

***Erfo Mereba* Ritual as Indigenous Psychotherapy for Pregnant Women in Raya Qobbo, Ethiopia**

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Abstract

Pregnancy is rarely a straightforward experience. Beyond the physical changes, it often brings emotional, social, and psychological challenges especially in communities where biomedical maternal mental health services are limited or absent. In such contexts, indigenous ritual practices frequently step in to fill therapeutic gaps, offering forms of care that are both culturally resonant and socially embedded. This study focuses on the Erfo Mereba ritual in Raya Qobbo, Ethiopia. It explores how Erfo Mereba functions as a culturally grounded form of psychotherapy for pregnant women. Drawing on perspectives from performance theory, functional and medical anthropology, as well as symbolic analysis, the article highlights how ritual enactment and symbolic language work together to ease prenatal distress. The study is based on qualitative fieldwork that combined observation, interviews, and documentation of ceremonies. Central to these rituals are oral poems performed by women known as Dubertis, whose recitations unfold across three distinct phases of pregnancy. The findings reveal that Erfo Mereba directly addresses psychosocial stressors such as marital insecurity, economic precarity, and health-related fears through therapeutic practices that make sense within the community's cultural framework. Hence, the study contributes to broader discussions on ritual healing, maternal well-being, and the integration of cultural practices into community-based mental health frameworks. The study recommends for the recognition of such indigenous rituals as vital cultural resources for the holistic wellbeing of pregnant women and the urgent need for documentation and preservation amid rapid sociocultural change.

Keywords: *Erfo Mereba, indigenous psychotherapy, ritual performance, symbolic healing, pregnancy, oral poetry, Ethiopia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral literature has accompanied humanity since its earliest days, serving not only as art but as a vital thread of communal life. It carries multiple functions: on one level, it preserves and performs cultural knowledge such as history, values, instructions, and ritual practices. On another, it thrives as entertainment, drawing on the artistry of speech, song, gesture, dance, and music. In oral traditions, these social and aesthetic dimensions are never separate; they intertwine to form a powerful medium that educates while it delights (Furniss & Gunner, 2019; Barber, 2018).

Scholars have long recognized that oral literature is indispensable for understanding how societies imagine themselves and make sense of the world. Its relevance today feels even sharper, as oral traditions reveal the complexity of human thought and the resilience of cultural continuity. In communities where the spoken word still outweighs writing as the vessel of memory, oral transmission remains central to identity and collective belonging. Ruth Finnegan (2012) reminds that no society exists without folk literature; to study it is to study the society itself. Karin Barber (2018) extends this insight, showing how oral traditions not only record the events that shape a community but also open a window onto its social fabric as a whole.

Within this broad landscape, ritual performance stands out as a living genre of oral literature. It is a space where words, symbols, and communal acts converge to create meaning that extends far beyond the text. Rituals are not mere entertainment; they are vehicles of psychosocial healing, teaching, and social cohesion. In many African societies, they provide emotional support, affirm bonds of solidarity, and transmit cultural values across generations (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014, pp. 678-682; Xygalatas, 2016, pp. 210-214).

This broader understanding of ritual performance as one of the genres of oral literature finds a vivid expression in Raya Qobo *Erfo Mereba* ritual. The *Erfo Mereba* ritual embodies a deeply rooted, indigenous approach to psychosocial and spiritual care, offering women in their communities a form of support that is both therapeutic and culturally affirming. Such ritual practice provides an important cultural framework through which communities respond to critical moments in the human life cycle, offering protection, meaning, and social cohesion.

In vain with this, Pregnancy is often described as one of the most profound stages in the human life cycle, a time marked by anticipation and the promise of continuity. In many regions including Africa, women frequently turn to culturally rooted networks of care, systems that weave together emotional reassurance and spiritual guidance, offering forms of support that extend beyond the reach of conventional healthcare (Abajobir et al., 2025; Opara & Petrucka, 2025; Mirzoev et al., 2023). Yet alongside its celebration, pregnancy can also be a period of heightened vulnerability, where expectant mothers face emotional strain, anxiety, and the weight of social expectations. Recent studies in global maternal health highlight that psychological distress during pregnancy is not an isolated phenomenon but a widespread concern, particularly in communities with limited access to formal mental health services (World Health Organization, 2022). Complications such as health risks, financial difficulties, or strained relationships may trigger anxiety and depression in expectant mothers. Scholars in maternal health emphasize that non-pharmacological interventions during pregnancy are particularly valuable, as they help women integrate internal resources and avoid fetal exposure to medication:

When clinically feasible, nondrug treatments for depressed pregnant women are desirable to avoid fetal medication exposure. The standard evidence-based option is psycho-therapy. A complementary remedy to common conditions faced during pregnancy may prove to be of significant benefit as prospective mothers avoid the side-effects of traditional pharmaceuticals (Katherine, 2009, pp. 12).

