



Unraveling the Metaphysical, Epistemological, and Ethical Elements of Oromo Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Long ago the external world (most prominent among which is the west) had excommunicated African mind from the realm/ treasure of reasoned knowledge. According to Hegel, Hume, Kant, and others, for any thought (about human life, about knowledge and truth, good and bad, right and wrong, mind and matter; about human nature and the universe we inhabit) to count as reasoned knowledge it must be subject to writing. African philosophers like Hountondji, Appiah, Bondurin, etc. have also expounded that individualist element, the main or only yardstick of reasoned knowledge, as they have put it, is missing in the traditional genre of thought. Apiece of these characterizations are unfair as they have indisputably tried to discredit the thoughtful knowledge built on oral tradition.

The central point in this article, therefore, is unraveling the practical reasoned knowledge exhibited in the traditional genre of thought. The aspiration is partly alluded to the task of being informative about the place of Oromo society and, by extension, traditional African thought in the realm of global knowledge.

This is done by closely examining the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical elements embedded in some proverbs of the Oromo.

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1. INTRODUCTION: ORAL TRADITION IN THE EYES OF THE WEST

When we pay a glance back to the different acts of the past, they appear, at first, to be things of the past, and outside our real existence. But in reality we are what we are through history. For instance, in the history of thought, what has passed away is only one side, and what we have at present as a permanent possession is essentially bound up with our place in history. The self-conscious Knowledge we Africans possess did not arise suddenly, nor did it grow only from the soil of the present. We must regard it as previously present, as an inheritance, and as the result of labor-the labor of past generations. It is true that those who preceded us in history were not familiar with writing. However, the accumulated skill and invention, customs and arrangements of social and political lives of the present society are the results of their thought, care, ingenuity, plans, and achievements. So we need to owe our reverence to a tradition that has been preserved and transmitted to us from the produce of antiquity.

Nonetheless, long ago, the external world, especially the west, had excommunicated Africans from the realm of reasoned knowledge. In the west the very concept of African thinking has no acceptance. In the Westerners eyes, the west is the home of knowledge and civilization whereas Africa was bereft of philosophical reflection. On the other hand, there are others who argue that traditional Africans have a collective thought which cannot be reconstructed by themselves in a critical, reflective and scientific manner. There are also African thinkers, for instance, Bodunrin and Hountondji, who claimed that literacy ought to be a recommended requirement for rational discourse. These thinkers concluded that the thoughts of traditional African societies who were not accustomed to writing are not self-evident knowledge. This characterization of oral tradition as basically inferior to writing and the wisdom of sages as authoritative views rather than individual positions subject to criticism and review, as revealed by Joseph Omogrebe in Oluwole and as I agree with, weakens the validity of oral tradition [1,2].

Thus, it is this view point of western and non-western scholars that present traditional African

society as one devoid of and alien to rational thoughts that motivated me to pursue this work.

The central point in this paper, therefore, is refuting the prejudice and stereotypic conception of western and non-western scholars on traditional African mind. It is intended, to counter the view that says "To have a rational thought it is mandatory that the thought be available to future generation in writing".

To this end, closer examination is made on the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical elements embedded in some proverbs of the Oromo. The examination is based on a careful analysis of the epistemic evidence as found in Oromo proverbs. The analysis contains critical remarks, clarifications and definition of epistemic terms. It is true, however, that this work does not give us a definitive and comprehensive treatment of the rational thought that inhere in Oromo proverbs.

2. THE PLACE OF ORAL TRADITION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RATIONAL THOUGHT

Oral tradition or oral culture is a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print. As clearly stated by Ong, a purely oral tradition (primary orality) differs from 'secondary orality' of present-day-high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, television, and other electronic devices that depend, for their existence and functioning, on print and writing (1982, 11).

In all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives (Ong, 1982). Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. Speech is inseparable from our consciousness and it has fascinated human beings, elicited serious reflection about itself since the very early stages of consciousness, long before the coming into existence of writing. As Ong has put it, proverbs from all over the world are rich with observations about this overwhelmingly human phenomenon of speech in its native oral form, about its powers, its beauties, its dangers. The same fascination with oral speech continuous unabated for centuries after writing came into existence.

Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom. In this connection, Ong (1982, 14) argued that “oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche.” Apart from this, in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interiors and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into closely-knit groups. Skillful usage of expressions in more sophisticated orally patterned thought is discernable.

Thus, it is possible to construct a credible history out of the oral tradition which is a viable source and a history in its own right. In Africa most of the reasoned knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation in a way which is mainly oral. Alexis Kagame’s formulation of a philosophy of being from the Bantu language of Rwanda, the case of Dogon Sage, Ogotemali, the Oromo proverbs and others are instances of an explicit rational thought in oral tradition. These examples provide an evidence for the critical, reflective and inquisitive mind of traditional African society.

3. THE OROMO CONCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

For the Oromo society knowledge and truth are the key elements in living a meaningful and satisfying life. They understood knowledge and the ability to know as the principal categories that differentiate human beings from animals. They define human beings as ‘the being that knows things’. In other words, it is only men and women who have the intellectual faculty for the acquisition of knowledge and full understanding of reality through the medium of ideas. Taking this essential nature of human being as for granted one way to say a person is ‘stupid’ is to say that ‘he/she is an animal’ (*Inni/isheen horii dha*). The Oromo believe that mind or intellect plays an inspiring role to think in a logical manner and acquire knowledge. They describe a person that is not intelligent as ‘his/her mind does not think’ (*sammuun isaa/ishee hin yaadu*), or simply ‘he/she does not think’ (*inni/isheen hin yaadu/yaaddu*).

Thus, for the Oromo society, knowing and understanding things, especially life in terms of

its fundamental meanings is a prerequisite for one to be human epistemologically.

3.1 The Method of Knowing

There are different questions that need to be addressed in the inquiry to know. The most important ones are:

- a) How do we get knowledge?
- b) What do we mean by knowledge or what is known?
- c) From where do we acquire knowledge?
- d) How is knowledge validated?

For the Oromo society, human beings have the tendency or are endowed with the capacity to know. They believe that she/he can know and does know. This being the case we need to emphasize on the question of ‘How do we know?’ The epistemology of the Oromo society is, therefore, concerned with the manner of knowing. To answer the question that asks ‘how do we know?’ A careful analysis of some of the Oromo synonyms for ‘to know’ is decisive. Two of the most important verbs for ‘to know’ are ‘*beekuu*’ and ‘*baruu*’.

3.1.1 To know as “beekuu”

Beekuu is the commonest Oromo word for ‘to know’. It takes an object of meaning ‘oneself’ or *waa* meaning ‘a thing’. The expressions *uf beekuu* and *waa beekuu*, therefore, imply the certainty about oneself or of something known respectively and so rule out any room for skepticism. The verb *beekuu* can also be treated as ‘to observe’, ‘to take a look at’, ‘to note’, ‘to look’, and these meanings of the verb appear in such proverbs as:

- i. *Haadha ilaalii hintala fuudhi* (Mammaaksa Oromo, 1991) look at or observe the mother marry the daughter.
- ii. *Abbaan of hin argu dhagaan of hin darbu*- A person cannot see himself as a stone cannot throw itself [3].
- iii. *Kan cabetu akkatti caba dhidhiiban beeka*- he who was once broken knows how to mend what is broken (Ibid).

The two verbs *ilaaluu* and *arguu* are closely related and call for the use of sense perception. *Beekuu*, then the consequence of *ilaaluu* or *arguu* which in turn means to gain knowledge by observation or seeing, by use of sense organs. The third proverb stands for knowledge we gain

after having experienced something. Observation or experience, then, is the means by which we come to know. To put it differently, the result of such an observation or experience then is knowledge (*beekumsa*).

