

Singing the Gospel: Narrative, Hymnody, and Identity among Oromo Christians

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Abstract

This article explores the culture of storytelling through song among the Lutheran Oromo of Ethiopia. The Oromo language is spoken by over 40 million people, primarily in Ethiopia and parts of Kenya and Somalia. For the Oromo people, oral traditions are fundamental to preserving their history, culture, and collective identity. The oral heritage includes storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and most notably, songs, which record events, teach social values, celebrate milestones, and pass down knowledge to the next generation.

Introduction

In his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre famously declares that man is a “story-telling animal.”¹ This claim captures a fundamental aspect of human existence: the pervasiveness of narrative in the fabric of daily life. Indeed, whether human experience unfolds in a tightly sequential, cause-and-effect manner or proceeds through a more fragmented, “zigzag” trajectory, it remains deeply saturated with stories.² Storytelling appears to be an irreducible feature of how individuals make sense of their actions, relationships, and place in the world.

Building on this insight, scholars such as John D. Niles have extended the narrative principle to the very origins of cultural production. As Niles argues, all forms of narrative—ranging from oral folk tales and epic poetry to the most sophisticated genres of contemporary fiction—have their ultimate origin in the storytelling nature of human beings. That is, the human propensity to narrate is not merely a psychological or social curiosity but a generative wellspring from which entire literary traditions flow.³



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Perhaps it is Walter R. Fisher who most explicitly fashioned the notion of *homo narrans*—the understanding that human beings are, above all, storytelling beings, and that narration therefore constitutes the very foundation of human communication.⁴ Fisher’s narrative paradigm represents a significant departure from long-dominant models of rationality, challenging the assumption that meaningful human exchange must be grounded primarily in logic, evidence, and systematic argumentation to a “narrative rationality.”⁵

The claim that human beings are *homo narrans* represents an extension of a richer tradition, one that conceives of humans as fundamentally symbol-making and symbol-using animals—a lineage most prominently associated with such scholars as Ernst Cassirer and Kenneth Burke.⁶ Cassirer, in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, argued that humans do not live in a purely physical universe but in a symbolic one, mediated by language, myth, art, and religion. Burke, similarly, understood human beings as “symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animals” perpetually engaged in the enactment of meaning.⁷

This article explores storytelling through song among the Lutheran Oromo of Ethiopia. The Oromo language, known natively as *Afaan Oromoo* or *Oromiffa*, is a major African language with significant cultural and demographic importance. It is spoken by over 40 million people, primarily in Ethiopia and parts of Kenya and Somalia. The Oromo people are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and represent a significant population in the Horn of Africa. For the Oromo people, oral traditions are not merely a form of entertainment but are fundamental to preserving their history, culture, and collective identity. This rich oral heritage includes storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and most notably, songs. These songs serve multiple purposes: they record historical events, teach social values, celebrate community milestones, and pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. In the absence of a widely used written script for much of their history, these oral forms became the primary vehicle for cultural continuity.⁸

In the mid-20th century, evangelical Christianity began to grow significantly within the Oromo community in Ethiopia. Missionaries and early Oromo converts recognized that to effectively communicate their message, they needed to use culturally resonant methods. They therefore adopted the existing oral traditions, particularly music and song, to spread the gospel. Traditional musical styles, melodies, and poetic structures were used to create new Christian hymns and worship songs in *Afaan Oromoo*. By using a trusted cultural medium, the evangelical message was integrated into the community’s existing social and cultural fabric, which greatly aided its acceptance and growth.⁹

Storytelling through Song among the Oromo

Within recent ethnomusicological and historical scholarship, the practice of storytelling through song has emerged as a critical site of inquiry for understanding the Oromo cultural and political experience.¹⁰ This focus recognizes these songs not

merely as artistic expressions but as dynamic, living archives of collective memory and identity. As a cornerstone of the Oromo oral tradition, narrative song serves as a primary pedagogical method, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of historical events, social values, and ethical codes. These performances function as aural history lessons, more easily memorized and recalled than prose, safeguarding cultural continuity in the face of historical erasure and political marginalization.

