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- Regassa, Megersa, Tsehay Dinsa and Inge Brinkman, 'Notes to the Oromo narratives by Rahis Siraj Abba Simal, 1, 2, 3' (VLIR-UOS Team project "Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia', 2024) <https://www.ol4d.ugent.be/>.

NOTES TO THE OROMO NARRATIVE BY RAHIS SIRAJ ABBA SIMAL

These are the notes to the audio and transcription/translation of three stories told by Rahis Siraj Abba Simal' in 2022. The audio's and transcriptions/translations are available on <https://www.ol4d.ugent.be/>, in the section web-publications and video's.

Performance context

These stories told by Rahis Siraj Abba Simal were performed at the request of Megersa Regassa during his fieldwork for his doctoral thesis for Ghent and Jimma University in 2022. He carried out fieldwork for various months in the Jimma Zone to discuss oral narratives in Afaan Oromo, there by focusing on monster characters and gender relations.

The narrative performance and the discussion were conducted at a social gathering organised by the Office of Culture and Tourism of the Mana District. The purpose of this gathering was to revitalise the memorization of Senna, the location where the first palace of the Jimma Kingdom was established by a king named Abba Faro. On one occasion, an acquaintance had told Megersa Regassa that he knew of a good storyteller called Rahis, and this person arranged for Megersa to meet with Rahis at the social gathering. As Rahis started telling stories to Megersa, in a few minutes they were surrounded by many people, mostly youth, who listened to the stories and to the discussions that followed each narrative. Then the young men asked Megersa to take turns to also tell their own stories. They came to Megersa and Rahis to listen to the stories and later found themselves being storytellers.

Initially Rahis assumed a formal posture in front of the camera, but soon his performance skills showed and he opened up: using gestures, facial expression and intonation to engage with his audience.

The narratives in historical perspective

The three narratives are probably quite ancient, as they know a wide dispersal. People of the various Oromo-speaking communities are familiar with these narratives and they are performed in the different varieties of Afaan Oromo. Megersa Regassa knows all three narratives to be published in textbooks and has also encountered them on social media. Thus a YouTube-video exist of the first narrative with the animal characters. This concerns a short animation video in Afaan Oromo, clearly meant for a young audience. The second narrative on the lion's hairs is offered on different websites and also mentioned on Facebook. For the third narrative it is more difficult to find information concerning the time-depth, geographical spread or intermedial trajectories.

Language in the narratives

Especially as it is spread over such a wide area, Afaan Oromo knows different varieties, according to the different communities within the larger Oromo group. A number of words in the narratives can be related to the particular linguistic background of the narrator, indicating his connections to the Machaa (in Afaan Oromo: Maccaa) community. Thus in narrative 1 the narrator uses words like *gaafa* (and not the more standardised *guyyaa*, meaning ‘day’), *bokkaa* (and not *rooba* as is used in other parts of Oromia, meaning ‘rain’) and *maasii* (and not the word used in Oromo communities, *oyiruu*, meaning ‘farm field’).

Rahis uses both *abbaa manaa* and *dhirsa*, meaning ‘husband’. *Abba manaa* is especially used by Afaan Oromo speakers of Machaa background, while *dhirsa*, is more widely used throughout the Oromia Regional State. Likewise *Qaalluu* (a religious leader in the Oromo indigenous religion Waaqeffannaa) and *beekaa* are both used to denote ‘wise man’. In this case *qaalluu* is a word that is widely used, while *beekaa* is indeed the term more used by speakers of the Machaa variant. In narrative 3, Rahis uses *kiyyaa* once and *koo*, to indicate the possessive ‘my’. *Kiyya* is widespread, while *koo* again is used by people of the Machaa community. In addition, Rahis also uses the word *giidoo*, meaning force when narrating about the force of water. The word *giidoo* is specifically used by Jimma Oromo, while *humna* is widely used by Afaan Oromo speakers. This usage indicates the specific linguistic background of the narrator.

Given the history of cultural, social and economic ties between speakers of Amharic and Afaan Oromo, it is not surprising to find borrowed terms from the Amharic language in the narratives under consideration. Before and during the period when Rahis grew up, the Oromo language was banned from being used as an administrative, judicial, educational language, and was even forbidden to be used in conversation. Many Oromo-speaking children were taught to take pride in learning Amharic and English. The ban was only lifted in 1991, explaining why the consequences of it are still being felt, especially among the elder generation.

Thus Amharic words like *gizee* (‘time’), *taraa* (‘turn’), *ishii* (‘ok’), *daarii* (‘edge’) are Amharic words that Rahis employs in his narrative instead of equivalent Afaan Oromo words like *yeroo*, *dabaree*, *tole*, *qarqara* respectively. Likewise a number of English loans entered the stories. Thus Rahis uses *addaaptii* to denote ‘adapt’, and *maajikii* for ‘magic’ in the second narrative, instead of equivalent Afaan Oromo words like *madaquu* and *falfala* respectively.