Within this context, the *Erfo Mereba* ritual of Raya Qobbo emerges as a culturally embedded psychotherapeutic practice that provides emotional reassurance, social reintegration, and spiritual protection for pregnant women.

Corroborating this, the *Erfo Mereba* is a ritual performed by old women for pregnant women in Raya Kobo community. It is actualized in blessing and securing safe passage for an expectant mother. It is best characterized by indigenous psychotherapy accounts embedded in oral poetic performance with culturally resonant metaphor, community participation, and spiritual authority to address prenatal turmoil. It provides candidates with emotional safety, returns them socially,

confers symbolic value, and points the way to moral considerations while navigating through the unknown of pregnancy.

Yet this valuable tradition now faces two pressing challenges that threaten its survival and proper appreciation. On one hand, globalization, rapid economic shifts, and changing cultural priorities among younger generations have reduced the frequency of its practice. As these external pressures grow stronger, the transmission of knowledge across generations weakens, placing this intangible heritage at risk of fading away. On the other hand, the ritual suffers from misrepresentation and undervaluation. Too often, *Erfo Mereba* is dismissed as mere superstition or, in some official narratives, inaccurately grouped with so-called “harmful traditional practices.” Such labels ignore the ritual’s intricate internal logic, its healing and affirming qualities, and its role in sustaining both social cohesion and individual well-being. What should be recognized as a vital cultural and psychosocial resource is instead marginalized, accelerating its decline.

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This study therefore seeks to confront two intertwined problems: the erosion of *Erfo Mereba* through neglect and the distortion of its meaning through misinterpretation. Without careful documentation and culturally sensitive analysis, an entire system of indigenous knowledge- one that provides essential support for maternal health and community resilience- risks being lost. The urgency of this research lies in preserving the ritual faithfully and articulating its true value before it disappears under the weight of misunderstanding and modern pressures.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this study is to examine *Erfo Mereba*’s ritual performance in line with its function for pregnant women. The above major objective in turn leads to the subsequent specific objectives:

- Record and document the performance of *Erfo Mereba* ritual
- Collect oral poems recited during *Erfo Mereba* ritual performance
- Identify the major themes reflected in the oral poems of *Erfo Mereba* ritual performance
- Classify the ritual according to its psychosocial and therapeutic functions for pregnant women

Significance of the Study

By examining the psychosocial therapeutic role of *Erfo Mereba* ritual for pregnant women in Raya Kobo community, the study is hoped to underscore the importance of oral traditions as a field of inquiry, inviting scholars to recognize their potential value in addressing diverse human challenges. Moreover, the study will help government officials and Media agencies to clearly see what harmful tradition is and what is not, since some cultural elements are blindly considered as harmful and are on the verge of dying out.

Moreover, this research will help to increase the growing body of knowledge on national ritual in particular and oral literature in general. Finally, it will also hopefully help to inspire researchers on other fields like anthropology, sociology and folklore to study the traditional values in the society.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study Setting

The study was carried out in Raya Kobo Woreda, located in the North Wollo zone of the Amhara regional state, Ethiopia. This area is predominantly inhabited by agrarian communities whose livelihoods depend on subsistence farming and livestock rearing. Social life here is deeply woven into kinship ties, communal labor traditions, and religious practices, all of which structure everyday interactions (Kitila et al., 2018, p. 47). Within this cultural framework, pregnancy is understood as both a blessing and a vulnerable stage of life, one that calls for ritual protection and collective support (Tiruneh, 2014). It is in this setting that the *Erfo Mereba* ritual emerges, functioning not simply as a cultural tradition but as a form of indigenous psychotherapy embedded in local understandings of health and wellbeing.

