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Exploring Environmental Discourses in oral literature: Ecocritical analysis of Oromo proverbs

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This study explored environmental discourses inscribed in Oromo proverbial lore. Its specific concern was with the analysis of place accorded to nature and the role of human's relation with the physical environment. Oral literature carries values long held in the society, and divulging into folk-ideas reveals the people's definition of self in relation to nature and their accountability towards it. To this end, proverbs were collected from elders in two zones of Oromia regional state (Guji and Eastern Hararghe). Besides, proverbs published in book volumes were used as an additional data for analyzing the indigenous environmental discourses. These proverbs were analyzed through the theoretical perspective of Ecocriticism. The analysis undertaken revealed the core beliefs and values about nature preserved in the proverbs. Four strands of thoughts (folk ideas) were identified; Nature has 'lubbuu'/soul, and so, should be conferred an intrinsic value; Nature should be taken care of because it has instrumental value; Not all nature is equal, and some are blameworthy though useful, and finally the ignoble nature could be associated with women, and both could be considered as common targets of man's control through the agency of entitlement. Based on the results of the study, the researcher argues that there is no one essential line of defining the Oromo folk-ideas pertaining to the issue of nature as a multiple environmental discourses are presented in the proverbs.

Key words: Proverbs, ecocriticism, Oromo, environment, nature, environmental discourse, oral literature.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous societies have wisdoms long held in their culture about the human, and their relation to the physical environment they occupy. Their oral literatures also embody repositories of thoughts about the non-human part of nature. These wisdoms reveal the societies' values and beliefs about the place of humans, and their

responsibility towards environment. As a result, oral literatures deserve attention in contemporary discourses surrounding the health and wealth of environment (nature). Paying attention to the lore of the people aids in raising consciousness through indigenous ways and in shaping minds through the values entrenched in them.

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Basing its perspective on such ground, this study discloses the environmental values in Oromo proverbial lore. The investigation was carried out following the theoretical perspective of Ecocriticism, an approach which gives emphasis on both 'words' and 'worlds' to see the discourse of correlation between people and their surroundings.

Simmons (1993:19) rightly claims that works of art, which are born of human imagination and creativity, contribute to "environmental constructions". The issue of environment then is not restricted to the commonly identified fields of studies. Indeed, the commitment of artistic expressions to the understanding/construction/saving of nature is not a new phenomenon if one looks at oral traditions of various societies. It is indicated by different scholars that indigenous societies have had highly developed constructions of the environment which were transmitted orally (Workineh, 2001; Asante-Darko, 2006). The dynamic interaction of humans with nature is embedded in these oral wisdoms, and as a result, we may say that interaction is one of the subjects of the indigenous artistic expression of these cultures. Seen from this perspective, the Oromo lived for long guided by indigenous tradition addressing the dynamic human-nature interaction (Workineh, 2001).

Generally speaking, a society's imaginations about nature can be influenced by natural phenomena or the beliefs/attitudes of the people which guide their individual and communal activities. The way the people define their selves in relation to the nonhuman part of their world can be understood from the folk ideas encoded in their proverbial lore. The beliefs held in them, the feelings they evoke, and the image they engrave in the human mind can influence the self-definition. By and large, these regulate the model of relationship to be established, and the way people treat the cubicle of nature. The status given to nature, in this regard, is constructed in human culture and can generally be altered for woe or bliss.

The difference in cultural regulations, which guide the mode of interaction between people and nature, can reveal various possible implications to be drawn from the modes. But, the existence of alterations which may end up in wretchedness calls for conscious intervention to counter human's destructive relation with nature. The proverbial poetic expressions laden with environmental values and ecocritical literary analysis recognize the importance of consciousness raising, through extending imaginative horizons out of the human sphere to embrace the totality of the ecosystem (Buell, 1995). The attention paid to such an endeavor, however, remained imperceptible in the context of Oromo, or one may say Africa (Slaymaker, 2001). There is growing interest now in the application of the perspective, especially in the sphere of written literature. But the inquiries focusing on oral

literature (proverbs) seem to be lacking. The impetus to undertake this study came from the wish to contribute towards the filling of the gap by analyzing the proverbial lore of the Oromo people within the ambit of ecocritical framework. In other words, it was aimed at showing the effort of humanities in raising environmental consciousness by analyzing the environmental beliefs, discourses and metaphors embedded in the proverbial wit.

While there could be innumerable issues addressed in Oromo proverbs, the researcher focused only on exploring issues pertinent to discourses about nature. The guiding question for the study then is what the proverbial lore of the Oromo does for the society with regard to environment, fashioning the concern after Dundes's (1965:27) question "The most important question is what folklore does for the folk". And in answering the question, the researcher depended on Simmon's (1993:14) observation that "an environmental construction, often of a normative kind, is frequently embedded in orally transmitted traditions and customs." Accordingly, the proverbial lore of the Oromo are taken as important repositories of the attitudes, perceptions, values and practices the people owned and followed. To this end, the study attempted to answer the following core questions:

1. What are the environmental discourses inscribed in Oromo proverbs?
2. What values are attributed to nonhuman nature in the Oromo worldview as depicted in the proverbs?
3. What strands of thought (folk-ideas) could be identified about human responsibility towards non-human nature?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Studying proverbs as expressions of worldviews

It is believed that oral literature, in its diverse forms, provides a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by the people in their lived contexts. It is based on such feature that oral literature is thought to encapsulate the indigenous beliefs, knowledge and values about nature (physical environment) and the people's place in it. As it provides the society's belief systems, it has the potential to guide their behavior and instruct how they should interact with their environment. Some consider oral literature as a repository of artistic expression commonly found in various cultures enhancing the desire for balance, harmony and beauty engraved in humanity (Appell, 2012). It is also reservoir of cultural wisdoms which regulate human behavior towards nature. All sorts of knowledge, including the boicultural ones, are transmitted across generations through folklore. And, through it, the meaning of life is organized, the uses of

environment and how to live in it is explained among others.

