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ABSTRACT: Folktale performance is a popular cultural activity among the Guji-Oromo, an ethnic group in southern Ethiopia. While Guji-Oromo children gain pleasure from hearing and telling folktales, they also learn cultural practices and values as a result of tale performance. Parents tell folktales to their children in order to teach survival skills and cultural norms, but children also share folktales among themselves. This article analyzes how children produce meanings from the folktales they hear and tell. Using data from ethnographic fieldwork, I suggest that children are actors in their own socialization. As they tell and talk about stories, they reflect on the morals of former generations while also critiquing the social complexities of their immediate environments. While the children are eager to engage with modernity, their interpretations also bolster existing cultural norms.

LIKE PARENTS ALL over the world, adults in Africa use verbal art in order to socialize children; folktales, for example, often dramatize the skills, moral standards, and values that are useful for reproducing and successfully navigating customary ways of life (e.g., Abrahams 1995; Davis 2007; Eder 2010; Finnegan 2007; Honko 2000; Jaleta 2009; Lovelace 2001). Among the Guji-Oromo in Ethiopia, adults may be seen as the primary purveyors of cultural knowledge: one dictum holds that “a child listens and learns; a child is not mature enough to

speak.” But children are also active participants in the production and reproduction of culture, especially by means of expressive performance (Corsaro 1977, 1985; Lancy 2008). Children learn folktales from adults at home and later share them with other children in schools or on playgrounds (Finnegan 2007; McDowell 1995; Tucker 2008). Guji-Oromo children also tell and interpret stories in spaces free from adult domination, such as when they herd cattle in the fields or play with neighbors and siblings at home. As a number of scholars have shown, performances in child-specific contexts call into question the reliability of discourses that construct children as listeners only (Ekrem 2000; Gumperz 1991; Jalongo 1992; Kjørholt 2003).

Despite extensive research on children as active participants in socialization, the extent to which children make meaning from folktales has not been given adequate attention. How do children interpret the folktales they hear and tell? In this article, I examine how children generate knowledge through listening to, retelling, and interpreting folktales. Working in three Ethiopian villages (Samaro, Bunata, and Surro) during 2009 and 2010, I observed, played with, and listened to twenty-six children over the course of ten months.¹ Specifically, I participated in storytelling events in which children told folktales to each other and then explicated their meanings—an interpretive act that is part of the local storytelling tradition.² After each teller had explained the meaning of a story, I asked listeners whether their own interpretations matched that of the teller. Every participant—including me—gave his or her view and argued for or against the points raised by the other listeners. These discussions revealed the children to be competent social actors who use traditional oral narratives not only to reflect on the norms and values of former generations, but also to react to and critique aspects of their immediate social environments.

Children as Social Actors

Contemporary studies of childhood depict children as social actors in their own right (James et al. 1998; Kjørholt 2003; Kehily and Swan 2003; Lancy 2008). Children—even very small ones—are seen as “active agents in molding their social environments and controlling and directing the behavior of their mothers and fathers” (Zinnecker 2002, 113). This paradigm also affirms that children are active contributors to the reproduction of the social and cultural practices entrenched

in their daily lives; it emphasizes childhood as “socially creative” (Sutton-Smith 1995) and documents children’s capacity to manage social and cultural phenomena (Corsaro 1985; Jenks 2000; Kjørholt 2003; Wyness 2006). The notion that children are social actors emerges from two related strands of scholarship. The first recognizes the sociological significance of groups composed entirely of children, while the second asserts that children can affect their larger communities in addition to influencing their own peers and immediate families.

Researchers have documented the common traditions observable in the interactions of children with other children, suggesting that children comprise competent “folk groups” that generate and maintain their own cultural norms (Corsaro 1985; McDowell 1995; Mergen 1995; Mouritsen 2002). Margaret Brady, for instance, observed Navajo children reproducing oral narratives among themselves in school contexts. She argues that the children were explicit about their reasons for performing the narratives—they wanted to make each other learn about “skinwalkers”—and emphasizes that children develop their narrative competence through telling and listening to such narratives (1984). Scholars have found that the performance of shared folklore and expressive culture allows children to demonstrate their concerns and also articulate their interests and experiences in complex and dynamic ways; mimicry, mockery, and parody, for instance, are especially effective and creative social tools wielded by children (Sutton-Smith 1995; Tucker 2008; Zumwalt 1995).

Studying the expressive culture of children can also demonstrate how young people actively produce and change society (Mechling 1986; Opie and Opie 1959). Felicia R. McMahon, for instance, has shown how young male Sudanese refugees in the United States connected to their home culture by recontextualizing *DiDinga* childhood folksongs. McMahon writes, “In performance [of their childhood folksongs], the young men created their own counter-discourse that resisted characterization of their identities as victims and became ‘found’ rather than ‘lost’ boys” (2007, 177). Performing folksongs allowed the youths to maintain a traditional identity even as they refigured themselves in a new context; thus, children do influence processes of social continuity and change. Competent in influencing their immediate social environments, children can also make significant contributions to their societies as they receive and transmit cultural practices. While researchers have demonstrated that children’s knowledge and values are useful when

attempting to describe and understand a society, scholarship on childhood and children's folklore has looked less closely at what children make of their folkloric practices. Accordingly, in this article I argue that children actively interpret folk culture: as they tell and talk about stories, they reflect on the morals of former generations while also critiquing the social complexities of their immediate environments. The outcomes are complicated: on the one hand, the children are eager to engage with modernity; on the other, their interpretations work to bolster existing cultural norms.

