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To cite this article: Tadesse Jaleta Jirata (2018) Folktales, Reality, and Childhood in Ethiopia: How Children Construct Social Values through Performance of Folktales, *Folklore*, 129:3, 237-253, DOI: 10.1080/0015587X.2018.1449457

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2018.1449457>

 View supplementary material 

 Published online: 01 Oct 2018.

 Submit your article to this journal 

 Article views: 22

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Folktales, Reality, and Childhood in Ethiopia: How Children Construct Social Values through Performance of Folktales

Tadesse Jaleta Jirata

Abstract

This article examines how Oromo-speaking children in Ethiopia construct social values in multiple ways through their participation in storytelling and the subsequent meaning-making discussions. By presenting children as actors in the re-contextualization of folktales, the article argues that participation in a folkloric performance is not a mere play practice for children, but is a social and artistic forum through which they acquire survival skills and grow connected to values of their society. This indicates that in the processes of storytelling and meaning-making, children draw an analogical relationship between imagined situations in folklore and living realities in their local environment. The article is based on data generated through ten months of ethnographic fieldwork with children among an Oromo-speaking society in Ethiopia.

Introduction

Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill
It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies

This is a verse that Guji-Oromo children of Ethiopia utter to define a social situation as a storytelling and meaning-making event. Using this verse, the children express that storytelling is a wisdom from which a clever boy or girl should not shy away, as the act of reluctance from such cultural practices is considered to be foolishness among the Guji-Oromo. Through speaking the verse as an introduction to a storytelling and meaning-making event, the children mark their participation in a folkloric tradition as a capacity to articulate indigenous knowledge and values. Such cultural capabilities of children are well recognized in both past and present studies of children's folklore. Earlier studies assert that children are competent actors in folkloric traditions (Opie and Opie 1959; Mechling 1986; Bronner 1999; Sutton-Smith et al. 1999; Tucker 2008). Peter and Iona Opie, for instance, present aggregates of lore collected from school-age boys and girls in Britain with the aim of introducing genres under rubrics such as wit and repartee, guile, riddles, parody and impropriety, topical rhymes, codes of oral legislation, nicknames and epithets, jeers and torments, half-belief, children's calendars, occasional customs, and pranks (Opie and Opie 1959). Similarly, a body of literature on African folklore emphasizes that folktales, riddles, and folk songs are still popular forms of play among African children. Accordingly, various scholars argue that children learn, tell, and interpret

folklore as a part of their everyday social and entertainment practices (Blacking 1967; Mello 2001; Davis 2007; Nyota and Mapara 2008; Sougou 2008; Mtonga 2012). Studies of children's folklore in North America and in Africa differ from each other, as the former contend that it is only about children, while the latter discuss it as an embodiment of children's everyday life and the values of the society in which they live. Thus, British and North American studies of children's folklore indicate that it is distinctive, as it is produced and shared among children (Bronner 1988; Tucker 2008), whereas studies in African contexts observe that through participation in folklore children interact with and acquire knowledge from adults as well as each other (Finnegan 1967, 2007; Kuyvenhoven 2007; Eder 2010; Jirata 2011, 2014; Nicolopoulou 2011). The African studies emphasize that children are not only actors in performing the various forms of folklore, but also agents in reconstructing folklore as a window to a culture whose meaning is rooted in their everyday life and culture.

There has been a related trend among scholars everywhere towards paying greater attention to the role of children in the telling and listening acts of storytelling. One such study by Nicolas Argenti, conducted in Cameroon, argues that storytelling is performed 'by children amongst each other, with no adult involvement, and the skill of telling is consequently learned by younger children from older ones' (Argenti 2010, 244). Argenti observes how children perform folktales to make sense of their present social, economic, and political conditions. Similarly, in my publications on Oromo-speaking children in Ethiopia (Jirata 2014; Jirata and Simonsen 2014), I discuss how children are active participants in adult-child and child-child modes of storytelling through which they transmit not only play practices, but also common knowledge and values. These studies show how children appropriate and transform storytelling, but they fail to capture how children discuss, analyse, and make meanings of a folktale so as to articulate their own concerns and position in society. As mentioned earlier, children's participation in the performance of storytelling is well recognized, but meaning-making—which is an important element of the storytelling tradition of Guji-Oromo children—is not captured in the existing body of studies, including my own previous articles.

In this article, I argue that performance in storytelling encompasses two central elements: first, the act of telling and listening, which involves the combination of language, tone, and action; second, the act of meaning-making, which includes discussion, interpretation, and understanding of a folktale and its contexts. I emphasize that meaning-making as an important part of storytelling involves a social and symbolic connection between a folkloric element and everyday life. In other words, I conceptualize children's performance in storytelling as an umbrella for the act of telling, listening, and meaning-making that involves meta-discourses based on an extended session of connected discussions that children do in a storytelling event. What I mean by 'meta-discourse' includes the discussions and meanings that children create based on a performed folktale (Hyland 2010; Flowerdew 2015). Despite the past and present interest in children's participation in folkloric traditions, due attention has not been given to how children in the present African context use folklore to explore and understand dynamics of values in their social worlds. In particular, what children think about characters and situations in folktales while they perform storytelling and how they understand their

local realities through telling, listening, and meaning-making in a storytelling event are not adequately captured in the existing body of literature. Thus, few studies have depicted how children use meaning-making as a process of associating the imaginary characters and situations in folktales to their living realities. Furthermore, although studies reveal that folktales are the imaginative representations of local values and environments, there is limited knowledge on whether children can understand and make sense of these local values and environments through the storytelling they perform.

