

# Positive Parenting

## An Ethnographic Study of Storytelling for Socialization of Children in Ethiopia

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*In this article, I discuss how the tradition of intergenerational storytelling provides parents with contexts for the socialization of children. My discussion draws on observations of family storytelling events and interviews with parents and children among the Guji-Oromo in southern Ethiopia. Through ethnographic analysis, I show that, among the Guji-Oromo, storytelling provides occasions for positive communication between parents and children, which in turn are effective in the process of socialization. I present three socialization outcomes that parents seek to achieve through storytelling: cautioning children, motivating children to learn from adults, and heightening children's respect for the value of adult supervision. I also discuss how these practices empower children to fit their actions to accepted norms and values. Parents among the Guji-Oromo perform and interpret folktales with the purpose of entertaining and educating children, and I argue that this process is a child-friendly means of socialization.*

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**KEYWORDS:** children, Guji people, Ethiopia, socialization, storytelling

*Storytelling, Self, Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2014), pp. 158–178. Copyright © 2015 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI 48201

## Introduction

Storytelling is a positive way of communication with children. My children listen to me when I tell them folktales, but they do not give their attention to my words when I speak to them in ordinary ways. I train them by saying, “Give honor to cattle. Take cattle to the grazing field in the morning and bring them to their shelter in the evening. Adorn your farm in the summer and your home in the winter. Do not stand in cattle’s way, and avoid keeping cattle in others’ way. Make peace, speak peace, and live in peace. Respect your elders, grandparents and parents. Keep up with your equals. Grandparents and parents have wisdom to share with you, but you have energy to support them.”

This statement was delivered by Waqoo (male, age 70) one evening at his home during my fieldwork. He made it to explain the purpose of intergenerational storytelling among the Guji-Oromo. According to Waqoo, storytelling from adults to children facilitates intergenerational communication, knowledge transmission, and socialization.

Among the Guji-Oromo, various forms of folklore such as storytelling, songs, riddles, and proverbs are performed as elements of everyday communication and knowledge transmission (Jirata, “Children and Oral Tradition”). The Guji-Oromo perform four main genres of verbal folklore: *qexala* (singing folksong), *duriduri* (storytelling), *mammaksa* (telling proverbs), *jecha* (proverbs), *hibbo* (riddling), and *xapha* (performing games). This classification system shares some similarities with what Bernth Lindfors termed “genres of folklore in Africa.” Of these genres, *qexala*, *mammaksa*, and *jecha* are performed by adults in rituals, ceremonies, neighborhood social events, and conversations among elders. These are considered to be adult genres of communication, and the social situations in which they are performed are not the prerogatives of children. *Hibbo* and *xapha*, in contrast, are performed by children in peer play interactions (see Jirata, “Learning through Play”). *Duriduri* (storytelling) crosses categories and fosters intergenerational interaction. In storytelling, children collaborate with adults as initiators, listeners, and inquirers, while adults act as tellers, entertainers, interpreters, and educators.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how the storytelling process draws parents (the term “parents” in this article includes extended family members such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and in-laws) and children together and serves as a site of intergenerational communication and socialization, transcending children’s

immediate experiences. I analyze the process of storytelling with an emphasis on how children initiate storytelling in a family social event, how parents tell folktales to children, how children listen to stories from parents, how parents interpret folktales for children, and how children react to those interpretations, as well as parent's and children's reflections on the tradition of intergenerational storytelling.

I draw connections between Guji-Oromo customs of intergenerational hierarchy and parents' relationships with children, and I discuss how adults introduce children to communal values through the interactive interpretation of folktales such that children are both entertained and steeped in local mores. I also observe how storytelling is conducted and how folktales are interpreted as part of the web of intergenerational relationships. Following the notion that folktales arise in the context of performance and are linked to culture and society through interpretation (Jirata and Benti; Kuyvenhoven), I analyze how children are connected to the values and norms of their society through these interrelated processes.

