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Research in African Literatures, Volume 45, Number 2, Summer 2014,  
pp. 135-149 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: 10.1353/ral.2014.0013



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# The Roles of Oromo-Speaking Children in the Storytelling Tradition in Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

Storytelling is essentially a communal practice transferring, across generations, cultural notions, norms, and values. However, in the study of storytelling practices in African societies, the empirical focus and analytical emphasis have been on adults and elders, in particular men, neglecting the roles of women and children. Adults and elders have been seen as producers and transmitters of cultural knowledge, whereas children have been seen chiefly as knowledge receivers. Based on ethnographic field research, this article analyzes the roles of children in storytelling events among the Oromo-speaking Guji people of Southern Ethiopia. Far from being passive knowledge receivers, the Guji children are attentive listeners and engaged narrators. They express their sentiments and opinions in gestures and words, pose questions to clarify points, make meta-communicative comments on the proper ways of narrating stories, and pass judgments on the moral messages. This article argues for a more child-centered perspective in the study of oral traditions in African societies, which recognizes their agency in the intergenerational transfer and change of storytelling traditions as well as of the cultural notions, values, and norms transpiring through them.

## INTRODUCTION

What roles do children play in the narration of folktales? Children have their own lore and storytelling habits, but they also listen to folktales narrated by adults and elders, interpret them, and retell them to other children, developing their own narrative competence within the institutionalized

forms of their performance (Brady 46). However, children's contributions in transmitting, perpetuating, and transforming folktale traditions are a neglected area in the study of African oral literature. Conventionally, perpetuations of folkloric traditions are seen as a role of senior generations, who pass them on to younger members of society. We know less about the roles children play in maintaining corpora of folktales, their roles in transmitting moral and folk knowledge conveyed through them, and the ways in which they continue the practices of performance.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of children in folkloric traditions of Oromo-speaking people in Southern Ethiopia. Particularly, the study analyzes cases of narrating *duri duri* folktales among the Oromo Guji people. *Duri duri* is a category of Guji oral literature that teaches about vices and virtues. The tales communicate an ethics of virtue, referred to by the Guji as *saffu*, and are regarded as essential to inter-human relationships. It is our contention that the reproduction and transformation of this sagacity through folktales and across generations cannot be done without the agency of children. We base this not only on the present social and cultural configurations of storytelling practices among the Guji, but also on the extent to which our analytical perspectives and models recognize children as social actors. Children's agency in intergenerational cultural continuity and change can only be asserted if they are recognized as social actors, contributing to form and transforming the social and cultural environment in which they live.

The study of storytelling as folk knowledge has been a concern of folklorists and anthropologists since the beginning of the 20th century. In his groundbreaking anthropological fieldwork on the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski established the ethnographic study of folklore and oral narrative as folk knowledge (Bascom, "Malinowski's Contributions"). He was followed by a number of scholars, such as Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, William R. Bascom, Richard Bauman, Ruth Finnegan, and Elliott Oring, whose studies advanced the understanding of how people perform, interpret, and value their oral narratives as folk knowledge. Storytelling grows out of people's lived experiences and imaginations and becomes an integral part of local ways of knowing (Jackson 360). Through oral narrative forms—folktales, epics, songs, chants, riddles, and proverbs—people improvise from their lived experience and give poetic quality to its contexts in performance and text (Bascom; Bauman; Finnegan; Oring). Folk knowledge in this regard refers to a practical knowledge of social norms, values, and skills acquired through habituation and embodied in the routine behavior of everyday activities and relations (Kresse 158).

However, children seem somehow to slip out of the analytical gaze in these pioneering studies, which has continued to occur in more recent studies of oral literature and storytelling practices (McDowell). Empirical focus and analytical emphasis have been on adults and elders, in particular men, as producers, bearers, and transmitters of local knowledge. In her pioneering study of oral tales among the Limba of northern Sierra Leone, Ruth Finnegan shows that storytelling was essentially a communal participatory exercise and part of family culture passed on from generation to generation. However, she argued that elders acted as knowledge producers and transmitters, whereas the young people primarily took part as knowledge receivers. The elder and parental generations used storytelling to justify everyday customary practices, norms, and values. She argues, moreover, that these are universal features of storytelling practices across societies on the

African continent. More recently, Sidikou and Sougou examined women's verbal arts that challenge the general notion that men and elders are the primary producers and disseminators of folk knowledge through oral narratives. Focusing on young women in Senegal, Sougou examines transformations in storytelling practices and notes that the women construe their own social and discursive spaces in which they perform oral narratives portraying gender relations, thereby asserting their authority. However, this study also centers on adult actors, giving less attention to children's place in the transformations of customary knowledge and storytelling practices.