With the aim of bridging this gap of knowledge, I analyse how children in Guji-Oromo society perform and interpret folktales so as to construct and reconstruct their meanings against the social and cultural practices of their society. I discuss how Oromo-speaking children analyse the relevance of the imaginary characters and situations in folktales to understand the socio-cultural practices and values of the society they live in. My discussion is based on the following questions:

- (1) Does meta-discourse in storytelling sessions help children make meaning from storytelling and connect characters and situations in folktales to their own lived realities?
- (2) Which social realities and behaviours do children observe through storytelling and their subsequent meaning-making discussions?
- (3) What does children's participation in these processes (storytelling, meta-discourse, and meaning-making) contribute to their social development?

Through answering these questions, I demonstrate how the children articulate social values through their folkloric performances.

Re-Contextualization as Analytical Concept

In this study, I use Richard Bauman's and Felicia McMahon's concept of 're-contextualization' to observe how children make meanings from folktales in relation to their experiences of everyday life (Bauman 2004). I use the concept to describe how narrative events are reproduced as play practices and then juxtaposed against social and cultural practices as meta-discourses. Through the meta-discourse and meaning-making that the process of re-contextualization involves, folk narratives are put into contexts and identified with human incidents in everyday life.

McMahon (2007) uses the concept of re-contextualization to explain how children connect their folk songs to their cultural background in order to express their social realities. She discusses how young Sudanese refugees in the United States linked themselves to their home culture through re-contextualization of their DinDinga childhood folk songs. Through re-contextualization, according to McMahon, these young people created their own views by which they resisted categorization of their identities as victims and reconstructed themselves as 'found' rather than 'lost' boys (McMahon 2007, 116–20). In the present article, re-contextualization is a useful concept to explain how children express their social world and their place in it (i.e. their contexts) in relation to situations and characters in folktales (i.e. their play texts). The concept of re-contextualization, again, justifies the way participants in a folk narrative performance

(children in this case) make sense of their performance in relation to their own experiences. My analytical framework, based on the concept of re-contextualization, is as follows: presentation of storytelling, which involves the teller–listener interactions; analysis of meta-discourse that the teller and the listeners use based on a folk narrative; and interpretation of these meta-discourses in relation to their meanings and relevance in the society. Following this framework, the analysis moves from observation of textual discourse to meta-discourse in which the textual discourse is connected to cultural contexts and then to meanings that link issues in textual discourse to social values in everyday life (Mphasha 2015). Thus, in this study, the re-contextualization includes children’s participation in storytelling, which involves both telling and listening actions; meta-discourse in the form of discussions in which children relate issues in the folktales to their own experience; and meaning-making in which children construct social values. This framework is used in the analysis of how children make sense of their local realities through their participation in expressive cultures.

Social Setting and Methodology

The fieldwork for this study was carried out among the Guji-Oromo in southern Ethiopia from May to December 2015 and from May to August 2016. The Guji-Oromo, whose population was estimated to be two million in the Ethiopian Population and Housing Census of 2007 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2008), is one of the ethnic branches of Oromo society. They speak the Oromo language (one of the widely spoken languages in Ethiopia) and are identified as people who have ancestral Oromo traditions (Hinnant 1977; Van de Loo 1991). The Guji are agro-pastoral communities living on animal husbandry and crop cultivation. Folkloric traditions play central roles in interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communications among Oromo society in general and the Guji in particular (Jirata 2011, 2014, 2017). The Oromo society to which the Guji belong identifies seven forms of folkloric traditions that they call *wedduu* (folk songs), *oduu-during* (myths), *duri duri* (folktales), *mammaksa* (proverbs), *hibbo* (riddles), *jecha* (expressions), and *xapha* (oral games) (Kidane 2002; Hussen 2005; Eshete 2008; Jirata 2017). The terms and categories are emic designations meaningful within the culture. These forms of Oromo folklore are performed by adults and children on different cultural occasions, including rituals, neighbourhood social events, and family social practices. As part of Oromo society, the Guji own these forms of folkloric traditions through which they make sense of their social world and teach their children. Of the seven forms, the performance of storytelling is popular among children and is an integral part of their oral play practices. Home and cattle pastures are the two dominant places where children perform this form of folklore. In the fields, while they look after cattle, the Oromo-speaking children come together and perform storytelling and the other forms of their lore such as riddling, gaming, and role-playing (see Figure 1). When children propose to each other ‘let us play’, while seated together in a group, what they usually choose is storytelling and the subsequent meaning-making discussion. Similarly, at night extended families (i.e. grandparents, parents, and children) gather in their homes and share social practices. Furthermore, night is the time when children relax and participate in additional storytelling and meaning-making discussions with each other.



