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*A Contextual Study of the Social Function of Guji-Oromo Proverbs.* By Tadesse Jaleta Jirata. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009. Pp. 87.

and

*Boran Proverbs in their Cultural Context.* By Abdullahi A. Shongolo and Günther Schlee. (Wortkunst und Dokumentartexte in afrikanischen Sprachen 24). Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2007. Pp. 139.

It is a wonderful coincidence to have two collections of proverbs that are explained in their contexts, drawn from closely related language varieties published so close together in time, and both with community members as authors. Guji Oromo is spoken in the southern part of central Ethiopia, with Boran Oromo (aka Borana) on the Gujis' southern edge extending down into Kenya. Both claim to have maintained more of their traditions than Oromos to the northwest. The Guji volume acknowledges that the Guji are closer to the Boran than any other Oromo group, but “there is still a clear dialectal and cultural distinction between them” (p. 5). Oromo politicians in Ethiopia claim them both to be part of a single broad Oromo nationality. The large number of proverbs used by the Oromo peoples of Ethiopia has been previously documented, such as by George Cotter's books. A cultural anthropologist would write a fairly different review of the present two books, but this one is written for those interested in proverbs.

### ***Guji***

Many proverb collections have been compiled and they are often criticized for their lack of context, simply being lists of proverbs. This author, however, is to be congratulated for having found a way around this problem. Being a community insider, he found a way to gather a large number of proverbs in their natural contexts at two kinds of traditional meetings that are natural con-

texts for frequent proverb use. He recorded speeches and deliberations at two kinds of meetings: *Ebbisa* and *Gumi Ganda*. He describes *Ebbisa*, led by the Qallu, a traditional leader, as an occasion for “traditional blessings, prayers, enumeration of cultural values and ways of life.” The *Gumi Ganda* meetings deal with conflict resolution, mediation, and local problems. Both types of meetings are rooted in tradition and work to reinforce traditions, so it is not surprising that both involve the use of many traditional proverbs. From his recordings at a series of these meetings, he collected about 250 proverbs in their spoken contexts. Later, he interviewed elders to discuss the proverbs he had collected, for a total of 310. Collecting so many proverbs in context by recording them at proverb-rich events is a noteworthy accomplishment both for his own research, but also as an example of methodology which proverb scholars and folklorists can learn from and adapt elsewhere.

The main body of the book consists of discussions of 74 of the proverbs, each with a small amount of the context in which it was recorded, along with some cultural notes and explanations of the proverb. The contexts given deal with topics under discussion, they do not include a transcription of the discussion with the proverb embedded. Since he had recorded all of the proverbs in context, it is hoped that someday he would prepare an expanded book giving all of the proverbs and more of the context in which the various proverbs were used, but that was beyond his resources.

The author classifies the proverbs used in the *Ebbisa* meetings as having a “reflective function” (27 proverbs in chapter four). He divides these into three categories: those reflecting aspects of customary practices, expressing the social values of morality, and reflecting the power of social laws. The *Ebbisa* meetings are led by a traditional religious leader, *Qallu*. An important priority of the Qallu is to maintain Guji traditions, encouraging people (especially the young) to follow the traditions of the Guji. In this context proverbs are doubly useful. First, they serve as lessons, nuggets of Guji lore, passing on Guji traditions, such as “Sin makes someone plump at first, and emaciated later.” Secondly, the use of proverbs reflects and reinforces traditional ways of public discourse. For example, in a discourse urging

maintenance of Guji traditions, in response to an elder's use of a proverb, another elder used the following proverb "One proverb gives rise to a point of discussion and another ends it." The proverbs also place a high value on the position of elders, "Head goes through the door before other parts of the body."

He divides the proverbs used in the *Gumi Ganda* meetings into two broad categories, corrective and reinforcing. The corrective proverbs (22 in chapter five) are classified under three categories, dealing with poverty, misbehavior, and disagreements. The reinforcing proverbs (25 in chapter six) are classified under conformity to social environment and reinforcing ethnic solidarity. The proverbs used in the *Gumi Ganda* meetings dealt with local disputes and problems. In the gatherings, the problems were expressed in ways that fit Guji speech patterns and the communal decisions reflected Guji tradition, both requiring the frequent use of proverbs, such as "Going on the wrong way makes someone face a problem." Land disputes are often discussed with, "Hawks quarrel on the ground for something on the ground."

