

## LEARNING THROUGH PLAY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CHILDREN'S RIDDLING IN ETHIOPIA

*Tadesse Jaleta Jirata*

Udessa: Take a riddle.

Elema: I took a riddle.

Udessa: I said 'Take a riddle', and you said 'I took a riddle?'

Elema: Yes.

Udessa: An owner of one hundred spears is standing and dancing.

Elema: [after thinking for a while] Is it a living thing or a non-living thing?

Udessa: It is a living thing.

Elema: [after thinking for a while] Is it a domestic thing or a wild thing?

Udessa: It is a wild thing.

Elema: Yes, I've got it. It is a buffalo.

Udessa: Wrong.

Elema: Now, I've got it. It is an acacia tree.

Udessa: Wrong.

Elema: Pick a country.

Udessa: I picked Borana land and possessed it with its people and cattle. The answer is a palm tree. It has sharp leaves.

Elema: I see. A palm tree has sharp leaves.

This is a transcript of riddling performed by Udessa (a ten-year-old boy) and Elema (an eleven-year-old boy) and demonstrates one of the popular play arts in the repertoire of the Guji people's oral tradition (Beriso 2000). The Guji people have a rich oral tradition that includes *oduu duri* (myth and legend), *duri duri* (folktales), *hibboo* (riddles), *mammassa gababa* (proverbs) and *weedduu* (folk-songs). Of these forms of oral tradition, the proverb, the myth and the legend are regarded as arts of communication for adults, whereas the folktale and the riddle are forms that constitute children's play practices. The folktale is told by adults to children as well as by children to children. Parents perceive this process as a means of knowledge transmission, whereas for children it is a form of play. However, the riddle is performed and transferred between children alone. In addition to these oral arts, Guji children play *giricha* (a stone-throwing game like jacks), *duqo* (a 'count and capture' game known elsewhere as *mancala*) and *waatolcha* (impressions), but attribute great significance to riddling and the processes of interrogation and interpretation that it involves. For example, when I asked Udessa and Elema about the type of play practice they like to play every day, both of them responded that they play riddling. It is the game every child knows and enjoys, they said.

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Most studies of riddles in African contexts emphasize their role in instilling cultural values (see Ben-Amos 1977; Beriso 2000; Derive 2003; Finnegan 1970, 2007; Kyoore 2010; Njoroge 1994; Noss 2006; Okpewho 1992; Schmidt 1971, 1977). They discuss the use by adults of riddles—and, in a similar way, other forms of African folklore—as a means of educating and disciplining children. However, the social and educational meaning of riddling from the children’s perspective, and the way these meanings are played out in the making of children’s peer culture, have only been included in studies of childhoods and children’s folklore in African contexts to a limited degree. These shortcomings of studies of African oral tradition are being recognized. A good example of this development is the work of Nicolas Argenti (2010), which approaches folktales as child-centred verbal play through which children express their lived experience. Argenti discusses folktales told by children in Cameroon and argues that children appropriate folktales to make sense of their context and express their own views through them. Helen Schwartzman’s (1978) conceptualization of play as child-centred exercise, which provided the basis for Argenti’s interpretation of folktales as child-centred practice, is also relevant here. Schwartzman’s comparative study was based on reports from Africa, America, Asia and Europe, and showed how children create and recreate discrete play worlds for themselves. Argenti’s and Schwartzman’s approaches are relevant for this analysis of riddling in showing how children produce and share riddles independently of adults, and how they manipulate riddling as the process and occasion of learning and playing together. Also important in defining the questions for this research is Carol Eastman’s (1984) account of Swahili oral tradition in which she states that the study of riddling should cover the time and place of riddle telling and interpreting, the identity of participants, how the participants perform and interpret riddles, and the description of the riddles that participants tell and interpret. Although Eastman does not examine riddling as a discrete sphere of children’s play, this agenda is useful in showing how riddling constitutes a form of expressive culture.