As Dewey (1958, 165) puts it, the process of acquiring knowledge from experience/ observation has two phases: The active and the passive. The active phase of experience consists of trying or experimenting with something and the passive phase is undergoing the consequence of what has been done. Experience, therefore, is valued for connecting the two phases-trying and undergoing phases. As Dewey (1958, 165) further states, “when an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by the action is reflected back in a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance”. The action that we perform has a meaning and this meaning is the knowledge which arises from the mental ability of the doer to connect what is meant by the first phase of experience in terms of its second phase- the result or effect. The ability of an individual in deducing the correct lesson from experience is highly valued in the Oromo society. This can be understood from the following proverbs:

- One who does not understand an inference will never understand the thing as it.
- Unless one travels one does not know about expatriation.
- A girl counsils her mother about child birth (*Hintalli haadha ciniinsuu gorsiti*). This proverb is uttered with the message that a new comer-the one who has no experience in a certain area and consequently had no knowledge –should not give an advice to a person who has more experience in the matter.
- It is only a fool who falls down twice on the same mound.

As one can understand from these proverbs observation and inference are methods of producing knowledge, and experience is the raw material for the production of knowledge. It is also worth noting that Oromo proverbs deal with the transmission of knowledge to others in addition to its possession. This transmission to others or communication is treated from the angles of a wise man (the utter) and that of the ‘receiver’ of the wisdom.

3.1.2 To know as “*baruu*”

The verb *baruu* has the meaning ‘to know’, ‘to recognize’, ‘to note’. It is used in such expressions: *Ani isa bareera* which means ‘I have known him’. This may refer to knowing someone after making oneself known formally to him by giving one’s name, or knowing the behavior or character of somebody after having observed his action. The object “*isa*” also stands for things and the expressions *Ani isa bareera* is equivalent to ‘I have known it’.

Generally speaking, one can validly conclude that observation or experience, inference and communication are the methods by which the Oromo knows him/herself, his/her environment (both social and natural environment) and reality as a whole. Observation and inference involve two steps: observing of external phenomenon by the senses and receiving the necessary sense-data from it- the experiencing phase of knowing; then comes the process of organizing and interpreting the sense-data into ideas which come to be referred to as knowledge (*beekumsa*). Accordingly, knowledge is the end product of psycho-intellectual processes which begin in sensation. Sensation, therefore, produces reflection and valid inference and is the begging of empirical knowledge which then can be reduced to sensory experience. In this process of knowing mind or intellect plays a significant role. It synthesizes our sense data and thus understanding is made possible. Knowledge is essentially a product of understanding. It is an active process; mere experience can never give us knowledge. The proverb ‘*yaada malee iiji hin argu*’ (without mind eye cannot see) which has the message that without the tendency to understand or without mind mere looking at or seeing of anything cannot give us real knowledge reveals this point.

The method discussed above is an active method of knowing. There is also a partially passive or an acted upon knowing. I call it partially passive because in this way of knowing too the role of mind is not underestimated. For instance, in the expression *Dhukkubni na qabate* (illness has seized me/I am sick) the subject knows something not by what he does but by what happens to him. In this sense, he came to know what happened to him after his sense organs inform his mind and based on such stimuli he makes decision.

In the indigenous Oromo society, therefore, knowing is the result of two different types of

experiences: active and passive and the tendency to make appropriate inferences. Accordingly, mere observation cannot give us an authentic knowledge. Clear attention and deep reflection (*xiinxaluu*) on what we experience are necessary. The proverb *Hadurreen keessi bineensa* (deep down a cat is a wild animal) reveals this truth. To clearly understand what a cat is, we need to undergo a rigorous reflection. We should not restrict our judgment to the external and mere appearance of objects.

3.2 The Oromo Attitude towards Knowledge

The Oromo society has different attitudes towards knowledge-*beekumsa* and *baruu*. The first attitude towards knowledge is that there is a limit to what anyone can know but there is no limit to what can be known. Since knowledge is limitless any person who claims to know everything knows nothing or very small. 'Know all know nothing' (*kan hunduma nan beeka jedhu homaa hin beeku*). It is because of this attitude towards knowledge that, in the Gadaa system,* the *Hayyuu Raagaa*-an advisory group is elected to advise *Abbaa Gadaa*, the one with the greatest authority in the Gadaa system. Because it is believed that a wise and sound judgment comes from different heads.