The Research Setting

The Guji-Oromo people—estimated to number 1.6 million in 2007—are an ethnic group living in rural southern Ethiopia (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2008). They inhabit predominantly rural environments, and their land encompasses areas both lowland (below 1500 meters) and semi-highland (1500–2000 meters). The Guji-Oromo are ruled by a cultural institution known as the Gada system, which formulates norms and values and governs the performance and transmission of customary practices across generations (Beriso 1994; Hinant 1977; Van de Loo 1991).³ Guji-Oromo communities subsist on mixed agriculture that is dominated by animal husbandry and crop cultivation. People in the villages rear cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys for economic gain, but also as part of a cultural mandate. Pride is centered on cattle; people who do not own cattle are not considered to be proper Guji-Oromo and are identified as *yyessa* (the poor). Guji-Oromo also cultivate food crops such as maize, sorghum, beans, false banana, barley, sweet potatoes, and wheat (Beriso 2000).

Many Guji-Oromo do not read, and oral communication prevails in all aspects of their lives. Proverbs, songs, sayings, and legends are common in communication among adults, and riddles and folktales are modes of enculturation in children's play culture (Jaleta 2009; Van de Loo 1991). Home and cattle-herding fields are the two primary places in which children play and work. During the daytime, children herd cattle in fields far away from their villages. Cattle herding is therefore a context that brings together children from different villages, enabling them to play with and know each other on their own terms. Children tell folktales to friends in cattle-herding fields, as well as during class recesses at school compounds.

After the day's work, household members gather inside to relax and talk about their daily experiences. According to one saying, "Night is a time when the home is full and the *kraal* [shelter for cattle] is full": all family members have returned from their daily workplaces, and the cattle have also been gathered together until the next morning. People from the same neighborhood congregate in one home, and the adults share what happened during the day while drinking coffee and eating dinner. Parents and grandparents tell folktales to children while the latter listen and laugh. Though children do not take part in the conversation, which occurs only among adults, they eagerly anticipate these forms of evening sociality. In this setting, folktales have a didactic purpose, and children present themselves as learners. However, the home context also incorporates nighttime play among siblings, when children sit together inside the home or under moonlight and tell folktales to each other without the involvement of their parents.

Gaining access to children's spaces during fieldwork was a bit tricky. The fact that I am an adult—both older and physically larger than the children—invoked power dynamics and expectations of respect that presented significant challenges. Other researchers (Fine 1995; Pole 2007) have recommended maintaining close contact with children in their everyday places in order to comprehend their "interior lives" in spite of the power differential, so I walked with the children; worked and stayed with them in cattle fields, at school, and at home; contributed to child-friendly conversations and discussions; told my stories and listened to their stories; and restrained myself from judging their activities. In general, I attempted to give attention to the views and wishes of the children rather than pretending to act like them or consciously working to influence their views and actions.

In the discussions that are the focal point of this article, I positioned myself as a person intent on sharing this narrative practice by asking children to tell me their folktales and by acknowledging that they knew far more about folktales than I did. In addition to encouraging the children to direct the event, I worked to build a sense of authority in them by explaining that I was interested in storytelling and wanted to learn it from them. When a child told a folktale, I listened attentively and raised questions that established my place as a cultural novice. My inquiries and the children's attempts to respond to them, as well as my interest in their discussions, encouraged them

to participate freely. To illustrate this process and to show how folktales emerged through my interactions with the children, I present the following example from my field notes.⁴

Context: In a field, on September 25, 2009, I joined a group of children who were looking after cattle. When I arrived in the field, the children were sitting in a group and playing with one another. They stopped their interactions and kept quiet the moment I greeted and joined them. However, the silence of fear melted away after some minutes of conversation. I had the following conversations with the children, who were five in number (one girl and four boys) and between nine and twelve years old.

Tadesse Jaleta Jirata (J): [*After I sat down among them*] How are you, children?

All children: [*together*] We are fine.

J: What are you doing?

Child 1 (boy): We are looking after cattle.

J: I mean, what are you doing sitting here?

Child 2 (girl): We are playing.

J: OK, that is good. What are you playing?

Child 2: Storytelling!

J: You are playing “storytelling”! That is interesting. I like storytelling. Who is telling?

Child 3 (boy): [*pointing to Child 4*] He is telling. [*To me*] Do you know storytelling?

J: I do not know much. I know only a little. I want one of you to tell me.

Child 3: How can you say “I do not know storytelling”? You are an adult man. [*The other children laughed at my inability.*]

J: Well, I knew some folktales when I was a child like you, but I have forgotten most of them now. Do all of you know storytelling?

Child 4 (boy): We all know it. But some of us can tell many folktales and some of us can tell few.

J: With whom do you play “storytelling”?

Child 4: With our siblings at home and our friends in cattle-herding fields. We also hear folktales from our parents.

J: Who can tell us a folktale now? [*All of the children kept quiet and looked to one another.*]

Child 4: [*after a while*] I can tell one. [*The children looked happy and ready to hear a story from him.*]

J: OK, please go on.

Child 4: [*smiling*] Once upon a time, there was an old man who was travelling from his village to another village found at a distant place. While he was travelling, the sun set and he wanted to rest. He stopped and looked around. He saw a house near the road. He walked to the house and asked the householders to host him for the night. The householders permitted him to pass the night with them. They gave him food to eat and a place to sleep. In the middle of the night, after all members of the household had gone to bed, the old man walked silently to the fireplace and slept by the side of the fire, as he felt cold. After a while, the head of the household woke up and saw the man by the side of the fire. The head [of the household] asked the man, “Guest, what are you doing by the side of the fire?” The man replied, “I am cooking food for breakfast.” Then, the head [of the household] said, “That is good. Go on,” and went back into his bed. [*All the children laughed.*]

Child 4: This folktale portrays how old men are wise and knowledgeable.

