

## Oromo Folklore Manifested through Features of the Northern Ground-Hornbill in Ethiopia<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

*Human cultures are co-evolved in association with attributes of biodiversity. This suggests that loss of a given species results in corresponding loss of cultural practices associated with that species. Consequently, it has been advocated for inclusion of cultural dimension of biodiversity to biodiversity conservation initiatives. However, studies investigating such human-animal interactions have been scanty. The objective of this article was to identify and interpret Oromo society's oral folklore manifested through various features of the Northern Ground-Hornbill (NGH; *Bucorvus abyssinicus*) in Ethiopia. Data were obtained from social media text posts on a Facebook community page in response to a post of questions asking the name and cultural values of the NGH. A qualitative, thematic content analysis approach was used for data analysis. Three main themes (oral folklore genres) were emerged from the data that elucidated the uses of NGH in oral literature: poetry, fable story and children word game. A total of 12 oral folklore taxonomies (7 poems, 4 stories, and 1 children word game) were identified and described. The results showed that Oromo people use oral poetry related to the birds in their day-to-day life activities to express their beliefs, attitudes, feelings and other communal affairs. Oromo people also deliver, through fable stories, important lessons about life, nature, love, friendship, heroism, and morality. These findings demonstrate that NGH has significant cultural values to the Oromo society.*

**Keywords:** birds, Gada system, Oromo, *Waaqeffannaa*, Northern Ground-Hornbill, *Bucorvus abyssinicus*, oral folklore, conservation

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<sup>\*</sup> A similar paper on proverbs (cited herein) was published as “Addisu Asefa (2021)” and the present article is focusing on analyzing three other Oral folklore genres: fable stories, poems, and children word game.

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## **Introduction**

The socioeconomic and cultural well-beings of humans are closely tied to the vital provisioning ecosystem services provided by biodiversity, including birds (Buechley & Şekercioğlu, 2016). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA, 2005) defines ecosystem services as “the benefits that people derive from an ecosystem”, and classifies them as: supporting (e.g., lifecycle maintenance), regulating (e.g., regulation of water flows), provisioning (e.g., food) and cultural (e.g., recreation). Cultural ecosystem services are the non-material benefits obtained from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experience, including knowledge systems, social relations and aesthetic values among others (MA, 2005). However, many plant and animal species are globally threatened to extinction due to unsustainable exploitation, driving extinction of cultural values associated with the species (Bird Life International, 2018a; Buechley & Şekercioğlu, 2016). Accordingly, effective conservation measures are required to improve or maintain ecosystem services provisioning for human wellbeing. Species conservation priorities are usually set based on their status and the amount of ecosystem services they provide. As a result, studies on cultural values of animal and plant species have, particularly, been a growing active research area among conservation biologists and anthropologists (MA, 2005). The information derived from such studies would aid conservation management decisions. Despite such studies, cultural ecosystem services are the least studied of the four major ecosystem service types.

Birds are important to human beings in many ways. They provide ecosystem services such as crop pollination, environmental cleaning (e.g., vultures), pest control and cultural values (Bird Life International, 2018a; Buechley & Şekercioğlu, 2016). Most importantly, humans’ direct and regular contact with specific bird species—especially, that possess prominent visual (e.g., feather coloration, anatomy, song and size), auditory (song and call) or behavioural (foraging, breeding and social interactions) characteristics—have been inspired humans since time immemorial (Gemechu, 1990; Muiruri & Maundu, 2010; Tribot et al., 2018). Such inspirations have motivated humans to use specific bird species as cultural symbols in arts, folklores, mythology, poetry and prose, music and religion (Bird Life International, 2018b, 2019; Coetzee et al., 2014a, 2014b). However, few studies have investigated human-bird interactions, such as their use in folklore, and the consequences thereof for conservation of the birds.

Folklore is defined as “the knowledge and traditions of a particular social group, who express their shared identity through distinctive traditions, and usually passed from generation to generation orally with no single author or creator

(Bronner, 2017). It includes the three common genres: material folklore (physical objects), verbal or oral folklore (common sayings, expressions, fable, stories, proverbs, riddles, poetry, folk songs, etc), and customary folklore (beliefs and ways of doing things), and a fourth major subgenre known as childlore (children's folklore and games) (Bronner, 2017). Folklore is an influential verbal art among many communities, especially, of literate communities, to express feeling, emotion and idea in most powerful, creative and authentic ways (Megersa, 2017 Tadesse, 2017). Orality (only performed with speaking, singing and other forms of oral expressions), memory (upon which the continued existence of an item of oral literature depends), repetition and formulaic expressions are the major characteristics shared by most folklore genres (Bronner, 2017). Among literate societies, oral literature plays crucial role in their daily life activities, functioning as communication, educational and entertainment media (Mohammed, 1994; Tadesse, 2017). Despite the popularity of animal-related folklore across many cultures, Krikmann's (2001) global review of number of publications on animal oral literature shows that birds are disproportionately being underrepresented compared to other wildlife groups or domestic animals.