The narrator uses various narrative strategies, in order to keep the audience listen and as mnemonic device to facilitate his performance. Thus repetition features in various manners in the narratives to bring cadence and rhythm both for the audience and for the narrator himself. Various expressions are used to summarise episodes in the narrative in a standardised manner or to refer to moral meaning-making in the narratives. To offer just one example, in narration 1 ‘*Dhugaan nama baasa*’ is used, which roughly translates as ‘Truth sets one free’. Such expressions add to the aesthetics of the performance, through their intertextual relations with other oral genres, like proverbs and sayings.

In several ways the narratives display the typical oral character of storytelling. Thus the interpunction (commas, full stops, etc.) is a proposal by the editors; Rahis did of course not use these. As is normal in oral speech, on several occasions he started a sentence without finishing it, hesitated before pronouncing a word, shifted between verbal tenses, and employed speech that is strictly speaking grammatically incorrect. Thus the *-tti* in *keeniyatti* in the first story can be viewed as redundant, as it results in doubling the locative: *-tti* and *keesa* roughly correspond with the English prepositions ‘in’ and ‘inside’. Rahis also started a sentence with ‘*egaa namnii midhaan kana*’, referring to ‘a person who’, but immediately shifted to the lion character. It is telling that the narrator so closely associates the animal characters in the story to humans.

These narratives and crisis situations

Obviously the plots are different for the three narrative. These differences in the sequence of events also make for different relations to matters of societal concern. The different plot allude to different crisis situations that are resolved in different ways.

Narrative 1

In narrative 1 a social crisis occurs because of the disloyalty of one of the animals, namely the rat. The rat steals from the grain harvest that the three animals possess together by using its digging skills. As the other two animal characters, lion and monkey, start complaining about the decreasing grain stock, the rat considers killing them. Ultimately, however, the rat brings about its own death as its plans fail. ‘Harm set, harm get’, is the message here, a proverb also used in Afaan Oromo in the form of ‘*Haaduun abbaan qare, abbaa qale*’ (‘The sharpened knife slaughtered the person who made it sharp’). In other words, this narrative teaches people not to create a crisis. The untrustworthy behaviour of the rat leads to its downfall. Still, even though the rat ultimately suffers, in the end, the grain that has disappeared is not returned. In other words, some harm cannot be undone.

During a workshop moderated by Inge Brinkman with a group of Bachelor 3 students of the Oromo Folklore Department at Jimma University in May 2024, we also noted that folktales refer to an ideal world where there is always a happy ending for the righteous. When a version of this story had been told, one female student related that this story reminded her of an event in her family history: her family had been confronted with theft as people had broken into their storehouse. Yet, the culprits were never found, no one was punished, and the goods were never recovered. The students indicated that the stories can make them remember, reflect on, and consider real life situations, but there may be stark differences between the moral world of the narratives and real life situations. They all felt that the stories function as a moral charter, inviting people to contribute creating a better world for all.

Narrative 2

In narrative 2 a gender crisis features, as a husband misbehaves towards his wife. The wife does not herself challenge her husband, but seeks advice from a male spiritual leader. This is indicative of the limited possibilities of women to address male behaviour directly. Also the solution that in the final analysis amounts to appeasing the husband instead of actively stopping him from behaving unjustly. In the end, it is the wife who changes her behaviour and not the aggressive husband. At the same time, the narrative displays a strong female character who explores the possibilities open to her within society’s limits so as to address the misbehaviour of her husband.

We can also look into the story from eco-poetic aspect. The woman entertains a peaceful relation with the lion, an animal considered as frightful. Initially she is overcome by fear, but gradually she manages to form a close bond with the lion. This qualifies the hostile relation between humans and lions in the narrative.

Narrative 3

The third narrative challenges the gender stereotype that women are not wise. The male protagonist in the story accuses his father of leaving him with no real blessings as he believes in neither women's wisdom nor water's strength. A friend convinces him of the contrary.

Yet, also in this case, the gender morality is ambivalent. On the one hand, a deep societal stereotype concerning women is deconstructed. On the other hand, however, the story only talks about women: women themselves have no say in this assessment. Furthermore, the story underlines that women should keep silent when confronted with male harassment (such as pinching). As in the previous narrative, the 'wisdom' of women in this narrative consists of accepting male aggression and misconduct. These ambivalences can form a means to reflect on gender norms in society with groups of young people, also inviting them to jointly consider alternatives.

After the workshop:

The group of 3rd-year Bachelor students of the Oromo Folklore Department at Jimma University, May 2024, with Milkessa Edae-Tufa and Terefe Mitiku (Lecturers and PhD-candidates) and Gerti Wouters (HoWest) and Inge Brinkman (UGent).