Child 1: The man is wise; he fooled the head of the household.

J: It is an interesting folktale. I agree that it shows the wisdom of the old man. What else have you learned from it?

Child 5 (boy): I learned that a wise person can protect himself from risk.

Child 2: Why do you call someone who fools others “a wise man”?

Child 4: Someone who is not wise cannot fool others. The man is able to fool the head of the household, and he is wise.

Child 2: I disagree.

Child 4: Do you say he is not wise?

Child 2: He can be wise, but he is not good.

The debate among the children continued, and finally they agreed both that the man was wise and that it is wise to fool others.

The folktale and ensuing discussion was followed by another folktale, this time told by Child 1. Other storytelling events during my fieldwork unfolded in similar ways. Ordinarily, Guji-Oromo children never tell folktales to adults; to do so would be to disrupt a social hierarchy in which adults are the teachers—thus the children’s surprise when I asked them to tell me tales, and their incredulity that I did not know them already. One nine-year-old boy, for example, said to me, “Why do you ask us to tell you folktales? How does an adult learn folktales from children? Rather, children learn folktales from adults.”

As I negotiated this breach of communicative norms, my participation as a researcher went beyond telling and listening to folktales. I regularly asked questions that initiated more discussions and arguments, redirecting the children into their normal contexts of telling, explaining, and listening to folktales, and eventually ended discussions and proposed a return to more stories. While playing such a role, despite the inevitable authority I had as an adult researcher working with children, I tried not to put myself in the position of dominating children's participation or influencing their interpretations. In spite of my presence, it is clear that the children were working to comprehend and express folktales and folktale "lessons" in their own ways. Below I present three folktales told, interpreted, and discussed by the children to illustrate how children make meanings from their folktales.

Guji-Oromo Folktales

The folktales told by Guji-Oromo children are part of a broader range of expressive forms that include *meeshaa aadaa* (material culture), *jila* (customary practices and rituals), *weedduu* (folksongs), *mamassa gababaa* (short tales), *oduu duri* (myths and legends), *hibboo* (riddles), and *duri durii* (children's folktales).⁵ Many Guji-Oromo believe these culturally central forms offer ways to communicate survival skills, customary practices, norms, and values from past generations (ancestors) to future generations (children) via the present generation (grandparents and parents). Grandparents and parents, whom the people regard as active mediators between the past and the future, are accountable for the transmission of folklore to their children in order to ensure continuity of knowledge and tradition.

According to those with whom I spoke during fieldwork, riddles and folktales belong to the world of children, and hence are not performed by adults for other adults. However, adults regularly tell folktales in order to entertain children while acquainting them with knowledge indispensable for their social and cognitive development. Guji-Oromo folktales include characters drawn from the immediate social and natural settings of children. Common characters are wild animals (monkeys, foxes, lions, hyenas, rats, baboons, and snakes), domestic animals (donkeys, dogs, sheep, goats, cows, and bulls), and human beings. The characters frequently portray foolishness, wisdom, vice, virtue, obedience, and/or disobedience. Scholars have grouped

these folktales told to and by children into three categories: animal tales, religious (moralistic) tales, and anecdotes and jokes (e.g., Kidane 2002; Sumner 1996). Animal tales consist of folktales that embody interactions among wild animals, domestic animals, wild and domestic animals, and animals and human beings. Moralistic folktales are stories about divine reprimand and reward, proofs of loyalty and innocence, the value of obedience and respectfulness, and the virtues of harmony and interdependence, as well as the power of truthfulness and goodness to win over one's opponent. Anecdotes and jokes include tales about foolish persons and those about trickery between wise and foolish persons. The content of some folktales included in this paper matches that of narratives indexed over decades by scholars Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther (Uther 2004).

A significant feature of tales told by Guji-Oromo children is their focus on past times, past symbols, and past events. Stories begin with phrases such as "once upon a time" or "a long time ago"; these opening formulas prefigure how the folktales symbolize situations of the people in earlier periods and speak to the individuals in the present. The tales depict characters in extreme contrast: the strong versus the weak, the good versus the evil, and the wise versus the foolish. Thematically, they portray how the power of wisdom, fidelity, and morality shape and reinforce relationships among people. Adults seek to inculcate the values from these tales in the minds of their children. As one adult told me, "Using our folktales, we show our children the perils of foolishness, the merit of wisdom, the virtue of faithfulness, and the value of conforming to ancestral norms." The bewilderment of the foolish, the triumph of the weak over the strong, and the deceptive trickery of evil characters catch children's attention and arouse their emotions. They trigger smiles, gestures, murmurings, laughter, movement, and tensions in the process of telling and hearing (Eder 2010)—and they also lead children to incorporate the narrated situations into their own worlds of meaning.