Folk literatures in general and proverbs in particular, are expressions of worldviews. The folklorist Dundes (1965) has had a particular interest in folklore as an expression of worldview. To assert the instrumentality of folklore in this regard, he relied on evidences presented from proverbs and other genres which reveal the preponderance of certain outlooks. He is at the forefront of the move for theoretical implications of using folklore for generalized worldview analysis. Dundes assertively indicates that with some caveats, it is possible to discern characteristic worldview elements via the folklore of a culture. In his article "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview" (1972), he stipulated that understanding the worldview of a society through their folklore becomes possible through the analysis of 'folk ideas' which he defines as follows:

By "folk ideas", I mean traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man's life in the world. Folk ideas would not constitute a genre of folklore but rather would be expressed in a great variety of different genres. Proverbs would almost certainly represent the expression of one or more folk ideas, but the same folk ideas might also appear in folktales, folksongs, and in fact almost every conventional genre of folklore, not to mention non-folkloristic materials (1972:95).

In short, one may say that proverbs are particularly useful in trying to understand folk ideas. Dundes (1972) is aware of the difficulty of studying aspects of worldview of a particular culture, but he argues that folklorists can aid in the task of identifying certain basic folk ideas. Following his footsteps, and acknowledging the difficulties and limitations, the researcher attempted, in this study, to investigate folk-ideas of the Oromo pertaining to nature in their proverbs. The indigenous literature of the Oromo has developed over centuries and explains the human condition as viewed through the society's cultural window; symbolize their experiences with the environment and their place in history. It presents accumulated wisdom, and can reveal the worldview of the people. Proverbs, which compress thoughts into short philosophical statements, essentially, carry folk ideas of the people about any subject including the issue of nature and human's relation to it. The interest in dealing with the issue of nature in the proverbs then comes from the comprehensive and versatile nature of the genre.

The Oromo: Introduction to their tradition and worldviews

The Oromo are one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the

Horn of Africa. They live mainly in Ethiopia, and are considered as one of the ethnic nationalities with a large number of populations in Africa (Hassan, 1990; Melba 1980). The people own age old indigenous traditions transferred through words of mouth. Because the people are dominantly oral, their wisdom and indigenous worldviews are mainly accumulated in their oral traditions. Scholars who have conducted extensive studies among the people attest that the secular and religious lives of the people are engraved in their oral tradition. The *Gadaa* socio-political governance system and the *Qaalluu* indigenous religious institutions have maintained these traditions to the present.

The Oromo recognize their cultural relations to nature and are conscious of the power that regulates their relation to nature. Asebe (2012), for instance, asserts that "It has been a deep-rooted belief among the Guji that any disruption in their relationship with non-human things in nature (wildlife, rivers, sacred spaces, forests, spirits and so on) would displease *Waaqa* and invoke punishment in the form of drought, famine, disease and war." Their wisdom of interaction between the human and the non-human nature is guided by the customary knowledge and their knowledge of laws. The latter knowledge bears the laws made by human (*seera namaa*), and the laws given naturally from the creator (*seera Waaqaa*) (Asafa, 2010). The former law, according to Gemechu (2005), is made based on the latter, and the latter one is immutable. The customary wisdom is a public and common knowledge that controls the day to day activities of the people. It is expected from every member of the society to abide by the laws.

The Oromo indigenous worldview is shaped by the operations of the *Gadaa* system and the *Qaalluu* institution (Bulcha, 2012; Legesse, 2006). The people own a complex system of governance in which male members of the society are organized into age sets. This system of governance is called the *Gadaa* system. This egalitarian system shaped the indigenous worldview of the society as it regulated the workings of the "military, economic, political and ritual" (Legesse, 1973) aspects of the people's lives. The system advocates the belief that all people should have equal political, social and economic rights and is believed to have influenced every aspect of Oromo life.

The indigenous Oromo religious outlook which controls their cosmic worldview is manifested in the *Qaalluu* institution which is also connected to the *Gadaa* system. The Oromo indigenous religion is called *Waaqeffannaa*. Scholars who conducted investigations on the religion of the people attest that the people believe in one *Waaqa* (God) that manifests His power through *ayyaanaa* (spirit) (Knutsson, 1967; Bartels, 1983; Van de Loo, 1991; Gemechu, 1993). For the people, *Waaqa* is creator and master of the earth and the sky, and everything that

inhabits the earth. He is the source of life and is omnipresent and omnipotent. He is believed among the society as the creator and regulator of all nature and is thought to regulate the balance in the relationship between different forms of nature. This image of creation has important consequences for the Oromo vision of the universe as a whole. It has influenced among other aspects of its traditional culture, its political and economic thought, and determined its traditional system of government and modes of production.

According to Gemechu (2005), the Oromo use three interrelated elements to explain the organization and interconnection of human, spiritual and physical worlds. These three concepts are *Ayaana* (spirit), *Uumaa* (nature) and *Safuu* (moral and ethical order). The scholar argues that understanding the Oromo worldview demands understanding these three concepts and the way they work and regulate the life of the society at the meta level. The Oromo believe that through *Ayaana*, God created and regulates human and physical world in balanced ways. This *Ayaana* also maintains the connection between the creator and the created. It is a major organizing principle of Oromo cosmology through which the concepts of time and creation are ordered

The concept known as *Uumaa* includes everything created by *Waaqa* including *Ayaana*. Gemechu says, "*Uumaa* refers to the entire physical world and the living things and divine beings contained within it, animal, vegetable, mineral and spiritual. In this sense, *Uumaa* even embraces *Ayyaana* itself, just as *Ayyaana*, which is the cause of *Uumaa*, also encompasses it" (2005:87). For the Oromo, all things have intrinsic characters or natures that are contained in them at their origin. Besides, there exists nothing (*Uumaa*) that does not have a character (*ayyaana*) (Gemechu, 2005).