This article explores oral literature of Oromo society related to the Northern Ground-hornbill (NGH) (*Bucorvus abyssinicus*) in Ethiopia. The NGH is a native bird species to Africa, north of the equator. Its distribution ranges from Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea in the northwest to southern Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda in the northeast (Bird Life international, 2018b). In Ethiopia, they are found across most parts of the country, except, the highlands (above 3000m asl) and lowlands (below 200m asl) (Redman et al., 2009). The birds are large-bodied, black hornbills, with white primaries, red (in male birds) or blue (in females) neck, and a long, deep-curved beak (Redman et al., 2009). NGHs feed on reptiles, including snakes and lizards, and mammals such as hares, and insects (Kemp, 2001). They are monogamous, with a male and a female pair, usually, found together and use visual and acoustic communications, with the main mode of acoustic communication between a pair (male and female) of birds involving a loud, booming duets of sound “*uh-uh, uh-uh-uh*” (Kemp, 2001). Due to such unique features the NGH can be considered as culturally important bird species (Addisu, 2021; Coetzee et al., 2014b). NGH are currently classified under ‘vulnerable’ threat category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of threatened species due to the rapidly declining population as a result of habitat loss and degradation, and intentional hunting for use in traditional cultural practices (Bird Life International, 2018b).

Many Hornbill species, including the NGH, are known to be used for various purposes in many cultures, particularly, in Asia (Bird Life international, 2019), and in Africa (Addisu, 2021; Biyela, 2003; Coetzee et al., 2014a). In some areas of its range countries, such as northern Cameroon and Burkina Faso, NGHs are hunted for food and killed as they are culturally considered as a sign of bad omen (Kemp, 2001; Thiollay, 2006). A recent study by Addisu (2021) also shows the high importance of the NGH in Oromo proverbs. However, some of the cultural uses that involve capturing or killing the animals have locally extirpated the birds where these practices are performed (Kemp, 2001; Thiollay, 2006). As a result, documenting the cultural uses of the species by societies across the species' range is important to contribute to understanding of human-NGH relationships and its implications for conservation of the species.

Oromos are the most populous ethno-national group in the Northeast Africa (Asmerom, 1973; Assefa, 1998; Dirrib, 2011). They account for ~40% of the estimated 110 million total population of Ethiopia (Assefa, 2020). Oromo people's native language is known as *Afaan Oromoo* which belongs to the eastern Cushitic language family and is the fourth widely spoken language in Africa, next to Arabic, Swahili & Hausa (Lodhi, 1993; Mohammed, 1994). The socioeconomic, cultural, political and religious affairs of the Oromo society have been largely governed by a traditional institution known as the "Gada System" (Asmerom, 1973, 2006; UNESCO, 2016). This indigenous institution has been practiced since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was registered in 2016 on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritages of Humanity (UNESCO, 2016). Oromo people's earlier and native traditional belief is known as *Waaqeffannaa*, which is derived from the word 'Waaqa' (literally means God) and means a belief in one God who has created everything and above all in His power (Asmerom, 2006; Assefa, 1998; UNESCO, 2016).

Oromo society provides a good opportunity to study African folklore, particularly, oral literature in relation to biodiversity, at least, for two main reasons. First, the customary laws of the Oromo "Gada system" and other pieces of information (i.e., history, beliefs, norms and moral codes) have been transferred orally from generation to generation (Asmerom, 2006). This oral transmission of traditional knowledge and wisdom involves from father to son, from elders to adults and youth, and from person to person through the use of common sayings, folktales, proverbs, oral poetry, folk songs and riddles (Asmerom, 1973; Tadesse, 2004). Second, the origin of most Oromo folklore genres are linked to features of their surrounding environment and biodiversity (e.g., specific plant and animal species, such as the NGH) (Addisu, 2021; Dirrib, 2011; Gemechu, 1990; Geremew

& Hunduma, 2018). Although studies on the Oromo folklore have shown an increasing trend in recent times (Assefa, 2020; Geremew & Hunduma, 2018; Sumner, 1996; Tadesse, 2004; Tamene, 2004), only few studies have investigated environmental ideas that emanated from folksongs (Ashenafi, 2014; Dirrib, 2011; Geremew & Hunduma, 2018). Furthermore, few studies have investigated Oromo oral literature associated with a single prominent animal or plant species, such as the NGH (Addisu, 2021; Gemechu, 1990). The recent study by Addisu (2021), in particular, does not only show the importance of birds, such as the NGH, in Oromo folklore, but also the little progress that has been achieved in documenting folklore related to birds. Thus, identifying the types and functions of Oromo folklore associated with various features (morphological, ecological and behavioural features) of the NGH would aid management decisions pertaining to the preservation and conservation of both the Hornbill and Oromo culture and traditions. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to contribute to our understanding of the extent to which a given human society's culture is related to a single animal species. The specific objectives of this study were to: (i) identify, describe and interpret the Oromo oral literature genres associated with the NGH; (ii) examine the causes underlying the Oromo people's motivation for using the species for such cultural purposes; and (iii) examine the consequences of use of the species for such cultural purposes for survival of the species.

