

**Original**

Oral Text in Cultural and Natural Context: Riddles among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo

By Dejene Gemechu<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract*

Dejene Gemechu (2014). Oral text in cultural and natural context: Riddles among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo. *Ethiop.j.soc.lang.stud.* 1(1), 41-62. eISSN: 2408-9532

*This article dealt with riddles among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo. It aims at exploring the role of riddles in enhancing the observational, normative, memory, intellectual and entertainment skills in social and natural environments of the Waliso Oromo. Ethnographic methods of data gathering were employed in generating relevant data from primary and secondary sources. Interpretive approach was used to analyze data. The analysis showed that riddles among the Walisoo Liiban involve both social and natural phenomena. The items of riddles are presented mostly enigmatically and symbolically in line with the value system of the people and the physical character of the area. Riddles also involve analogy based on similarities in size, shape, color, structure, co-existence, status, and the like. Riddles are one of the mechanisms commonly used to instruct young people the knowledge of the nature, morals, the social behavior, and virtue essential for their future social success. The study concluded that riddles are still being used in educating children to have a good understanding of their social and physical environments. They are also adapted to the changing world. The study indicated the importance of contextualizing and accommodating riddles in school curriculum to make education affordable and enjoyable.*

**Keywords:** *Hibboo / Natural environment / Riddle / Social environment / Walisoo Liiban Oromo*

**1. Introduction**

The Walisoo Liiban Oromo inhabit South West Shewa and West Shewa zones of Oromia National Regional State. As elsewhere in the world, riddles are common among the Oromo in general and Walisoo Liiban Oromo in particular; their use is not yet fully explored. Among the Oromo, oral literature was and still is closely linked to children's education and socialization.

Different writers (e.g. Sumner, 1994; Shongolo, 2002; Tesema, 2002; Shongolo & Günther, 2007) studied Oromo oral literature. However, to the knowledge of the researcher, none of these studies investigated children verbal games, particularly riddles in relation to the transmission of social values and environmental knowledge. Only one study, Tamene (2002), investigated riddles among the Oromo, but it lacks critical

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor (PhD) of Social Anthropology, Jimma University, Ethiopia. Contact: e-mail: dejemmoti\_33@yahoo.com, Telephone: +251-911-76-63-48

analysis. As oral literature shows variations in different geographic disparities, cultural contexts, lifestyles as well as viewpoints, and children inherit oral literature which is set or adopted in particular cultural and natural contexts from their parents and peers, further investigation is important.

Moreover, there are contradictory views concerning the change and continuity of oral literature. On the one hand, it is argued that with the expansion of globalization in which every corner of the world bears its consequences, oral literature is increasingly eroded. To the contrary, others have argued that this worrisome of the dying out of oral literature is rather itself a tradition for it is continued to be played but has inevitably faced changes (Tucker, 2008). Tucker further presented that certain factors have contributed to these changes. These include the change of the older patterns of rural life which happens beyond recognition. Oral literature is constantly updated to conform to the changing context. Thus, changes are positive and one way of surviving both internal changes and external pressures and retaining folk traditions (Tucker, 2008, p. 6). This indicates that any study of oral literature needs to be updated across the changing cultural and natural worlds. This study, thus, aimed at exploring the role of oral literature, particularly riddles in enhancing the observational, normative, memory, intellectual and entertainment skills in their social and natural environments. It attempts to document some of the changes and their effects in the specific cultural contexts of the Walisoo Liiban Oromo and attempts to fill the knowledge gaps in the area of oral literature.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Debates: An Overview

According to Finnegan (1992, pp. 23-24) developing theory is not necessarily the purpose of researchers. Yet, they inevitably use certain theories to design appropriate research strategy, when answering research questions or assessing the work of others. As a result, the involvement of a theory is recognized explicitly. However, there are certain theoretical controversies that involve different issues pertinent to the study of oral texts, including riddles. This study reviews them briefly.

Evolutionary theory studies and analyzes oral texts as survivals of some earlier stage of society somehow closer to 'nature' (Finnegan, 1992, p.25). The structural functionalist approach, on the other hand, focuses on the functions of oral arts in upholding the overall social order (Finnegan, 1992, pp. 31-32; Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 174). In functionalist approach, folklorists attempt to identify how oral literature functions in the community. This approach is often blamed for its synchronic analysis, which is conservative and static (Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 175). Marxist writers view oral literature as a weapon of class conflict in which the dominant class imposes meanings while disguising the power on which these are founded (Finnegan, 1992, p. 32).

Structuralism, which has been extremely dominant in the study of verbal arts, views the structure of the item studied as the most important element. It focuses on universal structural rules, rather than specific or context bounded meanings, history, and individual human actors (Finnegan 1992, pp. 34-35; Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 174; Bronner, 2007). This approach is harshly criticized for emphasizing universal rules at the

expense of local meanings, performances, contexts, or human interactions (Finnegan, 1992, pp. 34-35; Sims & Stephens 2005, p. 174).

Post-structuralism is another theoretical approach in the study of oral texts. According to Finnegan (1992, p. 36) and Sims & Stephens (2005, p. 193), the proponents of this approach have argued that rules are not universal and agreed, fixed or value-free, rather each text has a clear status in its own right. Critics argued that this approach leads to complete anarchy or total relativism.

A feminist approach is also part of the literature on oral texts. Feminist writers pay attention to develop interpretations that have not been grounded dominantly in male perspectives, and they are gender biased (Finnegan 1992, p. 42; Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 193). Another theory, reciprocal ethnography, assumes that the owners of a certain text of oral literature are the best to provide its meanings. Providing interpretation of a certain text out of cultural context or in the cultural context of the folklorist-researcher, would lead to ethnocentric analysis (Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 195).

In spite of these contending theoretical perspectives, Finnegan (1992, p. 47) indicated that nowadays scholars have broken the older boundaries and have tended to use wider approaches. Given the current dynamic nature of culture and cultural ties in a world-wide perspective, a new more broader and comprehensive approach is required. Similarly, Sims & Stephens (2005, p. 199) argued that currently intersectionality is at the fore. Folklorists focus primarily on the communicative aspects of oral texts and groups as part of a complex process of communicating ideas that form and reflect practices. These writers have suggested the use of interpretive strategies which is based on text and context. They stress the physical, social, and cultural contexts. Thinking about oral texts from diverse theoretical perspectives has also given a way to comprehend larger concepts pertinent to social and cultural factors, and how those factors shape and inform the ways people express themselves informally, artistically, and creatively. Likewise, inversely their expressions enforce, broaden, and sometimes test those cultural values (Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 201).

This last approach would provide a theoretical framework in analyzing this particular article for the main reason that no single theory is complete in itself to explain the reality of riddles in a particular cultural environment. This is well depicted by Malveaux (quoted by Sims & Stephens, 2005, p. 199) who opposed the use of a single theoretical perspective by saying that “we are used to using one or two things to explain our reality, when four or five factors might influence our space”.