In this article, I use Argenti’s and Schwartzman’s notion of child-centred verbal play and the aspects of the context of riddling presented by Eastman to demonstrate how Guji children perform riddling and facilitate their own informal learning through it. The central objective of my study is to document riddling as a sphere for children’s autonomous entertainment and knowledge acquisition. My discussion is based on the social constructivist epistemology which, according to James *et al.* (1998) and Wyness (2006), presents children as social actors who are able to perform their play activities without direct involvement of adults. In the Nordic context Mouritsen (2002), for example, adopts this perspective when he argues that children have their own, independent practices that they perform as play activities without the involvement of adults.

Thus, I view children as social actors and construct riddling as a critical element of their cultural practice through which they produce informal social networks and learn about the physical and social phenomena in their local environment. Grounded in this epistemological perspective, I raise two questions. First, how do children recreate their social world and share their play interactions through riddling? Second, how does riddling, as a child-centred practice, function as a context for children’s informal knowledge acquisition? I begin my discussion by presenting the everyday lives of Guji children as the social background to my

research and the methodological practices that I employed for data generation. Then, I analyse adults' and children's perspectives on the place and time of riddling; riddling as a discrete practice for children; the way in which children perform riddling; and the various forms of children's riddles among Guji people. Finally, I describe the way in which children acquire knowledge through performing riddling.

### EVERYDAY LIFE OF GUJI CHILDREN

Every day, I wake up early in the morning, clean the house, fetch water and make the morning coffee. My brother also wakes up early and works on the farm near our home. When the coffee is ready, I wake my parents, call my brother back and invite the neighbours to drink the coffee. When the coffee is over, my brother takes his notebooks and rushes to school. But I have to wash the coffee pot and the cups, and put them back before I leave for school. We walk for twenty minutes in order to reach the school. From morning (8 a.m.) to noon, we stay at school and learn; there are six periods in a day. During the break time and when a subject teacher is absent, we play riddles, storytelling, and *giricha* ('jacks') with our friends, but without shouting. At noon, I come back home along with my brother. At home, my mother gives us food to eat and water to drink. Then I rush to the bush to collect firewood and my brother goes to herd cattle. In the evening at home we [the siblings] come together and play riddling with each other as well as listening to stories from our parents. My brother shares the new riddles he learns from other children while herding.

This is the account of the daily routine of Idile, a ten-year-old girl, and her twelve-year-old brother, and it represents the life of children among Guji people—one of the Oromo ethnic groups living in a rural part of southern Ethiopia. The Guji people practise traditional subsistence agriculture, which includes crop cultivation and animal husbandry (Beriso 1994; van de Loo 1991). According to the 2007 housing and population census of Ethiopia, the Guji have a population of 1.6 million and 90 per cent of this population reside in a remote rural environment (FDRE 2007). The overall literacy level of the people is not known officially, but my household observations show that in the areas covered by this research only one out five household members have basic reading and writing skills, and oral communication has been and remains the primary means of interaction.

Children below fifteen years old constitute 41 per cent of the Guji population, of whom only 40 per cent attend school on a regular basis (FDRE 2007). As indicated in Idile's story, the contemporary everyday life of the Guji children is characterized by three social engagements: work, school and play. Every day, the children are absorbed in routines such as fetching water, collecting firewood, caring for smaller children, cultivating the garden and herding cattle. Through these activities children expand their social networks. Cattle herding, for example, is a daily activity in which children combine work with play (Beriso 2000; Debsu 2009). The pasture used for herding cattle brings children from different homes together and creates opportunities for them to play together and to establish peer relationships without adult surveillance. In contrast, children's interactions at home are heavily influenced by strict values of intergenerational respect between *gurgudda* (seniors) and *xixiqa* (juniors) that

place children in a subordinate social position (Beriso 1995; Jirata 2011). These disciplinary regimes mean that at home, as I shall discuss further below, children share storytelling with their parents, but perform riddling only with their siblings.

