

# Linguistic taboo in African marriage: a study of the Oromo *laguu*

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## Introduction

Linguistic taboo or the fact of avoiding mentioning certain words and expressions in a language is a common practice in more than one society. In traditional Africa, as a result of their lack of decency, shocking character or immorality and in order not to hurt the other members of the society, many a taboo term are never used in the lives of some individuals although the latter know them perfectly. In Madagascar, for example, different peoples use the term *fady* to refer to and justify their numerous prohibitions. Several Bantu ethnic groups share the same notion of taboo in spite of their differences and of the names each of them uses. The terms *imi-ziro* in Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), *bi-kila* in Lingala (D.R. of Congo), *bi-jila* or *bi-bindi* in Ciluba (D.R. of Congo), to give only a few, refer to taboo.

But taboo language is not only associated with lack of decency. Very often, it is just a matter of convention where the normal use of an item in a language is inhibited due to particular social values and beliefs (Trudgill 1986:29). The tabooed items vary from one society to another. According to Trudgill the strongest taboo-words in the English-speaking world are still associated with sex, followed by those associated with excretion. In Norway, they are mostly expressions connected with the devil, and in Roman Catholic culture, they are words essentially associated with religion.

In traditional Africa, they include words for sex and certain parts of the body, words for death, for marriage and kinship relations, certain birds' and animals' names, etc. For example, in Ciluba, sex is referred to as *mesu* (eyes). In Wolof, the lingua franca of Senegal, it is called *kanam*, which means 'face'. The Wolof expression 'to chat up a girl' for example is translated as 'to ask for a face' (*gnan kanam*). As to death, several euphemistic expressions are used, especially for announcing the death of a great person: 'to disappear' in Ciluba; 'to finish one's work' or 'to sleep' in Wolof; 'to go' or 'to leave' in Lingala, etc. To show respect, Africans address people, especially the elder ones, by using euphemism. As an example, Luba women call their husbands 'uncles',

'chiefs' or 'dads', and husbands call their wives *Muina kuanyi* ('the owner of my house') *Mwa bana* ('the mother of children') or after the names of their children e.g. *Mwa Mbuyi* ('mother of Mbuyi').

Because of their power, taboo-words are frequently used as swear-words to express hatred, antagonism, frustration, pain or surprise. Taboo-words and words like them must be observed by all the members of the society. Failure to do so can lead to punishment or public shame. But, where possible, the use of such words can take place only in a restricted set of situations.

The present paper is a descriptive study of *laguu* or *lagacha*, a linguistic taboo in Oromo<sup>1</sup> ethnic group (Ethiopia) which consists in avoiding mentioning the names of persons who are relations by marriage. The study shows that instead of using their respective proper names and those of their in-laws, husband, wife and in-laws have recourse to euphemistic forms, most of which are coinings. The study analyses the avoided taboo-words and shows the mechanisms used for finding substitutes.

Two parts are included in this work. The first deals with the background or sketchy information about the history, geography, cultural patterns and marriage system of the Oromo ethnic group. As to the second, it treats *laguu*, i.e. when, how and why to observe it; the types of names that are avoided; their substitutes and how they are found; and finally the violation of the custom and subsequent sanctions. The study paves the way for further studies which might be carried out on language use and culture within this ethnic group. We have used both written documents and information provided by academic Oromo informants.

## Background

### The Oromo people

The Oromo people originate from the Central part of present day Republic of Ethiopia. They live in twelve out of the fourteen administrative regions of the country, in North, South and West, and also in Kenya and in Somalia (Tesema 1986). Demographically, they are said to be the most important ethnic group of Ethiopia comprising 40% of the population.

According to Baxter (1986), the Oromo are one of the most ancient and of the first 23 widespread and culturally homogeneous people in Africa. Cattle breeding, agriculture and hunting are their main economic activities. The language, called Afaan Oromo, is

a popular one and counts several dialects. Although its speakers are more numerous than those of Amharic (a lingua franca of Ethiopia), only few written documents exist in this language. Ritual celebration, the system of adoption called *Gudifacha*, wedding ceremonies and fertility of both soil and women are among the important cultural patterns.

## **Marriage in Oromo culture**

Marriage in Oromo culture is the responsibility of both the boy's and the girl's families rather than being only that of two individuals. The girl is usually chosen by the boy's parents on the basis of her character and the honourability of her family. Wealth on both sides can be one of the criteria, but not always. The age usually varies between 10 and 14 for the girl and between 16 and 20 for the boy.