## **2.2 Riddles: An Overview**

### ***2.2.1 Definition and history of a riddle***

A riddle is a statement, question, or phrase that has a double meaning. It can also be described as a puzzle to be solved. Riddles can be thought provoking or funny comments that make us laugh. In oral literature, riddle is a genre of the short form; it commonly follows a definite stylistic pattern of riddling—it can be rhyming or non-rhyming (Finnegan, 1970; Nijoroge 1984, p. 54; Tucker 2005).

Riddle is one of the ancient forms of oral literature with numerous examples in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Sanskrit tradition. Riddles’ literary ancestry dates all the way

back to ancient Greece, where they were used as a cunning tool, to demonstrate wit and wisdom (Abrahams & Dundes, 1972). However, according to Tucker (2011), riddles are not of the same type throughout cultures—they vary in styles.

### 2.2.2 Classification of riddles

Riddles can be classified in different ways—according to their types, level of difficulty, and forms<sup>2</sup>. According to their types they are categorized in to two—enigmas and conundrum. An enigma is a problem in which the solution is expressed metaphorically, and it requires cleverness and careful thinking for its solution. It is mysterious and difficult to understand. Generally it describes a word (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2006). One common example of English enigma is “Three eyes have I, all in a row; when the red one opens, all freeze.” The answer to this riddle is traffic light.

Conundrum is a question, usually involving a trick with words that one asks for fun. Colloquially it is used to refer to a seemingly unanswerable question or the like; it is technically a riddle with a pun for an answer (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2006). An example of such types of riddles is “What is it that a cow has four of and a woman has only two of?” The answer to that riddle was legs [breast]. To add one example: “What is it that leaps and runs and has no feet?” The answer to that riddle was ball (MetaFilter, 2010).

Riddles can also be classified based on their level of difficulty—as simple and complex (Nijoroge, 1984, pp. 53-59). A riddle is labeled simple when the answer is simple. One of these types of riddles is “broad as a floor, light as a leaf”. The answer to that riddle was smoke. A riddle “board in a pond, it does not get dry or wet” is also taken as simple riddle with a formula of double denial. The answer to that riddle was tongue. These are structured in a single sentence or two and the answer is also short—usually a phrase or one word.

However, it is important to remember that, some riddles (even with a single sentence) are catches, difficult to comprehend, and require fast discovery of the issues rather than exactly searching for a referent. For instance, the riddle “if a plane crashes on the border between Ethiopia and Kenya, in which country would you bury the survivors?” requires critical examination of the question itself rather than choosing either of the two states for burying the survivors, for the survivors should not be buried.

On the other hand, a riddle is considered complex (1) when it is with more than two sentences, and (2) its answer is an explanation with more than one sentence.

Riddles can also be classified according to their form. As described by Nijoroge (1994, p. 49) and Finnegan (1970), riddles<sup>3</sup> are implicitly or explicitly interrogative mainly framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the mental acuity and wit of the guesser. They present objects or actions by selecting some salient traits, and they are powerful. McDowell (as quoted in Tucker, 2008, p. 24), who defined riddle as “an interrogative ludic routine incorporating some form of contrived ambiguity”, says that interrogative routines contain dynamics of power. He explained that the challenger has a

<sup>2</sup> Riddles can also be categorized according to their functions. For example riddle-jokes aim at establishing mock. Such a riddle asks the respondent to identify a referent.

<sup>3</sup> Riddles are considered as a type of art form and have been included in the studies of oral texts.

final power to decide on the correct solution, but may not renounce the right answer. This indicates that there are always the challenger and respondent, while the latter is supposed to respond to the former.

In this regard, Finnegan (1970) showed that the African types of riddle are different from the popular European or American picture of riddle. The latter involves an explicit question to which a respondent must attempt to come up with the correct answer; whereas the African riddles are not interrogative explicitly but they are at least statements outwardly. Nijorge (1994, pp. 49-63) presented most of the riddles in statement form or as a clause or phrase without any punctuation mark though they are implicitly interrogatives. For instance, the riddle “a hut without a door” is in essence a question with the connotation “what is something like a hut without any opening?”, and ‘an egg’ is the answer.

It is important to notice that in riddles a question is not asked directly; rather the respondent is exposed to an allusive sentence referring analogously to something else, which s/he is expected to identify. , since African riddles focus on some sort of play of images and visual acoustic, rather than puns and or plays of words, they are typically presented in allusive general statements. And the respondent is exposed to double process of answering the question, in which s/he is expected to identify the actual object of phenomenon that is allusively represented (Nijorge 1984, pp. 49-63; Finnegan, 1992).

The riddling question and answer follows formulaic approach. It is common that in African societies riddles are signaled by opening and closing rituals. The opening formula serves two main purposes. Firstly, it ensures the challenger the agreed participation of the potential respondent. Secondly, it enables the listener or respondent by defining that the session is a riddling session and different from other forms of oral genres. In addition, the formulaic approach expects the listener or respondent to discover the answer to the question asked, which is accompanied with a promise of punishment or reward.

In spite of the fact that statements or clause of riddles are functionally interrogative, Nijoroge (1984) selectively used question marks for sentences which are explicitly interrogative. For the rest either full stop or none is used based on the structure of the riddle. This style is used in this particular article.

However, it is important to know that, the riddling question and answer session, which is one of the important<sup>4</sup> issues pertinent to African riddles, is discouraged during the day time. Scholars unequivocally present that in most African societies children do not riddle during the day time. As Njoroge (1994) and Finnegan (1970) stated, in many communities riddling during the day time is said to be followed by misfortune, such as an attack from wild animals.

### 3. Methods

In doing this research, ethnographic methodology and qualitative data gathering methods were employed. Relevant data were gathered from both primary and secondary

---

<sup>4</sup>Riddling is important in developing language competence skills, observational skills, normative skills, memory skills, and entertainment skills.

sources. Secondary data were secured from Dawo District Office of Culture and Tourism. Riddles were collected from children and adults during April 2013 field work. Riddling sessions were organized at two different primary schools—Rachee and Qorichaa, and the performances were observed. These schools were selected purposely based on their geographical proximity to the Walisoo Liiban *gadaa* ritual centers and their accessibility in terms of transportation facilities. The people over the area are known for their conservative position in preserving most of the Oromo law and customs which are in fact embedded in and backed by the prevailing *gadaa* system.

The arrangement of riddling sessions in cooperation with school teachers were done as a substitute for the actual riddling practice, which was performed only in the evening before bed time or during post burial session. Observation of actual practices requires passing over night with some families who have children playing riddles or attending post burial session. This was not easy to achieve. It demands staying over the area for long days. Even staying few days with certain families as a guest does not serve the purpose for still the presence of the researcher would negatively affect the performance of children in plying riddle. The researcher practically confirmed this assertion during his fieldwork. Thus, using day time riddling session was not only an alternative, but also the best option as school children were free to riddle and to compete vigorously among themselves to win the award prepared by the researcher. The practice was not odd, since these days teachers often use riddles as icebreaker and ways of conveying certain knowledge, skill and attitude in the teaching-learning process. In earlier times, riddling session was in the evening to avoid any interference of the practice with normal day time activities of the actors. However, recently, since most children have joined formal school and education has become their central activity, riddles with their educational roles have gradually been accommodated into school activities. In this context, the arrangements helped to meet the objectives of the research in the changing circumstances.