Guji children do not attend school regularly. According to the children themselves, the two social factors discouraging them from school are domestic work and the limited play opportunities they get at school. Children recognize their domestic obligations and the need to herd cattle or help out at home, which are prerequisites for school attendance. For example, Ashagire (a ten-year-old boy) said, 'How can one learn without eating and eat without working?' As a result, those children that go to school attend for half the day only (from 8 a.m. to noon) and devote the rest of their days to herding cattle and household routines. The disciplinary measures that the school imposes on children's play activities are another factor that discourages attendance. Genet (an eleven-year-old girl) explained the situation: 'In school, we do not have sufficient time to play. . . . It is only in the break time and when a subject teacher is absent that we can play silently. It is not allowed to play loudly in school.' Such school rules compel children to remain quiet in the school compound and constrain their play time. As a result, work rather than school provides Guji children with the time and space in which they can play with freedom from adult control.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical data in this article are drawn from ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in three rural Guji villages.<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork included participant observation in children's riddling sessions in three schools,<sup>2</sup> four cattle-herding locations and ten homes, along with ethnographic interviews with children and their parents in their homes and workplaces. I carried out participant observations in thirty-five children's riddling sessions and ethnographic interviews with sixty children (twenty-five girls and thirty-five boys), eleven parents (six mothers and five fathers) and nine grandparents (four grandmothers and five grandfathers), all of whom were randomly selected from the people in the villages. In all riddling sessions, I blended the observations with interviews and performed these simultaneously. My ability to speak the Oromo language spoken by Guji people, my familiarity with the Guji culture and environment, and my ethnic affinity with the people helped me to establish close relationships with adults and children in the villages, to participate in their social and cultural events, and to be with children in diverse places and at different times while observing their social actions and customary practices. I played with children in school compounds, in cattle pastures and in their homes. I also worked with parents on their farms and stayed with them in their homes in order to elicit their views about their childhood play activities and observe their current relationships with their children. In this study, I focused on children between seven and fourteen years old.

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<sup>1</sup>The names of these villages were Samaro, Bunata and Surro.

<sup>2</sup>The three schools were Samaro Primary School, Bunata Primary School and Gongua Primary School.

## RIDDLING AS PLAY

Guji children and adults perceive riddling as a form of children's play that occurs exclusively between children. However, children and adults have different ideas about the appropriate time and place for riddling. Galgale (a 45-year-old woman), for example, reflected on this difference:

When I was a child, children played riddling during the night-time at home. My parents used to tell me and my siblings that if we played riddling during the daytime our uncle might die, and we used to believe this. Today, our children play riddles everywhere and every time they meet each other. This is strange. Children today disobey our traditional values.

Morma (a 60-year-old man) added:

When I was a small child, I used to play riddling with my siblings at home during the night-time. We did not play riddling during the daytime because we believed that if we played during the daytime our uncle would die. But my grandchildren do not accept this belief. They perform riddling during the daytime in the cattle pasture. Time is introducing changes to our culture.

Children today do not therefore relate riddling to a specific time and place but rather, in contrast to adults' traditions, they perform riddles during the day and at night, both inside and outside of home. This trend is perceived by adults as a form of misconduct by children who, in turn, reported that they no longer believe in the supposed dangers of daytime riddling. Demekech (a ten-year-old girl), for example, said, 'It is said that "if children play riddling in the daytime, their uncle may die"'. I do it in the cattle herding place with my friends and in school with my schoolmates during the daytime. But my uncle has not died.' Another child (Asnake, a nine-year-old boy) added, 'Uncles do not die if children play riddling in the daytime. It is a lie by adults. Our parents say this to make us stop playing riddles in the cattle pastures.' For children, adults promote this belief to prevent them from playing riddles during the daytime because it is believed to distract them from performing their household duties effectively. The intergenerational tension expressed through children's resistance to adults' beliefs about the correct time and place for riddling is attributed to two developments in children's social context. The first is the emergence of children's own places and times for peer interaction. Three decades ago, when the Guji people were exclusively pastoralists, children used to stay in close proximity to their parents and grandparents (Beriso 1995; Hinnant 1978). Small children and older girls stayed in the home and worked with their mothers while older boys worked under the close supervision of their fathers and grandfathers. As a result, children did not have peer relationships with one another outside their homes and their play activities were limited to interactions among siblings in the home. Through the division of labour, children have been assigned to household activities such as herding cattle, fetching water, and collecting firewood, and these assignments have given them places and times relatively free from adult supervision (Jirata 2011).