## **Materials and methods**

### **Study design and approach**

Folklore studies are usually conducted based on data collected through fieldwork (going out to meet their informants where they live, work, and perform), accessed from archives of unpublished folklore collections, from bibliographies maintained by libraries and on line (DWP, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2014). However, collection of folklore associated with the NGH has not been available (Addisu, 2021), nor it was possible to collect field data due to resource constraints. Therefore, the present study used Facebook data as simple, cost-effective means of gathering huge data, which otherwise would have not been achieved. One weakness of the use of social media data from Facebook, as is true of most other social media platforms (DWP, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2014), is its difficulty to access profile of participants (who made comments on the FB) in terms of gender, age, educational status, geographic location, etc. This may make it difficult to know whether the FB participants are predominantly from a certain part of Oromia (where such folklore could be dominant/active) or they are from across Oromia. As a result, such data may not always comfortably lead to generalization. Despite this shortfall, the use of social

media data in research has been growing rapidly, due to the ever advancing communication technologies and increasing number of users for social networking. With all the shortcomings, such data have been shown to be valid and results are comparable with those obtained through field-based data collection approaches (Addisu, 2021; DWP, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2014). Though the Oromo nation comprises of many clans with diverse cultural practices, our belief is that the research participants represent most Oromo clans, and it is possible to generalize that findings of the research are ‘knowledge of the society’.

This study was conceived following our observation of a page post, on 19 March 2019 at 09:42, of a photo of male Northern Ground Hornbill, along with the following text post, in Afaan Oromoo, a local language:

Oromiyaan waan hundumaan badhaatuudha. Maqaan allaattii kanaa maal jedhama? Amala allaattii kanaa osoo hin taane wanta oromoon maqaa esheetiin makmaaku tokko tokko barreessaa!! Allaattii seenaa qabeettii oromoon esheetiin ergaa baayyee dabarfata (Figure 1) <https://www.facebook.com/Dr-Jirenya-Sena-1121714954657794>.

Its literal translation is:

Oromia is endowed with everything [natural resources, culture, etc]. What is the name of this bird? Please, list Oromo traditional folklores attached to the bird’s imaginary behaviours. This species is a historic bird which Oromos transmit enormous messages in its name.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot picture of a Facebook page post showing photo of the male Hornbill and descriptive text and number of FB users reactions, comments and shares

These contents were originally posted on a popular community Facebook ‘Like Page’ known in the user’s name of ‘Dr Jirenya Sena’ on 19 March 2019 (Figure 1). As of 27 December 2019, the page had 101,423 followers (hereafter referred to as Facebook users) (Facebook, 2019; Figure 1). We found all FB users’ comments to be written in Afaan Oromoo—the Facebook page users who posted comments were thus assumed to be Oromos, or at least speak and read Afaan Oromo language and know Oromo culture—and the information embedded within the textual posts contained valuable knowledge. As of 27 December 2019, the page post had got over 1.1K reactions (i.e., users’ feeling on the post such as likes, love, sad, angry etc.), 494 comments (i.e., responses of FB users to the post, or responses of FB user to other users’ comments on the same post), and 265 shares (Facebook, 2019; Figure 1). Given this nature of the data source, a qualitative, thematic content analysis was used as a principal research approach to design the study and to collect and analyse data (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). This approach is based on an interpretivist research paradigm which is based on knowledge obtained through social constructs, and on the view of all knowledge (all

meaningful reality), which is being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Coetzee et al., 2014a; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Based on generally known sociocultural and historical contexts of the Oromo society, the methods we used to analyse, describe and interpret the folklore types have been found to be reliable for such kinds of social media data (for detail, see Addisu, 2021; Kozinets et al., 2014).

### **Participant selection and data collection**

As this page was a public Facebook page, ‘self-selection’ method was used to choose research participants (Franz et al., 2019). This is a nonprobability sampling procedure in which the sample units (each FB user) choose his or herself to take part in research on their own accord based on their free will, knowledge and/or experience (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Data collection was undertaken both through passive observation and participation netnographic procedures (Franz et al., 2019; Kozinets et al., 2014). Passive observation involved monitoring FB users’ activities (reactions, comments, and shares), without the FB users’ awareness that they do something towards the research (Franz et al., 2019), on the Facebook page post of the Hornbill once a day from 19–29 March 2019, and then once a week from 30 March to 25 May 2019. Then, all the data (FB user text posts) from the Page post were downloaded manually on 27 December 2019, and copied and pasted on excel spreadsheet. Participation data collection involved replying (posting questions asking for clarifications) to Facebook users who posted unclear concepts (Kozinets et al., 2014). Prior to analysis, a numerical ID code was assigned to each User’s text comments to ensure anonymity, and the whole text posts of each user were translated from Afaan Oromoo to English.