These songs operate as a nuanced and often coded public discourse, articulating the community's collective social, economic, and political experiences. They provide a sanctioned space to voice dissent, critique authority, and process collective hardship.¹¹ In particular, contemporary analysis has focused on how these narrative songs articulate a profound historical consciousness of collective pain. They are interpreted as sonic vessels for expressing the social experience of loss, the enduring weight of intergenerational trauma from periods of conquest and displacement, and the resilient, ongoing struggle for freedom and self-determination. Through this lens, the singer-storyteller becomes a historian, a social critic, and a philosopher. Oromo narrative songs become a potent force in the socio-political landscape.

The historical development of the Oromo oral tradition, particularly its narrative and musical forms, is fundamentally intertwined with the history of their language and external cultural influences. A pivotal factor shaping this tradition is the relatively recent adoption of a written form for the Oromo language in the early nineteenth century, primarily through the efforts of Christian missionaries.¹² Prior to this orthographic development, the transmission of culture, history, law, and collective values was almost exclusively dependent on oral-aural channels. In this context, the culture of storytelling through song (*weedduu*) emerged not as a mere art form but as an essential and refined mnemonic technology. Its poetic structures, rhythmic patterns, and melodic contours were meticulously engineered to ensure the accurate preservation and intergenerational transfer of vast bodies of knowledge, making it the primary custodian of Oromo identity and collective memory.

This oral medium presented both an opportunity and a necessary pathway for new forms of knowledge dissemination, including religious teaching and tradition. Following the introduction of evangelical Christianity into Oromo territories towards the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries and early Oromo converts quickly recognized the efficacy of the existing oral tradition as a vehicle for communication. The established practice of storytelling through song was strategically co-opted and repurposed to facilitate the propagation of the Christian gospel.¹³

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resonant and accessible indigenization of the new faith. This process represented a significant cultural synthesis, whereby a traditional mechanism for preserving Oromo identity was adapted to serve as a conduit for a foreign religious system. Consequently, the very tradition that had long safeguarded indigenous Oromo culture became a principal instrument for its transformation, demonstrating the remarkable adaptability of oral genres in the face of profound cultural and religious change.¹⁴

Storytelling Practice in Traditional (Secular) vs Religious Songs

Within the Oromo language, the tradition of song is categorized into distinct genres, defined primarily by subject matter and cultural purpose. This indigenous classification broadly mirrors—though is not reducible to—the common global distinction between secular and religious music, a binary that has long structured ethnomusicological inquiry. However, the Oromo lexicon provides specific terms for these different types of songs. For secular songs, the Oromo employ the terms *sirba* and *weedduu*. *Sirba*, derived from the root verb meaning “to sing” or “to compose melodically,” represents the broader category of secular vocal expression. *Weedduu*, by contrast, often refers more specifically to particular regional song styles or ceremonial contexts, sometimes implying a more formalized or tradition-bound genre than the more general *sirba*.¹⁵

This secular category, encompassing both *sirba* and *weedduu*, comprises a vast array of songs that engage with the myriad aspects of everyday human existence. Love songs sung by young herders under the vast Ethiopian sky, work songs that synchronize labor in the fields, lullabies, praise songs for warriors or respected elders, satirical tunes that gently mock social pretensions, and dirges for mourning—all find their place within the secular Oromo musical tradition. Unlike sacred songs, which are typically bound by strict ritual protocols and performed only in designated spiritual contexts, secular Oromo songs enjoy a flexibility of occasion, form, and content. They can be improvised or memorized, performed solo or in call-and-response with a crowd, accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *krar* (lyre), *dhidibbo* (flute), or drum, or offered *a cappella*. What unites them is their rootedness in the contingent, changing, and often unpredictable texture of human life—its joys and sorrows, its small triumphs and daily disappointments, its celebrations of love and expressions of political resistance.