The second development is the beginning of schooling among Guji people in the early 1980s (Beriso 1995). Schooling exposed children to a new social environment in which they gained access to information from beyond the

domestic domain. The introduction of schooling also seems to have allowed adults indirect involvement in the reproduction of riddling, through the writing and the circulation of children's books of riddles. As ten-year-old Ashagire said, 'I also learn riddles from books that I use for learning Oromo language in school. Then I tell those riddles to my siblings at home, as well as my friends in the cattle pastures.' Both these developments of sedentarization and schooling have drawn children together and enabled the formation of peer relationships in which children produce and share various play activities, of which riddling, storytelling and games are the commonest examples.

The changing times and places of riddling have also produced variation in the form and content of riddles across the generations. Waqoo (a 45-year-old man), for example, articulated this variation as, 'I do not know some of the riddles that my children perform with each other today. They are different from the ones I used to play when I was a child.' Through my participation in riddling with children, I understood that all of the riddles the adult informants recalled were known and performed by the children, but that adults did not know the newer children's riddles. This suggests that old riddles, with their set patterns, are being reproduced by the children. They pass from generation to generation through elder children telling riddles to the younger ones, as we learn from Ashagire's words, 'I learn riddles from my elder siblings and friends and also tell them to the younger ones', and from eleven-year-old Genet: 'I learned riddles from siblings and other children who know them more than me. Small children learn from me and I used to learn from older children when I was small.' Secondly, the fact that children perform riddles that adults do not know shows that each generation of children invents new riddles. Children's riddling traditions continue to be an important means by which children construct their social world because they are adapted over time. These generational shifts reflect improvisation and innovation in riddling forms themselves, along with structural shifts from pastoralism to a more settled agriculturalist way of life.

### RIDDLING NETWORKS

Children's play activities take different forms and engage children in different ways, as discussed in Mouritsen (2002) and Argenti (2010) in Nordic and African contexts respectively. In the Guji context riddling is perceived as a form of play exclusive to children, as the following interview with Galgalo (a 40-year-old man) demonstrates:

Tadesse Jaleta (TJ): What did you play when you were a child?

Galgalo: I used to play riddling, storytelling and games.

TJ: Which ones do you play now as an adult?

Galgalo: I do storytelling with my children.

TJ: What about riddling?

Galgalo: I do not do riddling now. I am an adult. But, my children do it with each other.

TJ: Do you not tell the riddles you know to your children?

Galgalo: My children know more riddles than me. They do not want me to tell them riddles. They want me to tell them folktales.

TJ: Do your children not want to play riddling with you?

Galgalo: Children do not play riddling with adults. They play it with each other.

As this exchange shows, adults among Guji people consider riddling to be a social exercise that children perform together outside the adult domain (McDowell 1981). Children are reluctant to play riddling with adults as the ten-year-old boy Uddessa suggests: 'I do not want to play riddles with my parents and other adults. I do not feel free to play with them. I play with children. Riddling is children's play. Why would adults play it? Adults do not know many riddles.' Children therefore perceive riddling as their own play activity, one that they seek to protect from interference by adults. Indeed, as Corsaro and Eder (1990) and Kyratzis (2004) explain in their reviews of studies of children's peer culture in the European context, children tend to protect their play space from intrusion by adults, especially when they do not trust adults' knowledge of their play activities. This control over a social network and cultural world is what the Guji children are exercising through their riddling.

Furthermore, riddling is a popular form of entertainment and play. Bonise (a nine-year-old girl) said: 'I enjoy playing riddling. I want to play it always. I play with my siblings at home and with my friends in the cattle pastures.' Children's passion for riddling can be attributed to three factors. First, as we have shown, riddling is free from adult involvement and it offers children autonomy in controlling and leading their interactions and play activities. Secondly, riddling creates a close social interaction among children, along with the motivation of competition. Gemechu (an eleven-year-old boy) described this motivation: 'When I am able to tell and interpret more riddles, I am proud of myself and feel that I am a winner.' Children strive to gain recognition and therefore participate enthusiastically in riddling sessions. Such interaction among children is observable in the other forms of children's play, as asserted by Mouritsen (2002) and Retting (1995) in Western contexts. Thirdly, riddling involves interpretation and gives children an opportunity to experiment with language. As Buchoff (1996: 667) shows, riddling enables children to test each other with language and feel a sense of accomplishment when they interpret a riddle successfully. These three factors underlie children's active engagement in riddling and their entertainment by it.