### Storytelling in Africa

The study of storytelling as an important part of African oral tradition has been a focus of folklorists and anthropologists since the beginning of the twentieth century. Among others, Pauline Davis, Donna Eder, Ruth Finnegan, and Ageliki Nicolopoulou have advanced our understanding of how folktales are performed, interpreted, and valued as folk knowledge. They discuss the ways that storytelling has been used to make sense of collective history and culture. Finnegan states:

Across the various cultures in Africa, storytelling traditions have many things in common. One of the significant commonalities is that performance of storytelling is perceived as a vital element of customary practices and an admired means of socialization across different African cultures. (44)

According to Finnegan, a storyteller is connected to her or his audiences through performance that involves dynamic communication (verbal and nonverbal) and relationship. Isidore Okpewho observes that “the success of a performance is judged fundamentally by the degree to which the artist mirrors the outlook and expectations of his society; and the audience of the performance seems obliged primarily to aid the artist in this task of mirroring” (162).

Both Finnegan and Okpewho studied storytelling for the purpose of understanding and documenting the outlook and expectations of a society. Many of the existing studies follow this trend and deal with how storytelling embodies moral and didactic values.

More recently, there has been growing interest in studying children's roles in the production and transmission of the oral tradition; thus there is an emerging shift from adult-centered to child-centered storytelling studies. One such study by Nicolas Argenti, conducted in Cameroon, argues that storytelling is performed "by children amongst each other, with no adult involvement, and they are consequently learned by younger children from older ones" (244). In a previous study (Jirata, "Children and Oral Tradition" and "Learning through Play") I have also shown that, among the Guji-Oromo, children perform storytelling as part of their everyday life, in their work, play, education, and social interaction.

However, the study of storytelling as the vehicle of intergenerational interaction and knowledge transmission has received less focus. Documentation of the uses and meanings of storytelling beyond morality concerns is less accessible in the literature on African studies. With the aim of bridging this gap, I analyze here how parents and children among the Guji-Oromo perform and interpret folktales as a means of entertainment and, particularly, socialization. I argue that the performance and interpretation of folktales contain inherent processes of socialization. My argument is based on the following two questions: (1) What are the socialization practices that parents discuss in the folktales they tell to children? (2) How does this tradition of intergenerational storytelling influence children's peer interactions?

### The Fieldwork and Its Setting

This study is part of the ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out in three rural villages of the Guji-Oromo in two phases: from July to December 2009 and from May to October 2010. Fieldwork activities focused on how oral tradition is entrenched in families' social interactions at home and embedded in children's play practices in cattle pastures and in schools. Children (25 girls and 35 boys), parents (6 mothers and 5 fathers), and grandparents (4 grandmothers and 5 grandfathers) were participants in the observation and interview processes. An interview with Waqoo Dube, the contemporary cultural leader of the Guji-Oromo, provided

elaboration on the Guji-Oromo culture and norms of intergenerational relationships. The primary focus of the research was on children ages 7–14 years of age.

According to the Ethiopian Population and House Census in 2007 (FDRE), the population of the Guji-Oromo is estimated to be 1.6 million. Oromo lies in the southern part of Ethiopia, and the Guji people speak a branch of the Oromo language, one of the major language groups in Ethiopia. The Guji predominantly inhabit rural areas and subsist on agropastoral activities that include animal husbandry and crop cultivation (Beriso; Van de Loo; Wako). Because they are one of the Oromo ethnic branches, the Guji share the Oromo worldview that entails a democratic system of traditional leadership, egalitarian relationships, communal solidarity, and civility in deliberation (Levine). The Guji-Oromo system of customary governance, known as the Gada system, is based on these concepts and structures the society into 13 generational grades, of which 5 are classified as children and the remaining 8 grades are counted as adults (Legesse; Hinnant; Wako). In the relationship between the two generational classes, children take a lower social position and are considered subordinate to the adults, whereas older generations take higher positions and have the power to control and guide those of lower rank. According to Johon Hinnant and Dube Wako, the Gada system of the Guji-Oromo has elaborate significance in the formulation and regulation of norms and values on which relationships among those generational classes are based. The relationship between children and their parents that grounds the discussion in this article is embedded in the customs of intergenerational hierarchy imposed by the Gada system (Wako).

Among the Guji-Oromo there is a complex set of relationships based on social institutions such as *gosee* (kinship), *soddaa* (marriage-bond), and *jaalaa* (friendship), and principles that govern such relationships derive from the Gada system. In the kinship ties known as *hagana* (clan), *balbalaa* (sub-clan), *warraa* (close relatives), and *maatii* (family), relationships between parents and children are based on the Guji-Oromo tradition of social hierarchy.

## Methodology

The folktales, storytelling events, and interpretations discussed in this article were generated through ethnographic methods. According to Carol Eastman and Tadesse Jirata (“Learning through Play”), an ethnographic study of storytelling

includes analysis of the process of telling through its cultural, social, communicative, and emotional aspects and meanings.