Folktales as Mirrors of the Past

Some folktales encourage children to imagine the past and compare it with the present. Folktale 1 was narrated by a young girl (A) at home. Afterward, her three siblings, two of whom were boys (B and C), discussed and interpreted the tale. I also participated in talk about the

story. Below I present transcriptions of the context, the folktale, and the subsequent discussion in both Oromo and English.⁶

Folktale 1

Context: On one occasion, between 9:00 and 10:30 PM, I was at the home of one of my research participants in Samaro Village. I was sitting and chatting with the male head of the household. The man's four children (two boys and two girls) were also sitting together on the ground inside the home. The eldest child (A), a girl, was eleven years old, and the youngest (D), who was also a girl, was six. After we had finished coffee and dinner, I turned my attention to what the children were doing and could hear that they were telling something to each other. I took my stool and joined them. The children were not at ease as they had been before I joined them, because they found it strange that an adult man would want to hear children's tales. However, they were familiar with me being present in their home, in the fields, and in their school, so they were not shy and continued as before. When I asked them what they were doing, child B told me that they were playing. I asked them to start the game again, as I had missed part of it, and the girl (A) resumed from the beginning. She started by presenting the subject of the folktale, "Waa'ee Niitii Gowwaa" (I am going to tell you about a foolish woman), and then continued as follows:

Duri duri abbaa mina fi haadha minaa. Abbaa mina fi haadha minaa waliin baadiyaa jiraatu turan. Abbaan minaa guyyaa guyyaan magaalaa dedebi'a ture. Haati minaa abbaan minaa kiyyaa durbartii biraa jaalatee magaalaa dedebi'a jettuun shakkite. Guyyaa takka abbaan minaa ishee [*in a deep voice*], "Magaalaa deemee meeshaa mina bituu jira," jedhee isheeti yeroo himuu isheenimmoo [*in a low voice*] cal jette. Deemi hindeemiin hinjenne. Namichi garuu deemee, magaalaa oolee galgala gara qayee deebi'e. Yummuu deebi'u haadha minaa isaaf daawitii bitee dhufe. Mina gayee, mina seenee, daawitii olkaa'ee horii galchuu minaa bahe. Namichi yoo bahu, haati minaa waan inni bitee fidee olkaa'e kana kaastee ilaalte. Of duratti qaddee dabaltee ilaalte [*putting her palm in front of her eyes as if she were looking into a mirror*]. Dawitii kessatti dubartii bareedduu agartee. Namittin dubartii bareedduu kanatti ila baaste. Kan daawitii kessas akkanuma ila ishitti baaste. Achumaan haati minaa iyyite [*crying in a high-pitched voice like a woman*], "Kuni dubartii abbaa minaa kiyyaa magaalaa dedebisaa jirtu. Kinoo na ilaalaa jirti. Yoo ani iyyuu isheenis ni iyyiiti. Nan takalaa jirti," jette. Jaartiin ollaa jirtu iyya dha-geettee ka'ataa dhutte. Jaartiin mina olseentee [*in the deep voice of an old woman*], "Maal taatee iyyita?" jettee gaafattee. Haati minaa [*in a*

high-pitched and fast voice], “Abbaan minaa kiyjaa guyyaa hunda magalaa deema. Guyyaa guutuu achi oolee gaafimmoo achuma bula. Hara’a wanta magalaatti isa dedebisu argee jira. Magalaa sani keessaa dubartii bareeddu takka jaallatee jira. Abbaan minaa kiyjaa na gatu jira. Kinoo asumaan ishee arge. Naa laalaa; na takalaa jirti.” Jaartiin [*in a deep voice*], “Dubartiin tuni meeti?” jettee gafatte. Haati minaa [*in a high-pitched, fast voice*], “Kino asii jirti laali,” jettee daawitii jaartiitti kennite. Jaartiin daawitii fuutee ofi dura qaddee laalte akkana jette [*in a deep voice*], “Jaartii dulloontuu fokattuu kanaaf iyyita. Kuni amma duutii hiniyyiin.” Haati minaa kan jaartiin jette dhageette ofi qabbanesitee jedhama.

A Tale of a Husband and a Wife: A long time ago, there were a husband and a wife who lived in a rural village. The husband often travelled to the nearby town, and the wife was not happy about this, thinking he might start a new relationship with a woman in the town. One day, the husband told the wife [*in a deep voice*], “I am going to the town to buy some materials for home.” The wife kept quiet [*in a low voice*]: She neither approved nor disapproved of her husband’s words. But the husband went to the town, stayed the whole day there, bought a mirror for his wife, and returned to his home in the evening. He entered his house, put the mirror on a table, and went out to herd the cattle into their kraal. While he was outside, the wife wanted to see what her husband had brought from the town. She checked and saw a mirror. She took the mirror, stood up, and looked into it [*putting her palm in front of her eyes as if she were looking into a mirror*]. In the mirror, she saw a beautiful woman. The woman in the mirror was beautiful and staring at her. The wife cried [*in a high-pitched, fast voice like a woman*], “This is the woman in the town who is attracting my husband to the town. She is staring at me. She cries when I cry. She is mocking me.” The wife cried, and an old woman in the neighborhood heard her voice and came running. The old woman entered the house and asked the wife [*in the deep voice of an old woman*], “What is wrong with you?” The wife replied [*in a high-pitched, fast voice*], “My husband often goes to town. He stays in the town throughout the day and sometimes throughout the night. Today, I learned the secret of his stay in the town. He has a beautiful woman in the town, a mistress. He is going to leave me. I saw her here. She is looking at me and mocking me.” The old woman asked [*in a deep voice*], “Where is the woman?” The wife replied [*in a high-pitched, fast voice*], “She is here. Look at her.” She gave the mirror to the old woman. The old woman looked into the mirror and saw herself in it. She said [*in a deep voice*], “She is old and not beautiful. She is old enough and will die soon. You should not worry about her.” Then the wife was persuaded by the words of the old woman and calmed herself down.

As the girl narrated the folktale, the children listened to her conscientiously, sometimes smiling, sometimes gesturing, sometimes looking to each other and laughing, and sometimes helping her when she failed to remember parts of the tale. The girl finished the folktale and then articulated the moral: “Mammassi kun gowwaa akka hintaanee ijoollee barsiisa” (this folktale teaches children that they should not be foolish). This statement triggered a discussion among the children and me:

Child A (the teller): Mammassi kun gowwaa nama durii mul’isa.