### RIDDLING AMONG GUJI CHILDREN

Kyoore (2010) and Njoroge (1994) show that African riddles are usually presented in the form of statements or questions that contain images of objects from people's social and natural environments. Thus, a child asks a riddle and another child interprets the image contained within it. By observing children's social events across different times and places (for example, night-time at home or during the day in the cattle pastures) I learnt that Guji children perform riddles in this familiar format. The following transcript of a riddling session demonstrates how Guji children perform riddling. In the session, the nine-year-old Bonise was the teller and her schoolmates were receivers. The riddling session occurred in a school compound and all of the participants were girls (seven to eleven years old).

Bonise: *Hibboo* (Take a riddle).

Children (in chorus): *Hiphi, Hiphi* (We took a riddle).



Bonise: *Hibbo Jjenmaan hiphi jettani?* (I said ‘Take a riddle.’ Did you say ‘We took a riddle?’)  
 Children [in chorus]: *Ewo* (Yes).  
 Bonise: Something is a corpse when it sits down and a lion when it stands up.  
 Children: Gun.  
 Bonise: Correct.  
 Children [shouting with happiness]: Yes! Yes!  
 Bonise: Take a riddle.  
 Children [in chorus]: We took a riddle.  
 Bonise: I said, ‘Take a riddle.’ Did you say, ‘We took a riddle?’  
 Children [in chorus]: Yes.  
 Bonise: People with grey hair stand in a field.  
 Children: Old men.  
 Bonise: Wrong.  
 Children: Horses.  
 Bonise: Wrong.  
 Children: Pick a country.  
 Bonise [smiling]: I picked Sidama land. I attack the people and confiscate their cattle. The correct answer is maize plants that are flowering.

Among the Guji children, the opening exchange is as in the example above. After this exchange, the teller asks the riddle and the receiver tries to interpret it. The receiver has a right to try several times until he or she can answer the riddle correctly or gives up. A receiver who fails to interpret a riddle correctly ends his or her attempt by saying ‘*Daga Fudhadhu*’ (‘Pick a country’). The teller replies, ‘*Daga Fudhadhe*’ (‘I picked a country’). Then, the receiver calls out the name of a place, a country or a region and the teller says, ‘I have picked it’. Finally, the teller interprets the riddle. Thus, the failure of a receiver to interpret a riddle is compensated by his or her promise to ‘give a country’ to the teller. This forfeit in turn reflects Guji people’s history of warfare, in which war parties from Guji used to attack their neighbouring ethnic groups (Sidama, Borana, Walayta), control their territory, and confiscate their cattle.

Only one child asks a riddle at any one time, but there can be several receivers. In that case, the receivers help each other and have the chance to interpret a riddle together. While these groups reinforce social interaction and friendship, interpreting in a group also creates a sense of competition among the children and those who can tell and interpret more riddles than their companions win the accolade of a ‘knowledgeable child’. Njoroge (1994) states that children feel more satisfied with interpreting riddles than with asking them because they feel a stronger sense of accomplishment by using their logic to search for clues and solve the riddles. Children’s participation in such a context encourages them to learn more riddles and to become competent in riddling so as to attract their peers and reinforce their social network.

## CONTEMPORARY RIDDLES

The riddles of Guji children capture everyday human activities such as preparing food, farming, travelling, planting, dancing, herding, hunting, fighting and loving. They also include references to the features of and relationships between objects of the physical environment such as wild animals, domestic animals,



plants, crops, water, the sky, the earth, the sun, the stars, the moon, rain, home utensils and human beings. The riddles have simple and complex forms. The simplicity or complexity of the riddles, as discussed in Njoroge (1994), can be analysed by the length of the sentences used to construct them, the imagery they involve and the knowledge required in order to interpret them, as explained in the following examples.