In Guji-Oromo, storytelling is embedded in everyday social processes and performed as part of families' interactive nighttime events as well as children's play interactions during the day. During these social events, I carried out ethnographic interviews in addition to conducting participant observation. I observed how children initiate the process of storytelling, how parents tell stories at their children's request, how children listen and react, and how the tellers connect the folktale's meanings to the norms and values of the society through interpretation. Through interviews, I obtained data about the meanings parents and children attach to the storytelling process and how they connect these meanings to their tradition and their everyday lives. Through living with six extended families (in which grandparents, parents, and children live together) for a long period of time, I was able to participate in storytelling events and observe how parents tell and interpret folktales for children.

As I am from the Oromo society and am a native speaker of the Oromo language, I had easy access to the homes and everyday lives of the Guji-Oromo families. However, I faced challenges in communicating and establishing rapport with children in the beginning of my fieldwork. The difficulty was related to physical and generational differences and to the power that the children attributed to me based on the Guji-Oromo's norm of intergenerational hierarchy. The physical difference between the children and me reflected differences in identity, role, and behavior because the children knew their social difference from adults and perceived my acts of boundary crossing as strange. To minimize this barrier, I made every attempt to reduce my perceived adult power through adopting the children's own culture of communication. I told stories about myself to the children, as well as telling traditional stories to them, and at every opportunity I asked them to tell me their own stories. As a result, I created a rapport with the children and participated in their play practices, through which I documented their perspectives.

### **Storytelling and Parenting among the Guji-Oromo**

The connection between storytelling and parenting in the Guji-Oromo culture is observable from three angles. First, children are attracted to storytelling and

participate in the process with great interest. In the performance and interpretation of folktales, children give full attention to adults and listen to them carefully. Storytelling in Guji-Oromo contains characters drawn from the immediate social and natural settings, and these characters display behaviors such as foolishness, wisdom, vice, virtue, obedience, and disobedience. Children's interest in storytelling is rooted in the fact that it connects them to their environment and involves moral imperatives such as victory of virtue over vice, reward for hard work, kindness, respectfulness, and helpfulness.

Second, storytelling is part of the Guji-Oromo intergenerational interaction, which, as has been discussed, is based on social hierarchy. The hierarchy helps determine intergenerational relationships in the Guji-Oromo extended family networks, which include five patrilineal family lineages called the *warra Guji shanani*, to which women are affiliated through their husbands (Beriso; Debsu; Van de Loo). From the seniors to the juniors, the hierarchy includes *botoro* (great-great-grandfather), *abaaboo* (great-grandfather), *akaakoo* (grandfather), *abbaa* (father), and *ilma* (children). In the close network of the intergenerational hierarchy, it is the seniors who tell stories to the juniors, as seniors are considered more knowledgeable and competent to guide and shape the juniors. In this social hierarchy, juniors are always expected to respect the seniors. Great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents are considered to be seniors. Children are expected to be obedient and loyal to their elders, including elder siblings. Thus parenting among the Guji-Oromo involves members of the extended family. Grandparents, parents, and siblings jointly bring up and care for children. Parents are responsible for equipping children with the knowledge necessary to smooth intergenerational relationships and to harmonize with their social and cultural environments. According to Waqoo (male, age 70), storytelling provides parents with a context through which they communicate knowledge to children. Jilo (male, age 45) also stated that through performance and interpretation of stories with children, parents can simultaneously entertain and educate them.

Parents of the Guji-Oromo believe that storytelling is the central component of their culture and the vehicle for communicating life skills, norms, and values from the past generation (the ancestors) to the future generation (children) via the present generation (the grandparents and the parents). The process of storytelling begins by calling forth the past time, indicated by phrases such as "Once upon a time" or "A long time ago." Such phrases invoke earlier periods when speaking to groups and individuals in the present.

Among Guji-Oromo, there are two types of storytelling events. The first is family social time, at home in the evening, in which grandparents and parents tell folktales to children. For the Guji-Oromo family, evening is a special time when “kraal and home are full and cattle and human beings rest,” and this is when children initiate storytelling by asking their parents to tell them folktales. The children sit around the parents or grandparents, listen with great enthusiasm, and ask questions either during the story or at its conclusion. Storytelling often goes on until parents go to bed. In this event, parents not only tell folktales to children but also explain the characters and their actions. They use words, gestures, and voices to imitate characters’ actions, speech, and behaviors and use performative devices to add to the beauty and artistic quality of the tale. It is this artistic quality that raises children’s interest in listening and creates favorable conditions for imparting knowledge. That is also why the Guji-Oromo perceive storytelling as a child-friendly means of communication.