### **Data analysis**

A thematic text content analysis method was applied to the text data (FB users’ text comments) to identify, code and categorize concepts related to the cultural uses of NGH (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fetters & Rubinstein, 2019; Neuendorf, 2019). The analysis was conducted in five steps. First, each user’s comments were read and reread several times to better understand the concepts contained within the comments (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second, contents of each FB user’s text comment were subjected to open coding process, during which descriptive codes were assigned to fragments of text on a variety of levels, including words, phrases, clauses,



sentences, or paragraphs (Coetzee et al., 2014a; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Third, a selective coding procedure was applied to concepts that emerged from the open coding procedure. This involved examining the codes to identify broader patterns of meaning and inductively grouping together of similar concepts into themes (i.e., oral literature genres) and categories of oral literature (specific artifact). Fourth, each theme and category were analysed in detail and appropriately defined and named. Finally, each theme and category were studied again in detail and double checked to make sure the original data truly supports the newly emerged themes and categories. Descriptions of each folklore categories and their functions were achieved based on the perspective of the participants' words or the authors within the commonly known sociocultural and historical context of the society (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Of the total 561 text comments posted by users in response to the Hornbill's post, 113 (20%) of the comments were found to contain concepts related to one or more oral literature associated with the NGH. The results presented and described in this article are based on the analysis of these 113 text comments.

## **Results and discussion**

Oral literature, such as poetry and fable story, is influential verbal art among many communities, especially, of literate communities to express feelings, emotions and idea in most powerful, creative and authentic ways (Geremew & Hunduma, 2018; Megersa, 2017; Tadesse, 2017). Such folklore genres are orally created, performed and transmitted from one place to another and across generations (Tadesse, 2017). The Oromoo ethnic group is one of such societies where oral literature plays crucial role in their daily life activities, functioning as constructions of identity, communication, educational and entertainment media (Dirrib, 2011; Mohammed, 1994; Tadesse, 2017). In this study, three themes (poetry, fable story and children word game) and 12 categories related to the NGH were identified and described from the qualitative analysis of the data.

### **Oral poetry**

The Oromo people use oral poetry in their daily life activities to convey various messages. They are performed through folksongs and other ritual songs to express their beliefs, attitudes, feelings and other communal affairs (Geremew & Hunduma, 2018). Poems are composed and performed (sung, recited, or uttered)

during various socio-cultural occasions, such as during weeding, ritual, spiritual and holiday celebrations (Geremew & Hunduma, 2018; Jama, 1994; Megersa, 2017). Contents and functions of messages conveyed through oral poems depend on the context of the situation/occasion, but include messages that motivate, threaten, alarm, and embarrass the target audience (Jama, 1994; Megersa, 2017). In this study, six Oromo oral poems manifested through Hornbill's attributes were identified and described.

*Poem 1*

*'Huummoo' jetti ijoolleen Baaburaa* (Children call the Train a Hornbill),

*Achi teeysee as na'eydii wanni afaan gaaguraa* (The hive-mouthed girl is watching me here sitting there).

In the rural areas, young Oromo lovers meet secretly, usually in the forest where boys wait literally ambushing their girlfriends to come down to the forest on their ways to fetch water or collect firewood. However, the chance for the girls to appear is fifty-fifty, because these works are planned by mothers and girls can only perform when ordered by mothers. In this poem manifested in the Hornbill's features, the boy used a metaphoric figurative language to explain the level of wisdom of his girlfriend. In the first verse of the poem, he explained children's inability to distinguish between Hornbill's sound and Train's sound partly due to the resemblance in sounds produced by the two entities and partly due to children's lack of knowledge about their surrounding environment. In the second verse, he expressed his anger at his girlfriend, because instead of creating any pretentious reason and coming down to him, she was watching him afar for him to come to her although she knew that he could not do so as her parents are around. He used an offensive phrase '*... wanti afaan gaaguraa*' (*a hive-mouthed girl*) to express his anger, which suggest that she has a wide mouth (or her acts are like a wide-mouthed girls) which is perceived as an ugly and attribute of foolish, untidy personality. Through this song, the boy attempted to declare that the wisdom of his girlfriend is not more than that of children. In addition to uttering anger to their girlfriends, Oromo boys use this song to teach such unwise girls that love is a mutual affair which should be equally important to both parties and the continuity of true love relies on the dedication of both parties.

*Poem 2*

“*Huummoon dhalee buuphaa tatarreessee*” (The Hornbill laid eggs and arranged each in order),

“*Siifan daggala ciisaa Sololiyaa naseetee*” (It is for the sake of you that I am roaming in the wild, not because of I am a Guineafowl).

Oromo boys’ experience of Hornbills and eggs of different bird species come from the fact that it is customary to wait for their girlfriends hiding in forests and bushes from parents to exercise their free will, privately, with their girlfriends. This is because Oromo tradition does not allow open field kissing or love plays in front of elders. Via such commentary songs, young Oromo boys express their inspiration for nature, in this case, the Hornbill. In this accord, the first verse of the poem in graves and shows, even envy, to the lucky life of the Hornbills, which by their virtue, enjoy their lives to the fullest. In the second verse of the poem, the subject again compares the life of guinea fowls with that of human beings. In simple terms, but subtle ways, he explains that forest belongs to the fowls not human beings. However, he found himself as one of them because he spends his days in the forest waiting for his beloved girl to appear one day. He should have always walked in the forest for there is no appointment with his girlfriend but an accidental crash. Through these kinds of poems, young Oromo boys compare their lives with that of guinea fowls, which always roam in the forest. The poem also shows the deep dedication to their loved ones. It is also easy to understand from these poems that the Oromos are very near to nature and their culture is intricately intertwined with nature.

