The socio-cultural functions of Kafa proverbs

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The objective of this study was to examine the social and cultural functions of proverbs told by the Kafa people in southern Ethiopia. Accordingly, field visits were made to the area to collect data. Fifteen proverbs were selected and classified to study issues related to agriculture, forestry and other social and cultural beliefs of the society. The analysis showed that the proverbs emphasized the hard work that is needed of the farmers in Kafa in order to avoid hunger and catastrophe. The care that the people show towards the conservation of forests and the environment is also represented in the proverbs. The high value that the society gives to righteousness, wisdom, and experience and the ways through which the society controls behaviors that it does not approve are also reflected in the proverbs.

Key words: proverbs, values, norms.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are commonly used in all societies, but they seem to be more significant in their transmission of tradition among those where illiteracy is dominant. According to Jeylan (2009), proverbs are the linguistic maxims of Africa and their employment in speech provides interest and excitement. Finnegan (1970) stressed this saying, “in many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs” (p. 390). It is interesting to note that there are proverbs about the functions of proverbs in different cultures in Africa. For instance, the Oromos of Ethiopia say, “a speech without proverb is like a stew without salt”, and the Igbo of Nigeria say “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”. Similarly, the Zulu of South Africa and the Kambatta of Ethiopia have the following proverbs about proverbs respectively:

“Without proverbs, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul” and “speech sounds good when it is interspersed with proverbs, food tastes good when it is cooked with butter” (Berhanu, 1986; Finnegan, 1970; Jeylan, 2009). These examples clearly show the important place of proverbs in Africa; they elevate speech from the mere nominal value of word to a higher aesthetic plane.

Proverbs have been used as disseminators of traditional wisdom, knowledge and apparent truths that are handed down from generation to generation, especially in the absence of vigorous written literature. They are used as a guardian and the carrier of a nation’s philosophy and its genesis (Mieder, 2004; Tae-Sang, 1999). Miruka (1994) stated that proverbs serve as reflective devices and provide us with a codified wisdom of a society that has been accumulated over many years of pleasing and
annoying experiences. In proverbs, we observe a society’s understanding of life as it has developed through observation and reflection. More than being the essential summaries of experience, proverbs may be very effective in exercising social control. Since they reflect the morals or ethics of a group, proverbs are convenient standards for assessing the nature and quality of behavior of approved norms and behavior of others. They are used to express admiration of those who obey the accepted socio-cultural conventions and to criticize or warn those who are deviant (Bascom, 1965). Generally, proverbs are an integral part of interpersonal communication of everyday life. They strengthen human interactions in day-to-day socio-cultural occasions, and make speeches interesting and impressive. Beyond their literary value, proverbs have often been used as a source of didacticism, and more generally as a medium for the expression of commonly held views and wisdoms. They enshrine much of the cultural heritage of a people, their traditions, their history, their wisdom and their ethics.

This article deals with the socio-cultural functions of proverbs of the Kafa people of Ethiopia. The Kafa people are one of the nationalities found in the Southern Regional State in Ethiopia. There is very little work done on Kafa oral literature, as far as the authors are aware of. Markos (2004) is just a collection of different kinds of Kafa oral literature and does not make any analysis. Wodajo (2012) presents both functional and stylistic features of Kafa proverbs, but this article differs from Wodajo’s in its classification and depth of interpretation. As a distinct nationality, the social and cultural values that these people have held are expressed in their proverbs, and are the subjects of this study.

METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to understand and analyze the culture and life of the Kafa people as reflected in their proverbs, a qualitative research method was used. Field visits, observation of actual occasions, and interviews were used as data collection tools. A functional theoretical framework that is derived from the aspects of cultural anthropology was applied in analyzing the contents and functions of the proverbs. The researchers and assistants visited places where people came together for social and cultural occasions such as coffee ceremonies, funerals, public discussions, conflict resolution in traditional courts, and observed the contexts in which the proverbs were quoted. Informal interviews were conducted with nine key informants who were recommended by the local people for being knowledgeable about the socio-cultural realities as well as the oral tradition of the Kafa society. During the interviews, the researchers attempted to elicit any proverbs the informants know. However, as proverbs cannot easily be recalled outside a relevant speech context, the researchers used various techniques to aid the memories of the informants. These techniques included creating situations in which proverbs could be quoted, using keywords or topics of proverbs (for example, asking about proverbs that deal with agriculture, rivers, domestic animals, laziness and wisdom), and using already collected proverbs and asking them to elicit other proverbs having related meanings and structures. In this way, a total of about seventy proverbs related to different spheres of life of the Kafa people were collected. Fifteen proverbs were then thematically selected for analysis, grouped under two topics namely, agriculture and forestry and socio-cultural values. The interpretations of the proverbs were done through relating them with the social and cultural factors of the Kafa people. In analyzing proverbs collected from speech occasions, examples of the situations in which the proverbs were elicited are given. All the proverbs were translated into English using a communicative approach to translation (taking the overall meaning of the proverbs irrespective of the form or structure in which the proverbs are written in the source language) in order to make them accessible to the non-Kafi Noonoo speaking readers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agriculture and Forestry

The major economic source of the Kafa people is agriculture (Bekele, 1996). The people give high value to hard work in agriculture; laziness is much condemned. The following proverb affirms this point:

*Gutta yeexaroo/ gaashoo gogahe wone.*
*Two lazy people/ cultivate teff together, it was said.*

This proverb ironically stresses the need for devotion and hard work. According to one informant, in the Kafa culture, it is deemed that it is not easy to grow *teff* (an indigenous crop). The land must be tilled until it gets very fertile, and after the seed is sown, strong and continuous follow up is needed (such as strengthening the fences and timely weeding) until its harvest. Lazy farmers cannot get a good yield of *teff*. This proverb reflects the Kafa society’s knowledge and accumulated experience of agriculture in general, and the nature of growing *teff* in particular. The proverb is used to condemn laziness and to reinforce the culture of work of the farmers. This proverb also conveys the message that people having similar characteristics and tastes associate with one another. There are two seasons in Kafa: the rainy season which is locally called *yooyo*, and the relatively dry season called *qaawoo*. The rainy season starts in May and continues until mid September, while the dry season, though not totally dry, begins in mid September and ends in April (Bekele, 2004). Depending on the season, the farmers sow appropriate crops and plant coffee and false banana. For instance, according to Bekele, in the highlands of Kafa, the months from July to September are convenient for sowing *teff*. In November and December, the highlanders sow barley and wheat while the lowlanders cultivate *teff* and sorghum. The farmers mostly use oxen to plow their land. However, those who are poor and do not have oxen use hoes to dig their land and this requires much energy. In some cases, those who have oxen lend them to the poor farmers for some days, but the poor may get the oxen only after the
owners have completed their plowing; their alternative is therefore to use hoes. The following proverb advises what should be done in such situations:

*Ashi gattoo gibanaaye/ ne kootaroo battaaye. Waiting for others’ oxen/ do not forget your hoe.*

This proverb means that if a poor farmer is waiting for others’ oxen, he will miss the cultivation season and therefore, will get little or no produce. Hence, although tilling land by hoe is awful, one must begin digging early. The proverb is used to advise people not to be dependent, but rather to strive by their own to tackle any problem. An elderly farmer quoted this proverb while advising a young farmer who had no oxen, and blamed the person who had promised to give him oxen but was not loyal to his words. The old man advised him to start tilling the land early and sow his wheat in time. According to one of the informants, in the Kafa culture planning is more important than the actual activity or performance. Crops are cultivated according to seasons, and the when and where of planting certain types of crops or plants are usually done by plan. Hence, it is the popular conviction of the Kafa people that activities that are carried out based on a plan are more fruitful than activities undertaken haphazardly. The following proverb is a striking example of the need of planning:

*Gochii nattitoyee/ gabii nattito mechee tunabana. It would be better if I were a wife of one who has planned for next year /than who has cultivated this year.*

