39.5 centimetres and mass of 28.0668 grams. Maria Theresa Thaler coin (Silver coin) has portrait of the Empress of Austria on the front as shown in fig 1 (a). In the portrait and on the coin, she is wearing a widow's veil and a brooch with nine pearls. The inscription is in Latin, and it means Maria Theresa, by the grace of God, Empress of Romans, Queen of Hungary and Bohemia.

The back side (fig 1 (b)) of the coin shows the imperial double-headed eagle, using the arms of Austria at the centre. It is surrounded by four quarters, which represent Bohemia, Hungary, Burgau, and Burgundy. The inscription on the back is also in Latin and it means Duchess of Burgundy, Archduchess of Austria and Countess of Tyrol.



a) Front side



b) Back side

Fig.1. Front and back sides of Maria Theresa Thaler coin, [Photo by Aster Mulu 24/08/2014 E.C.]

Historical Feature of Maria Theresa Thaler

Maria Theresa is the name of a woman who ruled Austria from 1717 to 1780. Maria Theresa was the only female ruler of the Habsburg Dynasty, and she was a wise and clever lady. Among her different quality assurance practices, minting international money by the mark of her name is one. As documents show, the first coin was struck in 1741 (Gervais, 1982).

The first accounts of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Ethiopia date from 1769 where they started to show up in the coastal port of Massawa primarily as payment for slaves (Pankhurst, 1979-80). At that time, and for many years before, Spanish (Mexican) dollars had circulated throughout the Middle East, at least in coastal ports, but gradually the Maria Theresa Thaler coin came to displace them. The coin also penetrated into the interior part of Ethiopia, though this occurred slowly because it took some time for rural inhabitants to come to prefer them to bars of salt or bolts of cloth as money. Still, eventually the Maria Theresa Thaler coin worn-out and Ethiopia began to run the balance of trade surpluses necessary to facilitate the growth of the money stock. Hahn (1996) cited in Tschoegl (2011) reported that the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated the delivery of Maria Theresa Thalers coin to the countries bordering the Red Sea. A year earlier, Britain bought the coin from the Vienna mint to finance Napier's punitive expedition into Abyssinia (Hahn, 1996, as cited in Tschoegl, 2011). Between 1884 and 1889, Emperor

Yohannes IV sent about one-third of a million Maria Theresa Thalers coin to the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem to pay for the construction of a church in honour of the Virgin Mary (Pankhurst, 2000b).

Between 1934 and 1936, Italy invaded Abyssinia. This provided the principal Fascist leaders, Pietro Badoglio, Rodolfo Graziani and Attilio Teruzzi, with an opportunity to loot the country. For instance, Badoglio reportedly appropriated half the 1.7 million Maria Theresa Thalers coin the Italians seized from the bank of Ethiopia and used the proceeds to build a villa in Rome (Pankhurst, 2000a). Before the Italians invaded Ethiopia, they allowed the official exchange rate of the lira against Maria Theresa Thalers coin to fluctuate. This was important because between 1933 and 1937, the United States purchased silver, driving up its value (Friedman, 1992, as cited in Tschoegl, 2011). After their invasion of Ethiopia and consolidation of their three possessions, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Italian Somaliland, the Italians attempted to eradicate the Maria Theresa Thaler coin (Pankhurst, 1970a). However, at the cost of their occupation, they again adopted a fixed exchange rate of five lira per Maria Theresa Thaler coin, which proved to be a mistake because it created an opportunity for arbitrage (Schaefer, 1996, as cited in Tschoegl, 2011). The Italians refused to mint Maria Theresa Thalers coin for private parties for export to Ethiopia, so merchant banks approached various non-Italian mints with a request that they produce the coins. The Anglo-Indian forces used these Maria Theresa Thalers coin when they drove the Italians out of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland (Tschoegl, 2011). From the British victory to the end of World War II, Maria Theresa Thaler coin again became legal tender in Ethiopia. In 1945, a decree and subsequent minting (in Philadelphia) of Ethiopian dollars put an end to the practice (Wasserman, 1946, as cited in Tschoegl, 2011). In 1946-47, the Ethiopian government shipped numerous Maria Theresa Thalers coin to the United States to be melted down and minted into Ethiopian dollars (Hans, 1951, cited in Tschoegl, 2011).