Figure 1. Children engaging in storytelling in a cattle-herding field (photograph by the author, December 2015).

At home, the storytelling practice follows a similar process to that in the fields except that in this context the event involves intergenerational interaction in which tellers are adults (parents/grandparents) and listeners are children.

It was not easy for me to engage with such groups of children and participate in their social activities because I was an adult person and the physical difference between me and the children embodied differences in identity, role, and behaviour. Although I spoke the same language and had had similar childhood experiences to these children, I could not have access to children's storytelling and meaning-making events because the children shied away and became reluctant to participate in storytelling when I joined their group. To overcome such challenges and have the opportunity to participate in children's storytelling and meaning-making events, I employed two approaches. First, I stayed in the places that the children frequented the most, such as cattle pastures, village neighbourhoods, and homes. After two weeks, I became familiar with the children through contacts in those places. Second, after obtaining the children's friendship, I got access to their social interactions and play activities. Through time, the children allowed me to be seated among them and listen to their stories. This enabled me to have access to their storytelling and meaning-making discussions, during which the children treated me as an adult friend who was a member of their peer group in both the fields and the village neighbourhoods. I then participated as a listener, teller, and interpreter in the storytelling and meaning-making events. All activities were proposed and led by the children themselves. However, sometimes the children demonstrated an

extreme motivation to showcase their abilities, which may indicate that my presence had influenced the natural process to a limited extent.

From my own childhood experience, I remember that in storytelling and meaning-making practices, adults actively participated while the children were mainly listeners. Unlike the tradition of storytelling during my childhood, these children tell, listen, and discuss folktales as part of their everyday play culture. The discussion part extends the play culture to meaning-making through which children comment on the social and cultural practices through folktales. During my fieldwork, I learned that there are two forms of difference between the past (the period when I was a child) and present tradition of storytelling and meaning-making. First, in the past tradition, storytelling involved adult-to-child telling, while currently storytelling is done in two forms: child-to-child telling, which is common and prevalent; and adult-to-child telling, which is limited to home contexts. This study focuses on the child-to-child tradition. Second, in the present context, children are active participants in telling, listening to, and discussing a folktale, unlike the children during my childhood who were predominantly listeners, leaving telling and discussing to adults. It should be noted that in both the past and present, storytelling and meaning-making traditions include children regardless of gender.

In a storytelling and meaning-making event among the Guji children, a child starts telling a folktale by saying 'Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies'. Right away, everyone in the storytelling group becomes quiet and begins to listen alertly. When a teller tells, listeners do not talk or disturb. However, they can interject and correct if the teller makes mistakes. When the process of telling and listening ends, the children continue discussing and analysing the folktale by linking it to the social and cultural practices in their local environments. In such a way, children participate in the storytelling process as narrators, audience, and interlocutors, thus playing active roles in perpetuating the folkloric traditions of the Guji-Oromo.

As already mentioned, the tradition includes not only the telling and listening actions, but also the meaning-making that encompasses discussions and interpretations. This narrator-audience interaction is based on the interlocutory dialogue among the children. The meaning-making part of a storytelling event begins by the teller asking the listeners to speak about what they understood from the narrated folktale. The question initiates a discussion in which each child expresses her/his views on issues raised in the performed folktale.

Data for this study were generated through ethnographic fieldwork carried out in three rural villages of the Guji-Oromo in two phases: the first phase from May to December 2015 and the second phase from May to August 2016. The fieldwork activities included participant observations, in-depth interviews, and group discussions in which children in the age range of seven to fourteen years were participants. During the fieldwork, I participated in children's social interactions and play events in cattle-herding places and village neighbourhoods in order to observe how children take part in the performance of storytelling and the subsequent meaning-making discussions. My participation and observation in children's storytelling events and the subsequent discussions were aimed at achieving three major goals. The first was documentation of how children make sense of characters and issues in folktales while they are participating in the storytelling and meaning-making practices. In my observations, I therefore focused on these matters.

The second goal was eliciting information about how the children related their own everyday reality to what they sensed from the folktales. The third was the observation of how the children reflect on the cultural practices and values of their society through storytelling. As a participant in a storytelling and meaning-making event, I played the roles of telling, listening, and meaning-making with the children. At all times I was careful that my presence should not affect the natural process of the children's tradition. The fact that I had grown up in Oromo society, was closely familiar with the Guji-Oromo culture, and could speak the Oromo language enhanced the close relationship between me and the children from various places. I recorded the data through field notes and tape-recordings; these were later transcribed and translated from the Oromo language to English.