*Poem 3*

“*Huummoo burree yaa wasaraa*” (The black-and-white Hornbill),

“*Galgala genyeeti walagaraa*” (Let’s see each other in the evening).

This song is performed by young boys and adult men during any social event that involves performance of traditional songs, such as wedding ceremonies, and holydays. It is an indirect expression of grudges to threaten a person who has done something wrong to them. The NGHs are known among Oromo community to be strong and muscular—that symbolizes a physically strong person—compared to other bird species. In the first verse of the poem, the performer person literally expressed his inspiration for the Hornbill due to its beautiful and attractive colour. Metaphorically, through poems, the boy informed his opponent that he is as muscular and strong as the Hornbill. In the second verse, he informs that he would

not attempt to fight his opponent there at the event place during day time in front of people who, otherwise, would mediate them. Rather, he would confront the opponent during darkness where people are absent. This usage is in agreement with reports of studies on Oromo folklore (e.g., Assefa, 2020; Sumner, 1996) who state that Oromos' folksongs as a powerful tool to express their collective grievances against government; to form solidarity to fight for their rights; and to convey warning, alarming, encouraging, or discouraging messages to the target audiences. On the other hand such wordings through poem are not prosecutable.

*Poem 4*

“*Yaa Huummoo mormma foonii*” (Ooh! You, flesh-necked Hornbill),  
“*Waaqatuu sii kennee boonii*” (Be proud of yourself for it is God’s gift to you).”

This poetic song is sung by women when they are engaged in doing house works. It is a poetic song expression of admiration to the Hornbills for having naked, featherless neck, which makes them unique from the many bird species. Accordingly, to the Oromo people, having such a unique few bird species appearance of having featherless neck, on top of their huge size, is a beauty and attractiveness. The Oromo people consider this unique beauty as God-given appearance that humans owe the Hornbills inspiration. Oromo women, principally’ perform this song to refresh their mind from the fatigue of house works (Megersa Regasa, 2017). The immediate reason for singing for the Hornbill is due to its beautiful colour and attractiveness. Through their song, the Oromo women express their appreciation to God, for His marvellous work, creating such beautiful birds. The Oromo women not only appreciate God by themselves, but also encourage others to do the same. In such a way, they express their appreciation to nature.

This usage is in agreement with earlier reports by Megersa (2017), who stated that Oromo women sing oral poems when they do house works to maintain their strength. Some of such songs have spiritual contents. The poetic songs are presumed to convey prayer to *Waaqaa* (Almighty God) in praise, petition, thanksgiving, and intercession.

*Poem 5*

*Huumoo gurraacha saqaa* (The black-and-white Hornbill),  
*Kaayoon deebite waaqaa* (Our goal is met, thanks to God);

*Huummoo morma baqqalaa* (The fleshy-necked Hornbill),  
*Aadaan teenna akkanaa* (Our culture is like this).

The Oromo traditional belief, under the Gada system, is ‘*Irreechaa*’, which is celebrated twice a year (UNESCO, 2016): in September and May. The September celebration is convened at lakes as a symbol of thanks-giving to praise God for the transition from summer to spring and the second is for petition to bring them rain on time (UNESCO, 2016). Summer in Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia is a rainy season which is frightening for its lightening, flood and cold weather. It is also a hard-working season for farmers. The September celebration is a thanks-giving for God letting them pass such a harsh season. In addition to this, however, such prayers are also undertaken during prolonged drought seasons, during which Oromo elders gather on high mountain tops or big lakes to pray to God to bring them rain (Tadesse, 2004; UNESCO, 2016). This song is performed by elders during such occasions, thanking God in advance, with the belief that the rain would certainly rain in due time by His order. The first two verses reflect elders’ faith to God that their pray would be accepted by virtue of mentioning Hornbill’s name that carries spiritual power vested upon it from God, and the last two verses implies that Oromo people have the culture of praying to God and getting what they wanted from Him.

*Poem 6*

Fuudhee niitii godhannaan, suubboo ta’uu kootii (If I get married, I  
 am going to be an adult),  
 Dulloomee ofdadhabnaan, aadaa deemuu kootii (If I get older and  
 retired, I am going to moan),  
 Huummoo ta’uu kootii (I am becoming like the Hornbill.)