### *Simple riddles*

The simple form of a riddle consists of short sentences and contains metaphorical images that relate to social and material realities in the children's local environment. The riddle images are usually presented in the form of a metaphor or comparison, a plain statement puzzle or a question. The comparative form is exemplified in the riddle: 'Something is a corpse when it sits down and a lion when it stands up.' Riddles as plain statements are presented in the form of an affirmative sentence such as 'You see it but you do not know it.' Finally riddles in question form would include 'I put you here, who put you there?'

The following transcript of a riddle session demonstrates simple riddles performed between Beka (an eight-year-old boy) and the ten-year-old Ashagire in a school compound.

Ashagire: Take a riddle.

Beka: I took a riddle.

Ashagire: I said, 'Take a riddle.' Did you say, 'I took a riddle?'

Beka: Yes.

Ashagire: Something does not have shelter to live in but has always food to eat.

Beka: It is a flea.

Ashagire: Correct.

Beka: Take a riddle.

Ashagire: I took a riddle.

Beka: I said, 'Take a riddle.' Did you say, 'I took a riddle?'

Ashagire: Yes.

Beka: Something is poor in the day and rich in the night.

Ashagire: Earth.

Beka: Wrong.

Ashagire: Mountain.

Beka: Again wrong.

Ashagire: I do not know it. Pick a country.

Beka: I picked Borana land; I keep my cattle there, and I build my home there. It is the cattle's enclosure. During the daytime it is empty because the cattle leave it. In the night it is full as the cattle gather within it.

Maranda (1976) described these as riddles that pose overt questions with covert answers. Simple riddles are easily memorized by children and are therefore performed frequently by children in varied social contexts.

### *Complex riddles*

A complex riddle is presented in long sentences and consists of questions that children answer using knowledge of their social and natural environment. It involves a cluster of images or characters in complex relationships with each other that demand logical associations and skills of interpretation. The following

example of complex riddling was performed by two children, Temesgen (an eleven-year-old boy) and the ten-year-old Uddessa in a school compound. The children called the riddle ‘What is one?’

Temesgen: Take a riddle.

Uddessa: I took a riddle.

Temesgen: What is one?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger.

Temesgen: What are two?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger and two are goat’s teats.

Temesgen: What are three?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, and three are hearth stones.

Temesgen: What are four?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones and four are cow’s teats.

Temesgen: What are five?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats and five are a hand’s fingers.

Temesgen: What are six?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats, five are a hand’s fingers and six are calves for dowry.

Temesgen: What are seven?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats, five are a hand’s fingers, six are calves for dowry and seven are days of a week.

Temesgen: What are eight?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats, five are a hand’s fingers, six are calves for dowry, seven are days of a week and eight are lion’s cubs.

Temesgen: What are nine?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats, five are a hand’s fingers, six are calves for dowry, seven are days of a week, eight are lion’s cubs and nine are members of *Gada* council (traditional administrative council).

Temesgen: What are ten?

Uddessa: One is a ring on a finger, two are goat’s teats, three are hearth stones, four are cow’s teats, five are a hand’s fingers, six are calves for dowry, seven are days of a week, eight are lion’s cubs, nine are members of *Gada* council and ten are members of a military unit.

This riddle is popular among Guji children and is performed as a form of play of associating numbers to objects. In its structure, the riddle is similar to the English riddle, *One Fat Hen*, although it is difficult to trace reasons for this similarity.<sup>3</sup> Complex riddles, in general, are presented in the question form and involve the long rehearsal of sentences that move towards increasing complexity. The major differences between simple and complex riddles lies in their structure and in the number of metaphorical images they present.

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<sup>3</sup>Children play the riddle by inserting different images in the set template. For example, they replace ‘ring on finger’ by ‘human sex organ’, saying ‘One is a human sex organ’. Again, ‘goat’ can be replaced by ‘donkey’, resulting in ‘two are donkey’s teats’. They also replace ‘hearth stones’ by ‘Guji clans’ and say ‘three are Guji clans’.