Folktales as Living Contexts for Children to Construct Social Values

The telling, listening, and meaning-making actions in a storytelling process are active verbal and emotional activities that enable children to construct the values which underlie the social and cultural practices of the society in which they live. Folktales, as part of children's lore, are simultaneously a cultural legacy rooted in the past and a symbolic practice constituted in the present. As a result, participation in the performance of folktales can serve to connect children to living values and enrich their experiences of commenting on the social and cultural practices of the society in which they live. In this section, I discuss how children construct social values through telling, listening to, and interpreting folktales.

Folktales Representing Laziness as a Cause of Distress

In general societal discourse within Guji-Oromo society, the concept of 'laziness' is understood as an individual's inability to accomplish her/his social roles and duties, overcome challenges, achieve personal goals, and obey social rules (Van de Loo 1991). 'Laziness' is conceptualized as a manifestation of moral incompetence. This shared understanding is often expressed through folk narratives such as folktales, proverbs, myths, and legends. Folktales of the Oromo represent contrasting images of 'laziness' and 'courage', which the children explain as 'distress' and 'happiness', respectively. Through their participation in storytelling and meaning-making discussions, the Guji-Oromo children articulate how everyday survival is demanding and full of challenges, and how it is a morally brave person who can move forward through the challenges. In contrast, a morally weak person does not have the stamina to overcome challenges; therefore, they cannot obtain success. Thus, the children manifest their belief in the impossibility of success without the stamina to overcome challenges. The following storytelling event and subsequent meaning-making discussion by the children reflect this situation. In this particular event, Temegen (boy, ten years old), Beka (boy, eight years old), Birqe (girl, nine years old), Bonise (girl, nine years old), and Boru (boy, ten years old) were participants. The children were together in a cattle pasture, playing and telling folktales to one another while attending to their duties of looking after cattle. They were eager narrators. 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!'. In this event I participated with the children as a listener and meaning-maker. Temegen started telling the folktale by saying 'Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies'. Then he declared that he was going to tell about 'a poor man and a rich man', and continued telling as follows:

Once up on a time, there were two men who were friends. One of the men was rich and had a kraal full of cattle. The other was poor and had nothing. One day, in the evening, the rich man entered his own house and saw the poor man sitting inside the house. The rich man was extremely wet as he was hit by heavy rainfall while he was herding cattle. As soon as he entered his house, he took a milking pot and rushed back to milk the cows. The poor man said to the rich man, 'are you going to milk cows in such heavy rain?' The rich man replied 'yes'. The poor man again said to the rich man, 'This is boring'. The rich man was surprised by what his friend said. He ordered his wife to prepare *annan iticha* (yogurt), *marqaa laqaa* (pancake), and *warqee diba* (enset or 'false-banana' bread with butter on it) as well as *warqee gogdu* (false-banana bread without butter on it). When the rich man finished milking his cows and came back home, his wife served the meal. He sipped from the yogurt once and gave it to the poor man. The poor man did the same. Again, he tasted from the pancake and gave it to the poor man. The poor man did the same. Then, he ordered his wife to take the 'wet' meal back and bring the 'dry' bread. He told her to give the 'dry' bread to the poor man. When the poor man started eating the 'dry' bread, he ordered her to bring the meal for him. The rich man started eating. He drank from the yogurt and said, 'One who does not like you should not eat you'. He again ate from the pancake and said, 'It is to eat you that I became wet'.

While the child was telling this with profound wisdom, humour, and concentration, the other children were following him with a deep sense of inspiration that they manifested through smiling, gesturing, laughing, and murmuring. In the tradition of storytelling among the Guji-Oromo, the teller poses a question to listeners at the end of the telling and listening process. Such a question serves as a transition marker from the telling and listening actions to the meaning-making discussion. Accordingly, after he finished the telling, Temegen (the teller) asked the other children (the listeners) to explain the meaning of the folktale. Boru began replying to the question thus: 'The folktale is about why the rich man is rich and the poor man is poor'. Bonise continued, saying, 'It is the difference between a rich man and a poor man'. Birqe added: 'The rich man is rich because he herded his cattle properly in the heavy rain and milked his cows even though he was tired and badly wet'. Beka also added: 'The poor man has kept himself dry but the rich man has made himself wet'. Finally, Temegen explained: 'The poor man is dry; thus, ate dry food and the rich man is wet; thus, ate wet food'. The answer from each child was followed by a heated discussion in which I was also an active participant and observer. In the discussion, some of the children translated the imaginary issues in the folktale to their living experiences. The following is an example:

Beka: Similar to the poor man, some children do not like to work and learn side by side. They do not like going to school in the morning and to cattle herding in the afternoon. Such children cannot learn. Such children are lazy; they cannot combine school with work. They grow ignorant.