The next attitude to knowledge is figuratively expressed by a proverb which says: *Handaaqqoo yaada malee nyaatan gaafa qalbiin ilaalan baallee irraa argan* (a chicken eaten inattentively will have feathers if you concentrate on it). This proverb carries the message that unless you pay attention to the chicken you eat, you will have the impression it has no feathers. But if you concentrate on what you eat, you will see that it has feathers. By the same token, if you do not correctly reflect on or come back on what you did, it will seem it was correct. Your concentration on your past deeds or on what you thought you know reveals your defects and measures the extent of your knowledge. Accordingly, experience and a deliberate effort of the subject play a significant role in the process of knowing. However, this does not rule out the prior existence of knowledge in some instances. The expression *Kan beekumsa qabu waaqa dha* (it is god who is knowledgeable) or *Beekumsa kan namaa kennu waaqayyo dha* (it is God who gives men knowledge) affirms knowledge as a priori. Thus, the possibility of both a priori (transcendental) and posteriori (empirical)

knowledge is acknowledged by the Oromo society.

Knowledge is also conceived as light and the source of freedom. This attitude towards knowledge can be seen from the proverb: *Beekumsi guca dukkana keessaati* (knowledge is a light in the dark). From this proverb, we can understand the linkage between absence of knowledge (ignorance) and darkness. A man who is ignorant has no light to anything. He gropes about in the dark. The expression *Namni seenaa isaa hin beekne akka bishaan gabatee irraa isa gara gabateen jallatetti jallatuuti* (A man who does not know his history is like a water on a container which flows in any direction following the direction the container inclines) also reveals the enlightening nature of knowledge. Accordingly, knowledge (*beekumsa*) is a light, a moral enlightenment that makes the individual free from ignorance and indifference.

Thus, from what we have seen so far, it can be rightly concluded that for the Oromo society the possession of knowledge and the ability to know or the capacity to understand fully are the critical properties that makes men human beings. Knowledge for them is both a priori and a posteriori (i.e., gained by experiencing the empirical world and the intellectual assimilation of it through the medium of ideas). Knowledge has the power to enlighten and free the subject.

4. THE OROMO CONCEPTION OF TRUTH

The subsequent discussion about the Oromo conception of truth is a logical follow-up of the study of knowledge that has been made so far. Though it is limited in scope, the discussion addresses the reasons for truth or falsity of our knowledge and the indigenous Oromo concept of truth and their attitude towards truth.

There are different terms for truth. *Dhugaa*, *Haqa*, *Sirrii* and *Afaan-tokko*, however, are the most common ones.

4.1 Truth as “*Dhugaa*”

Dhugaa as truth stands for a correct statement. The correctness of this statement presupposes the tendency to describe accurately the state of affairs as it is. A statement is *dhugaa* or true if it describes an object or event as it really is. These statements can be reports of/by eyewitness of events. The proverb: *Inni bira oole hooteetti jennaan inni mana oole hin hoone jedhe* (while

the shepherd says the calf has fed the stranger says it has not) is uttered with the intention that the report of an eye witness can be trusted to be true than mere speech of the one who is ignorant of a given state of affair. Because such reports have the tendency to give an accurate accounts of events. Thus, there is a high degree of reliability and accuracy in such truth-statements given by an eye witness. However, the possibility of error in the reports of an eyewitness cannot be ruled out. Hence, the attempt to base *dhugaa* (truth) on eyewitness is for its high degree of accuracy and not with the view it is an exact copy of reality. Accordingly, truth is a high degree of correspondence between true-statement and the objective state of affairs and its validity is based on its high degree of accuracy and reliability.

