Oromo oral literature

Different forms of oral literature have played an important role in the Oromiffaa-speaking communities, and a considerable bulk of studies and collections of texts have been written on several of their genres. There are surveys of the oral literary traditions of some major Oromo (O.) groups; for instance, CerFolk depicts western OOL traditions at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th as known to Loransiyos Walda Iyasus and to Cerulli’s other two informants, and as he could gather from Awaj Onesimos and Gânon Aster (1894). Tablino (1980) is the only available survey for one of the southern O. groups, the Gabra; Van de Loo (1991) surveys the Guğû oral literature, and Jeylan W. Hussein (2005) the Arsi one. However, few studies tried to deal with the known oral literature of all the major Oromiffaa-speaking groups: Haberland (1963:595 f.), Andrzejewski (1985), and Estete Gemed (2007) are the major ones.

An early glimpse of some genres of OOL from the first half of the 19th century can be found in Tutschek’s dictionary and grammar (Tuschek 1844:1845): a few short wisdom poems that he calls <magmago>, i.e., makmaaka ‘proverb’, and some other short poems on love, social satire and other topics that he calls <wette>, i.e., wëdd’iwa ‘song’, like the following complaint of a returning warrior (Tuschek 1844:148):

Silaa simalan yaaba
Silamlì daneen qaba
Gandatu wareen gaba,
‘Should I climb on a bamboo cane?
Bamboo canes have no branches;
Should I come back to the village?
The village has no respect for fame’

Also a few prayers were recorded by him (Tutschek 1845:84-88). One of them, “composed and offered after the close of a long and bloody war” between Hamb and Hamaya, begins with the following paragraphs (p. 84):

Waaqayoo laftanaa, goofaa koo! Ati na gubba tessa, ani si jalan ta’a.
Hoo hamaan natti dufe, akka mukni adan narraa gaba, ati hamaan natti qabti, goofaa koo, gaddisa naa ta’a! ...

‘Oh God of this earth, my Lord! Thou art above me, I am below thee.
When misfortune comes to me, as a tree keeps off the sun from me, mayest thou keep off misfortune from me, my Lord, be thou my shadow! ...’

A fourth genre is represented by the narratives collected by Tutschek, that have been published by Praetorius (1893:305 f.) posthumously (Folktales in Oromiffaa).

At that time the O.’s were already organized in different ways, even though most of them probably still followed the gadaa system and their traditional religion. Indeed, there also were O. kingdoms in the West (Gibe), different O.-speaking groups were being increasingly incorporated into the Ethiopian state and converted to Orthodox Christianity, while Islam was spreading in the East, in Bale and in pockets also elsewhere. Since the second half of the 19th century, the life of the O.-speaking communities underwent several dramatic changes: (i.) the Ethiopian state incorporated most of them, with the exception of the southern O.’s living in present-day Kenya and of the few Oromiffaa-speaking pockets in southern Somalia; (ii.) a partial differentiation between urban and rural O.’s resulted from urbanization; (iii.) the O. kingdoms were dismantled and the gadaa system came under increasing pressure, surviving only in southern Ethiopia and in Kenya; (iv.) organized movements struggling for Oromo self-determination developed in many areas of Ethiopia; (v.) policies of centralized nation-building under the monarchy and the Dârg (Provisional Military Administrative Council), that discouraged writing in Oromiffaa, were followed after 1991 by a partial regionalization of Ethiopia and the official creation of Oromiya, where written Oromiffaa was introduced in the regional administration and in the school system.

These changes had an impact on several aspects of OOL, not only on the topics it has been dealing with, but also on its genres and on how they have been produced and circulated.

One of its major poetic genres is the geerarsa, traditionally an epinicion, i.e., a poem of triumph by a warrior over his feats. Among several O. groups this is performed in a loud recitative form and can regard the killing of a large wild animal or an enemy. Boorna geerarsa’s are performed on the spot when the heroic feat is done, and when the hero enters his settlement (Leus – Salvadori 2006:260b), but among other groups they are also heard during gadaa ceremonies and other feasts. The geerarsa is also a genre for criticizing one’s lineage, explaining specific facts, and reflecting upon one’s self. During the last decades, long geerarsa’s have dealt with the political situation of the poets’ regions or countries, and thus fre-
frequently have strong nationalistic tones. Also *walaloo* ‘sung poem’ is used nowadays as a name for the genre that includes major political poems.