This proverb has an implication that planning carefully results in getting good harvests. The proverb is usually applied to criticize people who are unsystematic in their dealings, thus emphasizing the need for the prioritization of planning before the actual work to get impressive results. This proverb was used by a woman who was criticizing her husband who planted his maize messily; because of his failure to tauten the hedge, cattle entered the field and destroyed the plants. Famine is highly feared by the people of Kafa and that is probably the reason why they are strong in agriculture. Although they cultivate various types of crops, they give special attention to the plant false banana, which is the staple food of the society (Bekele, 2004). If a farmer is lazy and fails to cultivate seasonal crops, particularly to plant false banana, his family will be ruined because of hunger. The following proverb deals with this:

*Shaacee ginee koyoyee/ ash ginee koyo gaawa. Better to be pierced by human spear/ than to be pierced by hunger spear.*

In the proverb, the metaphor ‘spear of hunger’ is compared with an actual spear. When someone throws a spear, it may pierce only one person; however, when hunger throws its spear, it damages the whole family or the community at large. The Kafa people use this proverb to warn or to advise people to work hard and support their families as well as their community. This proverb was cited by an elderly person while trying to resolve a conflict between a husband and his wife who had quarreled because of the husband’s indolence and failure to cultivate crops and hence, the starvation of the family. After the elders found fault with the husband, one of them quoted this proverb to warn him to work hard to solve his family’s problem, and live in peace with his wife. The life of the Kafa people is highly connected with forestry. The people consider forests as one of their most precious assets, and the forests have substantial economic, cultural, and spiritual significance. According to Bekele (2004), in Kafa, there are various farming activities that are forest based. These include forest-coffee farming, and forest false banana and cereal crop farming. The Kafa society believes that the forests protect the crops and the plants from excessive sun light and help them receive enough rain. Moreover, the people are well known for their production of forest honey. Forests are also the main source of the material culture of the society. Traditional construction materials, agricultural tools, craft making materials, spices for cooking traditional foods and folk medicines are products of forests. The people of Kafa consider forests as the gift of God. Despite the existence of the Christian and Muslim religions in Kafa since the 16th century (Bekele, 1996), there also exist indigenous belief systems called *Eqqo* and *Deejo*. The *Eqqo* is led by *Alamo* on whom the cult rests, but it is supposed that the spirit stays in the forest. Thus, the people highly revere such sites and abstain from cutting trees from there. Similarly, the sites of *Deejo*, where thanks to gods are given once a year by butchering a bull and preparing a drink called *Dooco*, are highly respected, and even entering such forests is strictly forbidden, for all except for the leader called *Deeljecho*. For these reasons, the Kafa people highly value and conserve their forests. This respect to the forest is exclaimed in the following proverb:

*Kubbo aallegaat/ Kafachoch kashoo aalle. No life for Kafa/ without forest.*

This proverb projects that forests as the chief source of materials for various activities, play indispensable role in the life of the Kafa people. The proverb is used to warn people not to destroy the forest in using it for private use, and to advise them to care for and conserve forests. During a public discussion on distributing small forests to landless young farmers in one area an elderly man quoted this proverb warning the people not to use the forests for farming. After stating the multiple functions of forests and explaining his fear of deforestation, the man...
Socio–Cultural Values

According to an informant, the Kafa society is very strict in its enforcement of doing things in accordance with the socio-cultural norms. People who act against the norms receive punishment, directly or indirectly. For example, keeping promise is a highly respected value in the Kafa culture. The following proverbs reflect the Kafa people’s attitude towards righteousness and upholding promises.

1. Inde gommo/ inder naakkiitaache. Going through the right road/ never make the mother to be insulted.
2. Ne heciyo qitiba ne bushoo qitiba getee/ ta bushoo qitba iye wone. It is better to lose one’s child/ than to lose one’s tongue or word, someone said.