Child D: Miti, jirenya nama baddiyaa ibsa.

Child B: Ani guwumaa durii sani mul’sa jedha.

Tadesse Jaleta Jirata (J): Akkamiin?

Child A: Niitiin gowwaa. Daawitii kessaati ifi agartee ifi wallaalte. Mammassi kun nami durii hagam gowwaa akka ta’e fi qarooma akka hinqabine muli’sa. Daawitii arganii hinbeekne. Fakkii ofiillee arganii hinbeekne.

Child C: Dhugaadha. Niitiin gowwaa, daawitii kessaa ofilaaltee ofwalaalate. [*laughter*]

Child D: Nami durii gowwaa, baadiyyaa wanta jiraatuuf. Nami ammaa magaalaa jiraata qaroo. [*laughter*]

J: Baddiyaa fi magalaan addaa?

Child D: Ewo, adda. Magaalaa deemanii meshaa ammayyaa bitatani. Namich illee magaalaa deemee daawitii niitiif bite mitii.

J: Nami durii gowwaa yoo jenne; nami hammaayaawoo?

Child B: Nami hammaa qoroodha. Fakkeennafi dubartiin durii daawitii hinbeektu. Dubartiin amma daawitii nibeekti.

J: Ka duri gowwaa ta’u akkamiin beekna?

Child A: Mammassi kun yeroo durii yeroo gowwumma ta’uu isaa ibsa. Niitiin kun nama durii, nama durii ta’unn gowwaa waan taateef daawitii kessan ifi argartee if walaalate.

Child D: Naaf galee, Sirridha.

J: Nami durii beeka, kan aadaa beeku mitii?

Child C: Aadaa beeku malee garuu gowwaa. Aadaa qofa beeka.

Children A and B: Sirri jedhe.

J: Kanafuu mammassi kun gowwuma ibsa jetani?

Children A, B, and C: Ewo, namii durii gowwaa, yeroon durii yeroo gowwumaa ta’uu ibsa.

Child A: This folktale tells about the ignorance of the people in the past.

Child D: No, it is about life of people living in a remote area.

Child B: For me, it reflects the ignorance in the past times.

J: How?

Child A: The wife is a fool. She saw herself in the mirror and considered herself to be another woman. The folktale reflects how the people in the past were ignorant and uncivilized. They did not know about mirrors and had never seen their own image in one.

Child C: She [Child A] is right. The woman is foolish. She understood herself to be another woman. [*laughter*]

Child D: People in the past were ignorant because they lived in the countryside. They didn't live in town. [*laughter*]

J: Is the countryside different from town?

Child D: Yes, town is a place where people buy new goods. But there are no such goods in remote areas.

J: If we say people in the past were ignorant, what about the people in the present time?

Child B: People in the present time are wise. For example, women in the past did not know about mirrors. But today women in the rural villages know about mirrors and use them. They are not as ignorant as women in the past.

J: How can we know that those in the past were ignorant?

Child A: This folktale tells us that the past was a time of ignorance and people in the past were ignorant. The woman in the tale belongs to the past. The woman in the folktale was confused about her own image because of her lack of knowledge of the mirror.

Child D: I've got it now. She is right.

J: Are old people not wise? Are they not knowledgeable?

Child C: They know culture very well. But they are not wise.

Children A and B: He is right.

J: Are you telling me that this folktale reflects ignorance?

Children A, B, and C: Yes, people of the past time were ignorant and the past was a time of ignorance.

Through such discussions and negotiations the children collectively characterized the woman in the folktale as *gowwaa* (ignorant) and interpreted the folktale as representing *gowumma* (ignorance). They

asserted: "The woman in the folktale was confused by her own image because of her lack of knowledge of the mirror." To them, the woman's sense of strangeness to herself reflected her deeply remote life and environment. Such "idiotic" behavior is a source of pleasure and entertainment for children. Even though there are three primary characters in the folktale (the wife, the husband, and the old woman), the children were interested in discussing only the wife because her foolish acts, manifested by her inability to recognize her own image, engaged their emotions and minds. They did not discuss the actions of the man (the husband) and the old woman for two reasons. First, the children were not astonished by the man's actions (going to town and buying a mirror for his wife), because they were ordinary to them. Second, the old woman did not recognize herself, but the children observed that the same failing was more apparent and significant in the reactions of the wife. Old men and old women, they said, are commonly and understandably confused by modern objects such as mirrors, but by today's standards the younger woman—even in the countryside—should have known better. Thus, in the processes of telling and listening to a folktale, these children paid more attention to characters with unusual actions, construing folktales in terms of the roles performed by those characters.

Further, as they performed and interpreted the folktales, these children reflected on changes in their social environments. In this case the children observed that two sets of contrast were embedded in Folktale 1: the first is the contrast between the town, which symbolizes the modernity with which rural villagers may be less familiar, and the village, which symbolizes traditionalism, a characteristic in the lives of rural people. The children explained that the mirror (an element of modernity) revealed how the wife, who represents traditionalism, was unfamiliar even to herself. The folktale portrays how modernity reveals the unseen negative aspects of traditionalism, and children who listen to it tend to be overwhelmed by how the conflict between these social phenomena puts human beings in a state of confusion about themselves and their environments. A related contrast is between the past and the present: according to the children, these temporal states index ignorance and knowledge, respectively. Folktale 1 thus connected four Guji-Oromo children to the past and helped them visualize changes and continuities between the past and present; in addition, by casting the isolated women as foolish, the concrete story prompted the children to evaluate the abstract social conditions that undergird the tale.