In addition, primary data were gathered through interview. Interviews with five elders and four primary school teachers were conducted to secure information on events that the researcher could not witness. It was used to gain entry to the situations where the researcher was unable to participate. This method, thus, helped the researcher to gain access to information on riddles, particularly from emic point of view. Informants, both elders and teachers were purposely selected based on their knowledge of the issue under discussion. The researcher's cumulative knowledge and personal experiences over the area were also used.

Data were analyzed using interpretive and descriptive approach<sup>5</sup>. According to Sims and Stephens (2005, pp. 177-184), the structure of a riddle is useful in analyzing certain universal elements across cultures. However, to analyze the data, this study classified riddles based on the nature of their items (rather than their structure or

---

<sup>5</sup>Literatures indicate that different writers portray different ways to analyze oral texts. Miruka (1994, pp.38-43) described how oral texts can be approached in terms of its context of performance and structure. Other forms of classifications like subject, functional, and literary classifications are also used in analysis. Sims and Stephens (2005, pp. 177-184) showed how riddles can be addressed based on their structural classification. According to these writers, the structure supports and leads to answer riddles and puzzles. Further it is useful in analyzing certain universal elements across cultures.

functions), similarities, differences, forms, functions, facts, colors, size, status, co-existence or association, cause and effect relations of the items of riddles.

#### 4. Result

Regardless of the fact that riddles are common in all cultures and across time, the Walisoo Liiban Oromo have their own ways of riddling specific to their own social and natural environments. This part of the paper attempts to present certain basic features of riddles and riddling among the Walisoo Liiban. Some procedures and styles of riddling, the nature and items of riddles are depicted.

##### 4.1 Riddling Session and Procedures among the Walisoo Liiban

Riddles are the interest of children. Yet, they are not allowed to riddle during the day time. It is said that a day time riddling brings about blindness. The justification behind seems to be common and obvious. Primarily, it is to threaten children to concentrate on their daily activities and to control the possible interference of riddles with the children's normal (expected) chores. In addition, during the evening time adults and elder children are relatively free and have the opportunity to assist kids in riddling. Hence, children are encouraged to riddle mainly during the evening after the day's work. Yet, nowadays this is violated by schools where teachers often use riddles, stories, puzzles, and proverbs to teach children. Children are regularly invited to riddle in class as icebreaker, and teachers use them to transmit knowledge and/or shape behavior.

On the other hand, riddles are not exclusively of children. From his personal experiences the researcher knows that, among the Walisoo Liiban, riddles are commonly practiced by the adults in the evening in special occasions. For instance, as custom demands in post burial session friends, neighbors, and relatives stay with the family of the deceased person to show their condolence and to help the family members recover. Riddles are used as a means of entertaining the family members and other participants. But adults' riddles are of high standard and mostly puzzles.

Among the Oromo in general and the Walisoo Liiban in particular riddles involve question and answer form. However, it does not mean that riddles appear always in interrogative form. It is uttered either in phrase or statement form with interrogative connotation. Consequently, a riddle contains a challenger and a respondent. It always involves competition, in which the sender challenges the receiver and the latter is supposed to respond the question. A loser in riddle is liable to a fine, which is of course mere symbolic.

'*Hibboo*' is an Oromo word for riddle. The term is used both as general term referring to riddle as such and as opening word for a particular riddling session. A challenger marks the opening of the riddle by uttering the initial word *hibboo*. The respondent responds '*hibib*' or '*hiph*' or '*hibbakka*' that vary from local to local. The Walisoo Liiban use the word *hibbakka*. This is followed by the question from the challenger be it interrogative or statement. The following Walisoo Liiban riddling illustrates that exchange.

**Challenger:** *Hibboo*

**Respondent:** *Hibbakka*

These two lines precede any riddle as opening formula to define the text generically and to permit the expression of its unique qualities. The utterance of the word *hibboo* by the challenger, therefore, signifies that the challenger is ready to riddle. Similarly, the word *hibbakka* uttered by the respondent also marks that the respondent is ready to receive. The word *hibboo* has also a connotation of something challenging enough. It has similar meaning with the word 'paradox' in English. But the word *hibbakka* has no meanings outside the context of this specific genre. Once the opening formula is performed, the challenger forwards his question and the receiver tries to respond as soon as possible. For instance,

**Challenger:** "*Haati nama ilaalti, ilmoon nama nyaatti*"; meaning 'the mother targets the son eats'.

**Respondent:** '*qawee fi rasaasa*'; which means 'a rifle and its bullet'.

This is a correct answer. In this case, the answer marks the closing of this particular riddle. The respondent has the right to guess the answer for a reasonable number of times until s/he discovers the correct answer before the second question is raised. In case the respondent fails to answer the riddle correctly, the following closing formula is ritualized.

**Respondent:** declares his failure saying "*bakkaa dhugi*"; meaning drink melted butter.

**Challenger:** requests for recompense (a fine).

**Respondent:** states one of the nearby market or vicinity as a fine.

**Challenger:** s/he has the right to demand for another market or vicinity. If agreed upon, s/he praises or/and becomes proud of his/her fine, calling its name and enumerating some of its resources. For instance, if it is Busa<sup>6</sup> market, one can say that "*Busa argadhee maalan dhabe?*" "O! I am lucky! Since I got Busa, nothing I miss; Busa is a land of good harvest, honey, butter, cattle, and etc." Praising his pretended belongings, the challenger abuses the loser for losing the riddle in the following way:

### In Oromo

*Guutuu manaa irra si basee, raatuu namaa  
si dhansisee*

*Gama kee xaaxessaa dhaabee, gama koo  
xaaxa'aa dhaabe.*

*Kan kee xaaxa'ee bade, kan koo xaaxeessee  
gale.*

*Balbala irra ciifta, dhuufuu gad dhiifta.*

*Gama kee sardiidi kuruph, gama koo  
jabbiin kuruph.*

*Ati baksituu dha, ani kakaksituu dha.*

*Situ baksa goboxaa'ee, ani nan dhuga ol  
utaalee.*

*Gufuu gugguufuu jala bahi;*

### Equivalent in English

You are sent to the roof and  
trashed by the foolish.

Plant shrub to your side and  
corn to my side.

Yours is exploded, mine  
crackled.

Sleep at the get; release your  
fart.

A fox is gamboling on your  
side; a calf is gamboling on  
my side.

The butter you melt, I drink  
it.

You melt being bowed low to  
my feet; I enjoy it.

Face stumbling block, pass

<sup>6</sup> Busa is the administrative center of Dawo District where Sunday market is held.  
Ethiop. j.soc.lang.stud.

*utuu dhudhuuftuu bara bahi.*  
*Hundee migiraa, hundeen keenya fira.*  
*Fardi hin dannabsu, kana caala si hin arrabsu.*

the year farting.  
 Any ways we are relatives.  
 I will never abuse you anymore.

*Adamii baalaa, ani fi ati jaala.*  
*Deebiin isa qawee fi rasaasa.*

We are bond friends.  
 The answer is a rifle with its bullet.

Similar but slightly different version of ridiculing the loser is introduced since recently. The following is an example.