The studies of folktales and storytelling among Oromo-speaking people of Ethiopia are scarce and suffer from the limitations of the analytical focus on men and elders and from a static concept of "culture," more typical of earlier studies of folklore. Two recent studies by Kidane and Alemu are, however, more sensitive toward gender issues and analyze how power relations between women and men transpire in traditional folkloric texts. In these studies, "culture" is regarded as a system of shared norms, values, practices, and beliefs and folktales are seen as a vehicle through which communities articulate and validate their shared culture. These studies primarily explore Oromo folktales as reflections of past cultural and social practices and note that men use storytelling as a tool to disempower and subordinate women, justifying their positions by corroborating present experiences with folktales commonly understood as received wisdom from the past. While the focus on power relations between women and men is commendable, the studies neglect the performative dimensions of storytelling practices and, as a result, suffer from an earlier static view of culture and folklore. By neglecting performance, and that symbolic communication is interpreted differently according to age, gender, and social position (Turner), it is difficult to assess how shared values and beliefs are distributed, perceived, interpreted, experienced, and transformed. Paying attention, ethnographically and analytically, to performativity and the polysemy of oral narratives puts researchers in a much better position to examine the dynamics of social and cultural mediation and change across generations. Textual analysis alone may slip into the dangers of essentialist assumptions of "culture."

Studies of storytelling in North America and Europe have developed along a different path and place stronger emphasis on children's lore. These types of studies are anchored in two contrasting perspectives: those focusing on children's lore as knowledge produced by adults for children and those focusing on child-centered knowledge produced by and shared among the children themselves. Studies taking the first approach examine the role of adult-produced children's lore in cognitive development and socialization. The studies focus on lore as entertainment in itself, as well as socialization through entertainment (Oring 123; Sutton-Smith; Tucker 40). Employing this perspective in an African context, Schmidt argues that adults use lore produced for children in entertainment and play to make them aware of and act within their social environment. However, in many of these studies, children are viewed primarily as receivers of knowledge produced by adults.

Studies taking the second approach examine children producing their own lore. Pivotal to these studies is the view that children create interactive activities out of their immediate social and natural environments and share them with each

other without expecting adult intervention (Bloch and Adler; Sutton-Smith). In this perspective, child-centered knowledge is defined at a minimum as “knowledge shared by a group of two or more children, usually without involvement by adults” (Tucker 1). It was Iona and Peter Opie who firmly established the study of children’s lore and empirically demonstrated that they produce and procure their own. Studies within this perspective emphasize children’s role as storytellers and knowledge producers, i.e., how children make, use, transform, and transmit knowledge for and to other children through various aesthetic forms (Sutton-Smith). As such, this perspective corroborates the central paradigm in interdisciplinary social science studies of childhood, which view children as complex social actors who construe, maintain, and transform the social and cultural environment within which they live (Corsaro 1–5; James et al. 27; Jenks 67).

There are a few early in-depth studies of children’s lore in African societies, such as John Blacking’s *Venda Children’s Songs* from 1967. Interest is growing, however, in children’s play and child-centered perspectives in studies of African folklore. Mushengyezi, for instance, examines how Baganda children produce and reproduce play-songs. McMahon, similarly, discusses how Sudanese refugee children in the U.S. commemorate their traditions and negotiate their identities through recontextualizing a particular genre of childhood folksongs known as *DinDinga*. Furthermore, in a study of folktales, fosterage, and memories of slavery in Cameroon, Argenti examines how children reinterpret folktales to make sense of their present social, economic, and political conditions.