Folktales as Reflections on Intergenerational Change

In the process of telling, listening to, and interpreting folktales, Guji-Oromo children are also able to observe and comment on discontinuities between generations. The children's discussions and interpretations of Folktale 2 show how children construct discontinuities and draw differences between the elderly and the young in terms of interpersonal concordance and obedience. The folktale was performed and discussed by a group of children (all between eight and twelve years old) as they watched over the cattle. A twelve-year-old boy told the folktale to seven other children, five boys and two girls. Later, the children discussed what the folktale meant to each of them; I also participated in the discussion by arguing, supporting, and asking questions. The following is a verbatim transcription of the folktale, followed by its English translation.

Folktale 2

Duri duri jaallewwan lameen turan. Guyyaa takka minaa ba`anii bosona seenani. Waanta nyaataniif waanta dhugan barbaadachaa bosona kessa jiraachuu jalqaban. Bosana kessa deemuun nyaata barbadachaa osoo jiranuu, lameen kessaa takka jirma jigee ciisu argee, "Sagalee argadhe," jedhe. Inni dhibiinis, "Anis sagalee argadhe," jedhe. Jirmi sagalee ta'e. Lameenu nyaatan. Lameen bosona keessa deemu itti fufan. Takkichi tortora baala mukaa argee, "Dammaa arge" jedhe. Inni dhibii llee "Anis damma arge" jedhe. Tortoraan baalaa damma taanaan lamenuu nyatan. Ammas bosona keessa deemu itti fufan. Takkichi kuufama bishanii argee, "Aannan arge" jedhe. Inni biraas akkanuma jedhe. Bishaan aannan ta'e. Lameen dhugan. Akkanaa gammadanii yeroo dheeraaf bosona kessa jiraatan. Lameenu ijoollee horan. Guyyaa takka, ijoollee saanii waliin sagalee fi aannan barbaada bosona kessa deeman. Osoo deema jiranuu, akkuma yeroo kaanii jirma jigee ciisu argan. Isaan kessaa takka, "Sagalee arge" jedhe. Inni dhibiis "Anillee sagalee arge," jedhe. Ijoollee isanii kessa inni takka, " Ani jirma malee sagalee argaa hinjiru," jedhe. Mucaan inni biraa, "Anis jirma qofa argaa jira," jedhe. Jirmi sagalee ta`uu didate. Deemsa isanii itti fufuun kuufama burqaa bishaanii argan. Nameen kessaa inni takka, "Aannan arge" jedhe. Inni dhibiinis akkanuma jedhe. Garuu, ijoollee isaanii kessa inni takka, "Kun bishaan. Aannan meeti?" jedhe. Inni biraas "Ani bishaan qofa arge" jedhe. Bishaan aannan ta`uu didate. Nameen fi ijoolleen isaanii sagalee fi aannan argachuu dadhaban. Achumaan, jireenya isaanii fi jaalummma isaanii dhaabani gara mina isaanii duraatti deebi`an jedhama.

Once upon a time, there were two friends. One day, they left their homes and went into a big forest to live there and search for food. While they were searching for food in the forest, one of them who saw a big log lying on the ground said, "I saw food." The other said, "I also saw food." The log became food and they ate it. They continued to walk in the forest and saw a pile of decayed leaves on the ground. One of them said, "I saw honey." The other said, "I also saw honey." The decayed leaves became honey, and they ate them. Again, they walked in the forest and came to a small pond. Then, one of them said, "I saw milk." The other repeated the same. The water became milk, and they drank it. They lived in the forest successfully in that way for a long time. Both of them begot children. One day, along with their children, they started to move about in the forest to search for food and milk. As usual, they saw a log lying on the ground. One of the men said, "I saw food." The other man replied, "I also saw food." One of the children said, "I could not see any food—only a log." The second child said, "I also saw a log." The log did not become food. They continued on and saw a stream of water. One of the men said, "I saw milk." The other man repeated the same. One of the children said, "This is water. Where is the milk?" The second child said, "I saw only water." The water did not become milk. The men and their children could not find food to eat and milk to drink as before. They abandoned their life in the forest, as well as their friendship, and returned to their former homes.

The boy ended the telling by saying, "Mammassi kun waliigalteen barbaachisaa ta`u isaa mul`isa" (this tale shows that interpersonal harmony is essential). Then the other children expressed what they understood from the tale.

In their discussion of this story, some children stated that the folktale reflected the life of forest dwellers, while others articulated that it portrayed old people as more willing to concur. After a period of argument and discussion, the children reached a consensus and said, "The folktale depicts that old persons are more agreeable than the young ones." According to the children, the folktale is a manifestation of interpersonal agreement in older generations, as well as a representation of how historically successful modes of decision making can be impeded by a dissenting younger generation. Expressing the power of harmony to resolve social problems, the children said, "The men agreed to accept a log as food, and it became food for them. They also agreed to accept water as milk, and it became milk." According to this explanation, a log and water were reconstructed as food and milk through words of agreement. The children understood that through agreement, something that is considered worthless can become valuable.

Talk about discord between children and adults also led children to comment on intergenerational communication in their own lives. One of the children stated: “The problem between the generations is miscommunication [i.e., the misunderstanding between children and parents].” For at least one, the source of miscommunication lay with the children. A ten-year-old girl remarked, “Similar to what is observable in the folktale, there is mutual communication and agreement among adults in my village. However, children agree neither with adults nor with each other.” It is such inter-generational miscommunication that leads to changes and discontinuities in the construction of reality. Through discussing and interpreting Folktale 2, these Guji-Oromo children were capable of construing the changes between older and younger generations in terms of their own ways of life.