The second context of storytelling is children’s play interactions, in which children perform storytelling with their peer members in their workplaces and schools. These interactions can occur in pastures where children from different households look after cattle or in school compounds where schoolmates get together and play in their free time. Older children tell stories to the younger children just as parents tell stories to children, but storytelling contexts differ. However, these contexts are not the primary focus of this article, which rather emphasizes storytelling in reference to intergenerational relationships. (For storytelling in the context of child-to-child interaction, see Jirata, “Children and Oral Tradition” and “Learning through Play”; Jirata and Benti.)

## Storytelling for the Socialization of Children

### 1. Cautioning Children

Through intergenerational storytelling (storytelling from adults to children), parents and grandparents provide children with knowledge about what is safe and unsafe. Galgale (male, age 40) says, “We do not reiterate everything about what is safe and unsafe to our children, but we show it to them through storytelling, so that they observe and distinguish the safe from the unsafe in their own ways.”

According to Waqoo, children learn about what is safe and unsafe from the



actions of folktale characters. Both Galgale and Waqoo emphasized that the tradition of using storytelling to induce caution in children is popular among Guji-Oromo families. This tradition is further expressed by Udde (male, age 70), who asserts that “without caution, children cannot keep themselves away from risk. Cautioning enables them to be prudent, and it is through storytelling that children can listen to adults and observe the value of being cautious.”

*Event 1:* One day in the evening at Udde’s home, Udde’s wife, son, daughter-in-law, neighbors, and I enjoyed coffee and vivid conversation. Udde’s grandchildren (ages 4–11) played in the house. After the coffee, the neighbors left, and the daughter-in-law began preparing the evening meal at the hearth. One of Udde’s grandchildren intervened in the adults’ conversation, asking Udde, “Akaakoo [Granddad], tell us a story!”

Udde smiled and replied, “Okay. Listen.” The children became happy and sat on the floor in front of him. Udde spoke the introductory formula<sup>1</sup> that a storyteller intones to gather the attention of the audience: “Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies.” He continued:

Once upon a time, a donkey and a dog decided to run away. After they walked for a long distance, they got tired and agreed to spend the night in a pasture. During the night, the donkey ate much grass, but the dog could not get anything to eat. In the middle of the night, the donkey told the dog, “I am happy, I want to shout.” [The children smiled.] The dog replied, “You must not shout. If you do, the hyena will hear you and come and kill us.” The happy donkey insisted and shouted. [The children smiled.] After eating more grass, the donkey told the dog, “I’m going to shout again!” Again, the dog said, “Don’t! This is dangerous for us. This time, the hyena will surely hear you, and come to kill us.” But, the donkey shouted again. [The children smiled.] Sure enough, the hyena came running and killed the donkey. [The children contracted their faces as if scared.] After eating the donkey and quenching his hunger, the hyena turned his face around and saw a sleeping dog. The hyena asked the dog, “Who are you?” The dog replied, “I am the butcher of my master.” [The children smiled.] Then the hyena said to the dog, “Good, cut the meat in pieces and serve me.” The dog started serving the hyena. The dog went into the body of the dead donkey. It found the heart of the donkey and ate it. [The children smiled.] Finally, the hyena ordered the donkey, “Serve me the heart of the donkey,” and the dog replied, “Sir, the donkey does not have a heart.” [The children laughed.] The hyena asked, “Why?” The dog

said, “Sir, what do you mean? Why would the donkey shout at this time and this place if he had a heart?” [The children nodded their heads as if they understood.]

At end of the telling, Udde told the children:

He is not cautious—the donkey brayed at an unsafe place. He also did not accept the warning from his friend the dog. Thus, the donkey lost his life. This story shows that one should know what is safe and unsafe before he or she acts.

The children nodded their heads to show that they had understood the message. Afterward, I conducted an in-depth interview with Udde, the storyteller, from which the following text is extracted.