*saanqaa Waaqa jalaa si bute.*

I snatched you from under  
*Waaqa's*<sup>7</sup> door.

*Mo'oo egee si kute.*

I cut your knee.

*laga keessa kaadhu.*

Run in the river!

*Shaggar bahii madabii buufadhu.*

Go to Addis Ababa and make  
 your own bed.

*Kunoo foon jedhii, nadayii cuffadhu.*

Eat scar of leprosy.

*Butuuttuu abbaa marii, du'atti afaan bani.*

Wear dirty; open your mouth  
 to fatality.

*Re'ee gaafa muxee, ekeraan si bute.*

A ghost takes you.

*Re'ee gaafa saalaa, ekeraan si waama.*

A ghost calls you.

*Hojjattee hin nyaatin, kajeellaa malee.*

Be helpless; beg always.

*Ol jettee hin deemin, gugguufuu malee.*

Do not walk upright; bend  
 always.

*Muka muka irraa cite alaltuu ta'i;*

Be mad; feel bad.

*nama nama irraa cite maraattuu ta'i.*

In recent times there has been a procedure in which a loser demands the challenger not to abuse him/her by saying “*balbala Waaqaa saaqee cufe*” or “*balbala Waaqaa qabadhe*”; means “I opened and closed *Waaqa's* door” and I hide myself at *Waaqa's* door’ respectively. This implies that the loser takes protection or refuge at the door of *Waaqa*. There s/he has to be respected. The respect goes to the *Waaqa* from which the loser benefits. Thus, the challenger has to abstain from abusing the loser.

Even though the concept *Waaqa* is as old as the Oromo world view, pretending to hide oneself under His door to escape the potential insult by the challenger is a new element over the area. In the former time there was no such a procedure of preventing oneself from being abused by the challenger. It was up to the challenger to decide to what extent the loser has to be abused. The practice seems to have been diffused from other areas.

In the process of fine remuneration, a particular market or vicinity cannot be given repeatedly. Once it is symbolically handed over to the challenger, it belongs to him/her for the whole riddling session, unless otherwise he/she repays when losing the riddle.

Another development is the newly introduced procedure of asking for hint (clue) to guess the answer. The challenger can demand for hint saying ‘*si soqadha si qoradha*’.

<sup>7</sup> *Waaqa* is Oromo concept refers to a creator equivalent to God in English who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient

This means ‘let me get permission to ask questions of clarification’. Similarly, the challenger has the chance to ban any demand of clarification, by saying ‘*na hin qorattu, na hin soqattu*’, which means, ‘no question of elucidation is allowed’. The questions of clarification are allowed depending upon whether the respondent forwards the demand before the challenger announces the banning. If allowed, the respondent asks some questions of clarification, like ‘*mana gala moo ala gala? Tuqan xiixaa? Muran dhiigaa? Qaban fiigaa? Hin soorata moo hin sooratu?*’ Meaning, where does it live, in door or out? If touched, does it make any sound? If cut, does it bleed? Does it eat? Can it run? After these questions of clarification, the guesser is supposed to answer the question. This practice, as the researcher witnessed, and also as his informants confirmed, was not part of the riddling procedure over the area in former times.

## 4.2 The Nature and Items of Riddle among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo

Among the Walisoo Liiban, item of a riddle can be any object that varies from human body which is near at hand to extremely remote and complex objects and phenomenon such as the stars and moon. Based on the capacity of the challenger and respondent, riddles vary in terms of level of difficulty and numbers. This part presents a few selected examples of riddles currently common among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo. They are categorized in terms of the nature of riddle items. However, the categories are not exclusive to each other as some of the items are combinations of two or more categories.

### 4.2.1 Riddles related to body parts

#### In Oromo

1. *Godoo gamaa, balballi lama.*
2. *Kubbaa gurraacha, goodaa adii keessaa*
3. *Jooraa ooltee, ciraaroodhaan cufatte.*
4. *Lama ni hagsiisa; lama ni haga.*
5. *Dhagaa qaqawwisaa, diimaa lalisaa,  
sulula qal’oo, araddaa bal’oo, gootara  
warra abbaa qoroo kan bonaa fi ganna  
hin guutne*
6. *Misirroo diimtuu dallaa adii keesaa*
7. *Midhaanii fi nama qalqalloo tokko keessa*
8. *Jirmi gara olii dameen gara gadii*

#### Equivalent in English

The hut over there has two doors.  
A black ball in the white hall  
wondering around the whole day,  
shutting its door with brush wood  
in the evening.  
Two are discharging and two are  
enforcing the discharge.  
The white stones, the red grass,  
the thin valley, the wide field,  
the ever unsaturated big granary  
A red bride in a white fence  
A person and crop in the same sack  
The steam on the top, and the  
branches at the bottom

**Answers:** 1. Nose 2. An eye and its pupil 3. Eyes 4. Nose and fingers 5. Teeth, tongue, esophagus, chest and stomach 6. A tongue and teeth 7. An ovary of a pregnant woman 8. Human body structure (the two legs are considered branches)

#### 4.2.2 Riddles related to human practices and manmade objects

##### In Oromo

1. *Leenca lama, reenfa lama*
2. *Haadha gurraatti ijoolleen adaadii*
3. *Ol utaalee, si cuqqaale.*
4. *Raada abbaa qeenxee, udduu qabnaan dheedde.*
5. *Jaartii ulfaa duraa duubaan fiigdi.*
6. *Ibiddi haadha irra, haati bishaan irra, bishaan lafa irra*
7. *Re'een maraatte, ibidda qabsiifte.*
8. *Niitiin maratte, ibidda mataatti baatte.*
9. *Jaarsa guddaa xuraabba, kan ijoolleen jala dhibbaa*
10. *Ol ha'ee, gad ha'ee, waan adii keesaa Fuudha.*
11. *Raddi gurraatiin gabatee arraabdi.*
12. *Karaa irra dhabbata, afaaniin ibidda darbata.*
13. *Dhiyoo fageesse, fagoo dhiyeesse.*
14. *Utuu nyaatuu diddiga.*
15. *Adii qorkee, Waaqan morke.*
16. *Harkaan facaasee ijaan funaana.*

##### Equivalent in English

- Two lions two dead  
A black mother and white children  
I jump high and beat you up.  
If you hold its tail, it grazes.
- The pregnant woman runs back and forth.  
Fire on mother, mother on water and water on earth  
The madden goats ignites fire.  
A mad woman carries fire on her head.  
A great old man whose children are hundred.  
I threw it there and here and finally got something white.  
A black heifer cleans a dish.  
It stands on road and spits fire.
- It makes near far and far near.  
It eats and intoxicates at the same time.  
A white stone challenges the sky.  
Cultivating with hands and harvesting with eyes

**Answers:** 1. Yoked oxen, plough and yoke 2. A pot and cups 3. Mortar (receptacle and a pestle) 4. Sickle 5. Weft 6. Hubble- Hubble (hookah) 7. A pair of bellows 8. Lamp light 9. House 10. Charming cream 11. A sweet herb used to clean vessel 12. Traffic light 13. Mobile phone 14. Mill 15. Aircraft 16. Writing and reading

#### 4.2.3 Riddles Related to Animals and Insects

##### In Oromo

1. *Abbaan koo dheeraa, haati koo gabaabduu, maxinoon koo mi'ayaa, sareen koo hamtuu.*
2. *Yaa mana kootii fagaatuu, yaa maxinoo kootii mi'awuu, yaa saree kootii nama nyaatuu!*

##### Equivalent in English

- My father is the tallest,  
my mother is the shortest,  
my bread is the sweetest  
and my dogs are bravest.  
How my home far away is; my  
bread sweetest is,  
my dogs furious are!