Several examples of major political poetry also deal with razzias, challenges from field commanders, laments over dead heroes, pleas of mercy addressed to the victors, etc. (cf. CerFolk).

Moreno (1934, 1935:160 f.) and Tamene Bitima (GriefTam:41 f.) provide examples of short poems commenting current social and political events of when they were composed.

CerFolk (p. 70; cf. also Littmann 1925:49 f.) writes that decrees (“laws”) issued by O. Gabra’s were usually in verse. Very little is known about the oral poetry that was performed at the courts of the O. kings, it probably included major political poetry and praise poetry; possibly also many of their decrees were in verse. For the prose genres such as historical chronicles and jesters’ tales that were performed in those courts see below.

Religious texts are particularly sensitive to cultural changes in the communities where they are performed. Traditional ceremonies, festivals and sacrifices generally involve not only prayers and blessings, both in prose and in verse, but also hymns and songs such as the *gadaa* songs of the Guuggy (cf. Van de Loo 1991:32 f.), the *dikira*’s of the Gabra (cf. Tablino 1980:142 f.), the Ateetee and rain-making hymns (cf. Awaj Onesimos – Gannon Aster 1894 and CerFolk), etc. Spirit possession cults have their own songs, such as the *mesmuri addaraa* described by Van de Loo (1991:288 f.), while different brands of Christianity have produced their own religious hymns such as the Sabbath and *masqala* (mäsqāl) songs of Orthodox western O.’s (Tesema Taa GriefTam:25 f.; Triulzi – Tamene Bitima 1996) or the Pente songs of the Guuggy Pentecostals (Van de Loo 1991:296 f.). Moslem *manzuma*’s and *qasida*’s in praise of major local saints from Jimma in the west and from northern Kenya have been published by Ishihara (1996) and Stroomer (2001:94 f.). *Mawhld* hymns are widespread among all the O.’s who celebrate this major Islamic ceremony. Hymns connected to the cult of Sheikh Hussein in Bale are called *baahroo* by the *Arsi*, and have been extensively analyzed by Andrzejewski (1972), Jeylan W. Hussein (2005) and Stroomer (2001:71 f.).

The Western O. *weeddhu jaalalaa* is a genre of love songs that can also be of considerable length (cf. Tesema Taa GriefTam:13 f.). They use an elaborate lexicon and complex literary tropes. The same author (p. 36 f.) mentions O. *asmaarii* poetry (*Arsi* weelhu) sung for entertainment during marriages and festivals in the Naqumte area.

Minor poetic genres are known from most Oromiffaa-speaking groups, and are frequently characterized as male or as female songs. For instance, the short *Arsi* weelhu love songs described by Baxter (1974) are sung only by young men and, because they frequently involve humorously vulgar language, are never performed in the presence of elderly people. Tablino (1980:130) distinguishes young men’s *faaruu* love songs from young women’s *kaarilee* love songs among the Gabra. According to Leus – Salvadori (2006:591) the *kaarilee* is instead a genre sung by Boorana women for praising or insulting men, e.g., when going for firewood or water. A rich collection of short love and wisdom poetry from Wellegga and Shewa can be found in Moreno (1935:140 f.)

Other kinds of minor poetry include satirical and humorous songs, that can even become plainly insulting such as the *arrabsoo* songs. Farewell songs, songs for weddings, childbirths, and other kinds of important events have been published, e.g., for the western O., the Guuggy and the Gabra. Van de Loo (1991:225 f.) provides many examples of Guuggy work songs, such as beekeepers’ songs, women’s work songs, men’s songs performed when tilling the soil or threshing collectively, etc. Western O. cooperative work songs have been published by Triulzi – Bitima (1996:251 f.).

Children’s songs such as those in Haberland (1963:601 f.) are sung on different occasions; Van de Loo (1991:265 f.) provides examples of those sung by Guuggy children when tending cattle.