2.2. Study Approach

As the *Erfo Mereba* ritual is less about numbers and more about meaning, and its therapeutic power lies in oral poems, symbols, and communal participation, a qualitative approach was the more fitting path than quantitative approach. In effect, this study employed qualitative methods to collect, transcribe, and analyze oral poetry associated with the *Erfo Mereba* ritual in Raya Kobo. More than thirty ritual poems were documented, with twenty selected for detailed thematic and functional analysis.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

The study used two data collection instruments: **observation** and **interviews**. Having established the spatial and temporal settings in which *Erfo Mereba* ceremonies are conducted, the researcher sought to witness as many performances as possible actualized in four Kebeles of Qobbo town. On the day of each ritual, recordings captured the ritual enactments alongside the accompanying folk poetry in a manner that was both comprehensive and authentic. The significance of this process lies in the fact that the researcher was able to observe the living context of the ritual, thereby ensuring that the documentation reflects the practice as it is experienced and performed by its custodians. Another important method of data collection employed in this study was interview. In this regard, the researcher engaged not only with informants recognized for their expertise in composing, reciting, and performing the *Erfo Mereba* ritual, but also with officials working in the Woreda cultural and tourism bureaus and related institutions. Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key informants, including six *Duberti* ritual performers, four community elders, and two officials from the Woreda Culture and Tourism Bureau.

2.4. Methods of Analysis

Following the completion of fieldwork, the recorded materials were carefully transcribed. Through this method, the *Erfo Mereba* ritual poems collected from interviews and live performances were transcribed and organized separately, allowing for clarity and coherence in subsequent analysis. In total, thirty ritual poems were documented. Of these, eleven were selected for detailed examination, while the remainder being either repetitions or fragmented versions were set aside to avoid redundancy. As the original texts were in Amharic, they were translated into English with a focus on preserving thematic content rather than formal qualities. Inevitably, certain elements such as rhythm, rhyme, and stylistic nuances were altered in translation; however, this was considered acceptable in order to convey the underlying meanings faithfully.

Finally, the major phases of the *Erfo Mereba* ritual performance and the accompanying poems were identified and analyzed in terms of their therapeutic values. This approach enabled the researcher to highlight the cultural significance and psychosocial roles embedded within the ritual tradition. In line with this, drawing on performance, functional, medical anthropology, and

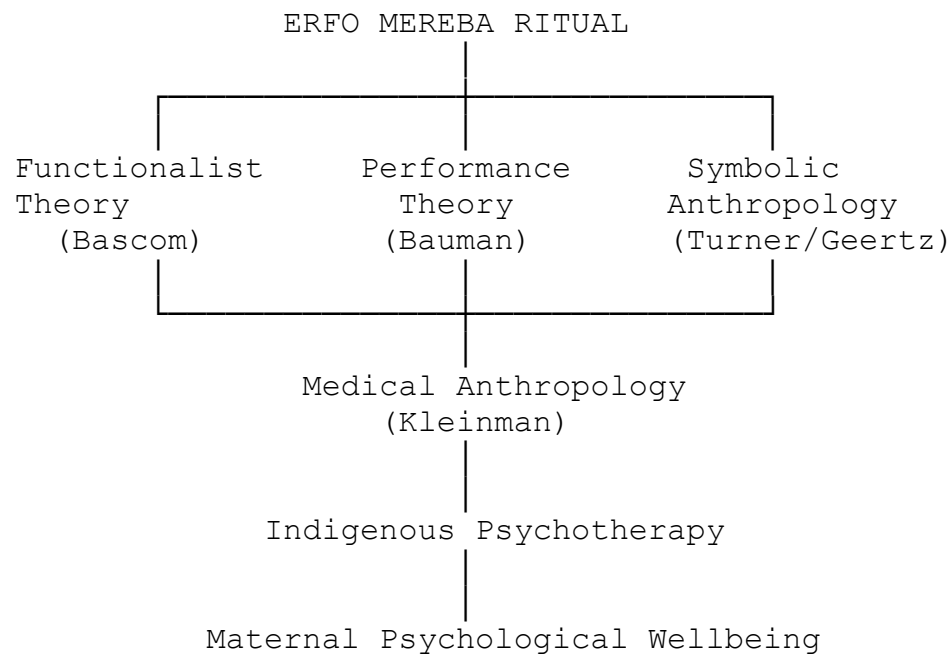
symbolic theories, the article analyzed how ritual enactment and symbolic language function to alleviate prenatal distress.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from participants. The researcher, being a cultural insider, ensured respectful engagement and anonymized sensitive information.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING ERFO MEREBA RITUAL AS INDIGENOUS PSYCHOTHERAPY

The interpretation of the Erfo Mereba ritual as indigenous psychotherapy for pregnant women in Raya Kobo requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that can account for its social, symbolic, and therapeutic functions. Four interrelated perspectives, functionalist folklore theory, performance theory, symbolic anthropology, and medical anthropology provide the conceptual tools to understand how oral poetry and ritual blessing operate as culturally embedded systems of care. Together, these frameworks illuminate the ways in which Erfo Mereba transforms maternal anxiety into reassurance, vulnerability into resilience, and uncertainty into hope.