- |                                                                  |                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. <i>Aayyoo dinqii yaa lola ishii!</i>                          | A surprising mother how bravest fighter she is!                          |
| 4. <i>Maxinoo kilashii raajii yaa mi'aashii!</i>                 | O! A loaf of bread, how sweet it is!                                     |
| 5. <i>Saani abbaa koo ibidda malee hin elmamtu.</i>              | My father's cow is never milked without fire.                            |
| 6. <i>Luka calii gootee dhungoo cal natti goote.</i>             | A little with thin leg kissed me deep.                                   |
| 7. <i>Eeboo dhibba baatti bosona keessaa kaatti.</i>             | It carries hundred spears and runs in forest.                            |
| 8. <i>Farsituu ganamaa, farriftuu galgalaa</i>                   | praising in the morning and crying in the evening.                       |
| 9. <i>Obbolaan afur bolla tokkotti finacaa'u.</i>                | The four sisters urinate in the same hole.                               |
| 10. <i>Haadha kootii tarsatu iddoo hunda hin hanqattu</i>        | Mr. Everywhere is a torn out coat owner.                                 |
| 11. <i>Utaalaa burraaqaa gurbaa kaarruu saaqaa</i>               | A jumping, handsome and joyful guy                                       |
| 12. <i>Riqicha abbaa malee hin Ceesissne</i>                     | A bridge that never carries except the owner                             |
| 13. <i>Baala fakkataa Waaqa irra Kaata.</i>                      | A leaf like flies in the sky.                                            |
| 14. <i>Mataan gara udduu , udduun gara mataa</i>                 | Head to bottom and bottom to head                                        |
| 15. <i>Ofii hin nyaatu namaaf hin laatu foon mataatti baata.</i> | It carries an hunk of meat on its, head neither eats nor gives.          |
| 16. <i>Mana eegi jennaan Waaqa ilaalaa oolte.</i>                | It is expected to shut the door, yet it passes the day watching the sky. |
| 17. <i>Sangaan re'ee irra re'een harree irra</i>                 | The ox on the goat, the goat on the donkey                               |

**Answers:** 1. Tree, beehive, honey and bee 2. Tree, honey and bee 3. Honey 4. Bee 5. Bee 6. Bee 7. Procaine 8. Frog 9. Four teats of a cow and a vessel 10. Fly 11. Colobus monkey 12. Spider's net 13. Butterfly 14. A calf sucking its mother's milk 15. Cock 16. A tail of goat or dog 17. A donkey, a load on the donkey and leather strap

#### 4.2.4 Natural objects and phenomenon

##### In Oromo

1. *Amma majii geessi biyya waliin geessi.*
2. *Birbirsaa waarituu sinbirri hin qaaritu.*
3. *Akaayyii mana irra facaase.*
4. *Inuma nyaata hin quufu.*
5. *Balaqeen balaqise biyya sodachise.*
6. *Barbaaddu hin dhabdu harkaan*

##### Equivalent in English

- As small as grinding stone but covers the world.  
A juniper tree that a bird never cross over.  
A roasted corn is scattered on the top of the hut.  
It eats but never satisfies.  
Shiner shined and frightened them.  
You never miss it, but never catch it.

- hin qabdu.*
7. *Ayyoo baxuree karatti duute.* A little mother dies on its way.
8. *Dhugee machaa'e karaa wallaale.* It is intoxicated and missed its way.
9. *Ganna ni dorroba bona ni okkola.* It is pregnant in winter and sick in summer.
10. *Abaan daboo hafee daboon gale* The organizer of the *dabo* (festive work) stays there, the participants back home.
11. *Hin dhiqatu hin dibatu ni cululuqa.* It is never rubbed and never washed, but clean.
12. *As koottu sittan hima.* Please come, let me tell you something.
13. *Muka isaa hin yabbatan,  
ija isaa hin nyaatan,  
isa malee hin jiraatan.* Never mount its tree, never eats its fruits, no one lives without it.
14. *Abbaa eeboo dhibbaa laga  
keessaa sirba.* A dancer in a river holds hundred spears.

**Answer:** 1. The sun 2. Sky 3. Stars 4. Grave 5. Thunder 6. Shadow 7. Flame 8. Whirlwind 9. Seasonal river 10. Dead man 11 Solanaceous fruit. 12. Climber or creeper 13. Cotton 14. Palm tree

#### 4.2.5 Edible florae and food items

##### In Oromo

1. *Birbirsa gabaabee diimaa robe.*
2. *Haati alaa sirbiti; intalli  
manaa keessumaa geggeessiti.*
3. *Hiddi isaa lafa lixa; ilmi isaa nama fixa.*
4. *Adii dhala, gurraacha hoosisa,  
diimaa guddifata.*
5. *Mucaa abbaa areeda,*
6. *Akka jaarsaa harrii qaba akka  
daa' imaa dugdatti baatama.*
7. *Jaarsa afaan areedaa, gabaabaa  
Bareedaa*
8. *Akka bofaa loa, akka dhakaa taa'a.*
9. *Jaartiin huduu furdaa; kan uccuu  
dhibbaa*
10. *Sa'i warra keenyaa utuu udduun  
eeganuu mataan dhala.*
11. *Irri du'aa, jalli du'aa gidduun*

##### Equivalent in English

- A small sycamore tree has fruited red.
- The mother is dancing out door; the daughter is entertaining the guests in door.
- Its root is in ground; its son is in person.
- It gives birth to white, feeds breast to black and nurtures red.
- A child, but has sprouted beard.
- As grey as an old, but embraced as a child
- An old man with beard, short and handsome
- It moves like a snake, it rests like a stone.
- A woman with fat buttock and hundred cloths
- Our cow gives birth through its head.
- Dead at the top, alive at the middle

*jiraa(irraan diph, jalaan diph giduun* and dead at the bottom  
*dibaa diphi)*

**Answers:** 1. Green paper 2. Green pepper and green pepper plant 3. Green pepper plant 4 Green pepper plant 5. Corn 6. Corn 7. Pumpkin 8.False banana 9. False banana (enset) 10. Cover, Injera (typical Ethiopian food) and girdle

#### 4.2.6 Riddles with combined items

1. *Namni tokko barii jibba, tokkoo dhiha jibba tokkoo immoo rooba jiba isaan maal?*

There is a man who worries when the sun sets; another person worries when rain rains, and the third worries when dawn comes. Who are they?

2. *Kessummaa waa sadiin galchu: tokko erbee refeensa hin qabne, kan biraa lafee foon hin qabne fi foon lafee hin qabne*

Three things are needed to welcome a guest: leather without hair, meat without bone, and bone without meat. What are they?