The third concept *Safuu* as explained by Asafa (1998), is "an ethical and moral code that the Oromo use to differentiate bad from good and wrong from right...[s]*afuu* constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded; it is that which directs one on the right path; it shows the way in which life can be best lived." Oromo claim that the understanding of laws of *Waaqa*, nature and society both morally and ethically, and living accordingly is necessary. They believe in God's law and the law of society that they establish through the *Gadaa* system of democracy to maintain *Nagaa* (peace) and *Safuu* among *Waaqa*, society and nature to achieve their full human destiny.

Gemechu (2005) stresses that it is impossible to understand the Oromo concept of *Safuu* in isolation from the concepts of *Ayyaana* and *Uumaa*. *Ayyaana*, as already stated, is that by which and through which *Waaqa* creates the world, whilst *Uumaa* refers to the entire physical world, both individually and collectively. In the Oromo

world-view, *safuu* provides the moral and ethical code according to which events, whether at a personal, social or cosmic level take place. It is by living in harmony with these laws, following the path of *Waaqa* that a full and happy life can be achieved. *Waaqa* in this case represents the highest form of abstraction unifying the whole of nature and more. It is from the context of this worldview that the analysis of Oromo proverbial lore should come. The folk-ideas one excavates from the proverbs are part of this worldview, and tell about the people's relation to nature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted based on data collected through fieldwork and document analysis. The field work was conducted to collect proverbs, and acquire the society's explanations given about them. The sources of the data in the fieldwork were mainly elders of Guji and East Hararghe zones of Oromia regional state. Sixteen elders were contacted through snowball sampling with the help of the Culture and Tourism offices of the areas. In the Oromo tradition, the elders are considered to be the most knowledgeable persons when it comes to the issue of *aadaa* (tradition/culture). Because of that reason it was inevitable to limit the informants to them.

As proverbs need context of generation and use, the researcher collected the proverbs through interview by eliciting contexts which initiate the informants to use the proverbs and talk about what each proverb entails. The document analysis that the researcher carried out before the interviewing sessions has helped him much in generating proverbs focusing on the issue of nature. The document analysis was conducted on collections of two volumes of proverbs published by Oromia culture and tourism office, unpublished proverb collections documented at the zonal offices, and collection of proverbs published by individuals available in the market. In addition to the collection of the proverbs, the interview was also targeted at generating data about the contexts of their use and indigenous perspectives on nature and human's relation to it in general.

The data collected through interview and document analysis were categorized thematically, translated into English and analyzed descriptively following the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism. In order to identify folk-ideas about nature, the researcher based the analytical perspective on Buell's (1995) criteria for nature-focused texts with a slight modification. Indeed, the modification made is on the inclusion of the issue of gender to the four criteria. The focus then was on the perspectives on the human-nature correlation, treatment of human interest in light of the non-human, implication in the discourse of the proverbs about human accountability, and gender-nature proximity represented in the proverbs. The researcher made an effort to search for the nuances which may fall under the theme of co-existence or not, and looked at the way people are expected to be related to nature in general with the implication on what their role should be.

Ecocritical framework, in the context of this study, follows the conceptualization of the perspective forwarded by Slovic (1999:10) and Hesie (1997). Slovic describes environmental literature as:

"The phrase environmental literature is used today to describe *all literary forms* (oral, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama) that investigate human-nature relationship" (emphasis added).

Besides, Hesie's (1997) observation of the relationship between

literature and the environment also guides the undertaking of the current investigation on Oromo proverbial lore. Hesse emphasized on how the imaginations of cultural communities are influenced by their natural environment and argued that ecocriticism is concerned with “examining how the concept of “nature” is defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it and why, and the way in which the relationship between the humans and nature is envisioned” (p 45). In other words, the emphasis of ecocritical framework should be the assumptions about and the ways through which nature gets represented in literary works.

Following such a framework means involving in the explorations of environmental discourses in literary works. Proverbs, which are rooted in the culture of the society present tropes which condition conceptualization of nature and regulate the ethics of the society. Cotter (1992) says, “Proverbs that deal with ethical and moral issues reach not only the head but also the conscience. They stir the conscience, they give assurance, they help in the exercise of deciding between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong.” Their analysis through ecocritical perspective can show environmental concerns accumulated over time in the tradition of the people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the framework described above, the following four strands of thought were identified in the collected Oromo proverbs.

The discourse of ‘*lubbuu/Soul*’: Quest for co-existence in Oromo proverbs

It has been asserted by researchers that the Oromo people value human-nature co-existence (Workineh, 2001; Negessa, 2011; Asebe, 2012). According to these researchers, the indigenous tradition of the people recognizes the issue of co-existence not as an option but as an essence which guides the day to day action of the people. The proverbs collected from the study area appear to partly confirm the claims so far made about the Oromo people’s attitude towards nature and the place of the human in the interaction. Some of the proverbs reveal the pursuit of affirming and strengthening co-existence through revealing the intrinsic value the people attach to different life forms.

