

## Celestial Diglossia and the Moral Clock: Ethno Linguistic Encoding of Cosmology and Social Hierarchy in Ethiopian Life Cycle Ritual Discourse

Muhammad Ridwan<sup>1</sup>, Belay Sitotaw Goshu<sup>2</sup>, Arifulhak Aceh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Linguistics, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Physics, Dire Dawa University, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

<sup>3</sup>SMK Negeri 1 Pancur Batu, Indonesia

Email: bukharyahmedal@gmail.com, belaysitotaw@gmail.com, arifulhakaceh08@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

*Ethiopian life cycle rituals have been extensively documented, yet the specific linguistic mechanisms that encode cosmology and social hierarchy remain undertheorised. Existing studies treat language as a transparent medium rather than a constitutive force. This article introduces two novel concepts, celestial diglossia (stratified access to astronomical registers) and the moral clock (celestial events that license ritual speech) – to explain how Oromo, Amhara, and Gedeo ritual discourse re classifies initiates across birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Twelve months of participant observation, 85 interviews with ritual specialists (Hayyu, Qallu, priests, Zār leaders), and audio recorded speech events (marriage negotiations, Dhibaayyuu vows, Zār healing sessions) were analysed using discourse analysis and ethnographic semantics. Celestial diglossia parallels the Ge'ez Amharic split, creating an epistemic hierarchy where priests control constellation names (e.g., Bakkalcha/Pleiades) and heliacal calculations. The moral clock exemplified by Bakkalcha's rising – periodically licenses Mekdes (loyal reproach), transforming taboo direct criticism into a "face gift." This temporary inversion reinforces rather than subverts hierarchy. In Gadaa transitions, the new Abbaa Gadaa cannot pronounce judgement formulas until Bakkalcha's first sighting. Eclipses suspend all ritual speech, proving the clock's regulatory coherence. Ethiopian ritual discourse accomplishes a triple transformation (biological→social→cosmic) through linguistic encoding, not mere symbolism. Age grade progression is mapped directly onto observable celestial events. Linguistic anthropology must integrate astronomical time as a performative dimension. Future research should examine southern Ethiopian groups (Sidama, Konso) and the impact of Orthodox Christianity on contemporary ritual registers.*

### **Keywords:**

*Celestial diglossia; moral clock; Bakkalcha (Pleiades); Mekdes (loyal reproach); Gadaa system*

## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Opening Hook: An Ethnographic Vignette

In the highlands of Ethiopia, under a canopy of pre-dawn stars, an Oromo elder stands before two families gathered for a marriage negotiation. As the constellation known to Indigenous astronomy as Bakkalcha (the Pleiades) emerges above the eastern horizon, a subtle yet profound transformation occurs in the verbal field. Moments earlier, the atmosphere had been charged with the elaborate politeness (yilugnta) that typically governs such encounters: indirect requests, honorifics, and cautious formulations that defer to the social distance between the two houses. Yet as the first light of Bakkalcha begins to diffuse across the sky, the elder leans forward, his voice rising in volume and slowing in tempo as he addresses the groom's father with direct pronouns that would have been unthinkable only minutes before.

“You know what you have done,” he says, his words cutting through the diplomatic fog. “Your son has shamed this lineage.”

It is Mekdes loyal reproach speech act that among Amhara and Oromo speakers transforms criticism not into a face threatening insult but into a paradoxical “face gift,” an expression of intimacy so deep that it can only be delivered by those who truly belong to one another. This particular performance of Mekdes, however, would not have been possible had the elder spoken one hour earlier, when the politeness regime of ordinary social interaction still held sway. The rising of Bakkalcha functions as what Goshu, et.al. (2026) term a “moral clock” celestial event that periodically re licenses otherwise forbidden speech, marking the threshold at which a relationship has ripened from respectful distance to unvarnished intimacy. The stars, in other words, do not merely illuminate the ritual; they regulate it, telling speakers precisely when the moral order permits, indeed, requires direct confrontation as a gesture of care rather than an act of aggression.

### 1.2 The Research Problem: Why Linguistic Encoding Matters

Ethiopian life cycle rituals have long attracted scholarly attention. From the elaborate age grade transitions of the Oromo Gadaa system to the therapeutic spirit possession rites of the Amhara Zār cult, from Gedeo blessing ceremonies to the prayers and dirges that accompany birth, marriage, and death across the Ethiopian highlands, a rich ethnographic literature has documented the symbolic structure, social functions, and cosmological frameworks of these ritual practices. Yet despite this wealth of description, one critical dimension remains systematically undertheorised: the specific linguistic mechanisms by which ritual discourse simultaneously encodes cosmic order and social hierarchy.

The existing literature has tended to treat language as a transparent medium vehicle for conveying cosmological beliefs or for expressing social status rather than as an active, constitutive force in the re classification of the ritual initiate. This gap is particularly striking given that Ethiopian ritual life is densely verbal: blessings, curses, prayers, vows, reproaches, and laments are not mere accompaniments to ritual action; they are the action. As Golle, Orkaydo, & Zekareas (2022) demonstrate in their analysis of Gedeo blessings, the very structure of ritual utterance; its lexicon, its turn taking protocols, its deictic orientation embeds a cosmology that venerates a supreme creator (Mageno among the Gedeo, Waaqa among the Oromo) while simultaneously enacting a strict hierarchy of seniority and ritual authority. But how precisely does this dual encoding work? What are the linguistic features the specific words, syntactic choices, prosodic patterns, and discourse structures that make a blessing simultaneously an invocation of the divine and an affirmation of the elder’s place in the social order?

### 1.3 Core Concepts: Celestial Diglossia and the Moral Clock

To address these questions, this article introduces two interconnected theoretical concepts.

Celestial diglossia extends the classic diglossia framework (Ferguson, 1959) beyond the purely linguistic domain to encompass the stratification of astronomical and ritual knowledge within a speech community. Among Ethiopian highland societies, access to celestial knowledge is not uniform. Priests and ritual specialists possess a specialized register of astronomical lore the names of constellations (Bakkalcha, the Pleiades; Saddu and Gulshān, among others), the principles of calendrical calculation (Bahre Hasab), and the esoteric computations that determine the timing of major religious festivals. Farmers and lay participants, by contrast, operate with a vernacular astronomical register focused on practical seasonal forecasting. This “celestial diglossia” parallels the functional split between Ge’ez and Amharic, and it serves a similar

ideological function: it naturalizes a social hierarchy by aligning differential access to sacred knowledge with differential access to ritual authority. Crucially, however, celestial diglossia is not static. The two registers interact during life cycle rituals, as priests interpolate Ge'ez blessings into vernacular ceremonies, and as lay elders invoke star proverbs that encode moral pedagogy (Goshu et al., 2026).

#### 1.4 Problem Statement

This article advances a central problem: In Ethiopian ritual discourse, language does not merely reflect cosmology and social rank; it re classifies the initiate through a convergent structure in which celestial cycles, liturgical registers and age grade hierarchies become mutually reinforcing.