3. *Muka muka caalu, bineensa bineensa caalu, sanyii sanyii caalu maal?*

What is a tree more important than all trees, a beast more powerful than all beasts and a seed more important than all seeds?

4. *Sadii waltarkaa dhufan, tokko lafa taa'a tokko lafa lixa, tokko tasa bada, isaan maal?*

Three things come together, one stays on the earth, the second penetrates in to the soil, and the third hibernates; what are they?

5. *Waa jaha diniq maal?* What are the six surprising things?

#### Answer:

1. *Somebody who owes money, somebody at odd with his wife, and somebody whose house licks rain*
2. *Good face, friendly words (tang) and teeth (laugh)*
3. *Cotton plant, ant and sperm*
4. *Excrement, urine and fart*
5. *Waaqa utubaa malee dhaabatu, lafa dhisaa malee diriiru, hiddii rooba malee gabbatu, qoree utuu hin qariin qaramu, uummoo dhukkuba malee aadu fi bofa miila malee deemu*

*The six surprising things are the sky remained intact without pillar, the stretched flat earth without being stretched, the ever fat Solanaceous fruits without rain, a sharp thorn without being sharpen, the ever groaning emu bird without being sick, and a snake running without feet.*

#### 4.3 Interpreting the Riddles

Close observation of the nature of the above items of riddles reveals that they involve analogy and are expressed enigmatically in terms of comparisons to a person, to other similar object, in terms of forms, functions, facts, colors, size, status, co-existence, cause and effect, etc. They enable to compare objects that appear similar, to contrast phenomenon that appear quite different, and to discover differences among objects and

Ethiop. j.soc.lang.stud. Vol. 1 No.1 June 2014

phenomenon that appear quite similar. Most of the items are, therefore, named with analogate.

For instance, in the riddle "the hut over there has two doors" the subject is a nose. A nose is symbolized by a hut, the two openings of a nose are considered as two doors. The representation is based on the similarities in their shape, structure and co-existence. One can take a riddle "the white stones, the red grass, the thin valley, the wide field, the ever unsaturated big granary" in terms of structure of elementary canals. It gives orientation to the kids as to the symbolic representation of these body parts and their co-existence. Here colors (red and white) and physical states of these body parts are used in designing the riddle.

Similarly, in a riddle "moving around the whole day and shutting its door with brush wood in the evening" shows that eyelashes are expressed as bush wood; an eyelid is expressed as a door, blinking an eye is expressed as closing a door. Besides, eyelashes and brushwood appear analogates. Here one of the salient features of eye is used to shape this riddle. The fact that an eye is an organ to see things around and sleeping is a phenomenon when an eye takes break from serving; these basic functions are used to coin this riddle.

However these are not the only features of an eye, other features too can be used to coin another riddles. For instance, in the riddle "a black ball in the white hall" black ball and hall are still used as analogates of eye pupil and the entire eye respectively. We mostly find at the center of an eye a black pupil (at least for the owners of this riddle) and round. It is located at the center of an eye which is represented in this case with hall. Still another feature of an eye is used to coin more riddle. The riddle "two neighbors that never see each other" focuses on the physical position of one's two eyes and their biological barrier to see each other. More features can be identified to coin additional riddles on the same item.

In this regard, riddles revolve around bee is a typical example. Bee is one of the popular objects of riddle. There are many riddles with bee, beehives, honey, and tree on which beehives is hanged (see riddles under 4.2.3. Numbers 2 to 6). These riddles have been coined in different ways focusing on different aspects of these items. Some of the riddles are different in their structure with similar essence. Some of them are more complex for they try to accommodate the whole components of honey production like structure, taste, and behavior of bee. Traditionally, beehives are hanged high on top of big trees; hence this physical structure is considered. In other case, the process of harvesting honey is focused. Traditionally, when harvesting honey, fire or smoke is used to protect oneself from bee bite. In these riddles, different aspects of honey production are used to shape the riddles from different angles.

The riddle "a red bride is in a white fence" symbolizes a tongue and teeth. A bride represents tongue while a white fence stands for teeth. In this case, the riddle is designed from color of a tongue and teeth. A tongue is symbolized by red bride, because as a bride is normally veiled and is not easily accessible to everybody (especially on her wedding day) so is a tongue to every body's sight. On the other hand, teeth physically and structurally appear fence.

Likewise, the riddle "my father's servant urinate blood" stands for coffee pot and boiled coffee; it is expressed in terms of color and services. The term servant refers to

the pot. This seems to be associated with the purpose it serves. The word urinate indicates the act of pouring the boiled coffee. The word blood stands for the color of the coffee. Similarly, a riddle "a black mother has white children" represents a pot and cups. This riddle seems to be designed purely from the size and color of a pot and cups. The black mother stands for a jar or pot, whereas the white cups are associated with white children. In addition to their color, the riddle is designed based on their coexistence. In traditional coffee ceremony, in different parts of Ethiopia in general and the Walisoo Liiban in particular, the two items are inseparable and culturally meaningful. Thus, this point indicates how cultural traits play roles in designing riddles.

In this regard, riddles which involve cultural values and norms are common over the area. For instance, the riddle "I planted but unable to uproot it" is familiar among the Walisoo Liiban Oromo. It can be understood only in relation to cultural values and practices. It refers to personal name. Traditionally, parents have undisputed mandate to give personal names for their children and those names remain unchanged throughout the lives of their bearers, even after. Yet, the current situation indicates that, when individuals reach the age of majority can change their names following the legal procedures applicable to it. This practice is common among the Walisoo Liiban. In this sense, the riddle gives meaning only in the context of traditional practices of name giving and retaining. For the new generation who is changing personal names without much difficulty, the riddle does not give sense.

Some of the riddles among the Walisoo Liiban are also designed and presented in terms of the shape of the actor. For instance, in the riddle "a hut without a door" the actor is an egg. As an egg is round, it is said to be hut, and for it is without opening, it is said to be without a door.

The spatial position of the actors also serves as a base for the formation of riddles. "Head to bottom and bottom to head" refers to a calf sucking its mother's breast, which is designed based on the position of a calf and a cow. The riddle "she passes the day watching the sky, though it is expected to shut the door" refers to a tail of either a goat or a dog. As opposed to its expected function, a tail of a goat or a dog never veil (cover) its backside (bum), rather turns up to the sky. Anus is taken as a door to be shut down with tail. Animals' tails usually serve this purpose, but with a few exceptions. This deviation is taken as a base to coin the riddle.

Some other riddles are designed based on the inevitable association of the items of riddle. In a riddle "three came at once, one stays on the earth, the second penetrates in to the soil, and the third hibernates" refers to excrement, urine, and fart respectively. The one remains on the earth is excrement, the one penetrates in to the earth is urine, and the one hibernates into the air is fart. The riddle is coined based on the association of the items of riddle in space and time. Meanwhile, it allows psychological relief from culturally imposed taboo words. Among the Oromo the word for excrement '*udaan*' is a taboo word and often replaced by *bobbaa*. But for riddling purpose children are allowed to use even taboo words. This riddle also shows the life of the rural Ethiopia, where there is no toilet and excretion is in the forest. As the life situation of rural people would change and the practice of using toilet would take over, the riddle would become meaningless. This indicates that riddles reflect the life situation of their owners.