The proverbs reflect the attitude of the society towards different life forms seen from intrinsic values. According to Workineh (2009), trees are protected among the society for utilitarian reasons, and at times for aesthetic reasons. Beyond that, however, the society gives attention to the intrinsic values of forest/trees. In one of the proverbs, the society contends against the clearing of forest saying (1) “*Bosonni lubbuu, lubbuu hin hubani*”/ *the forest is/has life/soul, one does not harm life*/. This proverb is purely based on the intrinsic value of the trees as it is not associated with any benefits that the forest

gives to the human. Tadesse (2004) discusses that the proverb asserts the social code of the Guji society wherein the cutting of trees is considered as the killing of a person. The proverb carries the biophilic affiliation of the society towards nature. Biophilia, according to Wilson (1993:31), refers to “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms...” The *woyyuu/safuu* tradition of the society puts restriction to the way someone treats the trees or any living organisms in which they live (Informant: Adulaa Gochuu). The philosophy behind this proverb is the indigenous value system anchored in the culture of the people which asserts that life forms should not be mistreated because they do own soul like the human.

The Oromo do not regard animals just as a wealth which should be browbeaten by human to the extent of annihilation. They balance the use and care as in the proverb (2) “*Akka lagni hin gognetti akka raachi hin eebonnetti*”/ *Not to the extent that the river dries, not to the extent the toad becomes thirsty*/. This proverb is used by an informant in the middle of our discussion when I was collecting data from the Guji Oromo of Adola district. Here, all life forms are thought to have the right to live on what nature provides. When the people take their cattle to the river, they do not let the cattle drink up all the water because they think the animals that live in it will die of thirst if the water is gone. It indicates that the human should be responsible for balancing the interest of life forms living in the river and their cattle. The proverb asserts the need for balancing needs through valuing nature equally. The informants indicate that people’s care about nature is inherent in their life, and even when hunting for food, they feel it is immoral to kill an animal at the moment it is drinking water. My informant, Adulaa Gochuu says:

“Uummani Gujii uumamaaf bakka guddaa kenna,... gara uummata keenyatti yoo dhufte, har’a jecha gabaabaan siif ibsuudhaaf ... bineensa bishaan dhugu tokkoo osoo ajjeesuullee barbaadee, isaa bishaan dhugu hinajjeesu... *lubbuudhaa* jedha. biqiltuu hinfayyadamaa yoo jenne, kichuu isaa hintuqu. ‘Kichuu hin muriinaa, *lubbuudhaa*’ jedha”

The Guji society gives a high place for nature... if you see our society these days, to tell you the issue in short, if someone is hunting an animal, he will not kill it while the animal is drinking from the river... he says ‘*it is/has life/soul*’... if we see how the society use plants, they do not cut the sprouting/budding ones, they say ‘*it is/has life/soul*’.

What we can understand from this is that the people value nature for its own sake since they see things/life

forms as having soul. The term 'lubbuu' means soul, its understanding in the discourse of talking about the soul of nature is related to human soul. As in the first proverb, it is against the moral codes of the society for an Oromo to kill a soul. In similar fashion, the cutting of trees and the killing of animals become immoral because it is believed that they do have the same soul that the human own.

The irreversibility of destructive actions followed by man against nature is also one of the main concerns of the proverbs. One of the proverbs warns against the cutting of trees through metaphorically explaining the image of the dying of plant soul compared to butter melted on fire. It says:

"Biqilli cabeeff dhadhaan ibidda bu'e hindeebi'u" / there is no coming back for a broken plant and butter that fall into fire/.

This proverb regulates the way nature should be treated. It strengthens the claims so far made about the care and responsibility humans should have that the tradition of the society maintains. The proverb suggests the soul of plants should be taken care of as it is not possible to get it back once it perishes. On the whole, the imagining of plants or other life forms through comparing it with the human soul is an ecological perspective that puts the issue of commonality of life at the center.

The discourse of worth: Utilitarian call for care and respect of nature

Beyond treating nature as having soul and respecting the intrinsic value, the Oromo take care of nature based on the instrumental value it has. Nature has cultural and economic values for the Oromo, and owing to that, the people assert it is their responsibility to take care of it.

Among the Oromo people some trees are sacred because they have ritual significances. In the proverb (4) *"Biyya mukni hinjirre, margatti hirreeffatu" / in the land where there are no big trees, the grass becomes the ritual center/*, we see a significance attached to the big trees because of their function in ritual context. This idea is expressed in several proverbs with similar pre-disposition. A different version of the same proverb is indicated in (5) *"Biyya qilxuu hinjirre, micireen abdaarii taati." / where there is no qilxuu (a big tree with shade), micire/a small plant/ becomes sacred/.*

These proverbs portray the importance of trees (forest) in the life of the people. Trees do have cultural significances among the Oromo and some trees are treated as sacred. The absence of those trees usually means the dislocation of the rituals on which the people's worldview

is based. The above proverbs lament about this fact. In the second proverb (5), 'qilxuu' is a sacred tree which is respected among the people as they use it for rituals. But 'miciree' is a small plant without shade and is not considered as sacred. It is ironic here that people should respect the 'miciree' tree at the absence of the sacred one, 'qilxuu'. 'abdaarii' is a big sacred tree of the kind of 'qilxuu' under which people perform rituals. Both grass and 'miciree' have no shade, and performing rituals under them becomes impossible and disgraceful as it down-grades the ritual. These two plants might be important to the culture in their own ways, but in the context of rituals they are not important. The grass is used for grazing the cattle and for constructing houses, but not for performing ritual under it. Hence, it is impossible to imagine rituals being performed under these small plants. The two proverbs indicate the respect the people have for trees as they are useful in their cultural and religious performances.