## RIDDLING AS LEARNING

The underlying motive for children to riddle is entertainment. However, according to the children, interpreting riddles helps them develop their capacity of associating images to reality and to understand their social and natural environments. The children said that when telling and interpreting riddles, they imagine the phenomena contained in riddles and learn their characteristics and relationships. Tigist (a nine-year-old girl) stated that, ‘Through telling and interpreting riddles with my friends, I can learn names and places of objects as well as how to associate words to things.’ Tigist’s statement implies that in the process of riddling children cooperate with each other and learn from each other.

Let us observe how the children performed riddling and how they reflected on it. The following examples were taken from a children’s riddling session that took place in the cattle pastures. Five children, namely Desta, Bonise, Ashebir, Tamirat and Tigist, participated in the riddling session. Two of them were girls (both nine-year-olds) and the other three were boys (nine to eleven years old). They performed the riddling as follows:

Ashebir: Take a riddle.

The children: We took a riddle.

Ashebir: Blood sprinkled on the farm of my father.

The children: Ripe coffee fruits.

Ashebir: Correct.

Bonise: Take a riddle.

The children: We took a riddle.

Bonise: You see it but you do not know it.

The children: Off-spring in the womb of a cow.

Bonise: Correct.

At end of the session I had the following conversation with the children.

TJ: Do you perform riddling at other times?

The children: Yes.

TJ: What do you gain from riddling?

The children: We get to play. We also learn from it.

TJ: What do you learn from it?

The children: We learn several things. We learn names of things as well as colours, places and what things are used for.

The children said that riddling is more than the chance to play. By associating images in the riddles to objects in their physical environment they also learn the names and characteristics of things that surround them and develop the skill of associating abstract images to the realities in their local context. According to my observation of the riddling process, the norms of interpersonal interactions and acceptable values are also contained as recurrent messages in the riddles. Through telling and interpreting the riddles, therefore, children evaluate and understand cultural and social phenomena appropriate to their contexts (Argenti 2010), as is illustrated in the following text:

TJ: What do you like to play?

Desta (a nine-year-old boy): I like playing riddling, storytelling and children’s games.

TJ: Why do you like riddling and storytelling?

Desta: I use them to play with my siblings and friends. Hearing and telling riddles and folktales make me happy. Through folktales and riddles, I also learn our culture.

The children also stated that in addition to the social value of the entertainment arising from contesting with each other, riddling has educational advantages. Gemede and Boru (both eleven-year-old boys), for example, asserted that riddles such as the following help them activate their memory and develop their ability to solve problems. They performed the following riddles in a cattle pasture:

Gemede: Take a riddle.

Boru: I took a riddle.

Gemede [presents the riddle]: There are parents (a father and a mother) and two children who want to cross a big lake. There is a boat that they can use for sailing across the lake. This boat can carry only 100 kilograms or less at a time. Each of the parents weighs 100 kilograms but each child weighs 50 kilograms. How do these people use the boat to cross the lake?

Boru [interprets the riddle]: First, the two children cross the lake together using the boat. Then, one of the children stays and the other child brings the boat back to the side of the mother and the father. Then, the father takes the boat and crosses the lake. Then, the father stays and the child who crossed the lake first brings the boat back to the side where the mother and the other child are. Then, the two children again cross together and one of the children stays and the other brings the boat back to the mother. Then, the mother crosses the lake using the boat. Then, the child who stayed with the father brings back the boat to his brother. Finally, the two children cross together and join their father and mother.

Gemede: Correct.

Boru: Take a riddle.

Gemede: I took a riddle.

Boru [presents the riddle]: A person is migrating from one area to another area. There is a big river between these two areas. He has tiger, goat and cabbage that he wants to take with him. Along with these three things, he reached the river and wanted to cross it. He can cross with only one thing (tiger, goat or cabbage) at a time. He cannot take all the three things with him at a time. He also cannot leave the cabbage with the goat and the goat with the tiger for the goat eats the cabbage and the tiger eats the goat. Thus, how can this man take these things to the new area?