Every life cycle rite is, at its core, a ritual of re classification (cf. van Gennep, 1960). Birth transforms a biological infant into a social person; initiation transforms a child into an adult with ritual responsibilities; marriage transforms individuals into a reproductive unit embedded within clan structures; death transforms the living into ancestors whose names and deeds become part of the cosmic order. What distinguishes Ethiopian ritual practice is the particular way in which this re classification is verbalized. The initiate does not simply pass through a series of stages; they are named, blessed, reproached, vowed, and eulogized in utterances that triangulate three dimensions of order: the celestial (referencing stars, deities, and cosmic cycles), the liturgical (mediated by Ge'ez and the specialized register of ritual specialists), and the social (encoded in turn taking protocols, honorifics, and the hierarchical sequence of speakers). The result is a unified field of meaning in which one's position in the age grade system, one's relation to the Supreme Being, and one's alignment with the movement of the stars are co articulated through regimented discourse.

## II. Review of Literatures

The theoretical architecture that underpins this article synthesizes three interrelated lines of inquiry: (i) the performative and entextualising dimensions of ritual language, (ii) the extension of diglossia theory beyond the purely linguistic domain into what I term "celestial diglossia", and (iii) a novel conception of temporality and speech act regulation through celestial events, which I conceptualize as the "moral clock". Together, these strands provide the analytical tools necessary to investigate how Ethiopian life-cycle ritual discourse simultaneously encodes cosmological order and social hierarchy.

### 2.1 Language as a Social Cosmic Operator

The foundational premise of this study is that language in ritual contexts does not merely describe or reflect the world but actively *constitutes* it. This insight originates with J. L. Austin's (1962) theory of performative utterances, which demonstrated that certain speech acts, such as pronouncing a couple married or naming a ship *do* what they say rather than merely reporting on a state of affairs. Austin's framework distinguished constative utterances (which describe) from performatives (which accomplish an action), though he later recognized that all utterances have performative dimensions. John Searle (1969, 1976) systematized this insight into taxonomy of illocutionary acts assertive, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, each governed by constitutive rules that determine their felicity conditions. For ritual discourse, the most consequential of Searle's categories is the *declaration*, a speech act that produces a change in institutional or social reality by virtue of being uttered by an authorized speaker under appropriate circumstances (Searle, 1976). In Ethiopian life-cycle rites, blessings, curses, vows,

and reproaches function precisely as declarations: they transform the ritual initiate from one status to another not because they describe such a transformation but because they *perform* it.

Yet the performativity of ritual speech cannot be fully captured within the Austinian–Searlean framework alone. As Silverstein (2003) has argued, pragmatic phenomena, including the felicity conditions that govern performatives are themselves subject to metacommunicative framing. Ritual speech works not only through the illocutionary force of individual utterances but through the *entextualisation* (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) of discourse across the temporal span of the ritual. Entextualisation refers to the process by which discourse is rendered extractable from its interactional context, enabling it to be cited, recontextualised, and transmitted as a bounded textual object. In Ethiopian life-cycle rites, the blessings uttered by a Gadaa elder at an initiation ceremony become entextualised as remembered words that accompany the initiate through subsequent grades; the reproach of *Mekdes*, licensed by the rising of Bakkalcha, is entextualised as a relational template that governs future interactions between the parties involved (Goshu, et al. 2026). Ritual speech, in this view, is not a series of isolated performatives but a *performative complex* that unfolds across ritual time, embedding past utterances as precedents and projecting future ones as obligations.

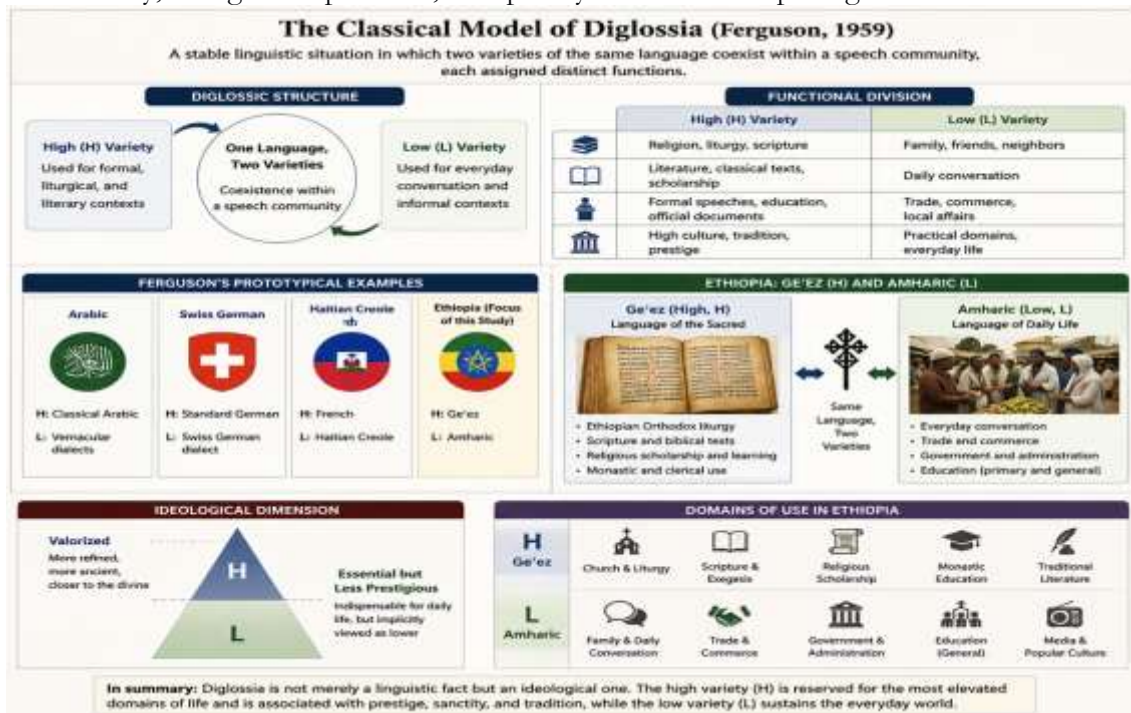
The notion that ritual discourse *reclassifies* the initiate is precisely what van Gennep (1960) articulated in his classic analysis of *rites of passage*. Van Gennep observed that all life-cycle rituals follow a tripartite structure: separation (from a previous status), margin or limen (a transitional phase), and incorporation (into a new status). What is crucial for the present analysis is that reclassification is not merely a cognitive or symbolic operation; it is accomplished *through language*. The naming of a newborn, the investiture of a new Gadaa grade, the exchange of vows in marriage, the eulogising of a deceased ancestor each is a verbal act that publicly announces and thus instantates the reclassification. The Ethiopian case adds a further dimension: reclassification is simultaneously cosmic and social. The initiate is repositioned not only within the human hierarchy of age-grades and clan seniority but also within the celestial order, aligned with specific stars, seasons, and the Supreme Being (*Waaqa* among the Oromo, *Mageno* among the Gedeo). This dual alignment is encoded in the very texture of ritual discourse in the spatial deixis that orients speech upward towards the sky, in the lexical choices that invoke celestial bodies, and in the temporal regulation of speech acts by astronomical events (Goshu et al., 2026).