The contract is completed only after paying a dowry to the girl's parents. The nature of the dowry is different from one area to another; it consists of money plus a domestic animal, either a cow or a few sheep. The period of full-term engagement is from 2 to 3 years. During this period, the girl receives instruction from mother, uncles' and elder brothers' wives, while the boy helps the father in clearing, ploughing, planting or harvesting the crops, he may also help with the father's trade. After this period, both families then get ready for the wedding celebration.

Virginity before marriage is highly valued for the girl and her parents, otherwise her reputation and her family's would be ruined at the wedding time. After the wedding, the young man and the young girl finally realise their new roles of husband and wife and of future parents.

## **The present study**

Although taboo is a practice everywhere the Oromo people are found, stress will be placed in this paper on its use in Illubabor Administrative region<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the context will be that of marriage and only the sense of avoiding mentioning proper names within this context will be examined.

## **Taboo observance and use of euphemism**

### **Taboo observance**

Observance of *laguu* usually begins on the day of engagement. Husband, wife and rel-

atives from both sides start avoiding mentioning the names of the different persons involved in the marriage relationships. The main reason for observing this custom is deferential: the wife explains to the others that the taboo-name is now so respectable that she cannot mention it. Of course, the degree of deference will vary from the husband and his parents downwards. This constraint is binding on the wife for ever, including after the husband's death or after divorce. In law courts, for example, when complaining against their husbands, wives usually refuse to tell the judges the names of the defendants for *laguu* reasons.

## **Names avoided and substitution mechanisms**

### ***Names avoided by wife and her relatives***

The fiancée or wife avoids mentioning not only the name of her fiancé or husband but also the name(s) of the husband's:

- (a) father, mother, step-father, step-mother(s), grand-father, grand-mother, step-grand-father and step-grand-mother(s);
- (b) brother(s), sister(s), step-brother(s) and step-sister(s), regardless of age;
- (c) uncle(s), aunt(s), nephew(s) and niece(s), also regardless of age.

In other areas, for example in Arsi, the list of taboo-names is provided to the wife four days after marriage by four elderly women.

### ***Substitutes for the husband's names:***

Wives usually get round the problem of avoiding mentioning their husband's names by devising substitution mechanisms. Some possibilities are:

a) use of honorific pronouns; e.g.

- isin: literally you, (plural); or honorific you (singular) used for address only:  
Maal taatan isin?  
'What's the matter with you'
- isaan: literally they (plural); or honorific he (singular) used for reference:

Isaan waami.

'Call him.'

b) use of different expressions which include:

- jaarsa ko/kiyya or jera ko/kiyya

'my husband (in both address and reference)'

- jerri ko/kiyya

'my husband (in reference)'

- jera kénna or jera kenna/keennaa

'our husband (in a polygamous situation in both address and reference)'

- warra ko or warra/kenna/keennaa

'head of my family, head of our family (in both address and reference)'

c) use of *Abbaa* (father of) plus a child's proper name; e.g.

Abbaa Gammachu

'Gammachu's father (where Gammachu is male)'

In this case the proper name used is not subject to *laguu*; in addition, it should be the name of the first-born child. Before the birth of the first child, the husband and the wife can select a proper name for an imaginary male child and use it. An imaginary feminine name is never selected; the Oromos wish their first-born to be a son. In the case of childlessness, the imaginary name adopted will be maintained and if a female child is born a name can be improvised.

d) use of physical and character traits plus *Abbaa*, e.g.:

Abbaa Cabsaa

'One who breaks his enemies'

Abbaa Dugumaa

'The truthful one'

Abbaa Kalbi

'The cautious one'

Abbaa Kaaru  
'The gap toothed one'

e) use of established convention corresponding to the real name subject to *laguu*;  
e.g.:

Usual substitute name	Real name
Abbaa Bulguu 'The tough one'	Nagawo 'Peace'
Abbaa Jiru 'The busy one'	Dingaa 'Amazing'

f) use of physical trait of the husband's horse plus *Abbaa*

Physical trait	Name
Boora 'Brown'	Abbaa Booraa 'Owner of a brown horse'
Diimaa 'Red'	Abbaa Diimaa 'Owner of a red horse'

The use of derivatives from names under social taboo and of phonetically similar sounds in identical or nearly identical environments as those in the names under the taboo is prohibited. This brings the wife and her relatives under great stress because even ordinary lexical items that have any such resemblances to the name under taboo practice are also taboo. One example which can be cited is the taboo-name Margaa which in turn derives from *marga* (grass). All derivatives from this word and all the words with similar sound sequences should be avoided due to *laguu*. Consequently, the following are also taboo-words:

marguu  
'sprout like grass'

marge  
'sprouted like grass'

magarti

'plant name'

maagaa  
'ascarid'

maagessu  
'cause ascarid'

The word *mar'kaa* meaning 'porridge' has the sound similar to /g/ of *margaa* in the same environment; as a consequence, it is also avoided. Its derivatives *mar'kuu* (he prepared porridge) and *mar'kite* (she prepared porridge) should not be used either.