Different coins (money) have appeared in the country, and Maria Theresa Thaler coin had the function as money until the Derg regime in Ethiopia. But it also served a number of other non or at least less, commercial functions. The next section will discuss the function of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Ethiopia, particularly in Amhara society.

Results and Discussion

The Contextuality of Maria Theresa Thaler in Amhara Culture

Context is a key term in the discipline of Folklore. Without understanding it, nobody can understand the real meaning of a culture. As Sims and Stephens (2005, p.137) stated, scholars have described context in many ways. For instance, Dundes (1964) described it as the observable setting in which a performance occurs. Hymes (1974, p, 55) added a psychological dimension in his description of performance. He says “communicative event” as taking place both within a physical “setting” and a “scene” defined by the psychological and social circumstances surrounding the performance. Totally, based on the above ideas of the authorized writers, it can be concluded that context is the place, time and condition in which folklore is performed. Depending on the context, people give meaning to a created or borrowed culture. As for the definition of Wyatt (2014), the act or process of putting information into context or making sense of information from a particular setting, situation or area of application to make the competencies relevant, meaningful and useful to the society is known as contextualization. Folks have methods to contextualize a culture.

Even though it is difficult to make clear boundary between folk narratives and performance, (as it is true for all folklore genres) the study used the two perspectives to show the contextualized process of material culture. Because as Woodward (2007, p.152) described, “objects cannot have cultural efficacy without these two important ingredients: narratives and performances”. The raw data which were collected from the study area also supports the above mentioned idea, which is in line with the realities among the Amhara society in the study area. It shows that the society of Amhara used performance and narratives as a means of contextualizing the Maria Theresa coin as described in the analysis below.

Contextuality by Performance

Kapchan (1995, p.479) defines performance as the aesthetic practices - patterns of behaviour, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities. So far as performances are based upon repetitions, whether lines learned, gestures imitated, or discourses reiterated, they are the generic means of tradition making. As Sims and Stephens (2005) stated, folklore scholars came to see that sharing folklore verbal, customary and material is a lively activity that teaches individuals about the beliefs and values of a group and maintains identity through repeated enactments of ideas that are important to the group. For folklorists, looking at performance means the opportunity to expand the understanding of how people create, share, and relate with folklore texts. As cited in Kapechan (1995, p.479), Roger Abrahams conceived of performance as “cultural enactment” in which members of folk groups express and reinforce community identity.

The culture of Amhara has started its performance of contextualizing Maria Theresa Thaler coin by naming it using the local language. Ben-Amos (1975) stated that “The names of folklore forms reflect their cultural conception and significance. The semantic components of such terms constitute sets of features which the speakers of a language regard as the primary qualities of each verbal form. These are the characteristics of a genre which signify the symbolic meaning of a given form in a culture. The name given to Maria Theresa Thaler by Amharic speaking people is known as “Tegera Birr”. As oral informants described it, the meaning of Tegera is “pure”, and Birr is “Silver”; hence, a Silver which is not mixed with other minerals. In addition, the word Tegera has another context to use. For example, if somebody says “Yerase Tegera Habet” the meaning will become “my pure wealth which is not mixed with other’s individual wealth”. (Ato Degu Andarge, South Gonder, Dera Woreda and Ayechesh Berihun, Bahir Dar, March 2017).

The two contexts of the word Tegera are not as such different as both indicate the purity of the item. As stated above, the silver content of the Maria Theresa Thaler coin is very high (833.3 /1000), so the Amharic name of the material indicates the understanding of the culture about the characteristics of the material. When the culture calls the material Tegera Birr, the meaning of the word indicates knowledge of the society about the mineral composition (Silver). As can be seen that by repeated observation of the researcher, and the raw data, Silver is a precious mineral next to Gold in Amhara culture. But it has more functions than Gold. According to the informants, because of its purity and insoluble nature, Silver is preferred for many socio-cultural functions. Due to this nature, it has several functions in the culture. The major functions are presented as follows:

Commercial Function

Maria Theresa Thaler coin initially served in Ethiopia as a medium of exchange. Pankhurst (1962, p.213) described that “traditionally, the Ethiopian economy was largely based on subsistence agriculture, trade being therefore at a minimum”. A large proportion of such transactions took the form of barter. Bartering was the main transaction system in Ethiopia, where peasants in possession of grain exchange with a nomad for a sheep or a goat. Maria Theresa Thaler coin, which first appeared in the country in the early nineteenth century, soon acquired a considerable circulation. This idea is supported by the following oral data which is found in the culture:

Many years ago, I remember that my father used to sell (barter) an ox by “Chibito” (homemade bread). The value of one ox was one or two “Ageligos” (traditional container of food made of special types of grass) of Chibito. Gradually, the folk knew and started using Tegera Birr. Depending on its physical condition and its age, the price of an ox was in the range of two to three Tegera Birr. Even though Tegera Birr was not Ethiopian currency during Derg regime, and almost all members of the society were using the paper money. I bought a sheep with two Tegera Birr. Today, Tegera Birr is no more functioning as money. But it became a material which is highly valued. (Ato Wasie Yalew, Dera Woreda, March 2017).

The above quote shows that as Maria Theresa Thaler coin came to Ethiopia, the culture of exchange system was changed. As written documents show the coin was spread in considerable circulation for commercial purposes, and it could not be immediately eliminated from the culture as other exchange systems were introduced in the country. Rather, it used to serve side by side with other exchange systems. Even after Emperor Minilk printed his national currency, Maria Theresa Thaler coin continued to serve. And as the oral data shows, this condition continued until the Derg regime. But now Maria Theresa Thaler coin has changed its commercial purpose. An informant stated that currently a single Maria Theresa Thaler coin costs 700 to 1000 Ethiopian Birr (Ato Ateresaw Kebed, April 2017, Bahir Dar).

As a part of the world, Ethiopia used Maria Theresa Thaler coin as a currency for several years. But in its social context, it is not only money since the society presumed it has other values. So, those values make it a folk material culture. According to Woodward (2007, p.3) “the term “material culture” emphasizes how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity”. On the other hand, Dorson (1972) emphasizes that folk material culture has a character which is known for longevity, tangibility, inherent and representativeness. Among these characters, representativeness is a cause to change Maria Theresa Thaler coin to folk material culture. Jones (2000, p.9) also describes material culture as:

Material culture is an abbreviation for the material manifestations of culture, i.e., objects made by human beings - the tangible things that people make, alter, and use, and to which they often attribute meanings and significance beyond utility or practicality. Artefacts relate to human values, concerns, needs, and desires both past and present. They may reflect the spirit of an age, the belief of a society or a sub group, or the experience of an individual.

The above quotation shows the nature of material culture. As it can be understood, material culture has two aspects. The first is the material itself and the second is its value, meaning or the philosophy of the society who possessed the material. So, based on the definition we conclude that Maria Theresa Thaler coin is a material culture. Today, in Amhara culture, the material has many cultural values beyond its primary function. Some of the values are presented as follows:

Ornamental Function

Traditional jewellerys are one of the focuses in material culture study. Maria Theresa Thaler coin is used as jewellery in Amhara culture and this function of the coin is historical as described by researchers. For example, Vanderhaeghe (2006, p.518) stated that

The materials used by the gold smiths were gold coming partly from the local mines of Welega and partly from Venetian sequins and imported Silver coins, mainly the Maria Theresa Thalers coin from the 1820s. As a result, residents or visitors of Ethiopia have the opportunity to observe Maria Theresa Thaler (coin of Silver/or dollar) as jewellery (especially as neck crosses).

An informant has also described this function in the following way:

. . . Yes, it has many functions. For example, we all married women use it as jewellery. In one way we use it with its natural shape by making pendant on it. And in other way we use it by changing its shape. This means that after melting it, blacksmiths make other kinds of jewellerys from it. Necklaces, bracelets, rings, and ear rings are some of jewellery prepared from Maria Theresa Thaler coin. All jewellerys made from Maria Theresa Thaler coin are very shiny. Because of that it makes us more beautiful when we wear it. Even when you wash it, it becomes neat very soon. (W/ro Ayemeku, Injibara, Adesegie Kebele, 2017)

The above statement shows that Maria Theresa Thaler coin is used as jewellery and is also the symbol of the social status of a married woman. This characteristic of material culture is indicated in the following definition by Bronner (1979, p.149), "Objects contain not only "concrete" or practical functions, but also possess abstract functions; conscious and unconscious beliefs, ideas, projections, meanings and values". Hence, based on this information, we can say that Maria Theresa Thaler coin is a material culture in Amhara society.