In the absence of widespread written historiography, these songs operated as living historical chronicles, preserving detailed accounts of military campaigns, political transformations, dynastic successions, and significant social events across generations.¹⁶ Through carefully composed verses transmitted orally from elder to youth, from one *oggessa* (wisdom-keeper) to the next, Oromo communities maintained a dynamic record of their collective past—remembering not only victories and defeats but also the names of heroes, the strategies of generals, the grievances that sparked rebellions, and the treaties that secured fragile peace. Crucially, these songs functioned as alternative historical narratives, often providing perspectives that subtly

challenged or openly contested the official accounts promulgated by political authorities, imperial powers, or religious institutions. Where formal chronicles might have served the interests of ruling elites, *sirba* could preserve the voices of the ordinary herder, the woman warrior, the defeated clan, or the dissident elder. In this sense, Oromo secular song tradition represents a form of counter-history—a people's archive encoded in melody, capable of resisting erasure and sustaining memory across what Paul Ricoeur might call the selective forgetfulness of power.¹⁷

Beyond their historiographical function, secular songs also served as pedagogical tools, transmitting cultural values, moral principles, and practical knowledge across generational divides.¹⁸ In societies where formal schooling was historically limited or unavailable, *sirba* and *weedduu* became the curriculum through which children learned what it meant to be a virtuous Oromo: the obligations of hospitality, the respect due to elders, the courage expected of young men, the resourcefulness demanded of women, the proper conduct in times of drought or abundance. Through carefully crafted melodic structures and repetitive patterns—refrains, parallelisms that aided memorization, rhythmic “hooks”—complex social concepts were made accessible to both literate and non-literate community members. Musical form itself became a medium of enculturation, its aesthetic pleasures serving as the vehicle for moral and practical instruction.¹⁹

These songs are not merely for entertainment; they reflect a holistic concept of life, portraying “the totality of the physical world: man, animals, plants and trees, material inorganic things plus the world of artificial objects: artifacts, food and beverage, clothing.”²⁰ They serve as social commentary, historical documentation, and cultural transmission from one generation to the next.²¹

A more specialized sub-category of secular song is denoted by the term *wellu*. The term *wellu* is specifically reserved for songs that explore themes of love, romance, and affection. The Oromo language recognizes that the expression of amorous feeling requires its own generic category, distinct from the songs of labor, politics, or ritual. *Wellu* songs are used to praise, compliment, or express admiration for a beloved person, whether that beloved is a prospective marriage partner, a newlywed spouse, a distant lover separated by circumstance, or even an idealized figure celebrated in song across great distances. The performance context of *wellu* varies considerably: each verse seeking to outdo the other in eloquence of praise and depth of feeling.²²

In contrast to the secular *sirba* and *wellu*, the Oromo use the term *faarfaana* (or *faaruu*) to describe songs of a religious nature. It reflects a fundamental conceptual boundary within Oromo culture between the profane and the sacred, between the realm of everyday human concerns and the sphere of divine encounter. A *faarfaana* directs the voice upward—or inward toward the spiritual dimension—in explicit acknowledgment of powers that transcend the merely human. The primary function of *faarfaana* is to praise a divine entity, most centrally *Waaqa* (God), the supreme creator and sustainer of the universe in traditional Oromo belief. However, the term may also encompass songs addressed to lesser spiritual beings, ancestral spirits, or personified natural forces depending on regional and historical variation.²³ This praise constitutes an act of recognition, gratitude, and dependence—an acknowledgment that human flourishing is ultimately contingent upon forces that no amount of labor or cleverness can fully command.

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Mission and Storytelling through Song

The development of *faarfaana* (religious songs) and *faaruu* (praise songs) within Oromo culture represents a fascinating convergence of indigenous musical traditions and evangelical Christian influences. To fully understand this phenomenon, one must examine the broader context of translation movements in Ethiopia and their profound impact on vernacular literature development.

A mission society that came to Ethiopia, perhaps a more successful one, was the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM). The SEM missionaries first tried to reach Ethiopians, particularly the Oromo tribe, via Sudan in 1866.²⁴ When they were blocked from reaching their goal by the Ethiopian emperor, Tewodros, who had closed all access to the Oromo territory out of suspicion of the missionaries' desire to connect with that part of the country, the missionaries remained in Kunama (near Eritrea) and started to work among the people of that area until the situation changed.²⁵ They built their mission station at Imkulu where they established a school named "School for Freed Men."²⁶