Functionalist Folklore Theory

Functionalist approaches to folklore highlight the social and psychological roles oral traditions play within communities. Bascom (1965) famously outlined four key functions of folklore: amusement, education, cultural validation, and the maintenance of social conformity. Building on this foundation, Ben-Amos (2010) and Dundes (2016) emphasize the central role of oral traditions in regulating emotional life and sustaining social well-being.

In the case of *Erfo Mereba*, oral poetry operates less as aesthetic ornament and more as a system of care. Blessings for peace, marital harmony, and prosperity not only affirm cultural ideals but also provide psychological reassurance to expectant mothers. Here, oral traditions function as therapeutic interventions, meeting emotional and social needs while reinforcing communal values during a vulnerable life stage. This perspective underscores the ritual's importance in sustaining cultural continuity and offering psychosocial support.

Performance Theory

Performance theory provides a lens for understanding ritual as a transformative event enacted through embodied practice. Bauman (1977) describes performance as a communicative mode in which form and function converge, producing meaning through active participation. Later theorists have expanded this view, stressing the embodied, affective, and interactive dimensions of performance in shaping social experience (Schechner, 2013, pp. 28-32; Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 38-42).

Within *Erfo Mereba*, the call-and-response structure (*Erfo Mereba-Mereba*) and rhythmic repetition create a participatory environment that transforms fear into reassurance. The cadence and collective chorus regulate emotion, fostering calm and solidarity. From this perspective, healing emerges not only from the content of the blessings but from the act of performing them: the embodied rhythm, communal affirmation, and sensory engagement themselves become therapeutic.

Symbolic Anthropology

Symbolic anthropology emphasizes the role of symbols in condensing and communicating complex meanings. Turner (1967) and Geertz (1973) argue that rituals are systems of symbols

through which societies interpret existential concerns. Contemporary scholarship extends this framework, showing how symbolic processes shape emotional experience and meaning-making (Ortner, 2006, pp. 130-134; Robbins, 2013, pp. 45-49).

In *Erfo Mereba*, metaphors of rivers, milk, pets, womb, and offspring condense anxieties about marriage, poverty, and mortality into narratives of abundance, intimacy, and protection. Rivers symbolize continuity and fertility, while the metaphor of husband as pet and wife as milk encodes ideals of care and mutual dependence. These symbolic transformations reframe distress into hope, providing pregnant women with culturally resonant narratives that make suffering intelligible and manageable. In this way, poetic imagery functions as psychotherapy, translating abstract fears into meaningful assurances.

Medical Anthropology

Medical anthropology situates healing practices within culturally specific explanatory models. Kleinman (1980) demonstrates that communities construct models of illness that guide therapeutic practice, while more recent scholarship emphasizes the integration of cultural, emotional, and social dimensions into understandings of health (Good, 2012, pp. 15-19; Kirmayer, 2015, pp. 460-465).

In *Raya Kobo*, conditions such as depression and anxiety are often understood as consequences of negative thinking, marital instability, or spiritual imbalance. The *Dubertis* intervene by reframing these conditions through blessings, restoring harmony between the woman, her community, and the spirit world. From this perspective, *Erfo Mereba* functions as a community-based mental health framework, complementing biomedical approaches by addressing emotional and spiritual dimensions of care. Medical anthropology thus underscores the legitimacy of *Erfo Mereba* as a culturally valid psychotherapeutic system, challenging reductive categorizations of indigenous practices as mere superstition.

4. RESULTS

Introduction

This section analyzes *Erfo Mereba* as a culturally embedded ritual that functions simultaneously as folklore performance, social practice, and indigenous psychotherapeutic intervention for pregnant women in Raya Kobo. Drawing on functionalist folklore theory, performance theory, symbolic anthropology, and perspectives from medical anthropology, the discussion interprets the ritual as a system of meaning through which prenatal distress is transformed into hope, belonging, and moral order.