Besides, the people's proverbs reveal their environmental knowledge and sensitivity. If we see the following proverbs, we can infer the environmental knowledge that the people own and the principles they live by.

(6) *"Bakka Odaan marge madda hindhaban" / where ever there is Odaa (sycamore tree), there is a spring/*,

(7) *"Muka guddaa utuu hin murree, hanxaxii jalaa ciran" / one does not cut a big tree, but use the dried branches for wood/*,

(8) *"Muka taheef hunduu gaaddisa hin tahu" / just because it is a tree it cannot be used for shade, and*

(9) *"Muka jigu bira muka dhii butu jira" / at the side of a falling tree, there must be another befalling it/.*

The first proverb (6) associates greenness with abundance in water, where there are trees there will always be springs. Their absence then would mean draught. The next one (7) presents the care given to big trees while using from it; you do not let the tree perish, but use from its branches. The third (8) indicates the values attached to bigger trees. This is especially significant in the context of cultural/social significances of nature. Trees are ritual centers and their shade serves as halls where people meet. Not all trees are used for this purpose, so those that have such significance should be taken care of. The last proverb (9) addresses the environmental knowledge of the people that explains ecological sustenance. Trees will not fall out of nothing in the forest. Naturally, the trees may be replaced by their kinds.

In similar way, domestic animals which provide life sustenance to the people are seen as needing care from the people. Though there are animals portrayed with negative images, some are accorded positive values in the proverbial wisdom of the Oromo. Especially among

the pastoralist Oromo, cattle (*loon*) are even revered and praised. The attitudes towards them are one of care and respect. They usually speak about their care and economic benefits. Other genres of oral literature of the society, for instance oral poetry, contain praise poems of the cattle (*weedduu loonii*), and the people refer to them in almost all of their ritual performances including the blessings they undertake during rituals and the folk dances they perform during ceremonial occasions. In proverbs such as the following we understand the care the society give to the animals and the values they attach to them.

- (10) *“Loon argan bishaan itti fuudhan”/ if one sees the cattle, one gives them water to drink/*
 (11) *“Loon abbaa miidhassa”/ cattle make the owner respectful/dignified/ and*
 (12) *“Loon tinni hingalchu, gurrati galcha”/ one takes the cattle home not just through tending/hitting them/ but through appealing to their ears/*

In these proverbs, the cattle are represented with positive images as they are source of respect and glory for the owners. The tenth and twelfth proverbs represent the care the owners are expected to give them: taking them to rivers and tending them in green fields. The last proverb contextually refers to the song sang for the cattle when taking them home from the field. Among the Guji Oromo, where the third proverb is collected from, herders do not hit their cattle when they take them to fields or when they take them back to villages; they rather sing songs (*weedduu bobbaasaa* and *weedduu galaa*, which are sang by the herders when they take them to the field or when they return) and it is believed the animals listen and are guided by the songs. It is because of this that the society use the proverb saying that it is not the tending that takes the cattle back home but the ‘ears’ which refers to the songs they hear.

Though the Oromo society uses domestic animals for food, there is a restriction put on which animals should be slaughtered. In the proverbial lore it is usually asserted that unless it is from critical poverty or problem, one does not slaughter heifers or calves. This is due to the need to let the animal multiply through giving birth. In the proverb (13) and (14) below, we see that the society prohibits the slaughter of heifers.

- (13) *“Rakkataan raada qala”/ it is a person in trouble that slaughters the heifer/*
 (14) *“Warri marii qabu dibicha qalata, warri marii hinqabne raada qalata”/ those who have consensus slaughter the bull, but those who do not have consensus slaughter heifer.*

The restriction shows the society’s social mores in

preserving the animals that give birth. In the first proverb, it is asserted that only the poverty stricken breaks the social mores of not killing a heifer. In the second one, it is the absence of concordance between people which lets them kill the heifer, but if there is agreement between them they would slaughter the bull, not the heifer. Beyond this, as Workineh (2009) indicates, with regard to the wild animals as well, the Oromo have no desire of eliminating the animals, they show kindness to the animals whether they are big or tiny. Another version of the same proverb is:

- (15) *“Mudatu raada qalan”/Necessity forces one to kill a cow/.*

It is a condition such as this that forces the people to do the killing which culturally is inappropriate. Usually, cows are left for breeding purpose, but the pressing need/ unavoidable problem forces them to slaughter them. This indicates how the indigenous Oromo tradition puts an emphasis on the sustenance of life forms.

Even in the context of poverty and critical problem itself, there is no easy submission to the mistreatment of nature. Proverbs are used to comment on such happenings. In the proverb:

- (16) *‘Deegnikee deegumaa ammas xobbee cirtaa’ jette hintalli”/your cutting of the sprouting plants will not get you out of poverty/.*

This proverb carries the folk idea that whatever your problem might be, you should be guided by the ethical code of the land and your breaking of the code will not solve your problem, it rather intensifies it. “*Xobbee*” or a very young plant of any kind is the symbol of hope and growth among the Oromo, and cutting this plant is seen as darkening its future. The symbolic significance of the proverb goes far beyond the issue of human, and embraces the totality of life forms admonishing the mistreatment of nature. Applied to the anthropocentric contexts, this proverb entails, one should not prosper at the expense of others, or by darkening the future of others.