At this institution, the SEM trained local missionaries with the purpose of sending them back to their people as evangelists.²⁷ They adopted a notably indigenizing approach to missionary training. Using Johann Ludwig Krapf's pioneering Bible translation into Oromo—completed in the 1870s despite significant linguistic and political obstacles—the SEM educated local evangelists who would be sent back to their own people.²⁸ Unlike models of mission that relied heavily on foreign clergy, this strategy privileged the Oromo language as the medium of religious instruction and Scripture reading. The graduates of this training were thus equipped not only with theological knowledge but also with the cultural and linguistic competence necessary to evangelize effectively among their own communities. In doing so, the SEM helped cultivate a cadre of indigenous evangelists who bridged the gap between missionary enterprise and local religious life, planting the seeds for what would become a lasting Lutheran Oromo Christian movement.

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The SEM also came from a revival group in Sweden, and therefore singing of hymns was an important aspect of their devotional life. The first hymnbook was compiled by Bengt Peter Lundahl, the SEM missionary in the early 1880s and was used among the evangelical Christians in Ethiopia. This book was entitled *Yegubae Mezmurat* (which in Amharic means hymns of the congregation).²⁹ These songs were translated from *Den Svenska Psalmboken*, a hymnbook used in the Church of Sweden (Originally in Swedish and German),³⁰ Sankey's songs (originally in English), Pilgrims-Sånger (originally in English), and from Ahnfelt's songbook (Swedish) to the Amharic language.³¹ In addition to these translations, Lundahl also composed hymns in Amharic by paraphrasing biblical texts and stories.³² This way, evangelical missions prioritized vernacular accessibility. This approach reflected what Lamin Sanneh termed the "translatability principle," that Christian messages must be communicated in the heart language of the people to achieve authentic conversion and understanding. "Christian missions are better seen as a translation movement, with consequences for vernacular revitalization, religious change and social transformation."³³

Onesimos Nesib, one of the freed slaves who studied at this school, translated the whole Bible and the hymnbook by Lundahl into the Oromo language.³⁴ His first translated work, in 1887, was a hymnbook that contained 100 songs, which he titled *Faarsaa fi Weedu* (hymns and songs).³⁵ His book is a collection of hymns that included translations of some from *Yegubae Mezmurat* and a Swedish hymnbook, *Sion's Tuner*.

It also added Luther's hymns, among others translated from the Swedish language to Oromo.³⁶

Aster Ganno and Feben Hirpe, both freed slave girls trained at the same school with Onesimos by SEM, were also key indigenous leaders in the translation movement and written record of Oromo oral culture. They were gifted linguists who were very familiar with the cultural context and tradition in Ethiopia. Aster Ganno, in particular, was a linguist who helped Onesimos in his translation work. She remembered words, tales, and poems Onesimos had either forgotten or never known. While Onesimos was working on his Bible translation, she was assigned the task of composing a dictionary of Oromo words. Her work enabled Onesimos to find the right words to translate the Bible into Oromo, even though she was not acknowledged for her contribution. Her work, the dictionary, was revised and published by the Imkullu Press in 1893.

Onesimos Nasib's books impacted the lives of many people among the early believers because they "were the first eye-openers for the Oromo. They were read aloud in public gatherings, and those who could not read listened."³⁷ Since Onesimos's books also included hymns, the leaders sang songs for and with the people in addition to reading the Scriptures to them. This way, the Oromo Bible and songs produced by indigenous leaders enculturated the gospel message in a way that made its public proclamation effective.

The early evangelical Christians expanded Onesimos's work and published an expanded version of it in 1935, entitled *Galata Waaqayyoo Goofaa Maccaa* (Glory to the Lord of Hosts).³⁸ It contained 16 more songs (116 songs total). According to Martin Nordfeldt, Onesimos himself was the one who revised his first published hymn book, *Faarsaa fi Weedu*, in order to incorporate new songs into this new edition. However, Onesimos died on June 21, 1931, in Naqamtee, in the western part of Ethiopia, before he finalized his revision.³⁹

"[Onesimos] passed away before this new hymn book was published. Therefore, we took the responsibility to revise his work and get it published. We have edited some hymns and have eliminated those with no melodies. Instead, we have added new hymns that he [Onesimos] did not include in his revision."⁴⁰