The above quote also indicate that material cultures have symbolic functions. Of course, Maria Theresa Thaler coin has a function as jewellery in one way and it also has symbolic function in another way. The coin functions as a jewellery not only by itself but also after silversmiths melted it and carved it as a cross (for neck), necklace, rings, ear rings etc as shown in fig. 2.



Fig.2. Necklaces Jewellery made up Maria Theresa Thaler Coin.
[Photo by Aster Mulu (06/02/2017)]

As a means of Symbolic Production

As explained above, among the society of the studied area, Maria Theresa Thaler coin also serves as a means of symbolic production. Woodward (2007) emphasizes that material cultures allow and empower people to act socially. This consists of objects that serve to represent things to others, frequently through iconic means. These materials are crucial parts of any social performance because they assist social actors to 'dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and moral they are trying to represent'. Folklorists referred to such things as 'expressive equipment'.

As a part of material culture, Maria Theresa Thaler coin can be included under the aforementioned idea since it serves as expressive equipment among the Amhara society. For instance, women wear different kinds jewellery made of Maria Theresa Thaler coin at once, it shows their financial status. Informants have described this function of the material in the following way:

If you have seen a woman who wears over three jewellery made of Maria Theresa Thaler coin, you can conclude that she is wealthy. Yes, we can say each married woman wears one or two jewellery made of the coin (Birr Kitil; as shown in fig 2 (c)). But women who have rich husbands have many "Birr Kitil". For example, I have a sister, who leads good and comfortable life with her husband. They are very rich and he loves her very much, so he buys many types of jewellery for her. She has around seven "Birr Kitil". When she goes to ceremonious places, she wears them and her chest is fully covered with it. At such occasions she attracts the eyes of the participants (Meseret Baye, Abaraj (around Bahir Dar), 2019).

It can be conclude that the coin is very important material. Hence, it is available in the hands of each married woman. But rich women have many jewellery made of Maria Theresa Thaler coin. When people see a woman who wears three or more Maria Theresa coin, they have no doubt about her wealth position among them. So, as we can understand from the data, the coin serves as a symbol of status marker in the society.

As the informants expressed in some places like Fogera Woreda (Gonder), the Maria Theresa Thaler Coin also serves as a symbol of acceptance to the new bride in the bridegroom

families. Informants expressed that when a girl gets married she will go to her husband's family for visit. In this time, the bridegroom families (the father or mother) will give to her one "Birr Kitiil" as a gift in her first visit. In the culture, that is considered as a sign of acceptance. (Wedie Alemu, Rib; Addis Zemen, 2019). Further data show Maria Theresa Thaler coin has much symbolic value in the other parts of the studied area. The data which was found in Shindi and Ankesha, Awi Zone shows how people are using the coin to its symbolic function:

Tegera Birr is a respected gift here in our culture. Even if you have much Tegera Birr, you will not give it to anybody. For example, let me tell you what my mother is doing still now. She gives a coin to her God children when the time of their wedding. You know why she does this? In our tradition there is an unwritten norm. That is, if you are Godmother or Godfather, it is expected of you to give care to your Godchild better than your own child. Because of this norm, people give different culturally valued gifts to their Godchildren when they got married. So as a responsible person, my mother gives the highest valued material to them. (Awoke Berihun, Shindi, 05/02/2022)

The data show the symbolic function of the coin. As we understand it, there is a spiritual connection between the Godmother or Godfather and Godchildren. Using Maria Theresa coin as a gift is one way to keep this relation. When we see here the value of the coin is not physical rather it is symbolic. As it can be understood from the data, the coin has good value in the society. At the same time, the culture of being Godmother is much respected. So, when we see the gift, it is used as a symbol to show the relationship between the presenter and receiver of the material and the value of being Godmother.

The following data also indicate how the Maria Theresa Thaler coin has served as a symbol of the society values among families who have relation in marriage at Ankesha Woreda.

Tegera Birr is a great valued material. It has many functions. It is a wealth; it is jewellery and it is medicine. Because of its value many people wish to own it. But, unfortunately, it is not found easily. Sometimes people found it accidentally when they dig the earth to other purposes. You know what? It is destiny, not by their wisdom or effort. It is just the will of God. But it is rare case. Others inherit it from their families. And the rest especially girls get it as a gift from their mothers or mother-in-laws. Commonly, it is known tradition for mothers to pass their jewellers to their female children. They do it on the wedding day of their daughters. But it has a different meaning if the mother-in-law gives Maria Theresa Thaler coin jewellery as a gift to her child-in-law. That is the symbol to express her great love to her son (Bogalech Fentahun, Ankesha, 06/02/2022).