The Discourse of Disparity: Envisaging Worthy but Ignominious Nature

The proverbs used in the above analysis showed how close the Oromo are to nature, and how the society values co-existence with nature. Workineh (2009), claims that the Oromo do not distance animals. But that is not the whole story about the view as long as the representations in the proverbs are concerned. Indeed, as shown above, they do have respect for animals and shun

their mistreatment. Yet, it is possible to identify a mixed image of animals represented in the proverbs. There are animals taken care of and respected, but there are also animals, though useful, represented with negative images. A simple observation of proverbs dealing with two animals, donkey and dog can show the mixed image. Though useful in their own ways, these animals are usually represented with negative images. The following proverbs are just few examples:

(17) *“Harreefi gadheen nammaraa hingortu”/ a wicked person and donkey never leave way for people/,*

(18) *“Harreen gaafa quufte sirba waraabessaa dhaqxi”/ a naughty/ bellyful donkey goes to the party of hyena/,*

(19) *“Harreetti dammi hin miyaawu”/ a donkey does not like honey/, and*

(20) *“Kan farda dhabe harreen garmaama”/one who has no horse rides on donkey*

In these proverbs, the animal is connoted with negative values. The first proverb (17) shows how disrespectful the donkey is, and is compared with a wicked person who is usually insolent. The second one actually might not be directly speaking about the animal, but a metaphorical speaking about a naughty person who because of his/her plethora falls into the trap of his/her enemy. Because of their imprudence, when their belly is full, they do things which make them fall in risk. The donkey is usually associated with selfishness/greed in the society. In another Oromo proverb we see the greedy nature of human beings criticized through the use of image of donkey:

(21) *“Erga ani du’ee marri hin margiin jette harreen”/ let not grass grow after my death, said the donkey/.*

This image abounds and most of the time, there is no good image which represents the donkey in Oromo proverbs. What is more, even the most delicious food honey is thought to be tasteless to the donkey, as stated in the third proverb (19). This portrayal comes from the lower and ignoble status given to the animal. And in the last proverb (20) we see a secondary position given to the animal. Even among those animals which humans own, donkey is not preferred in the first place. In this proverb, it is only at the absence of horse that donkey will be chosen for a ride. The proverbs depict a negative image of the animal both when referring to its intrinsic quality and using it as a metaphorical symbol used to speak about the human.

There is no respect or honor to this kind of animals as it is considered as inferior. This appears in another proverb:

(22) *“Harreen duute jedhanii karaa hinoolani”/one does*

not cancel a journey just because a donkey died/.

This shows the inferior position given to it. The donkey being a beast of burden is often used to carry goods. One does not mourn the death of a donkey. This is also used to mean that because of something inferior, a superior thing is not sacrificed. Contrary to this, however, in the culture of the people, there are cases wherein the death of horses is mourned like the death of a hero. The fate of the donkey is also usually destined in the proverbs to fall under the hands of its predator as in:

(23) *“Hangamillee turtu harreen garuma waraabessaa galti/regardless of its age, the donkey finally ends up in the belly of the hyena/.*

And, it is confirmed that the predator will not fail to find it. Though industrious the animal may be in its service to the human, it is represented with these negative values. The animal is always blameworthy and reprehensible in most of the proverbs, when it is used both literally and metaphorically.

The image portraying the donkey as blameworthy and hideous abounds and it has become a sign of showing disrespect to the lands in the context when the image of riding donkey is considered. For instance, what we can see in the following three proverbs is the mapping of the concept of disrespect through associating the animal and women.

(24) *“Biyya tuffatan harreedhaan garmaaman”/in a despised country, one mounts on donkey/,*

(25) *“Biyya nadheen quufte, harreetu garmaama”/ in a land where women become lawless, one rides on donkey/, and*

(26) *“Biyya qaani hinqabne, harreetu garmaama”/ in a land where there is no ethics, one rides donkey/.*

The place one despises, the land where women become lawless (repugnant), and the land where there is no ethics are all the same in the logic of the above proverbs. Though the first clause differs in its structure, it has the same semantic context with the initial clauses of the remaining proverbs. The three are interrelated and are a condition for the second clauses in each proverb. One rides on donkeys back in a country/land when a certain condition becomes feasible according to the mapping of ideas we see in the three proverbs. That condition is when, in the first proverb, the person wants to show disrespect to the country/the land. So, what we can see here is the association of donkey (the act of riding donkey) with disrespect. The implied meaning is that, the donkey, which is one of the despised animals in the culture is not rode to show respect, it is just a beast of

burden and mounting on it is like doing a shameful act for the person unless the intention is for showing disrespect to the land/people.

A despised land, when we map the logic with the remaining proverbs, is a land where there are uncontrolled women. This naughty nature of the women which the proverb tries to enforce becomes the source of disrespect for the land/the people of the land. If that condition is feasible, then, it is plausible to mount on the donkey, or it will not be surprising to see donkeys roaming in such a land. Still in this proverb, the donkey is associated with disrespect. In other words, when a land never controls its women (when it is full of the naughty ones), it is a disgrace to the land. This implies the necessity of controlling the women. It enforces the patriarchal claim of making women passive through control.

A similar predisposition is observed in the third proverb which brings the absence of morale to the stage as feasibility for the disrespect of the land. 'Qaani' refers to the ethics that guides social life. At the absence of this social code, obviously there is lawlessness and in the land where there is no respect for the social codes, one can expect the predominant existence of shameful acts. The disgracing of the land becomes plausible and the proverb claims it is possible to ride donkey in such contexts. In other words, where there are no social mores, one can plausibly find a large number of people mounting donkey (which still is a sign of disrespect).