From participation in this storytelling and meaning-making event, the children derived a meaning that a poor person is poor because of his/her laziness and inability to handle a hardship encountered in everyday life. The children were referring to the recurring symbolism expressed through the contrasting concepts of 'dry' and 'wet'. In the culture

of the Guji-Oromo, both concepts embody dual meanings. The concept 'dry' means cleanliness and comfort, on one hand, but deficiency and emptiness on the other. In contrast, the concept 'wet' signifies muddiness and discomfort, but also richness and good luck. In the context of the folktale, the poor man has kept himself dry and comfortable, but is eventually forced to eat the 'dry' food that symbolizes scarcity and distress. The rich man, on the other hand, has exposed himself to the rainfall which made him very wet, but eventually had 'wet' food—*annan iticha* (yogurt) and *marqaa laqaa* (the local pancake)—which symbolizes wealth and success. In their interpretation of this symbolism, the children articulated that 'a dry person lives in a dry life', meaning that a person who is not brave enough to face challenges cannot have a prosperous and happy life.

The children interpreted 'dry' and 'wet' as symbols that define scarcity and prosperity respectively. They emphasized that the life of the rich man, which is full of 'wetness', communicates that one's endurance and commitment in the face of rural hardships result in prosperity. Conversely, the life of the poor man—expressed as 'dryness'—is an outcome of laziness, or the moral incapacity to cope with rural challenges, which is a root cause of distress. For the children, the heavy rain that made the rich man wet and through which he endured to milk his cows symbolizes challenge and bravery, but the way the poor man expressed such a life as 'boring' reflects laziness.

This folkloric participation provided the children with the context through which they gave meaning to the consequences of human behaviours that they observed in their everyday lives. This is what Bauman (2004) and McMahon (2007) conceptualized as a re-contextualization process in performance of folklore. Similarly, through re-contextualization of the imaginary characters and their actions into their real-life contexts, the children communicated features that characterize good childhood. The children justified the fact that their rural life requires them to combine learning with working because of the tradition of household labour divisions. Thus, morally brave children are those who exert their efforts to combine school with household duties. This scenario shows how children understand their resilience to rural challenges as moral bravery that leads them to prosperity and their failure to do so as laziness that will put them in distress. Above all, through their participation in this storytelling and meaning-making discussion, the children indicated that individuals' laziness produces continuous distress.

Folktales Representing Foolishness as Dearth of Fortune

Associating 'foolishness', *gowwumma*, with a dearth of fortune is part of the social discourse in Guji-Oromo society (Jirata 2012). *Gowwumma* is understood as the substandard behaviour of individuals who are believed to have been born unfortunate or cursed by their parents while they were children. This is one of the socio-cultural issues that the Guji-Oromo children reconstruct through their discussions in storytelling events. For these children, to be wise means to be fortunate. In contrast, they see 'foolishness' as the manifestation of being unfortunate in all aspects of life. For example, someone's being unsuccessful in crop production, animal husbandry, or child-rearing is considered to be 'foolishness' that she or he receives as an inevitable curse from the supernatural powers.

Children's association of foolishness with lack of fortune through re-contextualization of folktales is observable from the following storytelling and meaning-making event. In this particular event, Bonise (girl, nine years old), Beka (boy, ten years old), Desta (boy, ten years old), Demekech (girl, ten years old) and Gelgelo (boy, eleven years old) were participants. The location was a field where the children looked after cattle and played together. Bonise started telling the folktale by saying the introductory phrase 'Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies'. Then she informed the children that she was going to tell a story of 'a husband and his wife' and continued to tell as follows:

Once upon a time, there were a man and his wife who were poor and had only one calf. The woman was pregnant. As they were poor, they hardly got any food to eat. One day, they were extremely starving and killed their only calf to eat it. They chopped the meat of the calf and put it on a big plate inside their home. Then they went to search for grass that they could use as a toothpick. As soon as they left to go to a bush where the grass was available, a man from their neighbourhood entered their house, seized all the meat and disappeared. After collecting a handful of grass, they came back to their home to enjoy the meat. When they entered their house, they found no meat at all except some flies sitting on the plate. They were shocked. The husband said to his wife, 'I can guess that these flies ate the meat'. The wife replied, 'Yes, you are right. We have to kill them'. Then, the husband took a big stick and started to hit and chase the flies inside the home. One fly sat on the chest of the wife and the wife called the husband by a sign to hit and kill the fly. The husband came silently so that the fly would not run away and hit it strongly. Immediately, his wife fell dead on the floor. In order to kill the fly, he killed his wife.

As the telling unfolded, the children followed with profound concentration and vibrant reactions. They expressed feelings of happiness, fear, sympathy, and despair following the behaviour and actions of the characters in the story. After Bonise finished telling, she asked the children what they understood from the folktale. Demekech replied: 'It is about a foolish husband and his wife. The husband killed his wife in order to kill a fly. He is a foolish man. His wife is also a foolish woman'. Desta said: 'The husband and his wife are unfortunate because they are fools. Mainly the husband is unfortunate. He lost his pregnant wife because of the fly'. Beka added: 'For me, the wife and her husbands are fools and unfortunate. They are fools because they suspected flies ate and finished their meat. The husband did not know that he could hurt his wife when he hit the fly that was sitting on her chest'. The responses initiated wider discussion among the children. In this discussion, Gelgelo asserted that 'The husband and his wife do not have food to eat. In order to survive, they killed their calf which is their only asset. The husband also killed his wife in order to kill a fly that was sitting on the chest of his wife. They are luckless persons. Because they are fools they become unfortunate'.