In addition to innovative devices, there are others that serve to circumvent these difficulties. Some examples are given in the following Table:

### 1. Conventional devices<sup>3</sup>:

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Taboo	Derivatives (or related words) to be avoided	Substitute for Column 2
Ba'daasaa (makes rich) Birru (to earn money) 'Dinsaa (cures) Fullaasaa (transfixer) Guddataa (growing) Margaa (growing) Rooba/Roobe (rainy) Tufaa (spitting) Wayyeesaa (healer) Yaadata (remember)	Ba'daasu (to make rich) Birri (dollar) Dinsu (to cure) Fullasu (to transfix) Guddachu (to grow big) Margu (to sprout) Roobu (to rain) Tufu (to spit) Wayyaayu (to feel better) Yaadu (to think)	Soromsu 'kar'si fayyisu warraanu baayisu bi'kilu bookkaan 'Co'c'cobu Cirr ikfaccu Fayyu 'kalbechu/'kalbisu

**2. Innovative devices:** These are varied depending on each wife's taste. A few examples are:

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
<b>Name to be avoided</b>	<b>Derivatives (or related word also avoided)</b>	<b>Substitute for Column 2</b>
Básano Dugumaa Gammadaa Lammessa/Lamu  Tola/Tolosaa	Bisaan (water) 'dugaa (truth) gammadu (to be happy) lammessu (to double)  tolu (to go well)	Taliila (clear water, truth) Hák'ki /Soba miti Dasitaa (Amharic for happy) 'kindi / 'kindessu (Amharic <i>tindi</i> for pair corrupted) 'turu ta?u (Amharic <i>tiru</i> for good corrupted)

As can be seen, the mechanism used in order to find substitutes for the taboo-words does not show any clear linguistic pattern. Several devices are used. The phenomenon is even more complex in Arsi where the wife makes use of many procedures such as:

a) Use of /'s/ for the initial sound in the name

<b>Name</b>	<b>Substitute</b>
Ba'daaso (enricher)	Sa'daaso (nonsense word)
Duulaa (combat)	'Suulaa (nonsense word)
Gadaa (Oromo system of government)	'Sadaa (nonsense word)
Nagawoo (peace)	'Sagawoo (nonsense word)

b) Use of initial syllable alteration with or without additional sound change.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Substitute</b>
Bulbulaa (mixer)	Soomulaa (nonsense)
Daddafoo (hurry)	Soommafoo (nonsense)
Gobanaa (moon)	Soomanna (nonsense)

c) Addition of initial sounds in rare cases

<b>Name</b>	<b>Substitute</b>
Araarsoo (mediator)	'Saraasoo (nonsense)



Elemaa (milker)

'Selemaa (nonsense)

## d) Use of synonyms:

Name	Synonym
Duressaa (rich, male)	Sooressaa (rich, male)
Durettii (rich, female)	Soorettii (rich, female)

***Substitutes used for the in-laws' names***

## a) Substitutes used by the wife

In Illubabor, the wife calls her father-in-law and her mother-in-law respectively *abbayyo* and *dayyo/daye*. She uses the same form to address or refer to her husband's uncles and aunts. For the husband's relatives other than his parents she resorts to different devices, namely:

- *abbaa* (for men) and *haa'da* (for women) in combination with proper names not subject to taboo. In the case of women, *haa'da* substitutes *abbaa*, the proper name remaining unaltered. For example: *Abbaa Kaarru* and *Haa'da Kaarru*.

- the extension of the terms *essuma* (maternal uncle), was *iilaa* (paternal uncle) and *adaadaa* (aunt.)

## b) Substitutes used by the wife's relatives

## (1) Addressing or referring to Sons-in-law

In addressing or referring to their sons-in-law, the wife's parents say *ilma ko* (my son) or *soddaa ko* (my son-in-law). The other relatives of the wife may or may not follow her in their form of address or reference to her husband. Usually, when they do not follow her, they improvise names.

## (2) Addressing or referring to Husband's parents

A wife's parents address or refer to their son-in-law's parents as *Abbaa Soddaa* (father of our son-in-law) and *Haa'da Soddaa* (mother of our son-in-law). Other relatives usually follow her example in addressing or referring to her husband's parents.