As mentioned previously, whereas earlier studies of folktales in African societies conventionally focused empirically and analytically on men and elders, there is an emergent trend among scholars to pay greater attention to the role of women and children in storytelling practices. These studies show how women and children appropriate and transform storytelling and make it relevant to their own concerns and position in society. In the case of *duri duri* folktales among the Guji, narrating them is not a role of any particular generation, but is done by men, women, girls, and boys alike. Although the present study is an interdisciplinary examination of “childhoods” in the social sciences, which recognizes children as social actors in their own right, an intergenerational perspective that does not accord a priori privilege to any social category or generation is preferred. It is important to address the relations between adults and children, as well as between children, as they unfold in specific storytelling traditions and, moreover, include in the studies of children’s folklore the elder generation’s memories of their own childhood in order to trace changes in storytelling practices through time.

## THE STORYTELLER’S ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Field research for this study was carried out in three Guji villages: Samaro, Bunata, and Sorro, in southern Ethiopia, from July to December 2009 and from May to August 2010. In addition, a short follow-up visit was made in 2011. The Guji, whose estimated population is 1.6 million, speak an Oromo language and are generally considered to be a people with ancestral Oromo traditions (“2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia”; Hinnant 126–31; Van de Loo 269–95). Historically, the Guji-speaking people are cattle herders and cattle and herding figure prominently in their folklore. In the anthropological literature, the Guji are also known

for their complex age and generational system, termed *gadaa*, which tends to reinforce the authority of senior generations over junior ones and supports patriarchal structures and gerontocracy (Beriso 23; Debsu).

The majority of Guji-speaking people live in remote rural areas, predominantly in lowland and semi-highland areas, where they have relatively poor access to schooling and modern health care. Today, their livelihood consists of various combinations of animal husbandry and crop cultivation, but due to arid land and insufficient water supply, many households produce less than they need, resulting in recurrent food insecurity. In the 1980s, the socialist military regime of Ethiopia (1974–93), commonly known as Derg, implemented a resettlement scheme, termed “villagization,” in order to reinforce state security and provide public services to a larger proportion of the population. The policy objectives were to provide education, health, and clean water services and promote equitable land use. People who had a more nomadic lifestyle or lived in more scattered residential patterns, such as the cattle-herding Guji, were clustered together in large villages with 200 to 300 households. Dislocations from pastureland and a high number of cattle in village areas that led to a scarcity of pastures and an increase in cattle diseases forced many Guji families to turn to crop cultivation for survival. The shift from nomadic pastoralism to a sedentary life based on agro-pastoralism with greater access to public services spurred profound social and cultural change in Guji families and communities (Beriso), which had formerly despised land cultivation (Hinnant).

Agro-pastoralism and schooling caused greater complexity and specialization in labor division between women, men, and children (Beriso) and a reorganization of the spatial and temporal patterns of everyday activities that resulted in fewer opportunities for child-adult interaction, including storytelling. Labor division between generations was less pronounced in the pastoral lifestyle before villagization. Boys herded the cattle together with their fathers and grandfathers and girls worked along with their mothers and grandmothers at the homestead (Debsu). According to senior Guji, storytelling was an integral part of these daily collective activities. Baritee, a 57-year-old woman, related that, “When I was a child, boys used to hear folktales from their fathers in cattle herding places and girls from their mothers at home. But, this has changed today. Today, children do not herd cattle with their fathers. Fathers work on the farms and boys herd cattle alone and attend school. Girls are busy with domestic works and attending school. Today, children spend more time with each other than with their parents. It is only during the nighttime that children listen to storytelling from their parents and grandparents. During the daytime, the children play storytelling with each other.”

Today, many adults cultivate crops, whereas boys and girls have increased independent duties in herding and household chores. Many of the children attend school in the morning and have other work duties in the afternoon. Children and adults in a household are at different places and engaged with different tasks during the day, so late evenings at home have become the most common time and place for adults’ storytelling for children and even that can prove difficult. Denser residential patterns demand more time for visiting relatives and friends. Agriculture is hard physical work, making some parents reluctant to tell stories in the evenings because they need to rest. Sedentary village life has, thus, affected Guji storytelling traditions. On the other hand, novel opportunities for child-to-child storytelling have emerged. The children learn new stories at school

from each other, their teachers, and books and boys and girls tell tales in the pastures and their homes. Schooling and new strategies of survival may give rise to new folktales, narrative forms, and storytelling practices. The resettlement has provided the children with opportunities to produce their own lore, with which they negotiate the social and cultural realities of sedentary village life, albeit such stories are not the focus of the present study, which examines children's role in the intergenerational transmissions of folk knowledge through the institutionalized *duri duri* folktales.