Language, then, functions as what I term a *social-cosmic operator*: a semiotic mechanism that mediates between the human and the celestial, transforming the individual’s position in both orders through a single discursive performance. The Ethiopian case is distinctive in the degree to which the social and the cosmic are *isomorphic*, the hierarchy of priests and farmers, of senior and junior Gadaa grades, mirrors a celestial hierarchy of stars and constellations, each with its own ritual affordances and moral pedagogy. To analyze ritual discourse is therefore to trace how this isomorphism is verbally enacted and, through enactment, naturalized.

## 2.2 Diglossia and Beyond: The Concept of Celestial Diglossia

The classical model of diglossia, introduced by Ferguson (1959), describes a stable linguistic situation in which two varieties of the same language coexist within a speech community, each assigned distinct functions: a High (H) variety used for formal, liturgical, and literary contexts, and a Low (L) variety used for everyday conversation (Figure 1). Ferguson’s prototypical examples included Arabic (Classical Arabic as H, vernacular dialects as L), Swiss German (Standard German as H, Swiss German as L), Haitian Creole (French as H, Haitian Creole as L), and crucially for the present study, Ethiopia’s own Ge’ez (H) and Amharic (L) (Ferguson, 1959). The functional division is stark: Ge’ez is the language of Ethiopian Orthodox

liturgy, scripture, and religious scholarship, while Amharic serves as the medium of daily life, trade, and government. This diglossic structure is not merely a linguistic fact but an ideological one: the high variety is valorized as more refined, more ancient, and closer to the divine, while the low variety, though indispensable, is implicitly framed as less prestigious.



**Figure 1:** Classical diglossia model (Ferguson, 1959) applied to Ethiopia: functional division and ideological valorisation of Ge’ez (H) versus Amharic (L).

As summarized in Figure 1, the H variety is restricted to liturgy, scripture, and religious scholarship, while the L variety governs daily conversation, trade, and government administration. This division is not merely linguistic but deeply ideological: Ge’ez is valorized as more refined, ancient, and divine, whereas Amharic, though indispensable, carries lower prestige (Ferguson, 1959; Irvine, 1989). The Ethiopian case thus exemplifies Ferguson’s prototypical diglossic structure. However, this classical model does not account for stratification in astronomical knowledge, which the present study extends as *celestial diglossia* parallel hierarchy between priestly and lay registers of celestial lore. The moral clock concept (Goshu et al., 2026) further introduces temporal regulation, showing that the heliacal rising of Bakalcha (Pleiades) licenses otherwise forbidden speech acts such as *Mekdes* (loyal reproach). These findings demonstrate that diglossic principles operate beyond the linguistic domain, shaping ritual discourse across Ethiopian life-cycle events.

Ferguson’s model, however, has been productively expanded by subsequent scholars who have noted that diglossia often extends beyond the linguistic domain into other semiotic systems. Irvine (1989) demonstrated how language ideologies, the culturally specific beliefs about language that rationalize and justify social hierarchies are embedded within broader political economies of communication. Silverstein (1979, 2003) further refined this insight by showing that linguistic structures themselves encode indexical orders, by which social distinctions are projected onto linguistic forms and vice versa. In the Ethiopian context, the Ge’ez/Amharic diglossia does not operate in isolation; it is paralleled by what I propose to call *celestial diglossia*: a functional split between priestly and lay registers of astronomical and ritual knowledge.

Priests and religious specialists possess access to a specialized register of celestial knowledge the names of constellations (*Bakkalcha*, the Pleiades; *Saddu*, unity; *Gulshān*, revelation; *Gabbija*, accountability) (Goshu et al., 2026), the principles of calendrical computation (*Bahre Hasab*), and the esoteric calculations that determine the timing of religious festivals. Farmers and lay participants, by contrast, operate with a vernacular astronomical register focused on practical seasonal forecasting when to plant, when to harvest, when to expect rains. Celestial diglossia thus mirrors linguistic diglossia in its ideological function: it naturalizes a social hierarchy by aligning differential access to sacred knowledge with differential access to ritual authority. Priests and senior elders, who control both Ge'ez and the high astronomical register, occupy a superior position in the ritual order; farmers and juniors, confined to the vernacular register, are positioned as recipients rather than originators of celestial wisdom.

Crucially, however, celestial diglossia is not static. The two registers interact during life-cycle rituals, as priests interpolate Ge'ez blessings into vernacular ceremonies, and as lay elders invoke star proverbs that encode moral pedagogy (Goshu et al., 2026). This interaction is particularly evident in the *Gadaa* system, where the transition from one age-grade to the next involves a dense interweaving of priestly and vernacular registers: the senior *Abbaa Gadaa* recites the genealogical succession of grades in a formalized register, while junior members respond in the vernacular, their responses progressively acquiring the authority of the high register as they advance through the grades. Celestial diglossia thus provides a theoretical framework for understanding how differential access to cosmic knowledge is not merely a fact of social stratification but an *enactment* of that stratification, performed anew in each ritual event.

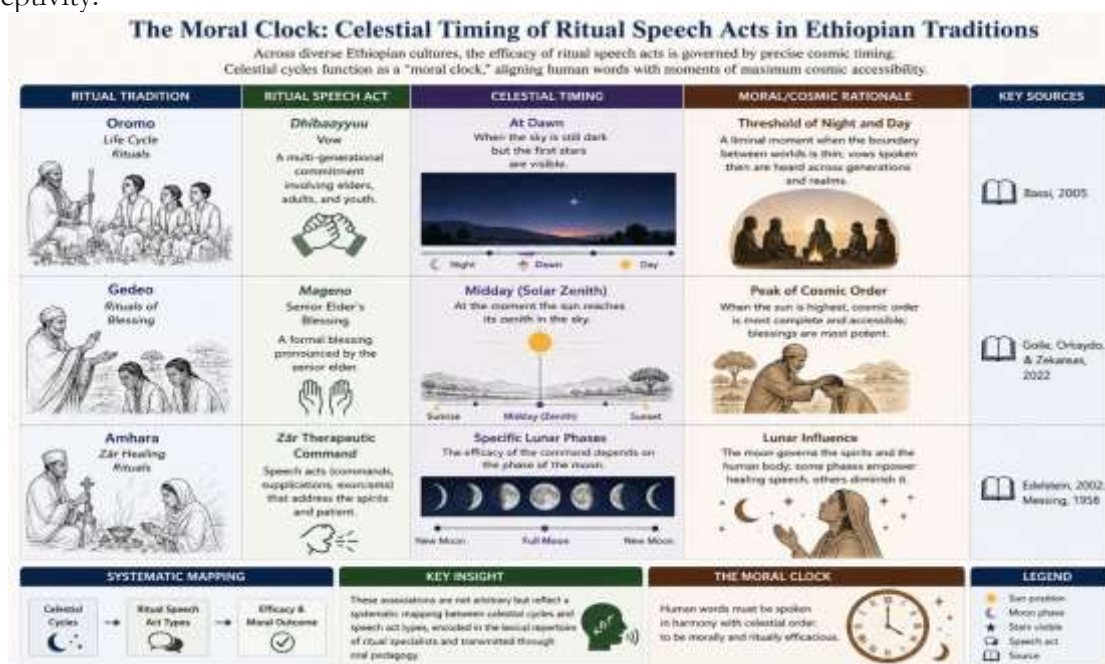
### 2.3 The Moral Clock: Temporality, Celestial Events, and Speech Act Regulation

The third component of the theoretical framework addresses a lacuna in both performativity theory and diglossia studies: the role of *temporal* regulation in ritual speech. Austin's felicity conditions require that a performative be uttered by an authorized speaker in an appropriate context, but they say little about *when* that context obtains. Ferguson's diglossia model describes functional differentiation across social domains but does not account for temporal variation within a single domain. What happens when the same speaker, addressing the same interlocutor, can shift from elaborate politeness to forceful directness depending not on the setting but on the *position of the stars*?