In a similar fashion, the image of dog is also negatively portrayed in Oromo proverbs. For instance in the proverb:

(27) *"Jaamtu jaamti malee saree ija hindhiqan"/ people would rather let the dog go blind than washing its eyes/*

We see the expendable nature of the dogs. It suggests that people do not care about the dogs because they are not worth the care. The same thing is explained in another proverb:

(28) *"Hangamillee jaalatan saree dhaqna hinqaban"/ one does not circumcise a dog, because one harbors love for it/*

And in the contexts when the animal is used to represent humans metaphorically, it always signifies negative characteristics like disgrace, untidiness, wondering without purpose, lower status, subjected position, etc. as observed in the following proverbs:

(29) *"Kunuu warri rafnaani jette sareen"/this is just only because the owners are in bed', said the dog/*

(30) *"Erga waraabessi darbee sareen dutti"/ the dog barks only after the hyena has left/*

(31) *"Utuu beeknuu huuba wajjin jette sareen"/ 'though aware, we consume with impurities', said the dog/*

Each of these proverbs represents the undesirable qualities attributed to the animal or what it metaphorically represents. The animal is considered as heartless in several proverbs as in:

(32) *"Sareen qalbii hinqabne irbaata gooftaa kajeelti"/ the heartless dog covets its master's supper/.*

The discourse of entitlement: Call for authority over nature and women

A striking image one identifies in Oromo proverbs is the association made between women and nature. A considerable number of proverbs reveal this association. Behind this association is the discourse of entitlement, the privilege given to men to subdue both nature (animals) and women. The association is made between the negatively valued animals and women when the discourse of the proverbs aims at the claim of control over women. It is hard to find a proverb that forms an association between positively valued animals and women. The absence implies that the target is common. Some of the proverbs define women based on the feature associated to animals (nature) in the culture and try to establish a discourse of putting both entities under control. In:

(33) *"Durbaafi Harreen ulee jaalatti"/women and donkeys like beating/ and (34) "Beeraafi Harreen ba'aa jaalatti"/women and donkeys enjoy carrying loads/.*

We see a discourse of designation established. Indeed, it is common to find Oromo proverbs which define women through the features that make them common to animals, especially beasts of burden. In the above proverbs, we see the discourse that establishes what the women and the animal do like in common. The traditional patriarchal assumption that women should be beaten to make them behave, is associated with the anthropocentric logic of defining the non-human animal (donkey in this case) as in need of coercion. In the culture of the society, this beast of burden is perceived as ignorant and demands much beating to make it accomplish some tasks. The logic of beating the women becomes rational as this proverb associates them with donkeys which are already assumed to be appropriate for the beating. The mapping of the logic then happens as a result of the distancing of donkey from human and the distancing of woman from man.

The next proverb (34) has the same logic of defining women through animal quality. The donkey is a beast of burden, from human point of view, and its central role is to carry loads which according to the proverb the animal enjoys to do. That is a common understanding in the

culture of the people. Through the same logic, women are represented in this proverb as fit for carrying loads. It is by loading them with several burdens that they could be controlled. In both proverbs we see women and the animal commonly targeted at the spotlight of man's dominion and exploitation. They are both subjected to the exploitation through the anthropocentric and androcentric logic of claiming control through distancing. The ideology presents the exploitation and oppression of both as natural through the animalization of women. We can see two levels of oppression in the discourse of these proverbs. The first one is the anthropocentric logic of human's/man's superiority over nature. And the second one is the androcentric ideology of men's superiority over women, and the justification of controlling and exploiting them.

Defining women through the naturalizing image is not the only discourse one can observe in Oromo proverbs. Indeed, that is usually presented as a pretext for the motifs that logically follow from it. If women are represented as lawless, naughty and wild, obviously one may expect the logic of taming them to behave appropriately. And it follows from this logic that men are responsible for this enterprise. Oromo proverbs that deal with the association of women and animals entitle men to take the responsibility of taming both. To make them fit to the interest of the anthropocentric and patriarchal expectations, the nature and women should both be tamed and controlled by men. The following proverbs emphasize on project of entitling men to carry out the taming of both:

(35) *"Niitiif farda abbaatu leenjifata"/ it is the owner that tames his wife and horse/.*

(36) *"Durbaafi jiboota gara golaa leenjisu"/ one tames girls and bulls behind the house/*

(37) *"Durbaafi Gaangee abbaatu gurgurata"/it is the owner that sells his girl and mule/.*

(38) *"Durbi gorana raftuufi sareen golaa duttu akka abbaan guddifateeti"/A lady sleeping outside the house and the dog barking from inside the house are both according to the owner's training/.*

The first two proverbs establish a discourse that foregrounds the inevitability of taming "*leenjisuu*" both the women and animals. In Oromo cultural practice, bulls should be trained by energetic men to use them as a plough animal. The taming needs much power and it is usually seen as a test of a man who is training the bull, as the bull is uncontrollable before the training. Through training men pacify the bull, and when tamed use them to plough their lands. The same works for the horse. Before mounting on its back, the horse must be trained and pacified. It should learn to gallop peacefully carrying the owner. Taming the horse also demands courage and

energy of the person as it is uncontrollable and dangerous before training. Men are the ones who do such activities and they are entitled to do it. What is at stake in these proverbs is the comparison they make between the taming of these animals to the taming of women. The discourse insists that it is inevitable to control and tame women, similar to the animals. The control comes because the discourse forms a metaphorical link between the uncontrollability of women and animals. Men/husbands are responsible for the training of both as they are given the superior position in the culture.

The third proverb (37), comparatively seeks what is there beyond the taming. Both the animal (mule) and women (girls) can be sold/ "*gurguruu*"/ by the owner only if they are trained well and pacified. The mule is more dangerous than even horses and bulls before they are trained, and it needs additional courage to carry out the training. The uncontrollable nature of girls is then implied from the comparison made between them. Indeed, the common image among the society about the mule is its uncontrollable nature. The mule symbolizes an uncontrollable power that should be managed first by the owner to make use of it. The comparison made between the two then maps the understanding of both on the same plane. Beyond this, we can see the reification of both women and the animal. The proverb claims the owner is responsible in making both sellable. The girls are considered as a chattel of trade like the mule through the process of reification. The proverbs entail the superiority of men in shaping nature and women towards making them passive and serving the interest of the patriarchy.