The origin of this poem is Oromo people’s perception that Hornbill’s song is a reminiscent of a person moaning in pain. Oromo people say ‘Hornbills moan for their internal problems by themselves because they are alone, with no one’s help’ (Addisu, 2021). This poem explicitly reflects that once a person is grown and engaged in marriage, he becomes an adult (verse 1). Then, the remaining life-stage is old age and retirement, during which they experience physical weakness and consequently a frequent moaning whenever they walk, move or do hard works (verse 2). If they frequently moan, then they are becoming like the Hornbills which moan always (verse 3). Similar to the perceived reason for the Hornbills’ moan which means lack of helper who understands and provide them with solutions to

their internal problems. This poem is performed by old people who have no families, who feel and show empathy to the challenges that such old people are experiencing or whose families betrayed them. In short, the performer expressed in verses 2 and 3 of the poem his sadness and feelings of being alone. Through this poetry, we see the Oromo society's perceptions of life. The Oromos have developed the sense of understanding nature through perceptions as a result of observation and reflection of happiness as an adult and loneliness at an old age. The Oromos understand happiness wanes away as age goes on and the end of humans is such that facing life as it comes, even loneliness. In addition to serving lonely old people to express their internal problem of loss of endurance, this poem also serves as advice to teach young and adult people that old persons are need our support.

*Poem 7*

*An namatti hin himu, namnis na hin gaafatu, dubbii garaa kootii*  
(Neither do I tell people, nor do people ask me, my internal problem),  
*Ofiin aadaa deemun, Huummoo ta'uu kootii* (I always moan to  
myself, just like a Hornbill”).

Similar to Poem 6, poem 7 is also related to Oromo people's perception of Hornbill's 'moaning-like' song. The first verse shows that a person who is in trouble but reticent of his situation for having no trust in his friends. Sometimes people are reluctant or not sure whether to tell a friend or relatives to seek help. The Oromo youth use these poems to express their situation in such cases using songs which is like in pome 6 and 7, when they have no way to express it openly. It is an expression of tight-mouthed individuals in disguise when bewildered by cultural complexities. Thus, the person is moaning in his problem by himself (verse 2). This poem is performed by such people experiencing a difficult situation to express their sadness for not having someone who would stand by their side. It is used to let people know bitterness of loneliness and warn not to be alone in life.

**Oral fable stories**

Oral fable story is a verbal folklore genre that has been told throughout past generations, trickling down to the present generation to deliver important lessons about life, nature, love, friendship, heroism, and being a good person (Tadesse, 2017). It is a wise way to teach people; especially, children, about morals, life skills, and impart the wisdom of ages in an engaging manner (Tadesse, 2017). Such stories involve one or more animals who can speak (personification,

humanization) and relate to human attributes. This excites people's (especially children's) imaginations and brings them necessary knowledge in a comforting way. Like many communities, Oromo people are known to use this oral folklore genre as one of the best ways to educate children (Tadesse, 2017). Oromo children in Ethiopia are known to construct social values in many ways through their participation in folktales and storytelling and the subsequent meaningful discussions (Tadesse, 2017). The following four fable stories related to the Hornbills were identified from the data and described.

*Story 1: Dhiichisa Huummoo (Hornbill's dance)*

The first and most cited fable story was known as: '*Dhiichisa Huummoo*' ('Hornbill's dance'). The story is described as follow:

Along time ago, a Hyena invited many wild animals to attend its daughter's wedding ceremony. All invited animals arrived on time and after having had food and drink, they all started dancing. Most animals were dancing inside the house while some others were dancing outside. The Hornbill was dancing around the threshold of the door, putting one leg inside the house and the other outside. One of the animals asked the Hornbill, 'Why do you dance keeping one leg inside the house and the other outside? Why don't you join the two groups either?' The Hornbill replied, 'I will join the group performing better; let me wait for a while to identify the group.'

This fable story shows that the hornbill is a shrewd animal. Given the behaviour of hyena, the hornbill situated itself in an opportunistic position, never to miss both the party and a lee way to escape from being devoured by hyena in case. Metaphorically, the story characterizes an opportunist person who wishes to gain better benefit by capitalizing on the occurrence of something else to decide on which course of action to take; or a pessimist person who pretends to support one side at one time, and the other at the same time. The story is performed on the occasions of informal and formal conversations made between two persons, among family members during dinner or coffee times, and during discussions on local social meeting led by community elders or leaders whenever a person is found to reflect two conflicting views about the affair under discussion. Within family, it is performed by adults during night time to teach their children. In short, Oromo people use this story, to advice pessimist individuals to build self-confidence, to censure a person who deliberately behaves in such mischievous manner to gain unfair benefits. It is also to teach children the bad side of behaving in a fraudulent

manner and to abstain from it. As such it functions as an instrument to avoid fraudulence and minimize negative social consequences of such behaviour and to create a responsible community.

*Story 2: 'Huummoofi Waraabessi Harree waloo waliin bitatan' ("The Hornbill and the Hyena bought a donkey together')*

This fable story about the interactions between the Hornbill and the Hyena is described as follows:

Once upon a time, the Hornbill and the Hyena bought a Donkey together (in share). Accordingly, they started using the donkey turn by turn for transporting their stuff. Each one on its turn agreed to look after the donkey. One day, the Hyena took the donkey of the Hornbill to transport its stuff. Three days later the Hornbill wanted the donkey and went to the Hyena's village and inquired the Hyena that it wanted the donkey back and asked where the donkey was. The Hyena told Hornbill that the Donkey was lost two days ago. Then, the disappointed Hornbill went back to its village and told this issue to its friends and requested them to intercede. Then, the Hornbill's friends laughed at it and said, "Oh! You retarded entity, good of you! From the very beginning, how did you think of buying a shared donkey with the Hyena! Please let it go and forget." They meant the hyena devoured the donkey.