The overall objective of the field research was to explore the ways in which children enriched and expressed their everyday life through oral traditions under the changing conditions toward sedentary life and agro-pastoralism. Multiple interviews were conducted with sixty children between the ages of seven and fourteen (twenty-five girls and thirty-five boys) and twenty adults (six mothers, five fathers, four grandmothers, and five grandfathers). Ethnographic information was produced on storytelling in the past and present and adult-child and child-child interactions in storytelling and other speech performances were observed in the participants' homes, pastures, and schools. Audio-visual recordings of the performances were made and the stories were transcribed and translated into English.

## FOLKTALES AMONG OROMO-SPEAKING PEOPLE

There is a strong cultural notion among the Oromo-speaking people that folktales are the voices from the past and a primary vehicle of passing on the experiences and wisdom of ancestors to new generations (Hussein). They regard parents and grandparents as mediators between the past, present, and future and recognize that their duty is to pass on the tales to children. However, many Guji-speaking adults emphasize that narrating and listening to folktales are also skills that must be learned. In addition, they encourage children to practice riddling and storytelling and give didactic comments to the children on the roles of the narrator and audience during storytelling performances. Uddee, a senior man in his 70s, said that "Children just love storytelling. When I tell them something in plain words, they do not even listen to me; when I tell them stories, they sit around me and listen to me attentively. Storytelling is a play for the children. They want to learn from us and tell [them] to each other when they meet."

There are four major categories of oral literature among the Guji-speaking people: lyrics, oral narratives, verbal expressions, and play and games that contain standardized phrases and utterances. Additionally, there are five subcategories of lyrics, including two that are strictly the role of men: *gerarsa*, "songs of brave men," and *quexala*, "songs for rituals, prayers, and blessings." There are also "work songs" (*gelelle*) performed by both women and men, "cattle songs" (*wedduu looni*), performed by boys as they herd cattle between pastures, and *sirba*, songs performed by young women and men during courtship and marriage. Subcategories of oral narratives include myths and legends (*oduu durii*), which belong to senior men, are most commonly narrated at village meetings of elders, and incorporate historical claims that may feed directly into on-going political processes and disputes between lineages, clans, and neighboring groups; "folktales" (*duri duri*, literally "a long time ago"), which are recited in homes, pastures, and schools; and



utterances, such as “riddles” (*hibbo*), “sayings” (*jecha*), and “proverbs” (*mammassa*, literally “wise words”). Riddles are popular among children at any occasion or event and *jecha* and *mammassa* are typically utilized as blessings and prayers at village meetings of elders spoken by senior men. Together with singing, riddling, and standard phrases in different games and play, the folktales children tell are regularly subsumed under a general category of children’s games and play (*xapha ijoollee*).

Folktales (*duri duri*) draw their characters from the immediate social and natural environment, such as wild animals (monkeys, foxes, lions, hyenas, rats, baboons, and snakes) and domestic animals (donkeys, dogs, sheep, goats, cows, and bulls). Protagonists are frequently portrayed as foolish, vicious, dishonest, and disobedient or wise, virtuous, honest, and obedient. The traits of protagonists determine the chief motif of the stories, which can be classified by three binaries of good and evil, termed *saffu*: “wisdom and foolishness” (*quarooma fi gowwumma*), “honesty and dishonesty” (*gaarummma fi hammima*), and “humbleness and arrogance” (*ulfinaa fi salphina*). These motifs are communicated by the narrator through an introductory phrase, such as, “I am going to tell a tale about a wise man and a foolish man; I am going to tell you about a bad husband and a virtuous wife,” and so on. Thematically, folktales communicate how good and evil shape relationships among people. It is this knowledge that the senior generations attempt to pass on and they assert the value and validity of folktales by referring to them as received wisdom from past generations. The folktales commonly refer to past people, times, symbols, and events. After the initial phrase identifying the *saffu* (motif) of the story, most tales start with phrases such as “once upon a time” or “a long time ago.”