Raya Kobo is located in Northeastern Ethiopia, inhabited predominantly by agrarian communities whose livelihoods depend on subsistence farming and livestock. Social life is organized around kinship, communal labor, and strong moral values emphasizing reciprocity, respect for elders, and spiritual faith. Pregnancy in Raya Kobo is culturally framed as both a blessing and a risky liminal condition. Women are believed to be especially vulnerable to misfortune, evil forces, and emotional disturbance during this period.

Structure of the Ritual

The ritual unfolds in three phases across the nine months of pregnancy, each lasting three days. Elderly women known as *Dubertis* lead the performances, reciting oral poems and blessings that address the psychosocial challenges faced by expectant mothers. The phases correspond to critical stages of pregnancy:

1. **First phase (1-3 months):** Focus on marital harmony and emotional security.
2. **Second phase (5-7 months):** Blessings for wealth, abundance, and economic stability.
3. **Third phase (8-9 months):** Prayers for safe delivery, maternal health, and the child's wellbeing.

This tripartite structure reflects what Turner (1967) describes as the “ritual process,” where symbolic acts guide participants through liminal stages of life, transforming vulnerability into resilience. Concerns commonly include:

- Marital stability and spousal support,
- Food scarcity and economic insecurity,

- Fear of difficult labor or death,
- Anxiety about the child’s health and future.

Such concerns are intensified by limited access to biomedical maternal and mental health services. Consequently, communities rely heavily on traditional knowledge systems and ritual practices to safeguard maternal wellbeing. It is within this cultural ecology that *Erfo Mereba* emerges as a crucial intervention.

Participants include the pregnant woman, female elders, neighbors, and relatives. Men may be present but usually remain in the background. The pregnant woman sits at the center, while the *Duberti* face her, establishing a direct relational axis of blessing.

First Phase: Peace, Love, and Marital Stability

According to the *Duberti*, in addition to the hormonal changes common during pregnancy, there are several factors that expose pregnant women to distressful and overwhelming state in this particular society. The first risk factor that exposes pregnant women to depression is the fear of unsuccessful marriage. Especially, when the woman gets pregnant immediately after marriage, the feeling of insecurity about the success of her marriage and even about the love of her husband will invade her. Understanding this condition, the *Duberti* will try to therapeutically heal it, before it gets worst, by their ‘*Erfo Mereba*’ ritual. Therefore, the first phase ritual of the *Duberti* mainly focuses on peace, love and successful marriage. The *Duberti* usually do this through reciting well cadenced poems. Among the plenty of blessing poems for successful marriage recited in this stage, the following one is an example:

<u>ዱብርቲዎች</u>	<u>ተቀባዮች</u>
1. እርፎ መረባ(2)	መረባ
አማን አማን ጀባ።	መረባ
2. ሰላምና ጤና ጀባ	መረባ
የማይበጅሽ ገደል ይግባ።	መረባ
አሜን	አሜን

<u>Performers</u>	<u>Participants</u>
Erfo Mereba	Mereba
Let be peace unto you	Mereba
May you have peace and health	Mereba
May evil be kept away from you	Mereba
Amen	Amen

It seems quite safe to assume that all human being desire peace, and health. Like any society of the world, peace and health have been almost natural companions in *Rayya Qobbo* society. In *Rayya Qobbo* society, peace is not an abstract poetic concept, but rather a down-to-earth and practical concept. Peace is conceived not in relation to conflict and war, but in relation to order, and harmony.

In this particular society, Peace is good relationship, well lived, absence of pressure and conflict, being strong and prosperous. In other words, Peace is the sum total of that the entire members of the society may desire: an undisturbed harmonious life. Therefore, a mere material wealth or progress that is not accompanied by peace and health is neither regarded as fullness of life nor is it envied in this particular society. That's why we notice the centrality of peace in the *Dubertis'* traditional psychotherapy for pregnant women, and it is believed that peace comes first in every aspect of life. As Geertz (1973) notes, ritual symbols are both "models of" and "models for" reality. By blessing peace and health, the *Dubertis* provide psychological reassurance and reinforce social bonds. This aligns with Bascom's (1965) functionalist view that oral traditions fulfil essential social needs.