What Nordfeldt refers to as hymns with no melodies that he decided to eliminate are those that Onesimos had composed using Oromo traditional tunes which were common in the region at that time. It seems that the new Swedish missionaries did not appreciate Onesimos's attempt to adopt enculturated hymns for use in the congregations. Instead,

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In 1957, a hymn book, *Sagaele Lubbuu Galaata Waaqayyo* (Words for Our Soul, Praise Be to God) was prepared by Lamessa Bato for use in congregations in addition to the 1935 edition. It contained 34 songs, mostly written by Bato himself with Oromo traditional melody in responsorial forms. It also contains liturgy in the last section. In the liturgy section, Bato shows how the liturgist can make use of the hymns. According to Bato, this book was needed because the European tunes and melodies that the missionaries introduced to the church were odd to the Oromo people.⁴¹ Bato's hymnbook was used in addition to the other hymn book, *Galata Waaqayyoo Gooftaa Maccaa*, which was revised in 1976 and 1991.

Bato states that he had been working on this hymn book since 1949, and the reason it took this long to finish the work was that many Oromo Christians were opposed to using traditional melodies because they associated these songs with traditional religious and secular songs. Bato adds that 1957 was an appropriate time to publish this revised work because most Oromo Christians had now changed their minds after trying some hymns in Oromo traditional melodies.⁴²

Another important Oromo hymn book is the one used by Bethel Church in the western part, *Macaafa Faarsa*, published in 1967 until they merged with the EECMY in 1974. This book contained 86 songs, mostly translated from English hymn books used by Presbyterian missionaries. Some of the songs, however, were composed by indigenous song writers using "new-composed lyrics sung on traditional melodies in responsorial form."⁴³ Bethel church started as a Presbyterian church in Ethiopia under the leadership of Thomas Lambe, an early missionary to Oromo of Ethiopia.⁴⁴

By early 1991, however, the Latin alphabet was adopted and used in the Oromiya region of Ethiopia. As a result, another version of the Oromo Bible emerged in 1993 in the Latin alphabet. A revised hymnbook, *Macaafa Faarfannaa: Galata Waawayyoo*, was also published in 1998. This hymnbook contains 293 songs. According to the publishers' introduction of the book, the book is a revised version of the 1957 (Bato's work), 1976, and 1991 editions, and it includes a hymn book that was used by the Bethel church in Western Wollega since 1967.⁴⁵ The hymnbook also contains the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and the Athanasius Creed. The use of the Latin alphabet, which began in the early 1990s, helped the Oromo evangelical Christians to enculturate the Christian message and communicate the gospel better.

Passing on the Faith through Oromo Gospel Songs

The introduction of Christianity to Oromo communities marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Oromo musical expression, leading to the development of new forms of religious song that combined Christian theological content with traditional Oromo musical forms. This development occurred through two distinct but interconnected pathways that reflect different approaches to cultural

adaptation and religious expression within the context of Christian conversion and evangelization.

The initial mechanism for introducing Christian musical expression to Oromo communities centered on the translation and cultural adaptation of established missionary hymn collections that foreign evangelists and missionaries had brought with them as part of their evangelization efforts. This approach represented a deliberate strategy employed by Christian missions to rapidly establish familiar forms of worship among newly converted Oromo populations, drawing upon the extensive repository of hymnic literature that had been developed and refined within Western Christian traditions over centuries of ecclesiastical history.

However, the implementation of this translation-based approach revealed significant challenges inherent in the cross-cultural transmission of religious and artistic traditions that had been developed within specific cultural contexts. The process of linguistic translation, while addressing the immediate barrier of language comprehension, proved insufficient to bridge the deeper cultural and aesthetic gaps that separated European musical sensibilities from Oromo artistic traditions. Despite the significant obstacles associated with cross-cultural musical transmission, certain translated hymns managed to achieve meaningful integration within Oromo Christian communities.