In the following, we examine the roles of children in four *duri duri*: two examples of evening storytelling in homes, one from play among herd boys, and one from play at school. Contrary to notions of children as passive knowledge receivers, these examples show how they initiate storytelling from adults, retell the stories to other children, intervene in the narration to clarify points, engage in dialogues to interpret the moral messages, and comment on the performance.

## STORYTELLING EVENTS

### *Adult to Child Storytelling in the Evening*

The Guji speak of the evening as “the time when the houses and the kraals are full” (*galgala alaas guutu minaas guutu*), signifying that children and adults have returned from work in the gardens and pastures and have herded all the domestic animals into their shelters. It is a time for rest and entertainment, when household members await the evening meal before sleep. While the woman of the house prepares food, the family, kin, and neighbors assemble for coffee and conversation. This is also commonly the time when members of older generations tell tales to the children.

On one such evening just after coffee, a ten-year-old boy, Tekalign, approached his grandfather and whispered something in his ear. The grandfather smiled and nodded his head in agreement. Tekalign, then, whispered to his siblings and all of them sat down in front of their grandfather, who then said, “Folktales of the *Maatti*, birds of a hill. It is a hill that sings and a fool that shies.” Immediately, everyone in the house, old and young, fell quiet and listened attentively. The phrase the



grandfather uttered serves as a context marker, defining the social situation as a storytelling event and “Maatti” is the name of a Guji clan whose members are renowned as storytellers and whose eloquence is likened to the delights of birds singing. Birds flock at hilltops singing and their message is captured in the phrase, “It is a hill that sings and a fool that shies,” meaning that a wise person does not shy away from telling folktales because the Guji regard the reluctance to tell folktales as foolishness.

The grandfather continued:

Once upon a time, a donkey and a dog lived together in the same house. One day, they collected milk and kept it to drink after they had finished all their daily chores. The donkey told the dog, “I shall go to the bush and collect firewood.” The dog replied, “Good! I am feeling sick, let me just wait for you here, sitting outside. I will not enter the house until you come back.” The donkey trusted the dog and left for the bush to collect the firewood. While the donkey was away, the dog went into the house [and] drank and finished the milk completely. [Tekalign asked, “Why did the dog break its promise?” and the grandfather replied, “Because it was an unfaithful friend.” The children smiled]. Then, the dog dug a deep ditch at the entrance of the house and covered it with tiny branches, leaves, and soil so that the donkey could not detect it. [Surprised, the children caught their breath in suspense]. The dog went outside and sat down, waiting for the donkey to return. [The children smiled and murmured. One of them said, “It pretends to be trustworthy!”] The donkey returned with a huge pile of firewood on his back and, while placing the pile on the ground, noticed that the door was open. The donkey asked the dog, “Why did you enter the house?” But the dog replied, “I didn’t enter the house.” [One of the children shouted, “The dog is a liar!”] “If you want to, enter the house and check!” The donkey entered the house, but fell into the trap and died. (Example 1)

One of the children asked the grandfather, “Why did the donkey believe the dog?” The grandfather replied, “Because the donkey thought that the dog was a faithful friend.” Then Tekalign asked, “What does this folktale show?” The grandfather replied, “The folktale shows that an unfaithful friend is a dangerous enemy!” The children agreed, nodding their heads.

Another evening at the home of Akko Ganame, a senior woman, her son, daughter-in-law, and neighbors enjoyed coffee and indulged in vivid conversation while her grandchildren played. After coffee, the neighbors left and her daughter-in-law began preparing the evening meal, sitting next to Akko by the hearth. One of Akko’s grandchildren intervened in the adult conversation, commanding, “Akko, tell us a story!” Akko replied, “Do you want me to tell you a story?” All at once, the grandchildren replied loudly, “Yes!” The children assembled by the grandmother, sitting down on the floor in front of her. Akko smiled and said, “Folktales of their *Maatti*, birds of a hill. It is a hill that sings and a fool that shies,” and continued:

Once upon a time, there was an elderly man in a village. The man had children. He continuously told his children what to do and not to do and closely watched their steps. But the children did not like his endless series of instructions and watchful eyes. They said, “Do not tell us everything. We know all things and we can do them by ourselves.” [One of children murmured, “They are right!”]

but another replied immediately, "They are not!" The grandmother said, "Keep quiet and listen!" and continued the tale.] The man accepted the children's complaints and stopped instructing them and ordering them about. [The children listening smiled.] One day, the children herded the cattle, goats, and sheep into the pens and cots, but left the donkeys behind in the pastures. [The children laughed.] The children returned to their house thinking they had herded all the animals into the shelters. However, the father discovered that the children had left the donkeys behind, but he could not tell them as they did not accept his instructions. Instead, he brayed like a donkey. [The narrator impersonated "the father" imitating a donkey's bray and the children cracked into laughter]. Upon hearing the bray, the children realized that they had left the donkeys behind. They returned to the pasture and brought the donkeys into the shelters. (Example 2)

The grandmother told the children, "This folktale shows that adult guidance is useful for children." One of the children asked her, "Don't children know what they should do by themselves?" She replied, "Children know what they should do, but adults know more than children." Another child commented that, "Only lazy children should be controlled by parents; clever children can do what they should without guidance."

#### *Child-to-Child Storytelling during Playtime*

Guji families share pastures for their herds and boys from different households cooperate to herd the cattle after school. The boys keep the herds together and prevent the cattle from eating crops in the gardens. While in the pastures, the boys play games and tell riddles and tales to one another. This allows them to form peer relationships beyond school and the village and to learn different folktales from each other. There are a variety of folktales and different families have their favorites. In addition, some families engage more in storytelling than others. Consequently, these interactions give the boys the opportunity to learn a variety of folktales and they differ in their skill to narrate and interpret them. Despite these differences, most boys appear rather interested in telling riddles and stories.

One day a group of herd boys sat together playing and telling one another tales. They were eager narrators and when one of them had completed a story, the others shouted all at once, "It is my turn to tell! It is my turn to tell!" On this particular occasion, ten-year-old Wondimu took the lead and decided on the succeeding order of narrators. Rather boldly, Wondimu selected himself to be the next narrator and told his peers a tale he had learned from his father one evening at home. He said, "I am going to tell you a folktale about the kitten of a cat and the pup of a rat" and continued:

A long time ago, the kitten of a cat and the pup of a rat were friends and used to play together. [One of the children intervened, "A rat and a cat are enemies! How could their offspring become friends?" Jointly, the others rebuked him, saying, "Keep quiet and listen!" In response, he smiled.] One evening, the cat asked her kitten, "My child, where did you stay during the day?" The kitten replied, "I was playing with the rat's pup." The mother told her kitten, "Rats are delicious food to us. Catch her and eat her!" [The children laughed.] The kitten replied, "Ok, I will do that tomorrow." The cat also asked her kitten, "My child, where did you stay during the day?" [One of the children intervened, "It is the rat, not the cat!"

Wondimu replied, "Yes, it is the rat" and corrected his narrative.] The rat also asked her pup, "My child, where did you stay during the day?" The pup replied, "I was playing with the cat's kitten." The rat told her pup, "My child, how come you play with your enemy? Cats are our enemies. They eat us! Do not play with her again." [The children voiced, "She is right!" Wondimu ordered his peers, "Keep quiet and listen!"] Early in the morning the following day, the kitten went to the playground and waited for the pup. When the pup came out of the nest, she noticed the kitten was waiting for her. The kitten called her, "Come, let us play!" The pup replied, "My mother has told me what your mother told you. Now we know each other." [The children commented, "The rat's pup is wise!"] After saying this, the pup rushed back into the nest. (Example 3)

As a closing, Wondimu told his peers, "This tale shows that children should know their enemy." His peers laughed and agreed loudly, "Yes! Yes!"

Storytelling is also a popular playtime activity among Guji children at school. Most of the village children attend school from eight in the morning until noon, during which they have six classes. There is only one fifteen-minute break and disciplinary rules are strict. Silence is valued at all times and pupils are not allowed to engage in noisy play and shouting in the schoolyard. Consequently, riddling and storytelling have become popular play activities during their break and, to keep their voices down, the children assemble in small groups.