Next to good health and peace, priority is given to successful marriage in this particular society. Successful marriage, in *Rayya Qobbo*, as it is everywhere in Ethiopia, is one of the defining issues in life. Due to this, it is familiar to see expressions about marriage in *Duberti's* oral poetry. That is why the *Dubertis* reflect their wishes and blessings through this oral poetry for the

successfulness of one’s marriage. Because the *Duberti’s* believed that blessing the marriage will bring the pregnant woman in peaceful and tranquil state of mind.

<u>ዳብርቲዎች</u>	<u>ተሳታፊዎች</u>
3. እርፎ መረባ(2x)	መረባ
ባልሽ ይውደድሽ	መረባ
እንቅሌፍ ይውስድሽ።	መረባ
4. ባልሽን እንደ ድመት፣	መረባ
አንችን ወተት ያርግሽ፣	መረባ
ሌቱን አብሮሽ አድሮ፣	መረባ
ጧት ማያው እንዲልልሽ።	መረባ
አሜን	አሜን
<u>Performers</u>	<u>Participants</u>
Ero Mereba(2x)	Mereba
May your husband loves you	Mereba
Have peaceful sleep	Mereba
May your husband be your pet,	Mereba
And you, his feast (milk).	Mereba
Nice and well, that he, Keeps guard of your heart.	Mereba
Amen	Amen

This metaphorical imagery compares the husband to a pet and the wife to milk, symbolizing mutual affection and dependence. Lévi Strauss (1963) interprets such symbolic oppositions as encoding cultural values. Sleep here symbolizes peace and happiness, reinforcing the idea that marital

harmony is central to maternal wellbeing. The blessings reframe insecurity into a narrative of affection, reducing anxiety and fostering emotional stability.

Second Phase: Economic Security and Abundance

The second phase ritual performance takes place between the 5th and 7th months' pregnancy period. In this particular phase, the *Dubertis* will plinth their therapy on the second significant risk factor that renders the pregnant woman to depression. The second risk factor, as the poverty worries pregnant woman a great deal. She knows that a fraction of 'Enjera' will be a hard won for the people around whenever there is lack of rain during summer. Therefore, she will worry very much about what she would feed her offspring if the same thing happened in one of the blue days.

Bearing this worry of the pregnant woman in mind, the *Dubertis* will pray and bless the pregnant woman for wealth focusing on cattle herding, successful harvest, trade and other aspects of socio-economic realities for three days in order to sooth the depression of the pregnant woman:

ዱብርቲዎች	ተሳታፊዎች
5. እንደ አላ ጎሊና፣	መረባ
ከረምትና በጋ፣	መረባ
ጣይና ጨረቃ፣	መረባ
ያድርግሽ ጀሊሉ።	መረባ
6. ሲያጡም አግኝ፤	መረባ
ሲያገኙም አግኝ።	መረባ
አሜን	አሜን
The Performers	Participants
5. Like <i>Ala</i> and <i>Golina</i> ,	Mereba
Through winter and summer,	Mereba
Like the sun and the moon,	Mereba
May the Almighty make you constant.	Mereba
6. May you find wealth when others lack it;	Mereba
May you find wealth when others have it.	Mereba
Amen	Amen

Ala and *Golina* are the two rivers of Raya Qobbo that course steadily through every season, resisting the grip of drought. The invocation of rivers and celestial cycles symbolizes continuity, fertility, and abundance. Turner (1967) emphasizes that ritual symbols condense complex meanings; here, natural imagery equates economic stability with cosmic order. By blessing wealth and harvest, the *Duberti* provide therapeutic reassurance against poverty-related depression. This aligns with Kleinman’s (1980) concept of “explanatory models,” where illness and distress are interpreted through culturally coherent narratives of nature, economy, and spirituality.

Generally, the *Duberti* bless the wealth of the pregnant women knowing that the economic challenge that women may face after labor is also a serious risk factor that usually exposes pregnant women to depression and anxiety. Then, the second phase ritual will end at the evening of the third day.

Third Phase: Health, Safe Delivery, and Child Protection

The third or final phase of ‘Erfu Mereba’ ritual is actualized for three successive days between the 8th and 9th months’ pregnancy period. At this phase, the *Duberti* ritual performance chiefly focuses on the health of the pregnant woman and her forthcoming baby. The reason why the *Duberti* do this is the pregnant woman worries about the health of her forthcoming baby especially when the delivery day is fast approaching.