The concept of the moral clock (Goshu et al., 2026) directly addresses this question. The moral clock refers to the capacity of observable celestial events to transform the performative force of speech acts. The heliacal rising of Bakkalcha (the Pleiades); its first appearance above the eastern horizon before sunrise, functions as a cosmic trigger that re-licenses the speech act of *Mekdes* (loyal reproach). Prior to this event, direct criticism among intimates would be heard as a face-threatening insult, violating norms of politeness that preserve social distance. Immediately following the heliacal rising, however, the same direct criticism is heard as a *face-gift*, an act of belonging so profound that it can only be delivered by those who share the deepest intimacy (Goshu et al., 2026). The celestial event thus operates as a temporal felicity condition, transforming the pragmatic force of the utterance by signaling that the relationship has ripened from respectful distance to unvarnished intimacy.

For the Oromo, the *Dhibaayyuu* vow, a multi-generational commitment involving elders, adults, and youth, must be performed at dawn, when the sky is still dark but the first stars are visible (Bassi, 2005). This liminal moment between night and day is believed to thin the boundary between worlds, allowing vows to be heard across generations and celestial realms. Among the Gedeo, the senior elder's blessing (*Mageno*) is pronounced at solar zenith (midday),

when the sun reaches its highest point. At this peak of cosmic order, blessings are considered most potent, as the alignment of earth and sky maximizes accessibility to the Creator (Golle, et al. 2022). In Amhara *Zār* healing rituals, the efficacy of therapeutic commands, supplications, exorcisms, and spirit negotiations depends on specific lunar phases. As Edelstein (2002) and Messing (1958) document, commands uttered during the new moon differ in performative force from those spoken under a full moon, with each phase calibrated to the spirit's presumed receptivity.



**Figure 2:** Systematic mapping of celestial cycles (dawn, midday, lunar phases) to ritual speech acts across Oromo, Gedeo, and Amhara traditions

These associations are not arbitrary but reflect a systematic encoding of celestial cycles into ritual speech, transmitted orally through ritual specialists. The moral clock thus ensures that human words are spoken in harmony with celestial order, a precondition for moral and ritual efficacy.

In contrast to routine ritual time the fixed, calendrical recurrence of weekly or annual festivals celestial events introduce an element of contingency. The moral clock is not predictable in the same way as a liturgical calendar; it depends on observable weather, atmospheric conditions, and the trained eye of the observer. This contingency heightens the performative force of the speech acts that it regulates. When the elder pronounces a *Mekdes* reproach at the precise moment of Bakkalcha's rising, the utterance is heard not as a mechanical repetition of a formula but as a *kairos* opportune moment seized from the flux of cosmic time. The moral clock thus aligns Ethiopian ritual discourse with broader anthropological understandings of ritual temporality, in which the *right* moment is as crucial as the *right* words and the *right* speaker.

Together, these three theoretical strands, language as social-cosmic operator, celestial diglossia, and the moral clock provide the analytical apparatus for the ethnographic analysis that follows. Section 3 details the methods by which the concepts are operationalised; Sections 4 through 6 apply them to the empirical material on Ethiopian life-cycle rituals.

### III. Research Methods

#### 3.1 Ethnographic Regions

The study was conducted across three distinct ethnographic regions of Ethiopia, selected to capture the diversity of ritual linguistic practices while maintaining analytical comparability. The first region encompasses Oromia, focusing on the Boorana and Guji Oromo communities, where the Gadaa system of age grades continues to organize political, economic, and ritual life (Bassi, 2005; Duressa, 2022). The second region comprises the Amhara highlands in the North Wollo and Gondar zones, the heartland of Zār spirit possession cults and the speech act of Mekdes (loyal reproach) (Edelstein, 2002; Messing, 1958). The third region is the Gedeo zone in southern Ethiopia, where a Cushitic speaking population maintains a rich tradition of blessing expressions embedded in a cosmology centred on Mageno (“the Creator”) (Golle, Orkaydo, & Zekareas, 2022).

Within each region, fieldwork was concentrated in rural kebeles (neighbourhoods) where indigenous ritual practices remain relatively intact and where ethnographic access could be negotiated through local administrative and ritual authorities. For the Boorana Oromo, the study focused on the Arero district; for the Guji Oromo, on the Ana Sora district; for the Amhara highlands, on the Deger pilgrimage centre and surrounding villages; and for the Gedeo zone, on the Bule and Wonago districts. These sites were purposively selected based on prior ethnographic literature and preliminary reconnaissance visits.

#### 3.2 Data Types

Data collection employed a triangulated qualitative design, combining recorded ritual speech events, extended participant observation, and semi structured interviews. This multi method approach aligns with best practices in ethnographic discourse analysis, where the researcher seeks to capture both naturalistic linguistic performance and the metalinguistic commentary of community members (Silverstein, 2003; Irvine, 1989).

##### Recorded ritual speech events

Audio recordings were made of three primary categories of life cycle ritual discourse. First, marriage negotiations among the Oromo and Amhara, including the formal request (walaloo), the counter offer, and the sealing of the agreement, as well as instances of Mekdes (loyal reproach) when permitted by the heliacal rising of Bakkalcha (Pleiades) (Goshu, e t. 2026). Second, the Dhibaayyuu vow among the Boorana Oromo, a solemn multi generational thanksgiving ritual to Waaqa (supreme being), which involves structured prayer formulas (galata and kadhaa) and collective commitments (Duressa, 2022). Third, Zār healing sessions in Amhara communities, where ritual leaders (shaykh or ummi) negotiate with possessing spirits through sung invocations, commands, and trance induced glossolalia (Edelstein, 2002; Kahana, 1985). Recordings were made with digital audio recorders in stereo format, and where possible, video documentation was also obtained to capture non linguistic co occurring features such as gesture, gaze, and body posture.

##### Interviews and focus group discussions

A total of 85 ritual specialists and community elders were interviewed, comprising: 25 Oromo Hayyu (ritual fathers) and Qallu (senior ritual leaders) from the Gadaa system; 20 Amhara priests and Zār leaders (shaykh, ummi); and 40 Gedeo Baalle elders (the highest governance council). Interviews were semi structured, lasting between 45 and 120 minutes, and were conducted in the local vernacular (Afaan Oromo, Amharic, or Gedeo) with the assistance of bilingual research assistants. Topics included: the meanings and origins of ritual formulas; the

social rules governing who may speak when and to whom; and the role of celestial bodies (the Pleiades, the sun, the moon) in determining the felicity of ritual speech. Twelve focus group discussions, each with six to ten participants, were held to validate and elaborate upon individual interview responses.

### 3.3 Analytical Approach

The analytical framework integrated discourse analysis with ethnographic semantics. Following Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model, each recorded ritual event was transcribed and coded for its components: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre. This approach enabled systematic comparison of turn taking protocols and sequential organisation across the three cultural groups.