One day at Samaro Primary School, the pupils continued their riddling and storytelling inside the classroom because their teacher was absent. Bonise, a nine-year-old girl, retold a story she had learned from the herd boys in the pastures. She began by informing her peers that, "I want to tell you about a shameful man":

Once upon a time, a man visited his in-laws. As night approached, his sister-in-law provided him with a mat on which he could sleep. In the middle of the night, he woke up because he had to poo, but he could not go outside because it was pitch-dark. [The children laughed and one of them commented, "He should have had a flashlight!"] Then, he defecated inside the house close to where he slept. [The children were thrilled and giggled and shouted all at once, "He did something shameful!" Bonise intervened, saying, "You should not shout. You should keep quiet, we are at school!" The children kept quiet and resumed listening.] In the morning, his sister-in-law woke up early, but she did not notice what he had done. She greeted him with, "Good morning" and asked, "Did you sleep well?" Upon hearing her voice, he replied, "It was not me who defecated, it was my anus" and then rushed out of the house and disappeared. (Example 4)

The children laughed aloud, but suddenly lowered their voices to discuss the story. One of the children commented rather seriously that, "He is a shameful man!" Another child asked Bonise, "What does this tale show?" Bonise replied, "It shows that one cannot hide shameful acts."

## ROLES OF CHILDREN IN THE GUJI-STORYTELLING TRADITION

It is important to note that Guji folktales (*duri duri*), in principle, may be told by any person at any time and are not owned by any one generation. That said, it is regarded as the duty of the senior generations to pass them on. Like adults, children can perform both the roles of "narrator" and "audience" and folktales play

an important part in both adult and children's play practices. Moreover, children are significant agents in perpetuating the corpus of Guji folktales and the skills of narrating them. In the evenings at home, it is the children who usually take the initiative, requesting that their parents and grandparents tell folktales. As discussed previously, narrating folktales is a significant part of the children's play and games and they retell the tales they learn from adults and elders, as well as those from other children, at school, in the pastures, and at home. The children in the current study appear to have achieved more in the way of social and cultural reproduction and transformation of these traditions. Before villagization, elders, adults, and children spent much of the day together and narrating folktales was an activity integral to their collective work. Comparatively, children had fewer opportunities to narrate folktales without adult intervention and guidance. It is notable that relations between generations in narrating *duri duri* are much more egalitarian than other genres of Guji folklore.

The performance of folktales is best analyzed as a form of dialogue between narrator and audience, in which all the participants, children and adults alike, are interlocutors (Saville-Troik). The above cases show that children are far from being passive receivers of folktales, but are engaged listeners who express their sentiments in bodily gestures, verbal utterances, and facial expressions. The narration of the folktale of the dog and the donkey (Example 1) is a case in point and comprises a particular narrative device. As discussed earlier, the children learned from the tale that the dog intended to trap the donkey and, as such, the children pitied the donkey, worrying it would fall into the hole. This narrative device usually leaves audiences in suspense, just as the children were left catching their breath. In general, Guji children feel free to make all types of gestures, utterances, and facial expressions, which, on the one hand, mark their role as audience and, on the other, show how important it is that an audience be attentive.

The children as audience also quite frequently intervene in the narrations. They ask questions to clarify points, stop the narrator if the tale is rendered incorrectly, discuss moral messages of the folktales, and make meta-communicative comments on the proper roles of narrators and audiences. Despite the norm that the audience should "keep quiet and listen," such interventions are an accepted part of their role. The challenge is to find a functional balance between which are legitimate and useful interventions and which are interruptions. The balance between legitimate and illegitimate interventions is negotiated in the dialogue between narrator and audience throughout the tales. The balance varies from one storytelling event to another, partly dependent on the particular narrator's attitude, evident in the grandfather's and grandmother's different responses to the children's interventions. Whereas the grandfather seemed generous, the grandmother stopped the children immediately, asking them "to keep quiet and listen." In addition, she cut short any discussions about the legitimacy of the complaints made by the children in the tale against their father's behavior (Example 2), a topic they returned to in discussions after the story was finished.