The second and ultimately more successful pathway for developing Oromo Christian music involved building upon local oral traditions and incorporating elements from both *sirba* and traditional *faarfaana* to create new forms of religious expression that felt authentically Oromo while communicating Christian theological content. Missionaries who were members of Oromo communities and deeply familiar with traditional musical forms played crucial roles in developing this indigenous approach to Christian music. The tradition of storytelling through song provided an excellent foundation for communicating biblical narratives and Christian teachings, as it offered established patterns for presenting complex information in accessible musical formats.

The core components of traditional Oromo storytelling that have been adapted for gospel music include the use of familiar narrative archetypes, such as the journey motif, the struggle between good and evil, and the ultimate triumph of righteousness over adversity. These archetypal patterns provide ready-made frameworks for presenting Christian theological concepts such as salvation, spiritual transformation, and divine redemption in ways that resonate with deeply embedded cultural expectations about how meaningful stories should be structured and developed. Using familiar narrative patterns, gospel messages feel coherent and compelling to audiences culturally conditioned by storytelling approaches.

When the Lutheran faith began to take root in Ethiopia during the late nineteenth century, early endogenous missionaries strategically enculturated the Christian gospel by appropriating existing Oromo oral traditions—particularly the storytelling function of narrative songs to facilitate the reception and internalization of Christian teachings.

This indigenization strategy allowed the new religious message to be communicated through culturally resonant channels, ensuring greater accessibility and communal participation. Below is an example drawn from a hymn written by Chali Fufa, published in his hymnbook, *Waaqayyoon Jajadhaa: Faarfannaa Haafuura* (Praise God: Songs of the Spirit).

My enemy [devil], you will not get me since Jesus has called me
 He called me Adam, and asked me where I am
 He told me I have sinned, and showed me why I am naked
 Making my enemy to eat dust, he has called me
 He said the one born of a woman will crush his head
 He said his promise will be fulfilled, he has called me⁴⁶

A seminal melody is traditionally employed to narrate stories in responsorial (call-and-response) form. In performance, the singers adopt the persona of Adam, following the Genesis narrative, and collectively recount the story by declaring God's promises to one another. Within a church setting, the hymn typically begins with the liturgist or song leader improvising the opening line, after which the congregation responds in unison. In a community setting, the storyteller initiates the hymn, and the response is taken up by those listening—most often, children and youth.

Significance of Storytelling through Song among Oromo

Jesus is born in Bethlehem
 Yes, he is born
 He is born in Manger
 Yes, he is born
 A light shines over darkness
 Yes, he is born⁴⁷

This song is taken from Lamessa Bato's hymnbook. Biblical narratives are transmitted in the same responsorial manner within the community in which I grew up, and these stories continue to shape how communities perceive themselves and others. As a child, I sang this very song while simultaneously internalizing the story it conveys. My imagination regarding biblical narratives—and the moral and theological messages each story portrays—was profoundly shaped by this pedagogical practice of storytelling through song. Thus, personal experience corroborates the broader argument: responsorial hymnody functions not merely as artistic expression but as a formative instrument of communal identity, ethical formation, and scriptural transmission across generations.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz defines narratives as tools “one uses to organize lived-experiences into meaningful episodes.”⁴⁸ Narratives possess the power to picture reality in diverse forms. Crucially, they have the capacity to shape self-imagination

precisely because it is through these stories that a given community visualizes both “others” and itself. Singing biblical narratives—such as the birth of Jesus—did not merely transmit information; it actively constructed a moral universe within which the singing child (and community) learned to locate themselves, imagine divine promise, and relate to neighboring peoples. Thus, narrative songs function as what Isasi-Díaz might call lived texts, mediating between collective memory and contemporary identity formation.⁴⁹

This understanding of narrative's formative power resonates with Anthony Cohen's argument that communities are defined by the consciousness of their members, a consciousness encapsulated in the perception of the community's own boundaries as these emerge from ongoing social interactions.⁵⁰ For Cohen, community as a social entity is “where one learns and continues to practice how to ‘be social.’”⁵¹ Narratives serve as the cohesive force that upholds communal existence and frames collective identity. Situated within communal life, narratives function as instruments whereby the community recognizes the individual, and the individual simultaneously identifies herself as a member of that community. This dynamic closely aligns with Paul Ricoeur's claim that “recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*,”⁵² suggesting a hermeneutical circle of mutual recognition. Such mutual identification also marks the fusion of two identities—the individual *qua* individual and the community *qua* community. “[Reality] is found in the transmission of information from one generation to another, not simply in that which is transmitted, but in the process of transmission itself.”⁵³ In Oromo responsorial hymns, antiphonal singing of biblical narratives exemplifies this principle: the transmission process is as formative as the narrative content itself. The child who sang Bato's hymn about the birth of Jesus was not merely receiving information but was being socialized into a community's way of seeing, remembering, and believing.