A key analytical focus was the identification of lexical sets with distinct cosmological and hierarchical functions. Three lexical domains were prioritized: (1) cosmological terms – references to Waaqa (Oromo), Mageno (Gedeo), and the names of constellations (Bakkalcha, Gulshān); (2) honorifics – second person pronoun forms, address terms, and verb inflections that encode the relative social rank of speaker and addressee; and (3) spatial deictics – words meaning “upward”, “heavenward”, “earthward”, which orient the ritual utterance within the cosmic hierarchy. Each lexical item was traced across discourse contexts to determine how its meaning shifts depending on the celestial “moral clock” (Goshu et al., 2026).

Data analysis proceeded in four stages: transcription and translation of recorded speech into English, with phonetic annotation for prosodic features; coding of speech acts using Searle's (1976) taxonomy, with particular attention to declarations (which effect institutional changes); identification of sequential patterns for example, the obligatory alternation between a senior elder's Ge'ez blessing and a junior's vernacular response; and cross cultural comparison to extract general principles of celestial social encoding.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

All research procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the associated university and by the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The study adhered to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Given the sensitive nature of ritual knowledge – especially restricted registers such as certain Ge'ez prayers and celestial calculations known only to priests, particular care was taken to obtain community level consent prior to individual consent. In each field site, the research was introduced to the Baalle council (Gedeo), the Gadaa assembly (Oromo), or the local church or Zār leadership (Amhara). Only after collective approval was obtained were individual ritual specialists approached for participation.

Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question and could withdraw at any time without penalty. For recorded ritual events, the researcher requested permission both from the officiating ritual leader and from the assembled participants. In cases where a ritual involved restricted knowledge (for example, certain Ge'ez formulas or the exact calculations of heliacal risings), no recording was made; instead, the researcher relied on detailed field notes taken after the event. All identifying information was anonymized in transcripts and publications, with pseudonyms used for individual participants.

The author also acknowledges that as an outsider to the three traditions, his interpretation is inevitably partial. To mitigate this limitation, findings were presented for verification to a panel

of six community elders two from each group who reviewed the analysis for accuracy and cultural appropriateness before submission.

### **3.5 Celestial Diglossia: Stratified Cosmic Knowledge in Ritual Language**

The concept of celestial diglossia extends the classical diglossia framework (Ferguson, 1959) beyond the purely linguistic domain to encompass the stratification of astronomical and ritual knowledge within Ethiopian speech communities. Just as Ge'ez and Amharic occupy distinct functional spheres the former reserved for liturgy and religious scholarship, the latter for daily conversation and secular administration, so too do priestly and lay registers of celestial knowledge operate in a hierarchical yet complementary relationship. This section examines the Ge'ez Amharic axis as the linguistic foundation of Ethiopian diglossia before turning to the astronomical registers that parallel and reinforce this structure.

### **3.6 The Ge'ez Amharic Axis**

Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic) is an ancient South Semitic language that, although no longer spoken as a vernacular, remains the primary liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholic Churches, and the Beta Israel Jewish community. In contemporary Ethiopia, Ge'ez is the language of scripture, hymnody (mezmur), and the Metsahafe Qeddase (Liturgy of the Hours). Priests and deacons undergo years of monastic training to read, recite, and interpret Ge'ez texts, while lay participants even those fluent in Amharic, typically receive only translated summaries or formulaic responses (e.g., *Səbhat la'ab* “Glory to the Father”) at the conclusion of each prayer unit.

This functional split creates a pronounced epistemic hierarchy in life cycle rituals. At birth and death rites, prayers for the deceased (*tazkar*) are performed exclusively in Ge'ez by ordained priests; the laity is forbidden from reciting the complete formulas. As the medieval Ethiopian literary tradition attests, the differentiation between Ge'ez as “the language of the clergy and the written discourse” and Amharic as “the language of the court and the verbal communication” had momentous reflexes on traditional teaching, with Ge'ez liturgical texts transmitted orally in Amharic translation (Gori, 2019).

In the Gedeo context, a parallel phenomenon occurs: senior Baalle elders who have completed the highest age grade (Yuuba or Guduro) are authorised to pronounce blessings that incorporate archaic lexical items and referential formulas addressed to Mageno (“the Creator”), whereas junior members may only request blessings or respond with set vernacular phrases (Golle, Orkaydo, & Zekareas, 2022). The hierarchical organisation of blessing is such that “the celebration begins with the Baalle leaders’ prayer,” and “the elder’s council prays and blesses the people in accordance with their hierarchy” (Golle et al., 2022).

Thus, the Ge'ez Amharic axis is not merely a linguistic fact but an ideological one: it naturalizes differential access to sacred language as a reflection of differential spiritual and social standing. This principle of stratified access extends beyond the verbal domain into the astronomical register, to which we now turn.

### **3.7 Priests’ Astronomical Register**

The priestly astronomical register comprises a specialized lexicon of constellation names, lunar mansions, and celestial phenomena, along with the computational principles (*Bahre Hasab*) for determining the dates of movable feasts such as Easter (*Fasika*). Among the Borana Oromo, the *Ayantū*, a hereditary class of timekeepers and astronomer-priests are trained in “celestial

observation, oral knowledge, and symbolic interpretation, maintaining the calendar's accuracy through generations". Their role extends beyond mere timekeeping; they serve as "spiritual guides, environmental planners, and cultural historians, ensuring that festivals, planting seasons, Gadaa transitions, and rituals are aligned with cosmic forces" (Facebook, 2025).

The Borana calendar is a lunar stellar system that relies on astronomical observations of the moon in conjunction with seven specific stars or constellations: Triangulum (Lami), the Pleiades (Busan), Aldebaran (Bakkalcha), Bellatrix (Algajima), central Orion (Arb Gaddu), Saiph, and Sirius. As Goshu, et al. (2026) demonstrate, these star names encode moral pedagogy: Saddu (unity), Gulshān (revelation), and Gabbiya (accountability) are not merely astronomical labels but ethical categories that inform ritual speech. The heliacal raising of Bakkalcha (the Pleiades) marks a critical juncture in the ritual calendar, authorizing the speech act of Mekdes (loyal reproach) by signaling that the relationship between speaker and addressee has ripened from respectful distance to permissible intimacy (Goshu et al., 2026).

Within Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, monks and religious scholars "interpret celestial events" and serve as "spiritual guides" who assist the faithful in understanding the significance of solar and lunar eclipses, planetary alignments, and the appearance of specific stars (Goshu & Ridwan, 2025). This astronomical knowledge is taught exclusively to initiates through oral transmission and the study of texts such as the Metsahafe Henok (Book of Enoch) and computus manuals. The result is a "celestial diglossia" that aligns social and cosmic order: priests and senior Gadaa leaders who control the high astronomical register occupy a superior position in the ritual hierarchy, while farmers and junior initiates who possess only the vernacular register are positioned as recipients rather than originators of celestial wisdom.