Truth as *dhugaa* can also be understood as something that is powerful and everlasting. As the proverb *Dhugaan qallattu iyyuu hin cittu* (no matter how much it becomes thinner truth cannot be destroyed) puts though one can threat truth, no one can destroy it. The one who is truthful will have a long and satisfying life. He/she does not lose hope for being threatened by falsehood.

4.2 Truth as “*Haqa*”

Haqa is an Oromo word for truth and has the meaning ‘real’, ‘genuine’, ‘distinguishable’. In these expressions, truth stands for a significant statement for it contains the word of life and precedes another statements and things.

This is a pragmatic theory of truth that is based not only on the workability of an idea but also on its ability to make possible a better human situation and to make life valuable.

4.3 Truth as “*Sirrii*”

The Oromo society uses this expression very often in discussions, communications, debates, etc. Truth as *sirrii* can either mean ‘straight’ or ‘right’ or ‘true’. Falsehood is referred to as *sirrii miti* which can either mean ‘not straight’ or ‘not right’ or ‘not true’.

This concept of truth presupposes the prior existence of normative standards of truth-statements which are used to measure other truth-statements. This normative truth-statement is what is generally known by the society and represented by the elders to be true. Such truth statements are acquired through experience and passes from generation to generation.

4.4 Truth as “*Afaan tokko*”

Afaan tokko is a phrase that is made up of *Afaan*-meaning ‘mouth’ and *tokko*-meaning ‘one’ and so *Afaan tokko* means ‘one mouth’. Truth as *Afaan tokko* is a statement that is consistent and without contradiction in the description of a given reality. It can either mean inner consistency and harmony or the consistency of the statement made by several people about a given state of affair. However, in the case of external consistency, by collaborating what others have said, one is confirming and not necessarily ‘speaking’ the truth which is first established by other. By the same token, the similarity of an opinion cannot be used as a criterion of truth. Therefore, the *afaan-tokko* conception of truth is a truth that is internally consistent, i.e., the consistency among the truth statements made by the same person about one and the same reality at different times.

To sum up, one can deduce four clear concepts of truth from the examinations made so far. The first concept of truth is truth as knowledge-statement of reality that corresponds with reality of higher degree. It is also conceived as the identity of new knowledge-statement with other knowledge-statements that have been accepted to be true. Thirdly, truth is conceived as the internal consistency and harmony of one’s thought about one and the same reality. Lastly, truth is the knowledge statement that can create new and better life.

5. ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS

This section of the paper examines how proverbs can be used to express ethics/morality and the Oromo conception of morality. As James K. Kikongo (cited in Sumner, et. Al, 2002) puts it “any people who have evolved a culture would be expected to have a distinguishable epistemology or conceptual knowledge of the basic components of their culture, including also their ethics”. Such conceptual knowledge guides the ethical conduct of the society. As Kikongo further states, “ethics in Africa is a component of traditional culture” (Sumner, et.al, 2002). This view holds true for the Oromo society. Ethics is found explicitly in the thought and practice of the Oromo people.

In the Oromo society, the foundation of ethics can be viewed in two ways. According to the first view, ethics or morality is founded on the widely practiced traditional religion of the Oromo. The

Oromo situate him/her self with regard to the forces and events which mark his/her existence, with regard to fellow human beings, and with regard to some supreme reality that he/she thinks accounts for everything that is. As Workineh Kalbessa (cited in Presbey, et al. [4] puts, *Waaqaa* (God) is the guardian of all things, and nobody is free to destroy natural things. The Oromo think that doing wrong or harming the creation of *Waaqaa* is a disharmony with the order of nature and would automatically disorganize the perfect harmony that exists within the created being and between the creator and creatures. Thus, the religion restricts the freedom of human beings in their dealings with both their natural and social environments. In their dealings with nature, the concept of *safuu* has a significant position. In this connection, Workineh emphasized that:

Safuu is an important concept in the beliefs and practices of the Oromo people. *Safuu* is a moral concept that serves as the ethical basis that helps individuals to avoid morally wrong actions. *Safuu* is knowing how to relate natural laws that are given by *Waaqaa* and to act according to them. *Safuu* can also refer to expression of astonishment, fear, pain, pity, shame, etc. (ibid).