**TADESSE:** Do you often tell such folktales to your grandchildren?

**UDDE:** Yes, I tell them when they are interested to listen and want me to tell them.

**TADESSE:** Is it useful to tell such folktales to children?

**UDDE:** Yes, telling folktales to children is our tradition. Our children listen to us better when we speak to them through folktales than when we advise them through ordinary words. Through telling folktales, we make our children learn our ways of life.

**TADESSE:** What did you want to teach or show to your grandchildren through this folktale?

**UDDE:** I want to show them the value of caution. I want them to be careful and mindful in their everyday actions.

What is notable from this performance and interview is that the grandfather and the children to whom he told the folktale have an interest in and purposes for engaging in storytelling. The children are interested in storytelling as a means of play and entertainment. For the grandfather, performance and interpretation of stories are ways of raising children’s awareness to distinguish what is safe from what is unsafe and to prevent them from acting foolishly. Through the telling process, he entertained the children and demonstrated to them the skill of storytelling. Through interpretation, he communicated to the children that being conscious and careful are essential attributes in life. The last statement in the folktale, “Why would the donkey shout at this time and this place if he had a heart?” is where he emphasized clearly the danger that follows carelessness. His

comment associating the donkey with imprudence and negligence is neither shameful nor threatening to children or animals, but rather it is intended to create associations in the children's minds that will sustain them over a lifetime.

In explaining his statement, the grandfather indicated that, among the Guji-Oromo, "heart" symbolizes discernment by which one distinguishes evil from good, being safe from being unsafe, and right from wrong. The main purpose of cautioning, according to the grandfather, is empowering children to have such a discerning mind. When he interpreted the folktale for his grandchildren, Udde said:

This folktale shows that carelessness exposes one to danger. The donkey in the folktale is careless. When it quenched its hunger, it became more careless and put itself in danger. It did not realize that it was in a risky environment. Its mindlessness destroyed its life. This is useful as it teaches you that you should be cautious and cognizant of the situations in your environment.

The values and meaning that the Udde attached to the folktale strengthen the idea that parents tell folktales to children with a clear purpose: developing children's awareness and helping them protect themselves from risk. Two more points are notable from this event and the following interview with the grandfather. The first is that storytelling is initiated by children even when it is performed by parents. While children crave it as entertainment, parents use it as a means of socialization. Second, it is a child-friendly means through which parents and grandparents can easily direct the attention of children toward socialization exercises disguised as imaginative play.

Storytelling is used not only to raise the awareness of children about what is safe and unsafe but also to inform them of cultural norms. A statement by Morma (male, age 65) elaborates this point. He said, "Place children in culture. Leave them free to see it. They can observe it and learn it. But caution them not be out of it." The statement is about providing children with access to cultural practices. It clearly shows how the Guji-Oromo recognize cautionary tale-telling as a strategy to place children in culturally appropriate relationships with adults. A common expression of the Guji-Oromo, "the senior leads the junior," explains this tradition and sums up the place of children in intergenerational relationships. Parents bring these norms of hierarchical intergenerational relationships to the attention of children through storytelling.

I observed the following storytelling event at the home of Shifera (male, age 40).

*Event 2:* After coffee was consumed, but before dinner was ready, a 10-year-old boy, Desta, approached his father and asked him “Ayyaa [Dad], tell us a story.”

The father smiled and replied, “Ask your grandmother. She knows more than me.”

Then the child asked the grandmother, “Akko [Grandma], tell us a story.”

The grandmother smiled and replied “Okay.” Then all of the children sat by the grandmother and listened to her with full attention. The grandmother recited the introductory formula, “Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies,” and continued:

Once upon a time, a child who used to eat with his father at home went with him to a ritual place. At the ritual place, there were seats prepared for the elders; one was for the father of the child. The child went to the seats following his father and tried to sit by the side of the father. [The children laughed and murmured “the child is foolish.”] Then the elders at the place ridiculed the father for his failure to shape his child. That is why the Guji say, “If you eat with children, they will think they are your equals.” [The children nodded their heads as if they understood.]

The grandmother explained what she wanted to tell the children: “This folktale shows what you should not do when you are with seniors [adults] outside of the home. You may do what you want to do and say what you want to say at home. But, when you are outside, you should be careful of what you do, where you sit and what you say. If not, you will be cursed and hated by the elders.”