The data shows the symbolic meaning of Maria Theresa Thaler coin serves as a gift. The coin gives a service as a marker of relation and level of intimacy within a family. Referring this we can say that the coin functioned as the symbol of family relation.

Generally, material culture has the function of representation of the idea of the owner society. Because of that any social actor in the society exploits the symbolic things and objects at hand in order to successfully express their meaning to others. In this condition things and objects become part of social performance.

Therapeutic Function

The World Health Organization (2013, p.1), defines traditional medicine as “the sum total of the knowledge, skill and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness”. According to the study of folk medicines, traditional medicines have three sources: plant, animal and minerals. Of course, Silver is a metallic mineral and that is what the Amhara society knows about Silver in its cultural understanding. And because of its mineral feature, Maria Theresa Thaler coin is a known medicine for different diseases in Amhara culture, specifically in Gojjam and Gondar.

As documented in many written manuscripts, Silver is a preferred mineral for different medical treatments worldwide. For example, Alexander (2009, p.289), says “over these millennia, Silver has been used for numerous medical conditions, mostly empirically before the realization that microbes were the agents of infection”. Similarly, Silver is used as a traditional medicine in Amhara culture. People in the Amhara society use Silver to protect themselves from evil spirit. According to informants, the society believes that Maria Theresa Thaler coin is useful in keeping away evil spirits. The following are some examples that show the contexts in which the coin is believed to protect members of the society from evil spirits.

Protection from Evil Eyes

The evil eye refers to the phenomena where everyday social communication, especially gazing and gossiping, in particular, and the exchange of negative energy, in general, can affect people’s health and well-being, leading to bodily symptoms of illness (Roussou, 2004). The society of Amhara believes that there are people with evil eye among the society. According to this belief, these people are possessed by evil spirit. And the evil spirit will attack others when the possessed people are impressed by somebody or something. But this attack can easily be protected by using Maria Theresa Thaler coin. In relation to this, one informant stated the following: “Maria Theresa Thaler coin protects one from evil eyes. If you wear it on your neck, evil eyes cannot attack you. All their attention will be on the coin, and they will forget you. As our elders told us, Silver is the best medicine by itself for evil eye”. Silverman and Sobania (2004, p.88) support the above idea stating:

The wearing of Silver pendants as adornment may be associated with the use of amulets to ward off disease and ill fortune. A coin sometimes had a loop soldered on to it so that it could be worn as a pendant. Not only did this maintain the value of the coin for future economic transactions, but it might have served as an amulet to protect against the wide-spread belief in.

From these oral and written data, we can understand the traditional belief of the Amhara society about the medical function of Maria Theresa Thaler coin.

Protection from “Shotelay” and “Tila”

According to the belief of the society, “Shotelay” and “Tila” are diseases which will occur when a woman tries to get pregnant or have a child. If it occurs on the stage of pregnancy, she will have miscarriage, and it is locally known as Shotelay. If it happens at the time of birth, the new born baby will die, and the cause is locally known as “Tila”. According to the belief of the society, evil spirit is the cause of “Shotelay” and “Tila”. (Atsede Abate,

Bahir Dar, 2019)

According to informants, people believe that pregnant women and mothers who give birth will become very weak in their physical ability if evil spirits attack them. So, to protect them from the attack, the society prepares a medicine. Maria Theresa Thaler coin is the one among different traditional medicines. Hence, to get healthy pregnancy and baby, it is necessary that a pregnant woman should wear Maria Theresa Thaler coin on her neck until she gives birth. (Ethiopia Mulu, Bahir Dar, 2019; Fentaye Teshome, Tis Abay, 2019)

To Cure Wound

Because of different reasons, people may get bodily wounds. A wound can be cured by different treatments like modern or traditional medical treatments. In Amhara culture, people believe that if the cause of the wound is fire, the treatment will not be easy and simple because it is believed that fire injury provides conducive environment for evil spirits to attack the person. According to an informant's description, evil spirits use fire to attack humans. For instance, a person who is possessed by evil spirit and burnt on fire cannot be cured from that condition until his/her death. Like this, if a person is wounded by the cause of fire, evil spirits will try to attack him/her unless the person got some means of protection. So, to protect a wounded person from evil spirits, Maria Theresa Thaler coin or jewellery which is made up of Silver will be tied around the wounded part (Observation, Bahir Dar, 2019 and interview with Takele Belete, Bahir Dar, 2019).