This story indicates that Hornbill's decision was wrong because donkeys are preferred preys of Hyenas and thus the Hornbill should be able to predict occurrence of such precedence. The core meaning is that someone who makes a friendship with the wrong person, with no background knowledge about him or her, will eventually suffer from a crisis. Oromo people use the story for two major functions. First, they use to teach and advice the community, especially children, to know personal backgrounds of people before establishing friendships and shared business ventures with them. They also use it to advice such impacted persons to calm down once they are cheated or betrayed by their business partners or untrustful friends.



*Story 3: “Waraabessatti gogaa fe’uu! jette Huummoon” (Does one loads hides on the back of the Hyena!” said the Hornbill)*

This story is similar to the preceding story (Story 2); it is about the interactions between the Hornbill and the Hyena and described as follow:

Once upon a time, the Hornbill and the Hyena entered into an agreement that the Hornbill would use the Hyena to convey loads as a packing animal, and pay the Hyena for the service provided. Accordingly, one day, the Hornbill packed many goat skins on the back of the Hyena to transport them to the nearby town for sell. They started the journey, but the Hyena was walking faster than the Hornbill. As a result, the Hornbill could not catch up with the Hyena. When the Hornbill gets closer to the town’s entrance, it found the Hyena lying down under a big Ficus tree and eating the skins. By then, the Hyena had almost finished eating the hides. The Hornbill was disappointed at what happened, and asked the Hyena why that was so. The Hyena replied ‘Do you think one should suffer from hunger while carrying its favourite food?’ That said, it carried on enjoying the skins. By this time, the Hornbill realized that nothing can be done except abandoning the area. Then, the Hornbill pleaded to its friends to intercede on its behalf and mediate on why the Hyena did so and inquire compensation from it. The Hornbill’s friends laughed at it again and said, “Oh! Do you think one transports skins on the back of the hyena! Please, forget it.”

This story has similar interpretation, meaning and function with the preceding story (Story 2). It literally indicates that Hornbill’s decision was wrong because Hyenas love hides and skins of livestock for food and thus the Hornbill should be able to predict occurrence of the incidence. The implied meaning is ‘a fool person who makes a wrong decision will end up with loss of advantages. This means little background search before deciding will save a lot.

*Story 4: “Seenaa jireenya maatii Huummoo” (The story of Hornbill’s family life)*  
Hornbills usually occur in a pair of male and female couple. However, such birds forage far apart from each other, often facing back-to-back. This fable story was originated from Oromo’s observation of this social bonding behaviour between couples of birds. This is described as follow:

In the ancient time, a group of people came across a pair of Hornbill and asked them, ‘You are always seen in pair. However, you always occur far apart, even facing back-to-back and not talking to each other. What is the reason of keeping such a distance and position?’ ‘We have some unresolved issues between us’ the Hornbill replied. ‘If so, why do you occur together?’ the people asked the Hornbill again. ‘Only we are there for each other’ the Hornbill said.”

The story tells us that life is difficult for the Hornbill in the absence of its partner despite the fact that many issues may present and arise between them. The same is true of people. It implies that living together (e.g., at family, village and regional or national levels) does not necessarily mean that there are no disagreements or difference of interests among members of the same group. However, group living is better than solitary life to lead successful life and to achieve community development. People experiencing a group life (e.g., wife and husband, Oromo clans, ethnic groups in Ethiopia), where a strong bond exists between them, can better lead enjoyable life and achieve individual or communal goals than loners. Oromo elders use this fable tale during cultural and social events, such as meetings held for reconciliation of disputes arising between family members or during coffee ceremonies to teach people about the need for and values of tolerance, loyalty or faithfulness, peacekeeping between family members to build the spirit of unity between families, villages, and the Oromo society, as well as between Oromo people and other Ethiopians. As such, it functions as a tool to teach people about the need for maintaining peace and tolerance, loyalty and faithfulness to strengthen (1) family life, (2) solidarity of the Oromo people to struggle for their rights in the country, and (3) tolerance of the Oromo people to rights and interests of other Ethiopian nations and nationalities to build a country where people live together in peace and harmony. This fable tale also reminds us that too much closeness and too much distance is no good for normal life.

### **Children word game**

*Huummoon Maal Baata? (What Does the Hornbill Carry?)*

Hornbill’s inspirational influence to the Oromo people has been manifested through the children word game known as “*Huummoon Maal Baata?*” (What does the Hornbill Carry?) This game is, perhaps, the most famous traditional Oromo children word game among all Oromo people who are born and grown up in the society. It has been in use since time immemorial, as oral tradition passing from generation to generation. It is an informal teaching and child brain-train method in

the Oromo culture.