Interventions are integral to the roles of "narrator" and "audience," irrespective of gender and age. If interrupted too often, it is difficult for a narrator of any age to keep focused, rendering the different elements of a story in the sequential order necessary to produce intended narrative effects, such as suspense and surprise. However, without the presence of adults, the children make their

interventions with less deference. In the case of the child-to-child narration in the pasture (Example 3), the interventions were more frequent and the children listening switched roles with the narrator, asserting the norm to keep quiet and listen. In terms of social status, the telling of folktales among children is a speech performance among equal peers. Finding a balance between legitimate interventions and illegitimate disruptions, and asserting the norms, are much more of a collective responsibility between narrator and audience. In adult-to-child narration, there are asymmetrical power relations between adult narrator and child audience and both children and adults expect the narrator to assess the balance and enforce the norms. Moreover, telling folktales are part of children's play activities at school and work and it takes on a game-like structure in which the children compete over who should tell the stories and their skills in narrating, the correct rendering of popular tales, and who told the most daring and entertaining ones. In these events, the children are autonomous social actors within their own local communities, in which they construe the tales and the roles between narrator and audience on their own terms. It is in these contexts that Guji children become social actors construing their own lore, i.e., their own culture of folktales and the social practices of performing them. Greater autonomy leads to the popularity of some stories over others. In addition, new stories and interventions are made on the old ones, which accentuate certain aspects that speak more to their experiences and senses of humor and which they would not necessarily share with adults.

The communication of the *saffu* moral through *duri duri* folktales cannot be seen as a one-directional process of the inculcation of norms and values and behavioral patterns from one generation to the next. The extent to which people—children and adults alike—in real life situations adhere to norms and values idealized in the folktales depends on the situation. For example, the relevance and applicability of idealized norms and values are subject to contestations between actors and their legitimacy depends on the interests and social position of the people in the given situation. More importantly, however, is that the children show interest in the moral messages communicated through the folktales. As the above cases show, Guji children are very well aware that the folktales communicate moral messages. By narrating and listening to them, the children develop imaginary and creative thinking faculties, including the ability to reflect and pass judgment on the values of moral messages (Eder). Guji children are concerned with, ask questions about, disagree on, and negotiate the moral message of the folktales. Like adult narrators, children identify the moral context in which the tale should be understood in the opening phrase for their audiences and answer questions regarding the message when they are finished.

Amid the loud laughter following the hilarious tale about the man defecating inside his in-laws' house (Example 4), the children quickly reverted to clarifying the moral message that it is impossible to hide disgraceful or shameful acts. They implicitly understood that they had better not do things that would put them in embarrassing positions. For example, one of the children asked the narrator, Bonise, about the lesson of the tale, to which she immediately responded. In addition, in the story about the children complaining about their controlling father (Example 2), the two intervening comments at the beginning not only revealed that Guji children are sensitive toward and aware of the moral messages, but also that they have different opinions on its value. The adult narrator arrested

the interventions of the two children with different opinions, but reiterated the moral immediately after she had completed the tale, stating that adult guidance of children's tasks and duties was useful. In response to the follow-up question from one of the children about the ability of children to carry out their duties on their own, the narrating adult justified the moral with reference to the superiority of the parent's experience and knowledge. One of the children modified this general assertion by stating that only "lazy children" needed adult or parental guidance. In the other stories, however, there was a consensus among everyone on the moral.

The *saffu* norms and values of inter-human relationships communicated through the *duri duri* folktales appear to be of such a universal nature that they may transcend the experiences of different generations and specific social conditions. Although the folktales are perceived by the Guji as manifesting a morality that has grown out of past generations' experiences of human vices and virtues, the typical messages of honesty and prudence can easily be adapted to the life experiences of new generations and social situations, including their present sedentary village life based on agro-pastoralism. However, the reproduction, transformation, and transmission of the *saffu* moral cannot occur without the agency of Guji children. Future studies of folklore among Oromo-speaking people of Southern Ethiopia must pay more attention to child-centered perspectives and performative dimensions. Only then is more concise knowledge about the generational and transformative dynamics of their folkloric traditions possible. In addition, this will allow scholars to recognize the contributions of children in these processes and avoid essentialist assumptions about their cultures.

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