Ethnicity and Local Identity in the Folklore of the Southwestern Oromo of Ethiopia: a Comparative Study

Summary

The primary concern of this research project was carrying out a comparative study on folkloric constructions and expressions of ethnic and local identity among the southwestern Oromo (Macha) of Ethiopia. The focus was on identification, documentation, description and sub-group-oriented comparative analysis of folklore, specifically oral narratives – seen as local discourses of and expressive basis for local groups and collective action. It was aimed at gaining insight into the issue of local identity and (sub-)group formation within the south-western Oromo of Ethiopia, a complex multiethnic state. An attempt was made to clarify how, on what bases, in what situations and to what end each local Oromo group understands itself in relation to ‘others’ within and beyond the wider ethno-regional Oromo grouping. Ethnicity is here seen essentially as a cultural interpretation of descent among a specific people or group. Thus the study essentially touches upon the construction and expression of ethnic and local group identity, specifically in its discursive self-presentation.

The core assumption behind this project is that from the internal perspective, there are local boundaries differentiating one’s own group from those of “Others” both within and outside the larger regional grouping. Furthermore, as the Oromo do not have a developed written literature, the bases for these boundaries, and definitions of and identifications with the local groups are constructed, negotiated and expressed in and through narrative performances.

The study was set in a wider analytical framework of socio-economic and political conditions and changes wrought by Ethiopia’s post-1991 ‘ethno-federal’ state structure. Thus, insights from the research are hoped to be applied to increase scientific and
practical understandings of the construction of (sub-) group identities, the emergence of group rivalry and of conflict in the largely multi-ethnic societies of Africa.

In large parts of Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, the study of folklore vis-à-vis (sub-)group identity has been relatively neglected, regardless of its empirical richness, diversity and increasing ‘political’ relevance. What is more, issues of local identities and internal boundaries within larger ethnic groups have often been overlooked. The same is true of the Oromo, one of the largest ethno-regional groups in Ethiopia. Though a number of studies were done on the Oromo, they made little use of the rich and untapped reservoir of local knowledge embedded in the folklore of the people. There is a paucity of empirical research on the dynamism of folklore and the importance of cross-group comparative study of local discourses and traditions for understanding changing perceptions and local meanings of history, ethnic identity, intra- and inter-ethnic relations within and outside the southwestern Oromo. The research project represents an attempt to fill this lacuna, by way of exploring the folklore data (notably the oral narratives) from the local groups for purposes of social analysis. Seen both as an expression of the people’s view of themselves and of “Others,” their shared values, beliefs, concerns, etc., and a critical cultural force that shapes worldview and behavior, folklore is thus used as a well-suited entry into the understanding of the dynamics of multiple local identities and patterns of interaction among the south-western Oromo groups.

To this end, a combination of multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives, sub-group oriented and ethnographically-informed comparative analysis of folklore discourse was employed, with emphasis on socio-cultural contexts, communicative processes, and situations of folkloric performances. An emphasis on comparison was necessitated by the very nature of folklore in general and of (sub-)regional or local folklore in particular. Based on evaluative comparison of local history, moral values, genealogical connection, and belonging to a common ‘ancestral territory’, members of each group define their
own local identity, ‘distinctiveness’ group-ness, and ‘superiority’ to other groups within and outside the ethno-regional context through folklore discourses.

The project was framed within the theoretical assumptions and considerations on the importance of place and cultural narrative as determinants of identity, i.e. the relational and situational constructedness of identity, the storied nature of identity, and reality within social interactions, and of the idea that narrative, or narrating, is an ontological condition of social life itself. In line with this, the concepts of place (locale) and local identity are understood as subjective and social constructs more attentive to culture and collective agency, rather than as an objective and abstract entity. Local space is seen not merely as a spatial framework in which social life takes place but as constituted and discursively (re-) constructed and situated in social practice itself.

The data were collected from four local groups (the Jimma and Gera of Jimma zone, and the Leqa Neqemte and Sibu Sire of Eastern Wollega zone) in the south-western Oromo region, where I conducted fieldwork intermittently from 2006 to 2008. A large body of folklore and ethnographic data were collected from the field, of which 14 narrative texts were transcribed, translated (into English) and analyzed in the thesis. In addition, a number of biographical self-presentations, proverbs, songs, and idiomatic expressions are included. The major methods used in data collection were unstructured (informal) interview, focus group discussion and participant observation of daily life activities and folkloric performances.

The above-mentioned four and the several other local Oromo groups within the south-western Oromo groups speak mutually intelligible dialects of the same language, Afan Oromo, share core culture, and, in some instances, even trace common ancestors. However, each group claims difference from and superiority to the other on the bases of local historical experience, moral values, style of life, natural resources, etc., so as to create its own positive self-image, reaffirm its groupness, and to negotiate better
place within the ethno-regional and federal social space. The processes of differentiation have given rise to intensified feelings of competitiveness and rivalry, which are time and again manifested in the folklore discourses of each group. This is observable in the much-politicized environment of intra- and inter-ethnic relations in present-day ethno-federal Ethiopia, where the construction and emphasis on ethnic identity and in-group consciousness have become pervasive.

The study resulted in new empirical data and suggestions of research questions for future comparative studies on the nature and function of folklore as a way of projecting recurrent problem situations and indexing means of addressing the same. The findings of the research project confirmed that the current ethno-federal state structure of Ethiopia has brought significant socio-economic and political changes in multi-ethnic Ethiopia, based on a political recognition of ethnicity. The new state structure introduced from above not only led to sharpened ethnic consciousness and differences between the various ethno-regional groups, but also to a construction of local boundaries and an escalation of a sense of distinctiveness and tension between and within sub-ethnic groups, as observed among the south-western Oromo. Competition for scarce resources and political power (i.e., representation in the regional as well as federal states, governmental resources and privileges) has centered within and between Oromo elites in the numerous (sub-) regional administrative units. I have come to understand that there is a subtle localism and favoritism within the (sub-) regional governments. Seeking grassroots support from one’s locality in various social and political arenas has also become the rule of the day. Under these circumstances, narratives of local history, moral values, territorial and genealogical connections not only became important sources of collective identity symbols and stereotypes selectively appropriated and made meaningful for political ends. A strong sense (or display) of belonging and identity attached to one’s locality, local history and traditional values are today an advantage, and rivalry on ‘boundaries’ within and between the several south-western (sub-) groups is rampant, which has a measure of invention or construction. It was shown that a strong sense of pride derived from the local history or
memory of ‘past greatness’ on the one hand, and current experience of socio-economic crisis and the urge for better future on the other, constitute central thematic and pragmatic elements in the interactive-rhetorical re-creation of local identities within the present-day south-western Oromia. It is grievance of loss or resentment of the local groups about their declining social influence and the urge for change (social recognition) that reverberate through many of the folklore data (identity narratives) collected from the research area.