### 3.8 Farmers' Counter Register

In contrast to the priestly register, farmers and lay community members maintain a vernacular sky lore focused on practical seasonal forecasting, planting and herding rites, and the moral interpretation of familiar celestial events. This register is not "inferior" to the priestly register but rather different in function: it is geared toward quotidian decision making rather than liturgical precision. Among the Borana Oromo pastoralists, indigenous knowledge of astronomical star positions is used for "seasonal weather forecasting," with specific stars indicating the onset of rains, the ripening of crops, and the proper timing for livestock mobility (Roba, 2023).

Crucially, these two registers priestly and farmer interact dynamically during life cycle rituals. A paradigmatic instance occurs in the Gedeo Dararo festival, a thanksgiving celebration that marks the beginning of the New Year in the local calendar. Dararo, whose name means "flower" or "renewal," is held after the harvest season (typically in January) and includes prayer ceremonies addressed to Mageno, the building of new houses, and a ban on sexual activity as a period of communal purification. A marriage negotiation scheduled immediately after Dararo draws upon both registers: the Baalle elder opens the ceremony with a formal prayer in the high register, invoking the cosmological alignment established during the festival and referencing the new planting season as a metaphor for fertility. The groom's family then responds in the vernacular register, employing proverbs about the Pleiades to request a favourable outcome. As Golle et al. (2022) observe, "the expressive functions of blessings in Gedeo vary from context to context ... [but] frequently revolve around praising Mageno 'the Creator,' shielding fellow community members from harm, boosting the land's productivity, safeguarding the environment, and upholding the general well being of the community."

Similarly, among the Oromo, the Dhibaayyuu vow, a multi generational thanksgiving ritual is performed by a Hayyu (ritual father) who interweaves Ge'ez derived blessings with vernacular star references (Duressa, 2022). The moral clock (Goshu et al., 2026) governs this interaction: the priestly register determines when the vow may be spoken (typically at dawn, when the heliacal rising of Bakkalcha is visible), while the farmer register supplies the lexical content of the petition. Celestial diglossia is thus not a static hierarchy but a dynamic complementarity, in which two registers cooperate to accomplish the ritual re classification of the initiate.

### 3.9 The Moral Clock: Celestial Events as Speech Act Licensers

The moral clock the capacity of observable celestial events to transform the performative force of speech acts represents a novel extension of both diglossia theory and linguistic anthropology. While classical performativity frameworks (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) recognized that felicity conditions require an appropriate context, they did not systematically consider how celestial temporality might function as such a condition. The Ethiopian case demonstrates that specific astronomical configurations heliacal risings, solstices, lunar phases do not merely accompany ritual speech but actively license it, determining when a speech act will be heard as felicitous, efficacious, or even obligatory.

#### a. The Helical Rising of Bakkalcha (Pleiades) as Paradigm

The most striking exemplar of the moral clock is the heliacal rising of Bakkalcha (the Pleiades) among Amhara and Oromo communities. In the Borana Oromo calendar, a lunar stellar system that relies on astronomical observations of the moon in conjunction with seven particular stars or constellations, the Pleiades (called Busan) is one of the key celestial markers used for calendrical regulation. Within this system, the first appearance of Bakkalcha above the eastern horizon before sunrise marks a critical juncture in the ritual calendar.

The speech act of Mekdes

At this precise moment, a transformation occurs in the verbal field. Prior to the heliacal rising, Amhara and Oromo speakers observe elaborate politeness norms (*yilugnta*), characterised by indirect requests, honorifics, and cautious formulations that defer to social distance. When the star appears, however, the speech act of Mekdes (loyal reproach) becomes permissible. Goshu, et al. (2026) describe Mekdes as “a face building act characterised by raised volume, slower tempo, direct pronouns, and forward lean features that signal belonging rather than threat”. Direct criticism that would otherwise be heard as a face threatening insult is instead received as a paradoxical “face gift”, an expression of intimacy so profound that it can only be delivered by those who truly belong to one another.

#### b. Other Celestial Regulators

Beyond the paradigmatic case of Bakkalcha, Ethiopian ritual discourse is regulated by a broader system of celestial temporality.

Solar solstices and the prohibition of cursing

Among the Oromo, the celebration of Irreechaa (Thanksgiving) occurs in September each year, marking “the change of season from cloudy and dark rainy season to a brighter autumn season” and thanking the creator Waqa for the seasonal transition (Face2Face Africa, 2019). During this solar regulated period, speech acts of cursing normally a potent social control mechanism, used “to nurture the moral law of the society” and to “reflect and influence human emotions such as anxiety, fear, dismay, joy, and sadness” are strictly prohibited (Getachew, 2025). The solstitial threshold thus inverts the moral valence of speech: what is permissible during the dark rainy season (cursing enemies, invoking misfortune upon wrongdoers) becomes

taboo during the bright autumn season, as the community turns exclusively toward gratitude and blessing.

#### Lunar phases and Zār healing efficacy

In Amhara Zār rituals, the efficacy of therapeutic commands depends upon lunar phase. Research on spirit possession cults across East Africa indicates that Zār healing sessions are timed to specific lunar moments, typically the new moon or the full moon, when possessing spirits are believed to be most receptive to human petition (Edelstein, 2002; Kahana, 1985). The shaykh or ummi (ritual leader) judges the appropriate moment not by calendar alone but by direct observation of the moon's illumination and position. A command uttered during the waning crescent is understood to have a different performative force more suited to expelling a troublesome spirit than one uttered under the waxing gibbous, which invites the spirit's \

### c. Celestial vs. Calendrical Time

A crucial distinction must be drawn between two forms of ritual temporality in Ethiopian practice. Calendrical time refers to the fixed, liturgical calendar, the Ethiopian Orthodox Metsahafe Qeddase, the Borana lunar stellar calendar, the weekly cycle of prayers. These are predictable, inscribed in texts and oral traditions, and they structure the ordinary recurrence of ritual events. Celestial event time, by contrast, refers to observation based phenomena the heliacal rising of a star, the precise moment of a solstice, the appearance of a particular lunar phase that require direct perception and carry an element of contingency.

The distinction is consequential for the performative force of ritual speech. Calendrical time, because it is known in advance, generates speech acts that are heard as routine obligatory, expected, part of the natural order of things. Celestial events, however, because they require observation and because atmospheric conditions can delay or obscure them, generate speech acts with heightened performative force. When an elder pronounces a Mekdes reproach at the exact moment of Bakkalcha's rising, the utterance is heard not as a mechanical repetition of a formula but as a kairos, a divinely appointed moment seized from the flux of cosmic time (Goshu et al., 2026). As one Borana Hayyu explained to the researcher, "The calendar tells you when to prepare; the star tells you when to speak."

This distinction also illuminates the relationship between celestial diglossia and the moral clock. Priests and senior Gadaa leaders, who possess the specialized astronomical register that enables them to predict heliacal risings and solstices, maintain control over the scheduling of ritual speech. Yet the very moment of the event is observable to all lay participants, too, can see Bakkalcha rising. The moral clock thus democratizes access to felicity conditions even as the epistemic hierarchy of celestial diglossia remains intact. It is this tension between stratified knowledge and shared observation that gives Ethiopian ritual discourse its distinctive texture.