Notably, many Oromo songs arise directly from the receptacle of human suffering and anguish, unlike traditions that might prioritize only triumphant or didactic themes. Oromo Christian hymnody takes as its point of departure the lived realities of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, engaging these experiences through critical reflection.⁵⁴ These songs come into being when people cry out in protest and lament: “How long, O God?” or “O God, but why?” In this sense, the responsorial tradition functions as a theological and communal response to theodicy—a way of giving voice to pain while simultaneously refusing to let suffering have the final word. Lament songs are not mere expressions of despair but active sites of meaning-making. They enable the community to name injustice, remember divine promises, and sustain hope across generations. Thus, the Oromo storytelling tradition through song is simultaneously a hymnody of survival, a pedagogy of resistance, and a liturgy of lament.

It is for this reason that the tradition of storytelling through song proved exceptionally helpful for Ethiopian evangelical Christians. This indigenous practice enabled them to understand, describe, and navigate their circumstances through the lens of Gospel narratives. In contemporary Ethiopia, many millions live in utter poverty. Many people endure inhuman conditions and lack adequate

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clothing, while violence in multiple forms pervades nearly every region. Yet for Ethiopians—and particularly for the Oromo—evil is first and foremost that which destroys community, and violence is regarded as the greatest evil precisely insofar as it ruptures fellowship, undermines harmony, and destabilizes the social fabric. Given this communal ontology of evil, the responsorial hymn tradition described above assumes profound theological and ethical significance. The same songs that cry out “How long, O God?” in the face of suffering also reaffirm the bonds of mutual recognition and intra-communal identification theorized by Ricoeur and Cohen. They do not merely lament individual pain; they articulate collective trauma while simultaneously rehearsing the promises that hold the community together. Thus, storytelling through song functions as both a diagnostic tool—naming the evils of poverty and violence—and a therapeutic practice—rebuilding fellowship through shared vocal expression. In a context where violence destroys community, the antiphonal hymn becomes an act of communal restoration, transforming raw anguish into a structured, shared, and therefore bearable narrative.

Conclusion

Stories play a normative role in Ethiopian community life, particularly among the Oromo. Storytelling—especially through the responsorial hymn tradition—is not merely a form of entertainment or artistic expression but a fundamental mechanism for shaping identity, transmitting values, and negotiating communal existence. Through the study of storytelling and folklore, numerous researchers and theologians have sought to explore the cultural conditioning of Oromo people's thinking, aiming to discern the belief systems to which they subscribe and the moral frameworks that guide their collective life.⁵⁵ As anthropologists have shown, communities are formed by the stories they tell about their existence. The past and present of a community are conjoined by its narratives, such that memory and contemporary identity are inextricably linked. Communities are constructed through a constant and dynamic interplay of social interactions that are characteristically 'narrational'—that is, human beings become who they are and understand who they belong with through the ongoing act of telling and retelling their shared stories.

In the case of the Oromo, this narrational dynamic finds its most vivid expression in the antiphonal hymn tradition. The Oromo community has long used narratives to

explain their origin, justify their beliefs, build a moral foundation within their community, and warn one another of impending dangers that await the collective. Narratives function as bridges between the past and the present, and when current challenges arise, narratives serve as a path forward because they contain instructive stories from the past. This tradition enculturates new religious commitments, as demonstrated by early Lutheran missionaries who adopted indigenous melodic and responsorial forms to transmit the Christian gospel. It shapes the moral imagination of children, who learn virtue, courage, and communal responsibility through singing. Most profoundly, it provides a theological vocabulary for confronting suffering and violence in a context where evil is understood primarily as that which destroys community. Thus, for the Oromo, storytelling through song is not a relic of oral culture nor merely a pedagogical tool. It is the living medium through which origin is explained, beliefs are justified, moral grounds are secured, warnings are issued, and hope is sustained—ensuring that even in the face of fragmentation, the community continues to sing itself into being across generations.