The basis for the origin of the game is Oromo's observation of the huge, sickle-like shaped Hornbill's beak. Traditionally the Oromo people imagine that Hornbills use their sickle-shaped beak for cutting and tearing apart its preys, and mythologically, even, that of humans. The game is invoked as a dialogue between two children in a command and an answer form. One of the children, usually an elder, acts as a commander or who asks questions (hereafter referred to as Player 1) and the second child acts as a responder (Player 2). The philosophy underlying the game is that Player 1 wishes the Hornbill cut the neck of Player 2, but Player 2 rebuts that wish to happen to somebody else. Usually, it is played during the evening time in the presence of their parents (if it is played between children of the same family) and/or among peers from the same village, and at schools.

The game has two parts. The first part is an introductory question where Player 1 initiates the game by asking the question: "*Huummoon maal baata?*" (What does the Hornbill carry?) Then, Player 2 replies, saying: "*Qara Maacidii*" (A sharp sickle). [This 'sharp edged sickle' refers to Hornbill's beak.] The second part consists of two questions: "*Mormashee*" (Its neck?) or "*Mormakee*" (Your neck?). This part, by default, is a short form of the question: "Why does the Hornbill carry its sharpened-beak?" Is that to cut someone's neck ("*Mormashee*") or to cut your's [Player 2's] neck ("*Mormakee*")? Thus, the corresponding default answer of Player 2 is: 'To cut someone's neck', because the player (Player 2) wishes that the Hornbill would not cut player 2's neck. Each of the two questions have only one correct answer: "*Shaph*" ("Cut") for the question "*Mormashee*" (Its neck?), and "pause/freeze" ("no response") for the question "*Mormakee*" (Your neck?). The first question (Its neck?) is the most frequently and repeatedly uttered question to which Player 2 should reply (saying "*Shaph*"), uttering with the same speed with which the asker utters. Player 1 alternates the questions in rapid, sporadic random sequences while increasing the speed steadily to the point Player 2's ear, brain and tongue (oral) co-ordination could no longer keep up. The goal of Player 1 is, by asking tongue twister phrases (*mormakee* and *mormashee*) in a difficult manner, to confuse and befuddle Player 2 so as to end up her/him replying the wrong answer and kicked out of the game as earlier as possible. The best players (Player 2 types) are those who stayed in the game longer by pausing to "*mormakee*" and responding 'Cut' to "*mormashee*" commands, while maintaining the speed with which Player 1 utters. As such, the wrong answer which leads to end of the game, is uttering "Cut" to the question "Your neck?", or "pausing/not responding" to the question "Its neck?" If this happens, then a new game starts

over between these players, or between Player 1 and another child acting as Player 2.

This game has many social, environmental and cognitive functions. First, staying in the game for a longer period than peers leads children of Player 2 types to be praised by their peers and families for their intellectual ability and considered to be cleverer than peers. This gives the children a sense of satisfaction, both at the completeness of having done something with a superior success and at their own intelligence. Conversely, it gives Player 1 similar feelings of triumphant moment of victory when she/he quickly eliminates away Player 2 by, suddenly and relatively at earlier period in the duration of the game. This gives Player 2 frustration that she/he is not actually as smart and intelligent as her or his peers are. Consequently, it provokes such players (Player 2s) to pay attention on the utterances of Player 1 and stay in the game for longer period during the other round she/he enters a new game. Second, it serves as a means to strengthen social-bonding and peer-learning among children. Third, it teaches children about their surrounding environment, particularly the Hornbill. Finally, playing the game increases the thinking or reasoning power – brain and cognitive development.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we identified and described Oromo society's oral folklore manifested through the NGH in Ethiopia. Based on qualitative, thematic content analysis, we identified three emergent themes of oral folklore genres: poetry/song, fable story and children word game, and 12 categories (identities) of oral folklore. The results indicate that Oromo people use oral poetry in their day-to-day life activities and during socio-cultural events to express their beliefs, attitudes, feelings and other communal affairs, and to motivate, threaten, alarm, or embarrass the target audience. Through fable stories, for example, Oromo people deliver important lessons about life, nature, love, friendship, heroism, and being a good person. The children word game serves to strengthen their social bond and cognitive development.

Every society in Africa has its own oral tradition as most languages were only oral and even have no alphabets (Prinsloo, 2008). The Oromo Society is among such nations whose language developed a Latin Alphabets, only during the last fifty years, to write and read. Historically, members of the Oromo society were pastoralists and had close contact with their natural environment. Oromia has been rich, endowed with rich biodiversity and even now is the richest in biodiversity and other natural resources in Ethiopia. Thus, Oromo cultural practices related to biodiversity should be documented and kept up for the next generation as the

present generation is no more interested in oral tradition given the fact that we are currently living in the digital era. From a bio-cultural perspective, coupled to the current conservation status of the species, this study provides an important knowledge about the cultural values of the NGH which can potentially contribute to effective conservation of the species and preservation of cultural identity of the Oromo community in two major ways. First, findings of the study aid to identify practices that have positive or negative consequences to the species, which helps reverse the negative impacts. Second, the findings can readily be applied for quantifying the relative ecosystem services contributed by this species, which in turn would be used to prioritize species or sites for conservation measures across the species' range.

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