The woman fears by the pretext that if she gives birth to abnormal child, and/ or if her child dies during labor. Thus, the *Duberti* pray and bless the pregnant woman to have a healthy baby. In addition to this, often times the pregnant woman gets frightened by the thought of if she dies when she gives birth to her child. Therefore, to reduce or even to escape such depression, fear and anxiety, the *Duberti* pray and bless the woman for the health of the woman and her baby:

ዱብርቲዎች

- 7. እርፎ መረባ
- ቁርስ ቁርስ ጀባ
- የምትወልድው በቤትሽ ይግባ።

ተሳታፊዎች

- መረባ
- መረባ
- መረባ

8. የልብሽ ይሙላ	መረባ
የልጅ በሽታ አይምጣ ለመሀላ።።	መረባ
እርፎ መረባ	መረባ
9. ያለው በፊትሽ	መረባ
በሽንጥሽ ይዙርልሽ።።	መረባ
የተባረከ ማህጸን ይሁን	መረባ
10. ዘርሽ የረባ ይሁን።።	መረባ
ይሁን (2 ጊዜ)	መረባ
መቼ	አሁን
በማንቃል	በዱባርቲዎች ቃል
አሜን	አሜን
Performers	Participants
Erfo Mereba (2x)	Mereba
May God give you breakfast	Mereba
Let you come back to home	
with a healthy offspring	Mereba
May God give you what	
your heart aspires for	Mereba
May God protect your baby	
from any health problem	Mereba
God bless your health and	
your breed	Mereba
When	Now
By whose name	By Duberti's name

This blessing emphasizes survival and reintegration. In Turner's (1967) terms, childbirth is a liminal threshold; the blessing ensures passage into motherhood without disruption. It reassures the woman that she will not only survive but also rejoin her household with a living child, countering fears of death or loss. “የልብሽ ይሙላ” “*may your dream come true*”, “በፊትሽ ያለው።በሽንጥሽ ይዙርልሽ” “*May your child be born safely and you hold him or her on your back*”, የተባረከ ማህጸን ይሁን “*may God bless your fetus*”, and ዘርሽ ይሁን የረባ “*May God bless your coming child*” all these

extracts of the poem are so significant in reducing the fear and depression that the pregnant women will have to endure during pregnancy.

11. የልብሽ ይሙላ

የልጅ በሽታ አይምጣ ለመሀላ። መረባ

May your heart's desire be fulfilled — Mereba

May your baby be protected from illness — Mereba

This petition reflects the psychosocial dimension of pregnancy, acknowledging maternal hopes and anxieties. Kleinman's (1980) explanatory model suggests that illness and distress are interpreted through culturally coherent narratives; here, the blessing reframes uncertainty into divine assurance. The line directly addresses biomedical concerns, substituting ritual blessing for clinical prophylaxis.

At the end of the day, when the blessings and prayers end, porridge is served to the *Duberti*. The *Duberti*, after they test the porridge three times, will give the porridge to the rest of the people in the ceremony. When the porridge ceremony ends, the ritual comes to an end. The porridge symbolizes health. It is a tradition for the mother to eat porridge for 40 days from delivery. Thus, the *Duberti* are foretelling the woman will deliver safely and be part of this custom by the prayers and blessing of *Duberti*.

4. DISCUSSION

Erfo Mereba contributes to maternal wellbeing at multiple interrelated levels. Women report emotional calm (*selam*), relief, and confidence after the ritual. Through poetic reframing and authoritative reassurance, anxiety is transformed into hope. In addition, the ritual restores belonging by placing the woman at the center of communal care. Collective responses and food sharing enact solidarity and *communitas* (Turner, 1969). Moreover, metaphors organize existential fears into meaningful images of safety and abundance, rendering anxiety bearable. Furthermore, invocation of God sanctifies the womb and provides metaphysical assurance, relocating fear to divine guardianship. Apart from this, ritual enactments foster resilience, encouraging self-care and

preparedness for childbirth. Finally, pregnancy is reframed as a blessed journey. Successful births are later narrated in relation to the ritual, reinforcing its efficacy in collective memory. Together, these dimensions show *Erfo Mereba* as a culturally embedded psychosocial intervention transforming distress into hope, belonging, and meaning.

This resonates with broader anthropological insights that ritual healing practices serve as mechanisms of emotional regulation and social integration. As Turner (1967, p. 94) observed, ritual performance creates a shared symbolic space where individual distress is reframed through collective meaning-making. In the case of *Erfo Mereba*, the call-and-response exchanges between the Dubertis and participants generate a participatory environment that transforms fear into reassurance and solidarity.