What is notable from these statements is that the act of “parents eating with children” signifies equality between children and adults. Such equality is not acceptable according to the tradition, as it is believed that the practice puts children in conflict with the norms of social hierarchy and respect for elders. The grandmother asserted that the claim for such equality makes children “cursed” and “hated” and leads them to an abnormal relationship with adults. However, the grandmother noted that obedience to the norms of social hierarchy is less expected from children when they are at home. This implies that, at home, children are less constrained by traditional norms, indicating in turn that social hierarchies in the Guji-Oromo are less tightly structured within the household and that stories are crafted to reflect and instill those distinctions.

## 2. Motivating Children to Learn from Adults

Some of the required skills of life among the Guji-Oromo are cattle raising and crop production for men, as well as cooking food, cleaning house, fetching water, and collecting firewood for women. These skills pass from older to younger generations through oral traditions. Parents and grandparents are providers, and children are receivers. In this tradition of hierarchical knowledge transmission, the central element of parenting is to equip children with the value of learning from adults. Storytelling is often used for this purpose. Morma (male, age 65), for example, asserted that he imparts knowledge about Guji-Oromo ways of life for his grandchildren through storytelling and that such knowledge is imperative for children's success in their present and future lives. I observed the following event at Morma's house one evening.

*Event 3:* After all members of the family gathered in the house before dinner had been prepared, Morma's grandchildren sat by his side on the floor. He looked at them and asked, "Do you want me to tell you stories?" The children smiled and nodded their heads in agreement.

Then Morma spoke the traditional opening: "Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies." Immediately, everyone in the house became quiet and listened attentively. Morma continued:

Once upon a time, a father gave a spear and a shield to his small child. The child asked the father, "What shall I do with these things?" and the father replied, "Keep them. Life will show you what you will do with them in the future." [The children smiled.] The child lived with his father and grew up and became a man. After he grew up, one day, enemies came to kill him. Then he used the shield and the spear to protect himself and defeat them. [The children smiled.] After that, he [the grown child] realized that what his father gave him when he was a child helped him to save himself from his enemy. [The children nodded their heads as if they understood.]

When Morma interpreted the folktale for his children, he said, "The spear and shield that the father gave to his child are the knowledge that parents give to their children. You may not recognize the use of this knowledge today. But, if you listen to me and put my words in your conscious minds, you realize the importance of it in the future, in your own ways, through your everyday lives."

The question that the child asked the father in the folktale (“What shall I do with these things?”) reflects what Jack Maguire expressed as the listener’s act of filtering knowledge. The response from the father, “Keep them. Life will show you what you will do with them in the future,” signifies that adults can provide children with knowledge but when to use it and how to use it must be left to the children to find out through their own life experiences. Interpretation by the grandfather is connected to the common belief among the Guji-Oromo that observation and listening are children’s modes of learning.

Depiction of adults as sources of knowledge for children occurs recurrently in the discourses and narratives of the Guji-Oromo. Nugusse (male, age 50) expressed that belief in the following interview.

*Event 4:* One day, in his house, I asked Nugusse, “What do you tell to your children as a father?”

He replied, “I often tell my children the following”:

See my actions and listen to my words and learn by yourself. I will teach you, and you should follow me. If you are not able to learn by yourself and do not want to follow me, you are not my children. Learn how to have wisdom from a wise person, how to be prosperous from a rich person, how to be strong from a powerful person. It is a person who learns from the wise who can have wisdom; the one who learns from the rich who can be prosperous, and the one who attends the powerful who can be strong.

Nugusse believes that Guji-Oromo parents are models from whom children learn how to be wise, rich, and strong. In the Guji-Oromo tradition, adults are portrayed as rich in local knowledge and powerful in social dealings. Storytelling gives children the chance to watch adult’s actions, listen to their speech, and learn from them in their own ways.

### **3. Raising Children’s Awareness about the Value of Adult Supervision**

Raising children’s awareness about principles and values related to social hierarchy through storytelling has been practiced among Guji-Oromo as customary way of shaping children. The Guji perceive adult supervision as indispensable in giving children proper guidance. Turi (male, age 50) asserts, “Parents assign their children duties and supervise them from a distance; they interfere and direct a

child only when he or she makes a mistake.” According to Turi, parents supervise children with the aim of shaping their actions in acceptable directions. Supervision is a way of empowering children to perform their household roles successfully. Turi added that it is through the process of storytelling that children listen to parents and understand their ideas. Sorreetti (female, age 55) emphasized that she often uses storytelling to demonstrate to her grandchildren the importance of supervision. I observed the following event one night at her home.