Proverbs are ideally suited for such matters since they are less direct and less confrontational. Also, they invoke the people's common traditions, rather than being based on the speaker's identity and status.

The categories that the author created to classify the proverbs reflect his insider's view, the emic view. Outsider analysts may try to classify them differently, reflecting an etic view. Therefore, the book should be studied to not only understand the individual proverbs, but also the insider's viewpoint from which they are interpreted. At the end of the book is a listing of 310 proverbs under the categories used in the earlier chapters, adding 234 to the 74 discussed in the previous chapters.

The book is based on Tadesse Jaleta Jirata's MA thesis from Addis Ababa University. Since the book was researched and written in Ethiopia, the author did not have access to large amounts of literature on proverb and folklore study, especially to recent work. Some parts of the first sections of the book are written in a way intended to convince an audience of the importance and relevance of proverbs and folklore studies; many readers of *Proverbium* are already persuaded of this and will skip these parts. However, all should read the section on his methodology,

section 2.3. The table of contents is helpful by showing the contents of subsections, but sadly the page numbers listed do not match the book.

### ***Boran***

The Boran volume is a companion to Schlee's 2002 book about the Boran's neighbors, the Rendille, which he prepared with a Rendille co-author. The Boran collection consists of fewer proverbs than the Guji volume (100 proverbs, along with a few citations of alternate and similar proverb forms), and they were gathered without contexts. However, the authors compensate for this by providing word-by-word English translations of the proverbs, grammatical translations into English, explanations of the meaning of the proverbs, cultural notes, and usually a cultural story to illustrate the proverb. The stories are presented in both English and Boran. Some of the stories are real cases, most are fictional but true to life. The majority of the stories contain the proverb in a conversation (providing the conversational context, though fictional, that the Guji volume does not give), but a few only illustrate the value expressed in the proverb. The authors observe, "This book about proverbs has become a book of stories" (p. 10). These stories, in addition to material for proverb study, provide rich material for folklorists, linguists, cultural anthropologists, etc.

The stories can explain a proverb more powerfully than merely an exegesis of the phrases. For the proverb "The ones who travel have seen something and are those who have traveled and those who have become impoverished", the story is two pages long. At the end of it, readers understand not only the enigmatic proverb, but something of the precarious existence of cattle herders, who in times of drought become "those who travel".

The authors give translations and explanations for each proverb they discuss, but they also admit that proverbs can have multiple meanings, such as "The ear pierces through darkness", for which they give four possible meanings (p. 52).

A few topics appeared in proverbs repeatedly. There are many proverbs and stories about legal disputes and the importance of one's reputation (literally "ear"). The reader learns

how such matters are traditionally decided by local elders, and if need be, by a gathering of senior elders from farther away. The pleas and verdicts are not in impersonal legal language, but often include proverbs and references to traditions. The need for individual justice must be balanced against the need for community cohesion, a view upheld by proverbs and verdicts.

Marriage is another topic commonly touched on, as the explanations, stories, and proverbs together give insights into marriage among the Boran, rich material for those who study cultures. Many proverbs about marriage touch on strains and breakdowns, not the joys of harmony (e.g. p. 67, 68). The authors helpfully and insightfully explain that spouses are seen as “neither enemies nor kin... but in some intermediate kind of relationship” (p. 88). Therefore, they are in an ambiguous position in relation to their husband's family.

The book concludes with an index of key words, both English and Boran, a wonderful idea. For example, using the index shows that a large number of proverbs and stories use words related to raising cattle, e.g. “calf”, “bull”, “cattle”, “heifer”, “milk”, most of the Boran living by their cattle. The index refers to these key words in both proverbs and stories, not just to their use in proverbs alone. The index, however, shows a danger in over-reliance on computer searches to create an index; for “hyena/waraabessa”, it missed the (misspelled?) form *waraabesa* in proverb 60 and the suffixed form *waraabesi* in 97.

One point that is not directly related to proverbs: the authors claim that Boran society is “egalitarian” (p. 97). Since status among the Boran is greatly determined by age, gender, and relative birth order, many would not see it as egalitarian.