## (3) Addressing or referring to Husband's relatives other than his parents

Usually, they either follow the example of the wife or coin appropriate names.

### ***Husband and his relatives***

#### **Names a husband avoids**

A husband does not have to avoid mentioning the name of his wife. But he might be discreet the longer they live together. By discretion meant such things as improvising names or using the *haa'da* formula. For example, in his wife's old age, the husband usually refers to or addresses her as *Haa'da manaa ko* (my wife), *Haa'da so* and so (mother of so and so), or *Jaarti ko* (my old woman).

In the case of parents-in-law, however, he has to observe the custom strictly. He addresses and refers to them as *abbayyo* (father-in-law) and *dayyo/daye* (mother-in-law). With respect to the wife's other relatives, the husband usually observes the taboo custom in address but uses his discretion in reference.

#### **Names the Husband's parents avoid**

The husband's parents can only refer to, or address their daughters in-law by conventionally established names or improvisations as indicated in the following table:

<b>Monogamous cases</b>	<b>Wife's name</b>
1st born Son's wife	Sooretti
2nd born Son's wife	Toltu Ba'daatu (improvisation is also possible)
3rd born Son's wife	Kosi/Beektu/Hortu (improvisation is also possible)
<b>Polygamous cases</b>	
1st born Son's wife	1st wife: Sooretti Guddo (Sooretti Senior) 2nd wife: Sooretti Tinno or Beektu or improvisation (Sooretti junior) 3rd , 4th, etc. wife: improvisation
2nd born Son's wife	1st wife: improvisation 2nd wife: improvisation 3rd wife: improvisation

Improvisations are usually made in connection with either the commemoration of an event or an expression of a wish. For example:

- *Roodbu* (She who is married in the rainy season)
- *Obse* (She who causes the husband to forget the death or desertion of his former wife or close relative).
- *Ba'daatu* (She who brings prosperity to the husband and his family)
- *Hortu* (She who is fertile) meaning that the husband has no children by an earlier marriage or wishes that his wife be fertile.

### ***Interparental address and reference.***

In Illubabor, the male parents address and refer to each other as *Abbaa Soddaa* whereas the female parents address and refer to each other as *Haa'da Soddaa*.

## **Taboo violation and sanctions**

People in Oromo culture are specially careful not to violate the custom because it is believed that a misfortune would happen to them. Wives would give birth to children with a scaly skin disease, cause the death of the husband or endanger the agricultural production, hunting or fishing. The principal victim of taboo violation is not necessarily the disobedient one.

Violations of taboo are very rare. When they occur, it is usually in reference and not in address, more by accident than by a deliberate act of non-conformity to this social norm. A few cases only are accepted in Africa. Some example are: In some tribes of Central Africa mothers of twins are allowed to utter all sorts of words and expressions in front of any person, especially during traditional ceremonies. Children in West Africa do whatever they like during the initiation ceremonies. They can ask a girl to show them her sex, show her their own genital organs or even attempt to rape her. In the Wolof culture, a wedding ceremony called *khakhar* is organised when the bride joins her husband. During *khakhar*, people, generally women, are allowed to insult or beat the wife and her relatives, use shocking terms, sing horrible songs, etc.

If violation occurs by accident, they will literally spit it out, thus symbolically atoning for the impropriety. In the presence of the husband, violation which is regarded as a wanton insult can result in physical violence or even in divorce.

## Conclusion

As a pattern of human behaviour, language taboo in marriage context is well observed among the Oromo people. Husband, wife and their parents have recourse to several devices in order to find or even to create the substitutes. Currently, the custom seems to be on the decline particularly in the cities and towns due to the conditions of accelerated economic and social contacts and changes. In rural areas, however, it is still intact although it is likely that the influence of the cities would have their effects sooner or later. The germs of *laguu* dissolution are already embedded in the thoughts of few individuals who consider it a disposable inconvenience or social encumbrance. Of course, if similar patterns are widely observable among the other ethnic groups of Ethiopia and elsewhere, it may be a feature of considerable significance worth not only of the ethnolinguist's attention, but also of the sociologist's and the anthropologist's.

## Notes

1. The term *Oromo* has been commonly preferred and used instead of Galla since 1974.
2. A few examples, in passing, refer to *laguu* practice by Arsi women (central area).
3. Long vowel in final position indicates use in reference; in address the vowel is pronounced short.  
e.g. *Ba'daasaa barbaadu*. (They are looking for Badaasa.)  
*Ba'daasa essa deemta* ? (Badaasa, where are you going?)

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