*Event 5:* One evening at Sorreetti’s home, I had coffee and interesting conversations with members of her family and her neighbors. After coffee, her neighbors left. Her grandchildren moved to her side and one spoke into her ear.

She smiled and said, “Do you want me to tell you a story?”

The grandchildren shouted, “Yes!”

Sorreetti recited, “Folktales of the Maatii, birds of a hill. It is a hill that cries and a fool that shies.” She continued:

Once upon a time, there was an elderly man in a village. The man had children. He always used to tell his children what they should do and should not do and closely watched their activities, but his children did not like his constant comments and watchful eyes. They said, “Do not tell us everything. We know it all, and we can do fine by ourselves.” [The children smiled.] The man accepted the suggestions of his children and stopped telling them what to do. He kept quiet, for his children did not accept his guidance. One day, his children collected the cattle, the goats, the sheep, and the calves to their shelters but forgot the donkeys outside in the field. The children came back to home thinking that they had collected all the animals to their shelters. However, the man realized that the children forgot the donkeys. He could not tell the children, as they did not like his comments, so he brayed like a donkey. [The children laughed.] Then the children realized that they forgot the donkeys in the field. They brought the donkeys to their shelter and learned that elders’ comments are useful. [The children nodded their heads as if they understood.]

At end of the telling, the grandmother repeated to the children, “It is wrong for children to perceive adult’s comments as useless.” She emphasized that children’s rejection of parents (“Do not tell us everything!”) and their claim for agency (“We know it all, and we can do fine by ourselves!”) are unacceptable. She also asserted that the silence of the man in the folktale suggests that good parents do

not impose upon children through interfering in their duties but show them clues and leave them to learn from the consequences of their actions.

#### 4. Children's Self-Socialization

Storytelling activities that parents perform for children are the basis for children's competence in interaction and play practices. Tekalign (male, age 10), who listened to his grandfather Udde's folktale about a careless donkey (see Event 1), articulated that, through the folktale, he observed the danger of being careless. He said, "I enjoyed the folktale as it showed me that I should not be like the donkey. I should not be careless and resistant to the words of my friends. I should identify what is safe from what is unsafe. I should know where I should go. I should know what I should and should not do." Similarly, most of the children who participated in the above storytelling events expressed that through listening and watching they learned that respecting their parents, grandparents, elders, and schoolteachers, as well as being conscious of their actions and behaviors, are expected social norms. As the children reflected, storytelling enabled them to feel socially responsible and be in harmonious relationships with adults. Even as the folktales teach respect and obedience to authority, by instilling an easy familiarity with social conventions, they can empower children's self-reliance, self-discipline, and social responsibility.

Similarly, children asserted that parents are knowledgeable in storytelling and can equip them with new folktales that they will then share with their peers in the pastures and at schools. Ashagire (male, age 10), who listened to the folktale about a man and his grandchildren from his grandmother, reflected:

I learn folktales from my parents/grandparents. My father and my grandfather are knowledgeable in storytelling. During nighttime at home, I often ask them to tell me folktales. I and my siblings sit by them and listen to their tales. Then, I tell the folktales to my friends in herding fields and at schools.

I observed Ashagire and Tekalign while they were telling the above folktales to other children in the fields on different days. This suggests that their parents' storytelling has positioned children as agents who receive knowledge from adults and transmit it to each other. At home, children initiate storytelling situations and motivate parents to tell folktales. The storytelling performances draw parents and



children together and serve as occasions for family interaction. The storytelling culture at home is taken outside the home and reproduced by children. Thus, children connect home to field through retelling folktales heard at home.

However, in child-to-child storytelling settings, children focus primarily on entertainment through telling and listening, rather than on interpreting the folktales and connecting them to the values and moral standards of the Guji-Oromo. I participated in a child-to-child storytelling event and interviewed the children about what they understood from the folktale about an elderly man and his children (see event 5). Children's responses to the interview shows that in the process of child-to-child storytelling, children reflect their own perspectives more than when they participate in the adult-to-child storytelling.

It is possible to learn this from the interview with Ashagire and Mihiret (female, age 12).

**TADESSE:** What have you learned from this folktale?

**ASHAGIRE:** The folktale teaches me that children should pay attention to adult comments. It is good to listen to adults, but I do not think that children always need adult's comments.