As in many parts of rural Ethiopia, there is no standard road system in the rural areas of Kafa. Thus, the people use local walking paths traveling on foot or on horsebacks. During the rainy season, the roads become mud-spattered and travelers may break the fences of farmers’ residences around the path and walk through them in order to avoid the muddy road that requires much energy. In such cases, travelers usually quarrel with the owners of the fences. Hence, the owners of the fences insult the trespassers. Proverb 6 figuratively means that if people do the right thing or follow the right and legal ways, they cannot face trouble. The proverb advises people to respect the norm, and warns those who deviate that they will suffer the consequences. This proverb was quoted during a coffee ceremony in a village called Decha. A father was advising his son who was engaged in illegal coffee trade. Government inspectors seized a sizeable amount of his son’s coffee while transporting it to Addis Ababa during nighttime. His father advised him to obtain legal license and continue his trade legally. Quoting this proverb, the father reinforced the idea that if his son had legal license, he would not have been punished. Proverb 7 metaphorically stresses the significance of truth and honoring one’s promises. A comparison is made between the tongue, which symbolizes promise, truth and loyalty, and the child, the most precious possession in Kafa family. The comparison reveals that, in the Kafa culture, keeping one’s promise and being trustworthy are highly treasured. The proverb is usually employed to reinforce the high value given to truth and loyalty, and keeping one’s promises, and also to advise people to be always true and loyal to their words or actions.

Wisdom is another topic that is reflected in Kafa proverbs. The Kafa people believe that a fool is always close-minded whereas a wise person is open-minded. Fools do not want to learn from their own or others’ mistakes; therefore, they are never critical and do not know the right ways of life. In contrast, the wise always open their minds to learn new things. As a result, they become well-rounded and are always gainers in life. The following proverb reflects this:

3. Ariiyaanooch gete bi getaa amoo bi ariich/ arriitoch gete bi getaa amoo bi tuushicha iye wone. The Fool knows nothing/ the wise knows everything, someone said. A young woman from Bonga used this proverb to praise an old woman who had come to her house to drink coffee, and interpreted the young woman’s dream. Before telling her dream to the old woman, the young woman had narrated it to three other people who failed to give the correct interpretation. When the old woman explained what the dream meant to her, the young woman became happy and quoted Proverb 9 below to praise the old woman comparing her knowledge to that of the others. The older woman’s age was taken as an important contributor to her knowledge. Although age is one of the ways in which wisdom is acquired, the Kafa people do not consider every elder to be knowledgeable. Some young people may even be wiser than other elderly people. The following proverb reveals this.

4. Shiiiji qaabboyee/ ariiya qaabbon echabi Ask an elder in wisdom/ not an elder in birth

This proverb explains that age should not be taken as the sole means of identifying wise people. Young people who always open their minds and strive to know may have far better knowledge and ideas than those who have lived long. As a result, the proverb reflects the Kafa people’s view that knowledge cannot be attained without effort and that long age is not a guarantee for wisdom. Experience plays a big role in Kafa culture. The people appreciate learning from lived experiences. Experienced people are highly respected by the society. The following proverbs reflect the importance of experience:

5. Geenoon yookkaa wixiyina lli/ yaaqqaa wuxaachine iye wone. You may overtake and kill an old man/ but you may not kill him by law, someone said.
6. Qappi ariiyaanooch/ qamoo shaawushoone iye wone. Liver is a bone/ for one who has never cut raw meat, someone said.

Proverb 10 deals with the power of experience that is accumulated by age. In the Kafa society, elderly people, especially men, are considered wise and well
experienced, particularly in defending themselves from their opponents in local courts. When people quarrel, usually they resolve it through local courts. In such cases, it is the elders who mostly win cases against their young opponents because of their experiences and knowledge of dealing with legal cases. Thus, beyond reflecting the Kafa people’s view on experience, the proverb advises the young to recognize the wisdom of the elderly. In the Kafa culture, eating raw meat is a common practice. They cut the meat into small pieces and prepare it for easy eating. However, learning to cut meat requires experience. The experienced meat cutters cut it easily and quickly, unlike the inexperienced ones. Hence, Proverb 11 explains that for the inexperienced person, even cutting the soft liver is as difficult as cutting bone. Beyond its literal meaning, the proverb uses the day-to-day activities of Kafa people as a reference to stress the significance of experience in every activity. A young man from Saylem quoted this proverb when he was talking about a teacher who fell off a horse. The teacher recently came to the village from Bonga town and had never ridden a horse before. Because Saylem woreda (district) has no road facility, the people of the woreda use horses to travel and are well experienced in riding them. According to the narrator, the teacher tumbled from the horse’s back because of his lack of experience to control his balance on the horse, reinforcing the idea that without experience even a simple task is difficult to accomplish. In Kafa, proverbs also serve to enforce the values and norms of the society and educate the young. In the society, proverbs are used as tools for criticizing deviant behaviors or acts. Through proverbs, the elderly people comment on actions or behaviors that are inconsistent with the socio-cultural norms of the people. The following proverbs provide examples of such functions:

   It is an elder child who shows bad conducts to his/her siblings/ it is a hen that shows bad conducts to domestic animals.
   Macoo woderoo kuxxite getee/ biich qabichite iye wone.
   When a horse pares its rope/ it makes itself short, someone said.
   All keep secret/ but the talkative one discloses it, it was said.
10. Bi gelloon wodiyaano/ baroon wodiyaache wone.
    One who is not able to help himself/ never helps others, it was said.

According to Proverb 12, in the Kafa culture, it is believed that elder brothers or sisters have an influence on the actions or behaviors of their younger siblings. If an elder brother or sister is well mannered, all his/her siblings will have good behavior; if he/she is ill mannered, the young will have bad behavior. Similarly, among domestic animals, the hen is considered to be the most difficult to manage because, unlike the other domestic animals, it lives in the house of its owner, and often disturbs the household as it is neither tied nor sent far away. Thus, newly born calves and lambs which have to stay in the compound of the owner before they are fit enough to go to the field may learn from the hen and become uncontrollable. A woman from Bonga quoted this proverb when she was angry with her younger child whom she found chewing chat (a leaf that has a stimulant effect) instead of going to school. Through this proverb, she was criticizing her elder child who chewed the leaf and became a bad example to his younger brother. The proverb is not only used to criticize misbehaving elder children, but also to comment on adults who show bad manners in the community. This proverb also admonishes the young generation for failing to become good models in the society.

Although, the economic life of Kafa people is grounded on cultivating crops, making forest honey and planting coffee and false banana, they also rear domestic animals such as horses, mules, cows and goats (Bekele, 2004). However, as one informant from Bonga stated, Kafa is a densely populated area and the people do not have enough land for growing crops and for grazing their cattle. Thus, they herd few cattle and cultivate crops sparingly. In so doing, they divide their land into two -they cultivate crops on one part and tie all their cattle using ropes, on the other. Hence, as all children in the family need clothes, all the animals, with the exception of the hen, require ropes for being tied. Proverb 13 literally means that if the horse pares the rope, it will become shorter and make it difficult for the horse to stretch itself for grazing. Connotatively, the proverb means that if one does things wrongly, it is he who becomes the victim of his wrong doing. Conversely, if one does things rightly, it is he who gets the benefit. The proverb is used to advise people to do good, just for their own sake, not for others, and to criticize those who engage in erroneous practices. According to Proverb 14, inability to control one’s speech and talking too much is considered to be a bad behavior in Kafa culture. The Kafa people highly value keeping secrets and never trust individuals whom they regard as talkative. Being talkative is considered to be abnormal behavior. People who are obsessed with too much talk fail to identify what has to be told and what does not. Thus, the proverb is used to criticize people who talk a lot and disclose secrets, a behavior that is subject to considerable social behavior. The Kafa culture expects every member of the society to be self-reliant. Individuals, particularly men, who fail to solve their social, economic and other problems on their own, get little or no recognition. Apparently before helping others, one should help himself. Thus, Proverb 15 is meant to mark the
The Kafa people, like people in many other societies, have developed their own set of social and cultural values. Their proverbs are expressions of these values; they deal with various subject matters and reveal the people’s native life and cultural experiences. Kafa proverbs reflect the people’s experiences, lives, beliefs, moral values, and their rules of conduct and wisdoms. The need for hard work in agriculture and the strict protection of forests occupy a significant space in the proverbs as they are important for the continuity of life. They are used to promote and preserve values that the society upholds as positive. Proverbs are also employed as tools for correcting deviant behaviors and sustaining customary beliefs and practices of the people. It is in line with what Bascom (1965), Mieder (2004), and TaeSang (1999) state about proverbs – that they tell much about people’s way of experiencing reality, about the proper or expected way of doing things, about values, rules and wisdom that the society wants to implant on the existing generation and on posterity.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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