Eventually, all of the children agreed on the point that the husband and his wife are fools and therefore unfortunate. In the discussion in which they emphasized the contrast between 'foolishness' and 'wisdom', the children underlined that foolish persons always fail in their struggles to survive. This interpretation is rooted in their culture, in which 'foolishness' is considered to be bad luck that leads a person to scarcity and hopelessness. The children connected the character of the husband and wife not only to the values of the society they live in, but also to their individual experiences by emphasizing the similarity between what they observed in their local environment and the struggle of

the imaginary couple in the folktale. As an illustration of this, the children discussed how the usual food shortage of families in their neighbourhood is connected to ‘foolishness’. According to the children, the susceptibility to persistent drought that often causes food shortages in their community is caused by people’s lack of the wisdom to supplement rainfall by man-made ponds. This is observable in the following statement by Demekech:

Wise persons collect water during the rainy seasons and make ponds. When drought occurs, they use the ponds to grow *shana* (a kind of cabbage) and *badala* (maize). Their cattle also drink from the ponds. However, foolish persons do not do this. Wise persons can always survive through drought, but foolish persons cannot.

This instance shows how the children interpret ‘foolishness’ as lack of fortune through re-contextualizing the life of the imaginary husband and wife in terms of their own living realities. Through the re-contextualization processes, the children demonstrated how the lack of wisdom leads someone to the lack of fortune that precedes an unsuccessful life. Through participation in such storytelling and the meta-discourse events, the children advance their knowledge about the values that their society attaches to wisdom. They also learn that they should strive to avoid ‘foolishness’ in their everyday actions and relationships. This can help the Guji-Oromo children understand their social positions and grow connected to the norms of the society they live in.

Folktales Representing Discrimination as a Sinful Action

Discrimination against a person or persons is understood as a sinful action in Oromo society. This kind of theme is recurrent in their folk narratives and portrays the power of virtue over vice. In their storytelling and meaning-making events, the Guji-Oromo children reconstruct these and the other forms of sinful practices as social evils that endanger one’s everyday life. The following session of storytelling and meaning-making illustrates how children re-contextualize characters and their actions in a folktale to show discrimination against someone (mainly children) as offensive and sinful. For this particular folktale, the teller was Godana (boy, twelve years old) and the listeners were Gemedede (boy, eleven years old), Genet (girl, eleven years old), Idile (girl, ten years old), Soressa (boy, nine years old), and Uddessa (boy, ten years old). This event took place in a cattle pasture. Godana said ‘Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies’, and told the children that he was going to tell about ‘a man and his sons’. He continued telling the folktale as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a man who had two sons. One day, he called the older son and told him, ‘All my cattle are for you after I die’. Again, he called the younger son and told him, ‘For you, I give only one hen’. When the man died, the older son inherited all the cattle and the younger one took only one hen. After a time, the rich brother became sick and went to a wise man to consult for a cure. The wise man, said, ‘in order to recover from your sickness, you have to kill and eat a hen’. The rich brother worried because he did not have a hen. His wife thought for a while, and said, ‘Ask your brother, he has got a hen. He can give it to you’. The rich brother agreed to the suggestion of his wife, rushed to the home of his brother and said, ‘My brother, I came to you to ask for your help. I am sick and the wise man ordered me to eat a hen to recover. Give me your hen’. The poor brother replied, ‘Even though I have only one hen, I can give it to you if it is a cure for your sickness. Kill and eat it’. The rich brother killed the hen and ate it. Then the rich brother recovered from his illness but did

not thank his brother. The poor man was sad for he lost his only asset. Another day, the rich brother woke up early in the morning and found his body covered with feathers. He cried and woke his wife. His wife said, 'What happened to you?', and he replied, 'Look at me. What are these on my body?' His wife became frightened. She tried to take the feathers off, but the man stopped her as he felt pain. The wife said to the man, 'the feathers are growing out of your body. This is frightening. Go back to the wise man'. The man quickly went to the wise man but the wise man said to the man, 'I cannot solve this problem. You should take it to the elderly men'. The man went to the elderly men, told them the story, and asked them for help. Then one of the elderly men replied, 'You and your father have been unfair to your younger brother. You made your brother poor and again killed his only hen. Go and ask him to forgive you. Ask your brother to spit on the feathers and they will go away'. The rich brother went to his poor brother and asked for forgiveness. His brother forgave him and spat on the feathers. Immediately, the feathers disappeared from the body of the rich brother and he became a normal person.