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1 Life Cycle Rituals: Reclassification through Ethno Linguistic Encoding

The four life cycle stages examined in this section birth and naming, initiation (Gadaa grade transition), marriage negotiations, and death with ancestor veneration—constitute paradigmatic instances of ritual reclassification (van Gennep, 1960). In each case, the initiate is moved from one status to another not merely through symbolic action but through densely regimented discourse that simultaneously positions them within the cosmic order (indexed by references to Waaqa, Mageno, celestial bodies, and seasons) and the social hierarchy (encoded in

turn taking protocols, honorifics, and register shifts). The following analysis traces how celestial diglossia and the moral clock operate across these four ritual domains.

### **a. Birth and Naming**

Among the Oromo, the naming ceremony is conducted under the authority of senior elders or, in Gadaa organized communities, the Abbaa Gadaa himself. The ritual begins with an invocation of Waaqa (the Supreme Being) using specifically skyward spatial deictics that orient the utterance toward the celestial realm. As reported by informants, Oromo cosmology holds that Waaqa “lies above the seven skies”, although the names of these seven skies are considered esoteric knowledge accessible only to ritual specialists. This epistemic stratification exemplifies celestial diglossia: the priest or elder who pronounces the naming formula possesses the specialized register that enables him to name the child “in the sight of Waaqa”, while the assembled community responds with vernacular affirmations (“We have heard”; Comboni Missionaries, 2021). The choice of an auspicious date for the name giving requires consultation of the celestial calendar, ensuring that the child’s entry into the community is aligned with favourable cosmic conditions (Comboni Missionaries, 2021).

Among the Gedeo, naming practices are similarly embedded in a cosmology centred on Mageno (“the Creator”). Blessing expressions, which accompany the naming of a newborn are “ingrained in their native cosmology” and serve functions that include “praising Mageno ‘the Creator,’ shielding fellow community members from harm, boosting the land’s productivity, safeguarding the environment, and upholding the general well being of the community” (Golle, Orkaydo, & Zekareas, 2022, p. 84). The order of speech during naming rites follows a strict hierarchical protocol: the father’s lineage elder speaks first, invoking Mageno in a formalized blessing register; only then does the mother’s lineage representative speak, typically in a more vernacular register. This turn taking sequence mirrors the clan hierarchy that will structure the child’s entire social life. Juniors and women present may voice formulaic responses but may not initiate the blessing, reinforcing the principle that differential access to sacred speech reflects differential social standing.

The contrast between Ge’ez blessings and vernacular warnings further encodes this hierarchy. Among Oromo communities influenced by Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the naming formula may include a Ge’ez petition for the child’s protection; among Gedeo, the high register is marked by archaic lexical items and fixed formulae addressed to Mageno, while vernacular warnings (e.g., “If you deviate from safuu, misfortune will find you”) are delivered by lower status speakers later in the ceremony (Golle et al., 2022). The naming ritual thus accomplishes what van Gennep (1960) termed incorporation: the infant is not merely given a name but is verbally placed within a nested hierarchy of family, clan, community, and cosmos.

## **4.2 Discussion: Convergent Orders Cosmology, Hierarchy, and the Individual**

### **a. Mutual Reinforcement of Celestial Diglossia and the Moral Clock**

The preceding ethnographic analysis demonstrates that celestial diglossia and the moral clock do not operate as independent mechanisms but function as mutually reinforcing dimensions of Ethiopian ritual discourse. Celestial diglossia establishes a static stratification of astronomical knowledge: priests and senior Gadaa elders control the high register of constellation names, heliacal calculations, and ritual timing, while lay participants operate within a vernacular register focused on seasonal forecasting (Goshu, et al. 2026). The moral clock, by contrast, introduces a dynamic, event based override of the diglossic hierarchy. When Bakkalcha rises, the temporal conditions for Mekdes are met but crucially, only the priest or elder who possesses the high astronomical register can predict when this window will occur. The lay

participant sees the star rising but cannot calculate its heliacal recurrence across years. The moral clock thus licenses speech that momentarily flattens hierarchy (a junior reproaching a senior), but the scheduling of that license remains the prerogative of those who hold stratified celestial knowledge.

This mutual reinforcement can be formalized as follows: celestial diglossia answers the question who may speak what about the cosmos; the moral clock answers when that speech may be performed. Together, they constitute a spatiotemporal pragmatics of ritual discourse in which access to celestial knowledge and access to ritual time are two facets of a single hierarchical order. The moral clock does not undermine celestial diglossia; rather, it depends upon it for its authoritative calibration, while the diglossic hierarchy depends upon the clock's periodic suspensions to renew its legitimacy through controlled inversion. This dialectical relationship aligns with Silverstein's (2003) model of indexical order, wherein higher order sociolinguistic indices (celestial diglossia) regulate the conditions under which lower order performatives (the moral clock's licensed speech) can be felicitously uttered.

### **b. Comparison with Other African and Global Cases**

The Ethiopian case invites comparison with other African and global societies in which astronomical knowledge and ritual language intersect. Among the Dogon of Mali, a complex system of stellar observation – notably the 60 year Sigui ceremony timed to the appearance of Sirius is accompanied by ritual specialists who employ a secret language during initiation periods (Wikipedia, 2025; Griaule & Dieterlen, 1965). The Dogon distinction between priestly and lay astronomical registers parallels Ethiopian celestial diglossia. However, Dogon ritual speech lacks the explicit age grade coupling that characterizes the Ethiopian Gadaa system: Dogon astronomical knowledge is transmitted genealogically within priestly lineages, not across a graded series of life course transitions. This contrasts sharply with the Oromo pattern, where each Gadaa grade receives incrementally deeper access to celestial registers as part of its reclassification.

A second comparative case is Balinese ritual diglossia. The Balinese language exhibits a three tiered register system (*basa alus*, *basa madia*, *basa kasar*) whose usage is strictly governed by caste hierarchy (*tri wangsa*), with the high register (*alus*) reserved for brahmin and *kshatria* castes in formal and ritual domains (Dewi, Wilian, Isnaeni, & Muhammad, 2025; Suwija, Mulyawan, & Adhiti, 2018). Like Ethiopian celestial diglossia, Balinese register stratification naturalises social hierarchy through differential lexical access. However, Balinese ritual diglossia is temporally flat: the high register is appropriate for certain domains (temple ceremonies, cremations) regardless of celestial configuration. There is no Balinese analogue to the moral clock – no heliacal rising that transforms a low register utterance into a felicitous high register act. The Ethiopian case is therefore distinctive in its tight coupling of age grade transitions with observable celestial events. Each stage of the Gadaa cycle is timed not by a fixed calendar alone but by the actual heliacal rising of specific stars (*Busan*, *Bakkalcha*, *Algajima*), and the ritual speech appropriate to each grade is licensed precisely by those celestial sightings. This coupling of social progression (upward through age grades) and cosmic progression (the annual return of the same star) creates a recursive isomorphism in which the individual's biographical time is mapped directly onto the time of the cosmos.

### **c. Theoretical Contribution: Beyond “Symbolic” Accounts**

The analysis advances a theoretical claim that moves beyond conventional symbolic or representational accounts of ritual. In much anthropological literature, ritual is understood to symbolize cosmology or to express social hierarchy (see Durkheim, 1915; Turner, 1969). The

Ethiopian evidence suggests a stronger claim: linguistic encoding is the primary mechanism of reclassification. The initiate is not merely represented as having moved from one status to another; they are verbally transformed through the performative force of blessing, vow, and judgement uttered under precise celestial conditions.