**TADESSE:** Do you think that the children in the folktale are right to avoid the comments of the old man?

**ASHAGIRE:** Yes, they are right. They know how to do things.

**TADESSE:** But they made mistakes by forgetting the donkeys outside.

**ASHAGIRE:** Adults can also make mistakes, not only children.

**MIHIRET:** I understood from the folktale that I should not ignore the comments and directives of my parents. Children should not be resistant to words from adults as adult words can help them accomplish their responsibilities successfully. But parents should also know that children can do things independently.

In the interviews concerning storytelling from adults, children tend to conform to adult perspectives, but in storytelling between members of their peer groups, they reflect their ambivalence with the values that adults articulate through storytelling. More specifically, it is clear from the interview that the folktale about the elderly man and his children convinced the children to accept adult supervision as useful to make their social actions more complete and effective. Children, however, believe that they can do things independently of adults, which implies that they regard adult supervision with ambivalence. This ambivalence

shows that children construe parents' socialization practices in their own ways and do not absorb them without retaining their own independent or opposing viewpoints. Although studies such as those by Christa Kamenetsky and Donna Eder reveal that adult discourses and practices constrain children's interest in acting outside of the scope of values and norms set for them by their culture, my interviews suggest that storytelling from adults to children enabled children to socialize themselves through learning local practices in ways meaningful to them. Children contextualize their social responsibilities and understand their relationships with their own social environments through storytelling. This implies that through acquiring knowledge from adults and drawing on their own imaginative abilities, children construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their own social environments.

## Conclusion

The performances, interviews, and observations cited here show that through intergenerational storytelling, Guji-Oromo parents use storytelling to mold their children in socially accepted developmental patterns. Parents tell cautionary, didactic, and disciplinary folktales to their children, with the purpose of making them reflective, confident, and self-controlled. The choice of storytelling as the basis for socialization is based on twofold cultural logic. First, storytelling provides rich contextual and mirroring functions. Storytelling as a process embodies events and messages that portray approved and disapproved patterns of behavior, reaction, and social relationships. Second, and most important, storytelling is a means of entertainment and a child-friendly mode of communication. For parents, it is an effective way of engaging children's minds, arousing their emotions while directing their thoughts. Children's inspiration for storytelling originates from the fact that folktale characters and their actions are relevant to the children's own needs and concerns.<sup>2</sup> The plots and interactions of the tales instill in children humorous insights about their social and natural environment. As a result, children initiate storytelling events during intergenerational family gathering times and listen courteously and enthusiastically while the telling is unfolding.

A secondary storytelling context discussed here is child-to-child storytelling. Through the socialization practices of parents, children acquire knowledge of storytelling and use this knowledge to develop their expressive competencies,

incorporate it into play interactions, and reveal their everyday concerns. Children do not merely absorb folktales and their messages from parents but also assimilate them into the realm of aspirational play and learning. As Argenti explained it, “Folktales enable children to express their experience of the world” (228).

I would argue that the study of storytelling among the Guji-Oromo has three potential significances. First, it shows that storytelling is a means for parents to accomplish their parenting responsibilities in line with the needs and concerns of their children. Second, it suggests that storytelling fosters close social relationships between parents and children and facilitates intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values. Third, it documents the power of storytelling in building creative child-to-child interactions and helping children adapt themselves to their social world.

Storytelling as a process of socialization has a dual impact in the social development of children. It creates smooth and cohesive relationships between children and adults, and it allows children to acquire from adults the knowledge and the skills that enable them to exercise their responsibilities. Storytelling creates cohesive intergenerational relationships, which in turn create a sustainable ground of common values for social stability. Therefore, storytelling helps bond children to the internal, intracultural system. Its effect on children’s acquisition of external (intercultural) knowledge requires further investigation.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the Norwegian Program for Development, Research and Education (NUFU) for providing financial support for this research. I also thank the parents, grandparents, and children who participated in the fieldwork and who graciously gave permission for their stories, reflections, and interactions to be recorded.

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## NOTES

1. This expression is commonly used by storytellers as an opening phrase and a means of attracting the attention of listeners. It implies that storytelling is a mark of knowledge and wisdom that a foolish person does not possess.
2. The characters are drawn from children's immediate social and physical environments and include small and large domestic and wild animals (rats, monkeys, donkeys, baboons, crows, bulls, hyenas, lions), family members (fathers, mothers, children, husbands, wives), and common classes of people (rich, poor, cattle herders, farmers, warriors, chiefs).

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