The riddle "the ox on the goat, the goat on the donkey" represents load on the back of pack animals. Therefore, the riddle refers to three necessarily associated items:

sack, strap, and pack animal. However, the words are not in their literal meanings. Ox indicates strap made up of relatively strong leather either of oxen or cows. Such a strap is used for fastening things together or for keeping loads in place on the back of pack animals. The goat stands for sack (skin bag) made up of goat's skin, which termed as *qalqalloo*. Among the Oromo in general and the Walisoo Liiban in particular, traditional sack is made up of skin of goats. On the other hand, the word donkey stands for any loaded pack animals. Furthermore, this riddle does not simply orient on the image and associations of objects, but also on some of the cultural materials.

Still some riddles are designed in terms of the status of the actors vis-à-vis other objects in the same category. The riddle "a tree most important than all trees, a beast powerful than all beasts, and a seed above all seeds" connotes cotton plant, ant, and sperm respectively. Similarly, the objects of riddle are partially expressed enigmatically using analogy. But important attention is not given to the symbolic meanings, rather to the status of the actors, its value and biological state. For instance, for the first item, 'cotton', no symbolic expression is involved.

The riddle seems to inform some items which appear weak physically and less important functionally, and sometimes they are proved to be the opposite. In this particular case, though cotton plant physically appears weak when compared to other large trees such as juniper tree, it is the most important plant that is used to make fabric and thread. Similarly, ant is small insect but wins almost all animals, including the most dangerous and powerful beasts such as lion. The secret behind its winning position is the fact that it lives in highly organized groups. Hence, this riddle directly or indirectly instruct on the idea that 'unity is strength'. The last item of this riddle, 'sperm', is expressed as a seed. Seed is basic for reproduction. Sperm is, therefore, expressed as human seed that is primary for procreation and continuation of human race. This last riddle is high level riddle and is asked most of the time by adults.

Riddles are also important for their artistic values. The following are some of the examples of rhythmic riddles prevalent among the Walisoo Liiban.

#### **In Oromo**

- *godoo gamaa,  
balballi lama.*
- *raada abbaa qeenxee,  
eegee qabnaan dheedde.*
- *ol utaalee,  
si cuqqaale.*
- *Quphee quphante;  
xiyyoo afaan bante;  
arbuun rarraate.*
- *Birbirsaa Waaritu,  
sinbirri hin qaaritu.*

#### **Equivalent in English**

- The hut over there has two doors.
- Heifer of Qeenxee's father  
grazes as you grip its tail.
- I jump high and beat you up.
- The *quphe* sits down;  
the *xiyyoo* opens its mouth;  
the fruits are hanged down.
- Birds never pass over Waritu's juniper tree.

In some cases, queer or unusual words are used in substitution of names for the actors. For instance, in a riddle "*qaluuxee fi baluuxe, wal-huute*" the word '*qaluuxee fi baluuxe*' have no clear meanings and are not among the stock of Oromo words. However, in this particular riddle, it stands for 'yoked oxen'. It means 'something

*qaluuxee* and another thing *baluuxee* – hang each other. In this case, the last word *walhuute* (hang each other) is more important to guess the answer as compared to ‘*qaluuxee fi baluuxe*. The last two words are used to make the riddle rhythmic.

From the data of this study, it is observed that there are continuous inventions of new riddles referring to newly invented or introduced technologies or ideas. Nobody knows who invented them first, but is commonly found in the stock of riddles. For instance, as elders attest, riddles related to sky were mostly in relation to birds, butterfly, the sun, the moon and stars. Recently, the riddle ‘a white stone challenges the sky’ was coined to refer to airplane. The riddle “it makes distant near and nearby far” is introduced soon after the expansion of mobile telephone. “Cultivating with hands and harvesting with eyes” is a riddle refers to writing and reading, which could be coined only at a certain historical stage in the development of human history.

Some riddles indicate that they were originated in a certain economic, social, and geographical context. This can be deduced from the fact that they refer to specific plants, or animals, or social structures peculiar to a particular area. The riddles “a woman with fat buttock has hundred cloths”, “my father’s daughter dances behind the house”, “my father’s children give birth through their head” or “our cow gives birth through its head” refer to banana or false banana. The state of blossoming is taken as giving birth. This plant is grown in some parts of Ethiopia, including part of the Walisoo Liiban Oromo. In the absence of these plants the riddle is meaningless. Answering these questions does not require logical inference, but empirical observation. In general, data from the area indicate that the social and natural environments play vital role in coining, understanding, and responding riddles.

## 5. Discussion

Despite the fact that riddles are common to all cultures, the findings of this work indicate that the way they are coined, structured, and played reflect the specific social and natural environments. Besides, as they are culture bounded, they play significant role in both transmitting cultural values and orienting environmental knowledge. These imply that the cultural, social and natural environments are fundamental to understand riddles. This is a general characteristic of oral literature that provides a framework to study riddles. The finding, overall, supports McDowell who said that riddles are not spontaneously playful without any particular purpose (McDowell as quoted in Tucker, 2008, p. 24).

As the present study indicated, riddles among the Walisoo Liiban are mostly presented in statement form with interrogative connotation. Only in a few cases questions are directly asked. The interrogative connotation of a statement is signaled by the initial word of the riddle. The initial word *hibboo* marks that it is a riddle and a question regardless of the forms of the sentence. This finding agrees with the works of Nijoroge (1994), Finnegan (1970), and Tucker (2008), which indicated that riddles are connotatively interrogative, but outwardly can have statement form.

These writers also depicted that riddles normally have their own opening and closing styles different from other genre of oral literature. According to them, certain

style for defining riddling session is common in African societies. Despite its variations, in its details, the riddling style of the Walisoo Liiban Oromo fits to the general pattern of African mode of riddling. The use of the word *hibboo* and *hibbakkaa*, the remuneration that follows failure to answer a riddle, the praising of the given fine, insulting the loser, and escaping the fear of being insulted are part of the style of riddling over the area. The finding confirms to most extent the work of Tamene (2002). The only difference in this case is where the loser of the riddle should take refuge to escape the potential insult from the challenger. Tamene discussed that a loser who is afraid of being insulted can pretend taking refuge under the shirt of Maaram (Oromo gods in charge of fertility and delivery). Yet, the present data indicated that children commonly use Waaqa instead of Maaram. In essence both are similar.

The results of this study further indicate that some riddles among the Walisoo Liiban have certain rhythmic and aesthetic qualities of language. They are so attractive and beautiful. The rhythmic expressions of riddles promote the artistic and aesthetic value of the language of communication. This substantiates what Tucker (2011) described rhyming or non-rhyming as possible features of riddles. The finding also agrees with Tamene (2002, p. 83) who indicated that rhyming is a common feature of riddles in Oromo. The style supports children, starting from their early age, to learn ways of composing short verse.