Folktales and the Effects of Heterogeneous Values

In Guji-Oromo culture, the long-established norm of intergenerational relationships often presents adults as *guddaa* (seniors) and children as *xiqqaa* (juniors). The *guddaa-xiqqaa* custom of relationships prescribes the social places of adults and children in intergenerational interactions. Guji-Oromo children’s understandings of this norm are illustrated through a discussion and interpretation of Folktale 3, “A Father and His Son.”⁷ This folktale was performed by a group of children aged between seven and eleven years in a cattle-herding field. It was told by a ten-year-old boy and heard by seven children, of whom only one was a girl. The process of telling and listening was followed by a discussion in which the children argued about what the man and the boy in the folktale should and should not do. I also listened to the folktale and participated in the discussion. The transcript of the folktale and its English translation are as follows:

Folktale 3

Dur dur, abbaa fi mucaan qayee isaaniitii ka`anii magalaa deemuu turan. Abbaan farada yaabee deemaa ture. Mucaan xiqayoo gannaa kudhan ta`u garuu miillaan abbaa faana bu`ee deema ture. Abbaa fi mucaan eega fagaatanii deemaniin booda, namichi takka, kan gara magaalla irraa badiyyaa deemuu jiru isaanitti dhufe. Namichi kun, dhabbatee abbaa fi mucaa ilaaleen booda akkana jechuun abbaatti dubbate [*in a*

low voice of surprise], “Ati akkam gara-jabessa? Akkamiin mucaan diqayyoon kun millaan osoo deemaa jiru ati farda irraa teette denta? Ati nama guddaa jabaataa wantaateef mucaa farda gubbaa kessee ifii kee milla keen deemuu qabda.” Abbaan hima namicha fudhachuun farda irraa gadi bu’ee mucaa farda gubbaa kaa’ee deemuu ittifufe. Xiqayyoo eega deemanii booda, namichi biraa kan magaalaa irraa baadiyyaa deemu jiru isaanitti dhufee. Dhabbatee jara eega illaaleen booda akkana jechuun mucaatti dubbate [*in a low voice of surprise*], “Muca! Salphaa akkamiti ati? Akkamiin abbaan kee millaan oso deemuu ati farda gubbaa teetta? Farda jaarssa kanafi kennii ati millaa keen deemi.” Mucaan hima namicha fudhachuun farda irraa gadi bu’ee abbaan farda gubbaa taa’ee deemuu ittifufan. Achiin booda abbaa fi mucaan waliin mar’atan akkana jechuun, “Namichi kun kana dubbate; namichi dhibiin kan biraa dubbatte. Lameen keynaa millaa kenyaan haa deemnu.” Millaan deemuu fi walii galan. Farda saanii arkifatani demmuu itti fufan. Deemaa oso jiranuu, namichi takka kan gara badiyyaa deemaa jiru isaanitti dhufee akkana jedhe [*in a low voice of surprise*], “Isin namoota gowwaa akamiiti? Farda oso qabdaniif lafa deentu?” Abbaa fi mucaan jechaa namicha kanaan sallatani lameenu farda ol koranii deemuu ittifufan. Xiqoo eega demaniin booda, namichi dhibiin isanitti dhufee akkana isaniin jedhe [*in a low voice of surprise*], “Isin ila hinqabdanu? Hinagartanu? Akkamiin nami lameen farda tokkicha koran?” Abbaa fi muccaan garagarumma yaada namoota dinqisifatani, yaada namoota sanii hunda dhiisanii akka duraan deemaa turanitti deemuu jalqaban. Abbaan farda koree mucaan millaan booda farda bu’ee deemuu itti fufan jedhama.

Once upon a time, a father and his son were travelling from their home in a rural village to a town. The man was riding on a horse, and his son, who was ten years old, was following him on foot. After the father and his son had travelled a certain distance, a man who was travelling on foot from the town to the village came up to them, looked at them, and said to the father on the horse [*in a low voice of surprise*], “How cruel are you? How can you ride the horse while this small child travels on foot? You should put the child on the horse and walk on foot, since you are stronger than the child.” The father accepted the rebuke, and got down from the horse and put the child on it instead. He walked on foot, and the child rode on the horse. After they had travelled for some distance, another man who was travelling from the town to the rural village came up to them, looked at them, and said to the child on the horse [*in a low voice of surprise*], “How rude are you? How can you ride the horse while your father walks on foot? You should leave the horse to this old man and walk on foot.” The child accepted this rebuke and got down from the horse. The father and the son discussed the matter, saying, “This man said this but the former man said the opposite. Both of us shall

walk on foot.” They agreed to walk. They led the horse and started to walk on foot. After they had walked some distance, another man walking to the rural village saw them and said [*in a low voice of surprise*], “What kind of fools are you? Why do you walk on foot and lead the horse?” The father and his son were confused by this comment, and both of them got onto the horse and started to ride on it. After a while, another man saw them and said to them [*in a low voice of surprise*], “How blind are you? Why do both of you ride on one horse?” The man and his son were surprised by the diversity of the comments they had received. They rejected all of them and agreed to travel as they originally had: the father rode on the horse and the son walked on foot.

Eventually, the boy interpreted this tale as, “*Namoonni aadaa hinbee-kine yaadi isanii addaa adda. Mammassi kun kana ibsa*” (People who do not have knowledge about the common values cannot have common ideas. That is what the tale portrays). The other children and I discussed the idea this child raised by adding our own views on the story.