Generally, in this sub topic, the function of Maria Theresa Thaler coin in Amhara culture is discussed. The discussion shows that Maria Theresa Thaler coin has medicinal function in the society. Oral and written data show that Maria Theresa Thaler coin is pure Silver and that is why it becomes a medicine for different illnesses. Recorded documents also explain that "Silver has been used extensively throughout recorded history for a variety of medical purposes" .

As mentioned earlier, performance and narratives are the two best perspectives to give a cultural meaning to material cultures. By the above analysis, this study tried to show how the Amhara culture has contextualized Maria Theresa Thaler coin in performance. The Amhara people also used narrative to contextualize the coin. The next section will show how narratives make Maria Theresa Thaler coin popularized.

Contextualizing by Narrative

Narratives are sub genres of folklore which are presented through language. As Bascom (1965, p.3) pointed out, narrative is an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art which includes myths, legend and folktales. This indicated that narratives are sub genres of folklore and as a folklore genre they are owned by folk. They describe the cultural, social, historical and economic identity of a society. However, as single independent genre narratives have definitions, Lewis and Sandra (2001, p.16) defined narrative as "a discourse with a clear sequential order that place events in a meaningful way for definite audience and thus gives insight about the world and people's experience of it". Accordingly, narratives carry the ideology and experience of a society. This function is also described by Woodward (2007, p.153) as follows: "Narratives are not only mental-istic or idealistic aspects of selfhood, but important components of culture. That is, narratives are not just told by individuals to others or to one. They circulate within culture, telling members of a group about their own culture and therefore about objects".

Referring to the above definitions to examine the narratives of Amhara people regarding Maria Theresa Thaler coin, it can be understood how the narratives help to contextualize the material. The society has narrations which describe its beliefs about how Maria Theresa coin is preserved without being ruined by rust; in what methods it is drawn from the “bank”, and who are the owners of the material. Moreover, the narratives are used to keep the norms of the society.

Narratives on the Conservation Methods of Maria Theresa Thaler Coin

According to the informants, culturally, people used to bury Maria Theresa Thaler coin in the ground for safety and security reasons. The following data also show the method how the Maria Theresa Thaler coin has protected from theft and ruined by rust:

They used various kinds of pots to store the coin. The clay made pot is viable material for collection of the coin. The coin and the ash are mixed together in the pot. Then they bury it under the ground. The ash will protect the Maria Theresa Thaler coin from corrosion. And the pottery does not decay by its nature. This is also traditional knowledge of the society (Getenet Tebabal, Zegie, 2017 and Melkamu Chekol, Bahir Dar, 2022)

The society believes that even though it is a secret, there are places where the Maria Theresa Thaler had been buried in the region. According to the folk narratives, the buried treasure could be belongs to unknown owner, the elders and Italians.

The unknown owner

In different parts of Amhara region, there are narratives that relate about Maria Theresa Thaler coin being buried in different places within the region. Sometimes people accidentally find the buried coin when they plough the land or dig the earth for different purposes. In such conditions, people do not know who the owner is or who buried it. The narratives do not reveal the identity of the owner of the treasure. According to the narratives, if someone approached the place where the coin is buried, the unknown power will knock him/her in the form of wind, rain and thunder. One informant says the following:

Among the places in Awi Zone between the border of Guangwa and Addis Kidam, there is a place known as Nana. In this place, we believe there is a buried Maria Theresa Thaler coin. It is a protected place and no one has the right to go to this place. Because of this, the place is covered by dense forest. The society believes that if somebody goes into this place, heavy rain, wind and thunder will happen. Of course, I have a recent experience regarding the matter. A person among us goes to the place repeatedly to dig out the Maria Theresa Thaler coin. But he could not get closer to the place because of the harsh weather. When he understood the condition, he found a helper who is a witch and they went together at mid night. But they could not resist the weather and they fall down on the ground. Even the residents around the place recognized the rain, and they suspected that some strange phenomena had happened. When they came out of their house and try to find what happened there, they saw a light around the protected place. They went to the place where they saw the light, and they found the persons (Bogalech Fantahun, Injibara, 2017).