According to the concept of *safuu*, everything in the cosmic and social order have their own place. It is the moral duty of human beings to keep them where they ought to be. It has a wide scope of applicability; there is *safuu* for every action we perform. The proverb: *safuu hin safarani, eelee* hin waqarani* (*safuu* cannot be measured *eelee* cannot be hammered) reveals the wider applicability of *safuu*.

Apart from this, ethics in the Oromo society is also founded partly on the considerations of human well being. In this respect what is morally good is what brings about dignity, prosperity, and contentment. Consider the proverb *sangaa abbaan gaafa cabse bittuun gatii cabsa* (the buyer lowers the price of an ox whose horn is broken by the owner).

This proverb has a double message. First, breaking the horn of an ox is contrary to the order of nature and, hence, it is unethical. Secondly, unless we act ethically, the consequence of our action will not be as desired. In the proverb given, had the horn of an ox not been broken, it would have been sold at a higher price. Accordingly, because of his immoral act the owner has lost prosperity. This second message also reveals that the spiritual

consideration of ethics, i.e., ethics that is based on religion and the concept of *safuu* is a foundation for the humanistic consideration of ethics, i.e., ethics that is founded on consideration of human well being.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Westerners and other scholars alike had a negative and inferior nature of Africans and African mind. The westerners had not only invented the ideas of primitive Africa, but also what they assumed to be a means for her to have a moral worth. According to this outlook, the west not only invented African thinking but also thinks on behalf of Africa. Consequently, grappling, retrospectively, with this down playing attitude is necessitated. This, as Bekele [5] sanctily states, demands scrutinizing indigenous knowledge of African thinkers to reveal their significance.

Hence, examination of some Oromo proverbs for their epistemological, metaphysical and ethical import is called for. The careful examination of the proverbs revealed that knowledge and truth are the key elements in living a meaningful and satisfying life. For the Oromo, one of the principal categories that differentiates human beings from animals is knowledge and the ability to think. The epistemology of the indigenous Oromo society is concerned with manner of knowing. *Beekuu* and *baruu* are the two most important words for 'to know'. In this manner of knowing, we have two different phases: the active and passive phases.

However, the Oromo society has different attitudes towards knowledge. The first attitude towards knowledge says that in spite of the infinity of what can be known there is a limit to what we can know. The second attitude expounds the significance of experience and the deliberate effort of the subject in the process of knowing. Knowledge is also conceived as a light and source of freedom.

Truth is the other important concept that has to do with our knowledge. *Dhugaa*, *haqa*, *sirrii*, and *afaan-tokko* are the four common terms for truth that entail clear concepts. These are the concept of truth as knowledge-statement of reality that corresponds with reality of higher degree, the identification of new knowledge-statement that have been accepted to be true, the consistency and harmony of one's thought, the knowledge-statement that can create new and better situations of life.

The proverbs have also a wide ranging significance in explicating the ethics embodied in the culture and life of indigenous Oromo society. They reveal that ethics in Oromo society is founded on two different practices: religious practice and the consideration of human well-being.

Hence, from the examinations made so far on the epistemological, metaphysical and ethical significance of some Oromo proverbs one can legitimately conclude that there is a practical reasoned knowledge embedded in the thought of an oral community. Such thoughts, similar to that of literate culture, are the product of an individual person who is critical, reflective and reasonable. It is also correct to say that literacy and the tradition of writing is not a necessary condition for rational thought though its significance in preserving and transmitting ideas and reflections of individuals intact and knowing them by name is not underestimated. The metaphysical, epistemological and ethical concepts discussed above are the product of deep and critical thinking about fundamental issues of life. Hence, traditional (pre-literate) societies have the capacity to think and reflect on the necessary questions in human life. Their works are handed down from generation to generation through

channels such as proverbs, wise sayings, socio-political make up, etc.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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