The findings of this study also indicate that items of riddle are not mostly presented in their literal meanings. Rather, the actors are expressed symbolically and enigmatically referring to the value system of the people or the very essence of the item of a riddle. In other words, riddles are designed or framed in socially defined and culturally recognized communicative situation. This makes possible effective communication between the challenger and the respondent as they share common values, language, and connotative meanings of objects of riddles. Support to this finding comes from the work of Sumner (1994) which showed that the Oromo describe images of objects, animals, persons, and plants metaphorically. Basically, riddles are ways of educating young people for handling images in the context of common understanding between the sender and the receiver. Another support to the finding comes from Nijorge (1984) and Finnegan (1992) who confirmed that riddles of this kind are typical of African.

Nijorge (1984) and Finnegan (1992) depicted that riddles present objects or actions by selecting some most important traits. Yet, the finding of this study reveals that there is no single salient trait of an object for a riddle to focus on. Various features of an object can be inspected from different angles and can be selected to shape riddles.

Further, this research indicates that the level of complexity of riddles depends upon the depth of meanings attached to the object or phenomenon of the riddle, rather than its syntactic classifications. For example, the riddle ‘a seed above all seeds’ is single and simple sentence; its answer is also one word— sperm. Yet, this riddle demands critical thinking within the cultural framework and the value system of the Oromo. This is contrary to Nijoroge (1984) who classified riddles into simple and complex focusing

on structure of the riddle (single sentence or two) and the answer (one word or explanation).

Moreover, the dynamism of riddle has vital importance. Pertinent to this, the issue of riddling session is relevant. Data from the Walisoo Liiban Oromo indicate that traditionally children riddle mainly in the evening. This result confirms what Njoroge (1994) and Finnegan (1970) stated in relation to the riddling session and mechanisms of enforcing it. However, this tradition is not intact among the Walisoo Liiban as riddles are taken to primary schools and often used by teachers for teaching as well as for icebreaker. In addition, the items of riddles are continuously changing. New items are introduced and old ones are dropped depending on the changing social, economical and natural environment. It is clearly observed that riddles, regardless of their origins, are contextualized in the social, economical, and environmental circumstances of the area. Contexts show that riddles are not static; they are dynamic and adaptive. This fact is supported by Tucker (2008) who argued that oral literature is constantly updated to conform to the changing context.

The finding of Tamene (2002) also showed the dynamism of riddles. Dividing them into traditional and modern, he showed that riddles are coined for new ideas and technologies. Findings from this study are in favor of his work. However, the idea that the traditional versus the modern binary is not supported for there is no such a separation. Primarily, traditional is not something detached from the modern; rather it is part of the contemporary practice. Secondly, the issue of modernity is simply relative and still given to change. Finally, some of the items of riddles and their salient features, which the riddles refer to, are not given to change and are free of challenges from modernity. In this regard riddles are both traditional and modern since they continue being meaningful across different historical periods. For instance, the riddle “two neighbors that never see each other”, which refers to eyes of an individual, cannot be affected by time change; hence it is categorized in neither domain.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, a word *hibboo* stands for riddles among the Oromo in general and the Walisoo Liiban in particular. The same word also marks the opening of the riddle. A word *hibbakka*, which is uttered by a respondent, signals that he is ready to answer the riddle. A loser in riddle is liable to a pretended recompense, which is symbolized by either nearby market or vicinity. A loser has the right to know the correct answer in return of the fine. Similarly, the challenger is responsible to offer correct answer, but has the right to win the reward when the respondent is unable to answer the riddle. Among the Walisoo Liiban, the correct answer to the riddle signals the closing. But when the answer is missed, a separate closing formula is performed for each riddle.

In this cultural context, riddles involve both social and natural phenomena. Most of them are designed in the form of statement with interrogative connotation. They are concerned with selected images of natural phenomena, objects, roles, and structures of some social institutions. The items of riddles are not presented in their literal meanings; rather they are expressed enigmatically and symbolically in line with the value system of the Oromo. Riddles also involve analogy based on similarities in size, shape, color, structure, co-existence, status, etc. In addition, some riddles among the Walisoo Liiban

are structured rhythmically, which enhances the artistic quality of the communication between the sender and receiver.

Riddles play significant role in children's educations. They are often used to pass the information and wisdom of human experience from former generations to the latter ones. Through riddles children receive not only a technical instruction, but also all ways of information regarding the natural and social environments. This indicates that oral literature in general and riddles in particular are the source of cumulative innovations of forefathers of countless generations.

Studies on riddles among the Oromo are very scanty. Oromo riddles still need further consideration in the face of modern society. This study attempted to fill the gap, at least to some extent.

## **7. Recommendations**

The findings from this study clearly indicate that riddles are culture and environment bounded. This boosts the need to select the values of riddles and to adapt them to the present context. Following this logic of argument, riddles have clear relevance to the modern education in enhancing the intended knowledge, skill and attitude of the learners. As it is clearly indicated in the discussion, riddles are not static; rather they experience significant changes, for they involve continuous invention of new ideas and technologies. In this framework, the need to preserving and transposing riddles deserves great recognition from educators and curriculum designers. They can be profitably introduced into the school system. They make education not only possible within the learners' means, but also enjoyable. Finally, since the present work is not a comprehensive material on the subject, it suggests further in-depth investigations.

## References

- Abrahams, R. D. & Dundes, A. (1972). Riddles. In Richard M. Dorson (ed.) *Folk Lore and Folk Life: an Introduction*. London: The University of Chicago.
- Bronner, S. J. (2007). *The meaning of folklore: The analytical essays of Alan Dundes*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral literature in Africa*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Finnegan, R. (1992). *Oral traditions and the verbal arts: A guide to research practices*. London and New York: Routledge Publishing Company.
- MetaFilter (2010). What are some examples of real conundrums? (Retrieved on August 6/2014 from <http://ask.metafilter.com>).
- Miruka, O. (1994). Understanding and teaching proverbs. In Austin Bukonya et al.(eds.). *Understanding Oral Literature*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 36-48.
- Nijoroge, H. N. (1994). The Riddle. In Austin Bukonya et al. (eds.). *Understanding oral literature*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 49-63.
- Oxford Advanced Dictionary* (2006, 7th edition).
- Shongolo, A. (2002). Borana traditional blessings and prayers. In Catherine Griefenow-Mewis/Tamene Bitima. (eds.) *Oromo oral poetry: Seen from within*. Kölen: Rüdiger Köppe verlag, 49-58.
- Shongolo, A. & Günther, S. (2007). *Borana proverbs in their cultural context*. Kölen: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- Sims, M.C & Stephens, M. (2005). *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*. Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Sumner, C. (1994). *Oromo wisdom literature: Proverbs collection and analysis, 1*. Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation.
- Tamene Bitima. (2002). On some Oromo historical poems. In Catherine Griefenow-Mewis/Tamene Bitima (eds.) *Oromo oral poetry: Seen from within*. Kölen: Rüdiger Köppe verlag, 41-48.
- Tesema Ta'a. (2002). Oromo traditional songs. In Catherine Griefenow-Mewis/Tamene Bitima (eds.) *Oromo oral poetry: seen from within*. Kölen: Rüdiger Köppe verlag, 13-40.
- Tucker, E. (2008). *Children's folklore: a handbook*: London. Greenwood Press.