This leads to a model of the life cycle ritual as a triple transformation (biological → social → cosmic). At birth, the naming ceremony linguistically transforms a biological infant into a social person embedded in clan hierarchy (Golle, Orkaydo, & Zekareas, 2022). At initiation, the Gadaa grade transition transforms the social person into a political ritual actor now authorized to speak certain judgements. At death, the funeral dirge and Dhibaayyuu vow transform the deceased into an ancestor residing in the celestial realm (Duressa, 2022). At each stage, the speech act that accomplishes the transformation indexes not merely the social order but the cosmic order: spatial deixis oriented skyward, lexical reference to Waaqa or Mageno, and temporal licensing by the moral clock. Language does not accompany reclassification; it is reclassification.

The theoretical upshot is that “cosmic order” and “social hierarchy” is not two separate domains that ritual speech reflects; they are co produced through the same indexical operations. When a Gedeo Baalle elder blesses a newlywed couple, the lexical choices, the turn taking protocol, the orientation of the speaker’s body, and the timing relative to the solar zenith jointly instantiate a hierarchical social world and a structured cosmos in a single, unified performative act. This convergence is what distinguishes the Ethiopian case from more diffusely “symbolic” systems.

#### **d. Addressing Counter Evidence: Eclipses and the Suspension of Ritual Speech**

No system of celestial regulation is without moments of contradiction. The most salient counter evidence arises when celestial and social orders conflict most dramatically during a solar or lunar eclipse. In Ethiopian understanding, an eclipse represents a rupture in the ordinary cosmic rhythm. The sun or moon, whose regular movements underwrite the moral clock’s predictability, suddenly deviates. Across Oromo and Amhara communities, the occurrence of an eclipse during a scheduled life cycle ritual mandates immediate postponement or suspension. The marriage cannot be sealed, the Gadaa judgement cannot be pronounced, the Mekdes cannot be performed – even if Bakkalcha is visible. Speech acts that would have been felicitous moments earlier become infelicitous the moment the eclipse begins.

This suspension of ritual speech follows from the same logic that constitutes the moral clock: if celestial events license speech, then celestial ruptures can de license it. The eclipse is interpreted not as a scheduled celestial event but as a violation sign that the cosmos has temporarily withdrawn its sanction from human performatives. In the Ewe worldview, for example, an eclipse is understood to signal a rift in natural order, propitiated through priestly ritual (Boateng, 2023). Similarly, in the Ethiopian context, the suspension of ritual speech during an eclipse is not a failure of the system but a proof of its coherence: the moral clock regulates both the permission and the prohibition of speech, depending on celestial configuration. The eclipse thus does not falsify the model but demonstrates its capacity to accommodate negative cases – a hallmark of a robust theoretical framework.

The temporary suspension also reaffirms the hierarchy of celestial diglossia. Only the Ayyaantu (Oromo astronomer priests) can predict eclipses and thus advise on ritual postponement. The lay participant knows that speech is now forbidden but cannot independently determine when normal conditions will resume. The conflict between celestial

anomaly and social order is resolved not by abandoning the system but by intensifying reliance on the priestly register – the very register that celestial diglossia privileges.

### Summary

The discussion has argued that celestial diglossia and the moral clock mutually reinforce one another, that the Ethiopian case is distinctive in its coupling of age grade transitions with observable celestial events, that linguistic encoding is the primary mechanism of a triple (biological–social–cosmic) reclassification, and that counter cases such as eclipses do not falsify the model but demonstrate its internal logic. Together, these findings position Ethiopian ritual discourse as a paradigmatic instance of how language, cosmology, and social hierarchy converge in the re classification of the human life course.

## V. Conclusion

### Recap of Central Findings

This article has examined how Ethiopian life cycle ritual discourse simultaneously encodes cosmological order and social hierarchy through two interconnected mechanisms: celestial diglossia and the moral clock. The analysis drew on ethnographic and linguistic data from Oromo (Gadaa system), Amhara (Zār, Mekdes), and Gedeo (seniority based blessing) communities, focusing on birth, initiation, marriage, and death rituals.

### Celestial Diglossia

Celestial diglossia extends Ferguson’s (1959) classical model beyond the linguistic domain to the stratification of astronomical knowledge. Priests and senior ritual specialists control a high register of constellation names, heliacal calculations, and ritual timing, while lay participants operate with a vernacular register focused on practical seasonal forecasting. This differential access naturalizes social hierarchy by aligning it with differential access to sacred cosmic knowledge. The Ge’ez Amharic axis provides the linguistic template, but the principle extends to star lore, lunar mansions, and the timing of Gadaa transitions.

### The Moral Clock

Exemplified by the heliacal rising of Bakkalcha (the Pleiades), the moral clock periodically re licenses speech acts that would otherwise violate diglossic boundaries. Mekdes (loyal reproach) – direct, face threatening criticism – becomes a “face gift” when uttered under the rising star. This temporary override of default politeness and hierarchy does not subvert social order but reinforces it through controlled inversion: the very intimacy that licensed the reproach reaffirms shared belonging within the existing hierarchical structure. The same principle governs the new Abbaa Gadaa’s judgement speech, funeral oaths at solar noon, and the suspension of ritual speech during eclipses.

### A Unified Field of Reclassification

Ethiopian life cycle rituals encode a unified field in which social rank, age grade, and celestial alignment are co articulated through regimented discourse. The naming ceremony, Gadaa initiation, marriage negotiation, and funeral dirge each transform the initiate across three dimensions simultaneously: biological (age), social (status, authority), and cosmic (alignment with Waaqa or Mageno, the stars, and ancestral sky beings). Language is not a transparent vehicle for representing these transformations but the primary performative mechanism that accomplishes them.

### Implications for Linguistic Anthropology

The Ethiopian case demands that linguistic anthropology take astronomical time seriously as a performative dimension of language. Austin's (1962) felicity conditions and Searle's (1969) constitutive rules typically focus on speaker authority and institutional context; they have not systematically considered how observable celestial events heliacal risings, solstices, lunar phases – function as temporally variable felicity conditions. The moral clock concept offers a framework for analysing such temporality across other societies where indigenous astronomy regulates ritual speech.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on three groups (Oromo, Amhara, and Gedeo). Future research is needed on southern Ethiopian communities such as the Sidama, Konso, Hamar, and Daasanach, whose distinct sky lore traditions likely exhibit different configurations of celestial diglossia and moral clock regulation. Comparative work across the Ethiopian Highlands and the Rift Valley would test the generalisability of the proposed model. Additionally, the impact of Orthodox Christianity and Islam on contemporary ritual speech – while noted – requires systematic investigation, particularly in urban and diaspora contexts.

### Closing Statement

Ritual speech in Ethiopia does not merely mirror the world; with the rising of the Pleiades, it re makes it. The convergence of celestial diglossia and the moral clock transforms the life course into a cosmic itinerary, each stage marked by words that are at once social declaration, celestial alignment, and moral pedagogy. When the elder pronounces Mekdes under Bakkalcha, when the Abbaa Gadaa speaks his first judgement at the star's rising, when the mourner commits the deceased to Waaqa's cattle camp – in each utterance, the sky and the social order become one, and the individual is reborn into a universe that speaks back through the stars.

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