Recent work in global mental health underscores the importance of culturally grounded approaches to psychological wellbeing. Kirmayer, et al. (2019, p. 310) argue that indigenous healing traditions often provide care that addresses social relationships, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity-dimensions frequently overlooked in biomedical models. Within this perspective, rituals such as *Erfo Mereba* can be understood as culturally meaningful therapeutic practices that complement biomedical care.

Maternal mental health research also increasingly recognizes the role of social support in reducing psychological distress during pregnancy. The World Health Organization (2022, p. 12) emphasizes that emotional reassurance and community support are crucial for maternal wellbeing, particularly in contexts where access to professional mental health services is limited. The *Erfo Mereba* ritual embodies this principle by placing the pregnant woman at the center of communal care and symbolic affirmation.

A further dimension of the ritual lies in its use of symbolic metaphors. Through imagery of fertility, abundance, and divine blessing, ritual poetry transforms uncertainty into narratives of hope. Geertz (1973, p. 89) suggests that such metaphors act as interpretive frameworks through which individuals make sense of life transitions. By embedding maternal fears within narratives of protection and prosperity, *Erfo Mereba* provides psychological reassurance that reduces anxiety and fosters resilience.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *Erfo Mereba* is more than a cultural performance. It functions as a culturally grounded system of psychosocial care that integrates emotional support, symbolic meaning, and communal solidarity. Recognizing the therapeutic dimensions of such indigenous practices can contribute to more culturally inclusive approaches to maternal health and community wellbeing.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study of the *Erfo Mereba* ritual in Raya Qobbo demonstrates that oral traditions are not simply aesthetic or symbolic practices, but deeply functional systems of care that address the psychosocial needs of pregnant women. Through its three phases- blessings for marital harmony, prayers for economic stability, and assurances of maternal and child health, the ritual systematically responds to the most pressing anxieties of pregnancy. Each oral poem, performed by the *Dubertis*, transforms fear into reassurance by mobilizing culturally resonant metaphors, rhythmic repetition, and communal affirmation.

The analysis shows that *Erfo Mereba* operates as a form of indigenous psychotherapy, offering emotional support, social reintegration, and spiritual protection. It validates maternal hopes, reframes distress into culturally meaningful narratives, and strengthens resilience through collective participation. The ritual's therapeutic logic challenges reductive categorizations of indigenous practices as superstition or harmful tradition, instead positioning it as a sophisticated cultural resource for maternal wellbeing.

By situating *Erfo Mereba* within functionalist folklore theory, performance theory, symbolic anthropology, and medical anthropology, this research underscores its multidimensional significance. It is simultaneously a performance of oral literature, a symbolic reframing of anxiety, a communal enactment of healing, and a culturally coherent model of mental health care. In conclusion, *Erfo Mereba* should be recognized as an invaluable intangible heritage that contributes to maternal health and social cohesion.

5.2 Recommendations

Building on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made:

- Documentation and preservation: Cultural institutions and universities should give priority to recording and safeguarding indigenous ritual traditions such as Erfo Mereba. These practices are not only cultural heritage but also living systems of care that deserve recognition and continuity.
- Policy engagement: Policymakers are encouraged to evaluate traditional practices within their social and cultural contexts rather than dismissing them as superstition or harmful custom. A more nuanced approach can reveal their therapeutic and communal value.
- Integration into maternal health programs: community-based maternal health initiatives should consider weaving culturally meaningful support systems into their design. Rituals like Erfo Mereba can enhance emotional wellbeing during pregnancy by providing reassurance and solidarity.
- Interdisciplinary research: further collaborative research across anthropology, psychology, and public health should explore the relationship between ritual healing and maternal mental health in different Ethiopian communities. Such inquiry can deepen understanding and inform culturally inclusive health strategies.

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ሀዝባዬሽ ጌታሁን። (2002)። “የቆቦ ወረዳ ያለበትን ጎጂ ልማዳዊ ድርጊቶች ያለበትን ሁኔታ ሆማየት የተደረገ ጥናት”። ቆቦ፣ የቆቦ ወረዳ ባህሊና ቴሪዝም ቢሮ ባህሊና እሴቶች ጥናት ተቋም።

ቆቦ ወረዳ ማጽ/ቤት። (የካቲት፣2002)። “ራያ ቆቦ የባህሌ ገንቦ”። ህዳሴ። ቁጥር 41

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