The last proverb (38) stresses on what results if the training is not done in the way expected. Women have places reserved for them and they should be trained to respect the culture in occupying their place. According to the discourse of this proverb, a girl brought up in a family where there is no control becomes a disgrace to the family by occupying (sleeping) in the prohibited space. The lack of appropriate training/taming, then, results in such a disgrace. This is explained through the metaphorical comparison made between the acts of the girl and the dog. The dog is expected to keep the compound safe and its place is not inside the house. But a dog not well trained by the owner in accomplishing its activity becomes a disgrace by barking from inside the house. In Oromo tradition, dogs serve the human in keeping their compounds safe from thieves and wild animals that may attack their cattle at night. They stay out at night and their appropriate place is at the gate, not inside the house. Both should occupy the space reserved for them in the culture, and it is the responsibility of men in training them to do so. The right place for the girls at night is not at outside the house but at the fireside where she does her household chores and the right place for the dog is at the

gate in the compound from where it should keep the safety of the house of the master. In the proverbs, the entitlement of men in the training of women and animals is made to justify the ideological project of shunning the unacceptable behaviors. Men are the only beings entitled to do it.

The discourse of inevitability of control on women and animals is repeatedly encoded in the proverbs of the Oromo. In most cases, parents or husbands are responsible in controlling women and owners (human) are entitled to do the taming of nature (mostly animals). As a result, mostly the proverbs establish the discourse of entitlement. For instance, in the following proverb, the discourse suggests the inevitability of husbands in controlling their wives from acting wild like a horse without bridle:

(39) *“Niitiin abbaa warraa hinqabne jedhi, farda sakaallaa hinqabne, tokko”/a woman who has no husband, and a horse without hobble are the same/.*

A horse without hobble (scotch hobble) is uncontrollable. At the absence of both (the husband and the hobble), women and horses become uncontrollable. This induces the ideology that men are entitled naturally to tame and control women and nature. Behind such a representation are the intricate ideologies of anthropocentrism and androcentrism, defining the essentiality of human and man-centered nature of the discourses surrounding women and animals in Oromo proverbs.

What is striking in the discourses of entitlement of men in controlling women in these proverbs is the justification used. In one of the proverbs:

(40) *“Nadheen quufte wabii gaangee taati”/ an arrogant woman becomes a witness to the mule/.*

We see a clear justification made. The proverb inherently claims the importance of men in controlling women from doing an illogical thing like becoming a witness to the mule. The association made between the two still foregrounds the wild/untamed nature of both. It invites one to inquire ‘who would become a testimony to the acts of the wild, unless it is the hysterical itself?’ The proverb seems to ask such question and indirectly impart the logic of dominion. Pacifying the wild through taming them can only save both nature and women. The responsibility of doing that is given to men in the culture.

The discourse of entitlement of control over nature and women is so strong that some proverbs present triviality of taking care of them. In the proverb:

(41) *Namni beera koorse galgala qorsoo nyaata; namini farda koorse galgala kooraa bataa/*

A person who soothes a woman eats roasted barely at night; a person who soothes his horse carries the saddle at last.

This indicates the irrelevance of taking care of them. It justifies the frivolous nature of extra care given to women and animals. The analogy is that if women are given extra care, they will forget their role in the kitchen. It says a husband consumes *qorsoo* (roasted barely) at dinner if he soothes his wife. In the Oromo tradition, *qorsoo* is not considered as a staple food and cannot be eaten as a good meal at dinner. In the same way, too much care or sooth given to a horse makes it idle, and the owner has to carry the saddle he is supposed to sit on. The horse in the Oromo tradition carries the owner, and whatever exhausted the horse might be, the owner does not carry the saddle. The logic that follows, then, is that both should be controlled, and carefully handled. And the owners are entitled to carry out the control of both to prevent the problem from happening.

Conclusion

Four main strands of environmental discourse in Oromo proverbs have been discussed in this study. Firstly, Oromo proverbial lore represents the quest for human nature co-existence through its claim of the intrinsic value vested on different life forms. The assigning of intrinsic value to different forms of life in the ecosystem reflects the ethics of care in the culture. In the second strand, we see the utilitarian value attached to nature in the discourses of the proverbs. This attachment of instrumental value comes with the attitude of care which the humans are advised to follow in the proverbs. The proverbs in this category charge the human to become accountable for their action in order to get benefit out of nature. The third perspective opens up an opposite discourse to the first two. Proverbs in this category reveal the consideration of a section of nature (some animals) as blameworthy. They are considered as useful, but are not given the honor other animals (those in the second strand) are accorded in the proverbs. A discourse of distancing these animals from the human, and claims of control over them are observed in most of the proverbs. The last strand is a continuation of the third in that it bases its discourse from the perspective given there. In this category, ignoble animals are associated with women, and men are entitled to control both. Seen from this last perspective, nature is given a negative attribute which should be put under the human dominion. In short, the study revealed a contradictory view of nature portrayed in the Oromo proverbs. Partly it is ecological as it gives intrinsic and utilitarian values to the life forms, which is followed by the attitude

of care and coexistence. And partly it is anthropocentric in that nature (animals) was distanced, and the project of control is at the center of such discourse. Men are entitled to have dominion over what is considered as the ignoble non-human nature and women. Apparently, the proverbial lore of the people presents a mixture of both Nature-centered and human/man centered points of view/folk ideas/.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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