Following the speech and gestures of the teller, the children were listening and reacting unconsciously to the actions, behaviours, and interactions of the characters. Godana finished the telling and invited the children to explain what they understood from the story. Genet explained that she understood that the father committed a sin by bequeathing 'a kraal full of cattle' to the elder son and 'only one hen' to the younger one. Gemedo, for his part, stated that the discriminatory action of the father that left the one with 'only one hen' and the other with 'a kraal full of cattle' was a sinful action that drew a line of difference between brothers. Uddessa also interpreted the action of the father as an insane treatment of his own younger son by giving him 'only one hen'. Soressa connected this action to his own life and explained thus: 'My father often mistreats me. He beats me but he does not mistreat my brothers and sisters. He loves them. To me, he says "You are a lazy child. You are useless. You do not like herding cattle but only eating food"'. This narrative prompted Idile to voice her grievance as well: 'My parents are sinful. They do not care for me as they care for my younger brother. They order me to boycott school and work at home. However, they let my brother attend school regularly. I am still in grade one but my younger brother is in grade four'.

There are two phrases that recurred regularly in the discussions of the children. These are 'a kraal full of cattle' and 'only one hen', which embody the pivotal issue in the folktale. These two phrases are meaningful when they are interpreted in the context of the Guji-Oromo's cultural discourses. Among the Guji-Oromo, the phrase 'kraal full of cattle' represents substantial wealth, while the phrase 'only one hen' signifies a scarcity. Informed by such discourse, the children voiced that although injustice was done against the owner of the 'only one hen', he became the winner because he was virtuous. To underline this point, Godana recited a popular Oromo proverb: 'Scarcity in virtue is more powerful than wealth in vice', through which he validated the surrender of the vicious person to the will of his virtuous brother as the ultimate victory of purity over sin. Through the discussion, the children articulated that possession of huge wealth does not save a vicious (sinful) person from suffering. In contrast, it means that a person who has virtue but not a material asset is always a winner. For the children, discrimination—which is a sinful action—may put other people in a destitute situation temporarily, but by the power of virtue, those people can become winners. The children associated the characters and issues in the folktale with their own lives. They interpreted that

discrimination is a sinful act in dual ways. First, a person who discriminates against someone is sinful because, eventually, he suffers from his own vicious actions. Second, discrimination exposes another person to distress temporarily as she/he loses what she/he deserves. According to the children, both the perpetrator and the receiver of discrimination are losers, although the former is a greater loser than the latter. The discussion session thus helped the children to observe, interpret, and understand both the consequences of discrimination and the power of virtue in terms of the values of the society in which they live. Thus, their participation in the storytelling and the subsequent discussion enabled the children to re-contextualize their own experiences and give meaning to their lived realities. Bauman describes such practice as a performance in which participants transform folkloric material into a communicative event that helps them make sense of their environment and their positions in it (Bauman 1975).

Folktales Representing Care by Stepparents as Mistreatment

Issues related to care by stepparents as a form of mistreatment were prevalent in children's interpretation of folktales. In their meaning-making meta-discourse events, the children asserted that stepparents do not provide appropriate care. According to the children, stepparents beat, scold, and harass their stepchildren. The folktale narrated and discussed in the following is an instance of a storytelling event in which the children articulated this issue. In this event, Diribe (girl, eleven years old) told the folktale to Ayantu (girl, nine years old), Boru (boy, eleven years old), Girma (boy, twelve years old), Lammesso (boy, ten years old), and Zekyos (boy, ten years old). As with the other events, the children came together in a pasture to play and look after their cattle. After saying the introductory phrase 'Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill; it is a hill that cries and a fool that shies', announcing that the tale was about 'a baboon and a lion', Diribe narrated it as follows:

Once upon a time, a lion and a baboon were living together. They herded their cattle turn by turn. The baboon had its mother living near the cattle herding place. The lion was poor because his mother was dead. One day, the lion asked the baboon, 'on the day you herd cattle, the cattle are happy. You are also happy. You do not look weak and hungry like me. What is the secret?' The baboon replied, 'It is because of the reason that the cattle love me'. The lion was not convinced by baboon's answer. He secretly followed the baboon to the cattle herding place. He observed the baboon shouting, 'Bring the cooked for myself and the raw for my cattle'. Then he saw a woman who came running and gave cooked food to the baboon and raw food to the cattle. At this point, he learned the secret behind the happiness of the baboon and the cattle. On his herding day, the lion came to the cattle herding field along with his herd and shouted, 'Bring the cooked for myself and the raw for my cattle', but he could not get any response from the woman. He repeated but there was no response. He sat down on the ground and cried. In the evening, he went back home along with his cattle. He was starved, weak, and unhappy. His eyes were red as he had been crying throughout the day. At home in the evening, the baboon asked the lion, 'Your eyes are red. Why?' The lion replied, 'My eyes are red because I received bravery from my father today'. The baboon asked the lion, 'Well, would you share some of it with me?' The lion responded, 'You are welcome. I can do it for you. In order to receive it, close your eyes and keep silent while I do it for you'. When the baboon closed his eyes, the lion heated a sharp knife and poked it into baboon's eyes. Finally, the baboon lost its eyes and became blind.