According to similar narratives, there are many such places in which Maria Theresa Thaler coin is buried. Informants stated that nobody knows who had buried the treasure,

but when we refer back to the history of Ethiopia, it is not as such difficult to guess who did. During the time of the second Ethio-Italian war, the Italian troops had taken many treasures from Ethiopia. For example, they took 4,000 (from each) Maria Theresa Thaler coin from Debre Libanos and Debre Birhan Monasteries (Jarrells, 2017, p.157 & p.164). Because of this, as much as possible, Ethiopians tried to hide different wealth of the country in different ways. According to the informants, burying was one way of hiding wealth. Based on this, it might not be wrong if we assume that the buried Maria Theresa Thalers coin which look like ownerless are not really ownerless but they were buried by concerned citizens, who for some reason died before they show or tell their secret.

The elders

Many families have a wish to inherit what they have acquired during their lifetime to their children or close relatives only. Because of this, families who had Maria Theresa Thaler coin put (hide) it in the earth. Informants describe the case as follows:

For the purpose of protecting their wealth from thieves, or to use it in appropriate time, or to transfer their money to their children and grandchildren, wealthy families had buried their Maria Theresa Thaler coin in their villages. But the problem is they did not show to anyone where they buried it, even to their family members. Because of this, nobody can get it after their death (Gizachew Mekuria, Bahir Dar and Yirgalem Gerem, Azena, 2017).

It is traditionally believed that when people bury the Maria Theresa Thaler coin, they make agreements with an evil spirit who is supposed to be a guardian of the treasure. This means no body will get or even approach towards it unless he/she gets the permission of the spirit. But there are lucky people who get the Maria Theresa Thaler coin when they dig a land for other purposes (Gizachew Mekuria, Bahir Dar and Yirgalem Gerem, Azena, 2017).

It can be said that burying the Maria Theresa Thaler coin in the ground was a mechanism of banking for the Amhara people. Due to the fear of thieves, the Maria Theresa Thaler coin had been buried in secret, and this resulted in loss of the treasure.

Italians

According to historical accounts, ever since the 1880s, Italy had been committed to an imperialist policy in the Horn of Africa with Italy taking Eritrea in 1885, and subsequently parts of Somalia. An attempt to conquer Ethiopia in 1895-96 ended with a humiliating defeat for Italy at the Battle of Adwa and caused the downfall of the ultra-imperialist government of Crispi (Bahru, 2001).

Adwa is not only a national but also it is continental victory for Africa. In another way, Adwa is a great psychological defeat to Italy. Italy cannot forget what happened to it for many years. Because of that after 40 years the Italian army under the direction of dictator Mussolini invaded Ethiopian territory on October 2, 1935, filled with a spirit of revenge. After the invasion, Italians tried to make Ethiopia under their control and to this they did many miserable activities on Ethiopian for five years. In May 5, 1941, Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia had returned to Addis Ababa to reclaim his throne with the help of England (Aregawi, 2003).

When Ethiopia achieved a victory on them, Italians were not thinking about defeat let alone being ready to leave the country. So, when they lost victory unconditionally, they did not have time to take the money which they collected from different parts of the country, hence buried it as an immediate solution. On the other hand, they had no doubt about their return. But history shows us that they did not come back again and the wealth remained buried and that is what the Amhara society calls “the Maria Teresa Thera coin buried by the Italians”.

Generally, the data show that burying the coin is a tradition of the society or even a banking system, but taking out the Maria Theresa Thaler coin from the earth also has its own tradition. The following section deals with narratives on how to dig out the coin from the ground.

Narratives about Traditions of Digging out Maria Theresa Thaler Coin

Taking out buried Maria Theresa Thaler requires different traditional activities. The beliefs of the society are the sources of these activities. The society believes that the people who buried the coin made an agreement with bad sprit. The sprit guards the treasure from theft and the people give sacrifice to the sprit. Because of the power of the guardian, nobody can touch the treasure except the owner. The statement of a participant further explains the above idea:

As my grandmother told me, her families buried Maria Theresa Thaler coin at the back of our house. The place is protected by a fence which is made of wood. This fence alone is not secure; hence, it is protected by a giant snake near the place. It is a spiritual guard of the Maria Theresa Thaler coin. When my family wants to take out the coin for any purpose, they first slaughter sheep and give the blood to the snake. Otherwise, nobody can go near that area. If someone tries to open the cover of the hole without presenting the necessary sacrifice, he/she will be bitten and die. After the snake drinks the blood it goes away from the place where the coin is buried until the owner takes out the. Then the snake comes back and the process always goes like this (Beletu Wasie, Ankesha 2019).