When I discussed the different travelers’ comments with the children, they alluded to the norms and values in adult–child relationships as well as to the social positions of children in Guji-Oromo culture. In the beginning of the discussion, some children voiced the opinion that the boy in the folktale was biologically weak and could not travel long distances on foot, and therefore should have ridden on the horse. The others asserted that according to Guji-Oromo culture, an adult is honored, and hence the father should have ridden on the horse. These children emphasized that it is not a Guji-Oromo norm for a child to ride on a horse while an adult walks on foot. In their discussion of these issues, the children viewed their own social roles from two different perspectives. Some of them considered children’s social roles in terms of biological or physical realities, while others viewed children’s roles from cultural perspectives. However, after some deliberation, all of the children agreed that adults hold honored and senior social positions in Guji-Oromo culture. The debate about children’s roles from the perspective of biological constraints lost out to the idea that the child’s role in this situation was best determined by cultural factors. As they moved toward consensus, the children concurred with the solution suggested by the story: the original (the Guji-Oromo) way was best; they also reaffirmed the importance of mutual communication, as had been previously suggested by Folktale 2. According to the children, the characters in Folktale 3 make conflicting comments because they are not

conscious of the values and norms related to adult–child relationships in Guji-Oromo cultural life. The children agreed that “in Guji-Oromo culture superior social positions are given to adults, and it is a father who deserves to ride on the horse. The role of a child is to walk on foot and accompany the father.”

In sum, then, in these post-narration discussions the children suggested that it is through collective social and cultural values that people can arrive at mutual agreements and interpretations. Without common values, it is difficult to construct shared meaning from the actions and behaviors of humankind.

Conclusions

In this article I have shown that children are actors not only when listening to and telling folktales but also when interpreting them; they approach folktales as windows to culture, rooted in the past and persisting as cultural objects in the present (Finnegan 2007). The Guji-Oromo children I met during fieldwork used folktales as a way to bridge the actions, knowledge, and values of their forebears with their own experience in the present, helping them explain the past from their own perspectives (see Ekrem 2000). On the one hand, they actively thought about and tried to make sense of the past; on the other, in the act of telling and discussing folktales they were empowered to put forward their own perspectives on social and cultural events in their own environments. Thus, children’s interpretations of folktales helped them think about how the actions and lives of the present generation deviate from those of the past (see Mushengyezi 2008), and the tales prompted the children in my study to explore the consequences of those changes. In effect, as they played “storytelling,” the children became actors in their own socialization. Even as they valued the expanded knowledge and opportunities they associated with modernity, their interpretations also affirmed existing cultural norms with regard to consensus building and adult–child hierarchies.

As educators and as scholars, then, it is important to pay attention to children’s lore and what children do with it. Children think about expressive culture as they perform it, and occasions for meta-commentary help children articulate their views in relation to the cultural settings in which they find themselves. In my own fieldwork, folktales enabled children in Guji-Oromo villages to express their interpretations and their perspectives confidently on matters that concerned their own

lives and those of family members—and they did so even with an adult outsider in their midst. We see that children have the capacity to interpret, understand, and express social and cultural realities; to form relevant and significant perspectives on reality; and to regulate their own environments. Practically speaking, it seems useful for schools, parents, and others responsible for the care and learning of children to encourage active participation in local expressive cultures. Children who are asked to interpret their folk culture may be enhanced in their capacity to forward their own views, and perhaps be more willing to participate in other school activities. Such a pedagogical approach could work to validate local knowledge and values; it would also encourage children's capacity for learning from and changing their social environments by prompting both reflection and evaluation.

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Notes

1. My fieldwork took place from June to December 2009 and from May to August 2010. Although I obtained letters from political administration officials that asked for consent and support from the local people, it was not until village leaders had ascertained my identity and purpose for themselves that I was permitted to begin my research. They asked where I was born, who my father was, who my grandfather was, which clan I belonged to, where I was brought up, where I was living, and why I had come to their villages. After they deliberated and felt satisfied that I could speak Oromo and had a legitimate purpose, they gave me their blessing and allowed me to live and move around in their villages. Twenty-six children, whose ages were between seven and fourteen years and who resided in the rural villages, participated in the research process. Ten of the children were female, sixteen were male, and all attended primary schools in their respective villages.

My methods included participant-observation and unstructured interviews with children in storytelling events at homes, in cattle-herding places, and in schools. I conducted unstructured interviews and discussions with participant children before, during, and after storytelling events. I carried out multiple unstructured interviews with and observations of children across these places and times with the aim of capturing variations across different groups of children (Fine 1995; Goldstein 1999). I express gratitude to all those children and adults who participated in the process of my fieldwork.

2. Both adults and children commonly explain a tale after its telling. In Guji-Oromo communities, storytellers are expected to convey a message (moral, corrective, etc.) by means of narrative, and it is part of the telling to explain the message.

3. The Gada system involves generational grades that acquire leadership every eight years, during which they assume cultural power and ritual responsibilities.

Each grade remains in power in a specific Gada period (eight years) and begins and ends with a ritual transfer of power.

4. While I observed and interviewed, I jotted down the fundamental points in my notebook. Immediately afterward, I expanded these notes into a complete narration of the situation. I also made use of audio and video to record the folktales and interviews. But because the children were fond of looking at their images in the camera and hearing their voices on audiotapes, using these devices during fieldwork was challenging: they distracted the children and affected the flow of the event. All texts in the original language are verbatim transcriptions from audio recordings; translations from the original language to English are mine.

5. Guji-Oromo children refer to folktales as *duri durii*; adults refer to them as *mammassa ijoollee*.

6. Folktale 1 includes elements found in Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type 1383 (known by some as the German folktale “Fredrick and Catherine”), about a foolish wife and her husband.

7. Folktale 3 corresponds to Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type 1215 (also known in Aesop’s tales as “The Man, the Boy and the Donkey”), about a man and his son who must respond to the diverse comments of passers-by.

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