It was not only the way the teller told the tale that caught the attention of the listeners and forced them to act dynamically, but also the interaction between the characters that the narrative portrays. These children analysed the characters in different ways. For instance, Girma said ‘The baboon is happy because it has its own mother. However, the lion is not happy because it does not have its mother; so it is mistreated by the baboon’s mother’. Boru added: ‘It is the mistreatment of the lion’s mother that caused conflict and hatred between the lion and the baboon. The baboon hated the lion because of the disguised mistreatment of the lion’s mother’. Lammesso continued: ‘Lion’s mother was supposed to help and care for the lion, but she put him in conflict with his friend; as a result, he lost his eyes’. Zekyos drew the similarity between the characters and his own reality in the following way:

The life of the lion is similar to my life. I lost my biological mother four years ago. I live with my stepmother. She has two children whom she bore. She gives food to them when I go to sleep. To me she gives little food. She orders me to do heavy work, but to them she gives simple tasks. She scolds and beats me, but she does not say anything rough to them. Then I started to hate her children. They are innocent, but I hate them because of her mistreatment.

This discussion shows how the children translated actions of the characters in the folktale to the mistreatment that children receive from stepparents. The discussion focused on illuminating how adults’ mistreatment creates conflict and hatred among children. That is, stepparents’ unequal care and mistreatment results in not only discord between adults and children, but also hostility among children themselves. This is similar to what Nicolas Argenti discussed in relation to how children express their experiences of fosterage in a Cameroonian context. Argenti argued that among contemporary Oku, an ethnic group in Cameroon, about thirty per cent of children are fostered at some point in their lives and the folktales they tell are distressing to them because they embody misadventures that are similar to their experience of hardship in fosterage (Argenti 2010). Similarly, through participation in the performance of folktales such as this, the Guji-Oromo children were prompted to reflect on their distress in their relationships with their stepparents.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Guji-Oromo children, through their meaning-making discussions, re-orient folklore from a play practice to a discourse that mirrors their social realities. It presents two important points that could be useful in research with children’s folklore and the participation of children in folkloric performances. First, the storytelling tradition, which is a popular folkloric practice among the Guji-Oromo children, does not end with the act of telling and listening, but extends into the subsequent meaning-making discussion in which children articulate their experiences, views, and values. It involves a three-step process which I have called the telling and listening step, the discussion (meta-discourse) step, and the meaning-making step. In the first step, the participating children perform the storytelling through a dramatic narrator–audience interaction. In the interaction, the verbal and mental engagement of the narrator and the audience with characters and issues in a folktale is strong. In the second step, the narrator–audience interaction extends to the discussion that develops the narrative to

meta-discourse. Here, the role of a teller is to pose a question to initiate discussion among the listeners. Each listener responds to the question by relating characters and issues in the narrated folktales to his or her experiences and everyday realities. Such responses result in lively discussions among the children. In the third step, children come to a consensus on the meaning of a folktale and confirm their agreement by nodding their heads or simply saying 'hee', which means 'Yes, I agree'.

These three steps in the storytelling and meaning-making process may be conceptualized as children's re-contextualization of folktales. In the re-contextualization process, the teller and listeners cooperate to bring the characters and issues in a folktale into living realities and to reflect on their own lives and lives of other people through it. In other words, through this process, the children make meanings from folktales through translating characters and issues into everyday realities and internalizing the values and norms of their society through this action. Therefore, the re-contextualization process, involving the storytelling, discussion, and meaning-making steps, gives the children the time to think and widen their curiosity. It gives the children the opportunity to look into the connection between folklore and lived realities. Such an ability to re-contextualize folklore and thereby make sense of challenges, beliefs, and values through it can be understood as children's artistic communicative competence and analytical power. Participation in such a folkloric performance and meaning-making tradition empowers children to learn to comment on themselves and their environments, as well as to convey their perspectives on justice, rights, values, and social obligations. Again, participation in this folkloric tradition seems to help children avoid laziness, foolishness, injustice, selfishness, and immorality as destructive actions and behaviours. Above all, through the meta-discourse and meaning-making discussion, the children understand their social and cultural environment and become better connected to the values of their society. This process connects children's feeling, valuing, perceiving, and believing capabilities to the maintenance and reproduction of socio-cultural values.

In general, it is notable that the conventional understanding in African folkloristic studies that the interpretation and transmission of folkloric traditions is a role of the adult generation seems to be invalid, as it disregards the narrative and interpretive competence of African children. Through their narrative culture that encompasses the telling, listening, and meaning-making actions, children maintain and transmit the corpora of folklore and folk knowledge. Folkloric engagement at such an early age shows that children are the creators and perpetuators of their social and cultural environment. In other words, in Oromo culture there is a strong link and interplay between folklore and childhood. Such tradition has empowered the Guji-Oromo children to use expressive culture to interpret their living realities in multiple ways.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2018.1449457>.

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