Littmann (1925) already showed that O. oral poetry counts the number of syllables. In the corpus he gathered from early publications, six- and seven-syllable lines were the most frequent ones, but five- and eight-syllable lines were not rare. Lines of different lengths occurred in the same poem, e.g., for highlighting a particular point or for separating stanzas. Word repetitions, syntactic parallelism and extensive vowel parallelism are features that also occur frequently in western and central O. poetry. For instance, in the above short poem from Tutshek, line 1 is syntactically similar to 3, and 2 to 4; in addition to this, lines 1 and 3 have i-a-x-a-a-a-a vowels and lines...
2 and 3 x-a-x-a-e-a-u vowels. No systematic study is available yet for southern O. poetry.

An important aspect of OOL. is that early sources from the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th mention well-versed performers such as Loransiys Waldia Iyasus (cf. CerFolk), but not major poets, even though there are some examples of authorial poems, such as abbaa Qasumii and Ilaansoo Hallsoo of the Waliso O. mentioned in Tamene Bitima (GriefTam:43 f.). Prominent asmaarii poets such as abbaa Qasumii are mentioned by Tesema Taa (GriefTam:37) for the western O. during the second half of the 20th century. Major oral poets who composed long poems of social critique and comment on current events emerged during the last decades, such as SkeeT Tahan Umar and Jaarsoo Waaqoo Qoqto (Schlee – Abdullahi A. Shongolo 1996; Assafo Tefera Dibaba 2003).

Some 42 examples of prophetic prose texts from Griggo Baacho, also known as Abbaa Raqqii, a famous western O. soothsayer. Both prose and poetic prophecies by Areeroo Boosaaro, a Boorana raaga who died at the beginning of the 20th century are discussed by Bassi – Boku Tache (2005).

The Boorana daaduu is a “narrative recitation in which the person tells of his own heroic deeds ... at top vice and top speed” (Leus – Salvadori 2005). It is thus quite similar to the geeraarsa in its topics, but it seems to differ from this in how it is ritually performed and in its being in prose rather than in verse.

CerFolk (p. 190 f.) mentions “professional jesters” such as Abbaa Wadaa, and provides some examples of their witty tales (haasaa ‘conversation, story’) and sayings. They were maintained at the expenses of western O. courts, and were quite similar to the ačćašāč of the Amhara’s. Their haasaa tales are quite similar to some of the folktales that have been collected in considerable number for different Oromiffaa-speaking communities (Folktales of the Oromo).

Historical oral chronicles are also mentioned by CerFolk (p. 148 f.), such as the Dubbii moootumna Gumaa ‘Chronicle of the kingdom of Guma’. One of their purposes was to exalt the noble origin and the deeds of the dynasties that ruled over the western O. kingdoms, but already at the beginning of the 20th century such chronicles were known only to the elders.

Minor oral genres in OOL., are proverbs and riddles. The former (makaaka or mammaka, a term that may also refer to short gnomic poems or tales) are of quite diverse types, e.g., short sentences, sequences of two or three clauses, wellerisms, etc. When they consist of (at least) two parts, these tend to have parallel syllable numbers as well as syntactic and lexical parallelisms, sometimes also vowel parallelism and even alliteration, like the following proverb:

Nammi dadaa afzan naxa’a, / dagaas afaan namaa saa’a.

‘The person who has been fed with butter, / feeds you with stones’ (about ingratitude; 8 + 8 syllables, a-x-a-a-a-a-a-a vowels, d- alliteration in dadaa and dagaas).

There is a huge literature on O. proverbs, that includes collections of them (e.g., Abbaraa Nafaas et al. 1991-2004, Cotter 1990, etc.), and attempts at explaining their meanings and structure (e.g, Tsegara Hirpo 1996; Abdullahi A. Shongolo – XX 2005; Esthete Gemeda 2007: 136 f; etc).

Riddles (hiibboo) have a strongly formalised structure like proverbs, as shown by Tamene Bitima (2004:81 f). The game of asking and answering riddles is a highly ritualized one; among the western and central O.’s it has to be introduced by saying “hiibboo!”, and answered with “hiibbakka!” by the person who is willing to answer.

It appears that OOL. is a huge field, with a considerable degree of variation in the different regions where the Oromiffaa-speaking communities live. The O. oral literary traditions of several areas, such as the lower course of the Tana River and Wollo are still almost unknown.

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Giorgio Banti