### *Comparison of the two volumes*

Both of these books are significant contributions to proverb study because their proverbs are rooted in context. The two books have some significant similarities and differences. The Guji volume categorizes proverbs, both according to the context in which they were recorded and also their function, while the Boran volume does not attempt any classification of the proverbs. Both were written in English by non-native speakers, a feat which I salute. (Both would have benefited from editing by a

native speaker of English, the Boran in a few places, the Guji volume in many.)

Though I did not make a systematic comparison, I noted only two proverbs that the two books had in common, though with minor differences in form. The first concerns the blind man saying that he does not like jokes about eyes. The second is about vultures flying in the air, but dying on the ground. Also, both books contain proverbs about dead donkeys being eaten by hyenas.

Though the proverbs contained in the books differ, the values that are promoted and supported by these proverbs are similar: mutual responsibility, deference to elders, forgiveness, cooperation, reconciliation, family harmony, coping with poverty, patience, hard work.

Both books purport to use the official spelling system in use in their areas. Guji follows the Ethiopian *Qube* system and Boran follows the Kenyan system that is influenced by Swahili. Readers who try to compare them must be aware of these differences in spelling, such as the alveolar ejective being symbolized by <t'> in Boran, but <x> in Guji. However, both books contain some inconsistencies in their Oromo spellings

Though there is no discussion of the poetry of their proverbs in either book (that was not their focus), it is a delight to find many proverbs that show clear evidence of poetic art. Oromo proverbs sometimes are formed with complete assonance, containing only the vowel *a*, e.g. Guji *Bara baraan dabarsan* "Time passes after a time" and Boran *Waam lafaat falan, gaalat fan* "That which has been designed on the ground can then be packed on a camel." In the last example, note also the repetition of *l*, *f*, and *n*. In Guji, we also have *Durba qaban qabaa qaddi* "Abusing a girl is causing a problem to one's self", repeating *ba...qa*, plus *d* at both ends. There is also poetic art in the Boran proverb *Mal male man hin seenan* "Without a plan, one cannot enter a house," notice the repetition of *ma(l)*- at the beginning, but *-(a)n* at the end. Also in Borana note the similar sounding final words in each couplet in *Hammeeni d'ala, hammeenna d'ara* "A dispute between relatives is not a genuine dispute."

***Points of interest beyond Oromo areas:***

Dundes once noted that for quotation proverbs (he said “wellerisms”), “the geographical distribution has not yet been accurately established” (1964:113). Though nearly half a century has passed, there is still too much truth in this observation. The study of proverbs from Ethiopia has not drawn attention to the presence of a number of quotation proverbs in Oromo varieties and in Amharic. Of the 310 Guji proverbs, nine are quotations with their speakers, e.g. “I can see everything now;’ said an old woman after burning down her house.” Additionally, three are quotations with passive verbs and no speaker specified, e.g. “Nothing new’, it is said.” Of the 100 Boran proverbs, four are wellerisms with speakers mentioned. Additionally, two are quotations commonly known to be ascribed to particular speakers, one to a dik-dik antelope, one to a legendary mighty warrior. Clearly, quotation proverbs are a standard form of proverb among the Oromo.

A particularly intriguing Guji quotation proverb is the following: “What is our sin?’ said a dog after giving birth to nine blind puppies” (p. 80). Proverbs that refer to a bitch (female dog) giving birth to blind pups because of her wrong actions are found in ancient Akkadian, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Arabic. Alster (1979:5) has described such proverbs as having “a longer history than any other recorded proverb in the world”, going back to “around 1800 BC”. *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*.

***Conclusion***

In addition to those who generally collect books of proverbs, these two important books are of particular interest to two groups of proverb scholars. First, proverb scholars who are concerned with the use of proverbs in contexts will want to read these, the Guji volume in particular showing a fruitful procedure for collecting many proverbs in context. Secondly, these volumes will be of interest to those who study culture and worldview as expressed in proverbs, since the notes and illustrative stories (from an insider) give many insights. Additionally, the books are vital for any who are interested in Oromo society and culture. I intend to use and cite them repeatedly.

It is merely a coincidence that I have these two books on my shelf directly between my Bible and Wolfgang Mieder's two-volume *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (2009), but it suggests how highly I value these two volumes studying Oromo proverbs in their social and cultural contexts.

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