Gemede [interprets the riddle]: First he crosses with the goat. Then, he comes back and crosses with the cabbage. He leaves the cabbage and comes back with the goat. Then, he keeps the goat at the former place and crosses with the tiger. Then, he comes back and finally crosses with the goat.

Boru: Correct.

The children also reflected on how interpreting such riddles helps them to develop their intellectual capability. Here are their words:

TJ: Is it not difficult to interpret such riddles?

Boru: It is difficult.

Gemede: Yes it is difficult.

TJ: How are you able to interpret it?

Boru: I first worked out in my mind how the children and the parents can use the boat to cross the river in line with the given information. The weight that the boat can carry at a time is given. The weight of each person is also given. Then, I have to think and find the way these persons can cross the river.

Gemedede: I also worked out in my mind how this person can take his animals with him across the river. I used the given information and found how the person can take the animals across the river safely.

The children stated that through the performances of complex riddles they acquire not only an abstract ability to solve problems, but also skills that are useful in their everyday lives. For example, in the ‘What is one?’ riddle they count the numbers one to ten and associate them with objects in their social and natural environment. This is in line with what Buchoff (1996) and Eshach (2007) describe as children’s informal ways of learning. Hence, as Njoroge (1994) argues, riddles are brain teasers that help children develop their social and intellectual skills. In general, then, through riddling children interact, entertain and negotiate with each other, and teach each other about situations in their local settings.

## CONCLUSION

The empirical material in this article shows that riddling, which is a popular form of children’s folk culture among Guji people, has social and educational values for children. The social value of riddling derives from the fact that it is the children’s own play practice and differentiates Guji children’s culture from the adult cultural world. It also shows that children can create and share their own cultural realities through which they resist adult imposition. Riddling creates a context in which children entertain one another through testing each other, and which also sustains their social networks. As children’s artistic performance, riddling exposes children not only to the realm of play, but also to situations that enhance their problem-solving skills and their ability to interpret metaphorical images by associating them with social and natural phenomena.

Riddles thus provide children with contexts in which they experiment with language and solve problems. This, as discussed by both Buchoff (1996) and Burns (1976) in Western contexts, enables children to develop their memory and interpretative skills through their own play activities. As children acquire and recall a large number of riddles and interpret their meanings in association with social and natural phenomena, they steadily extend the scope of their intellectual awareness. Thus, riddling epitomizes child-friendly play, providing informal learning situations through which children reconstruct their social practices as different from those of adults, exercise their intellects and acquire knowledge about realities in their local environment.

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#### ABSTRACT

Although the educational value of African oral traditions, particularly folktales, has been discussed widely in social studies of children, education and folklore, riddling is not commonly investigated as a part of children's everyday social practice. In this article, I present riddling as a part of children's expressive culture, through which they play together and learn about their local environment. I generated the data through ten months of ethnographic fieldwork among Guji people in southern Ethiopia. Based on analyses of the times and locations of this activity, as well as the social interaction involved, I argue that children perform riddling in order to entertain themselves and to learn from their immediate social and natural environment through discrete peer networks.

#### RESUMÉ

Si la valeur éducative des traditions orales africaines, notamment des contes populaires, a certes fait l'objet de larges discussions dans les études sociales consacrées aux enfants, à l'éducation et au folklore, en revanche la devinette n'est pas communément étudiée comme un constituant de la pratique sociale quotidienne des enfants. Dans cet article, l'auteur présente la devinette comme une composante de la culture expressive des enfants, à travers laquelle ils jouent ensemble et apprennent à connaître leur environnement local. Les données de cette étude sont le fruit de dix mois de travaux ethnographiques menés auprès des Guji dans le Sud de l'Éthiopie. Sur la base de l'analyse des temps et des lieux de cette activité, ainsi que de l'interaction sociale en jeu, l'auteur affirme que les enfants pratiquent la devinette afin de se divertir et d'apprendre de leur environnement social et naturel immédiat à travers des réseaux discrets de pairs.