The data show that taking out the Maria Theresa Thaler coin from the place it is buried has its own folk belief activities. The society believes that without these activities, even if the person is the owner of the material, he/she cannot touch it. If a person tries to touch it, he/she will get a certain punishment from the guardian spirits.

Keeping the Norms of the Society

Each society is believed to have its own norms to live by. Similarly, the Amhara society has different norms. Among these norms is the belief that the source of any wealth is the blessing of God. Based on this belief, the society has developed the norm that prohibits wishing and touching the properties of others. To maintain this thinking among the society and keep it to the next generation, the culture uses different narratives. For instance, the following narrative can serve as example of the methods the society uses to guard its values.

Once up on a time a woman dreamed about a place where Maria Theresa Thaler coin had been buried. When she was awake in the morning, she told her dream to her husband and she said “let us go to the place and check whether it is true or false. But her husband

said 'no, it is not necessary to go to the place because if your dream is true, we can get it without getting tired. We cannot find a wealth by our subtle journey. She did not agree with her husband's idea. Then the woman told her dream and what she decided to do about it to her neighbour. Her neighbour agreed with her idea and they went to the place where she had seen in her dream. After the neighbour saw the place, he planned to take the Maria Theresa Thaler for himself. He advised her saying "today we cannot do anything because we have nothing to act on. But we will come back tomorrow and we will dig out after we perform all the cultural practices. They agreed on this idea and returned to their home village. But when it got dark, the neighbour went to the place alone and started digging the ground. However, instead of Maria Theresa Thaler, he got a large snake (Python). When he saw this, he got upset and said "she wanted me to die bitten by anaconda snake; I have to punish her for this." He caught the snake wisely and took it to the woman's house. But the woman and her family were asleep. When he saw her door was closed, he threw the anaconda at the gate of the house and it fall down near the closed door. The next morning the husband of the woman woke up first before any member of the family. When he opened the door there was a pot full of Maria Theresa Thaler. He called his wife and said to her 'do you remember what I advised you when you wanted to go to the place that you saw in your dream. If it is the will of God to give the Maria Theresa Thaler coin for us, no need to go towards it because it will come where we are. As I told you the coin came to us before we would go to it' (Getinet Tebabal, Zegie 2019).

This is the belief of the society. Because of this, the culture did not give permission to search or asses the buried Maria Theresa Thaler for "if it is God's will, the Maria Theresa Thaler will come to you". This belief is the principle of the society, and the belief is not limited only to Maria Theresa Thaler coin. It is also reflected on other aspect of their life. Therefore, based on this idea it can be concluded that narratives related to Maria Theresa Thaler coin serve as a method of keeping the society's norms.

Conclusion

The study shows how the society of Amhara contextualized Maria Theresa Thaler coin to its culture. Maria Theresa Thaler served as an international currency in many countries. As a part of the world, Ethiopia first used it for transaction purpose. But when it was outdated from its transaction function in the world, Ethiopians especially Amhara society, put other values on it and those values contextualized the material. The contextualization process used two methods. One way is through performance and the other is through narratives. According to the result of the study, using Maria Theresa Thaler coin to commercial function, wearing and preparing it as jewellery, serves as a means of expressive material; uses for therapy and as medicine (protection from evil eyes protection from "Tila" and "Shotelay", to cure wound) are performances which have make Maria Theresa Thaler coin contextualized in Amhara culture. The narratives are also the tools in the society to contextualize the coin. As it can be understood from the result of the narratives' theme, the society used narratives to teach and transfer knowledge beliefs and wisdom to its own living society and the coming generation. Narratives express that the society has buried the Maria Theresa Thaler coin under the earth as a means of traditional conservation method. According to folk narratives, the buried treasure has three owners. These are the unknown owner, the elders, and Italians. The result of the analysis shows that unless he or she is the owner (Gifted by G/god) of it, nobody can touch the coin. This belief can help keep the social stratum of the society in terms of wealth, and it serves as a method to keep the norms of the society. Generally, the study tells that culture is dynamic as such transgresses boundaries. It is through cultural process the Amhara society has contextualized the Maria Theresa Thaler coin as part of their core culture.

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