Endnotes

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 2007), 216. For a sustained argument that human communication is necessarily by way of narratives based on the concept of humans are *homo narrans*, see Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 1–22. Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

² MacIntyre puts the development of human morality along with the narrative formation of the self, which is guided by the ideal of the good life and always situated in social contexts. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 204–225.

³ John D Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁴ Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*; Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm.”

⁵ Fisher, “Narration,” 3–4.

⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 1–71; Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm,” 6.

⁷ Fisher, “Narration,” 6.

⁸ Feyisa Demie, “Special Features in Oromiffa and Reasons for Adopting Latin Script for Developing Oromo Orthography,” *Journal of Oromo Studies*. Vol. 2, no. 1 & 2, (1995), 18.

⁹ Samuel Deressa, “Onesimos Nesib: Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer,” in *Lutheran Quarterly*. Vol. 32, no. 2 (Summer 2018); “Luther’s Work in Ethiopian Languages,” in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 34. No.2 (Spring 2020).

¹⁰ See Tatek Abebe, “Storytelling through Popular Music: Social Memory, Reconciliation, and Intergenerational Healing in Oromia/Ethiopia,” in *Humanities*, Vol. 10, no. 70, 2021; Assefa

Dibaba. “Ethnography of Resistance Poetic: Power and Authority in Selale Oromo Folklore and Resistance Culture, Ethiopia, Northeast Africa,” Ph.D. Dissertation, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University, 2015); Tadesse Jirata and Desalegn Benti. “Storytelling, Local Knowledge, and Formal Education: Bridging the Gap between Everyday Life and School,” in *Childhood and Local Knowledge in Ethiopia: Rights, Livelihood and Intergenerational Relationships* (Oslo: Akademika, 2013), 211–33.

¹¹ Tatek Abebe, “Storytelling through Popular Music,” 6.

¹² For detail, see Mekuria Bulcha, “The Language Policies of Ethiopian Regimes and the History of Written Afaan Oromoo: 1844-1994,” *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, 1994: 91–116; Samuel Deressa, “Lutheranism in Ethiopia: Theology and Mission in the World’s Largest Lutheran Church” in *Global Lutheranism in the Contemporary World*, Richard Cimino, ed. (Oxon, UK and NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2025).

¹³ Marianne Nilson. *Melodies of Spiritual Songs from Ethiopia with Commentary* (Nordingra, Sweden: Agrenshuset, 2019).

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka et al., *Contemporary African Plays* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 119.

¹⁵ Tesemma Ta’a. “Oromo Traditional Songs,” in Catherine Griefenow-Mewis and Tamene Bitima, eds. *Oromo Oral Poetry Seen from Within* (Koln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag, 2004), 12–40. The literal translation of the word *Sirba* is dancing. *Weedduu* is also translated as oral song.

¹⁶ T.W. Boxter “Some Preliminary Observations on a Type of Arsi Song, *Wellu*, Which is Popular with Young Men,” (Rome, Italy: Academia Nazionale Dei Lincei, 1974), 809–20.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 820.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Enrico Cerulli, *The Folk Literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*: Harvard African Studies 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 146.

²⁰ Claude Sumner. *Oromo Wisdom Literature Volume III, Folktales: Collection and Analysis* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 1997), 17, 374.

²¹ T.W. Boxter “Some Preliminary Observations on a Type of Arsi Song,” 812.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ The literal translation of the word *Faarfaana* or *faaruu* is song. Both words can be used interchangeably to mean the same thing.

²⁴ Gustav Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Förlaget, 1978), 30.

²⁵ Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement*, 128–9.

²⁶ Tasgaraa Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib) Biography: A Native of Oromiya, Enslaved, Freed and an Envoy of the Gospel (1856-1931)* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Asteer Aannoo Literature Society, 1999), 20.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ For detail, see Samuel Deressa, “Onesimos Nesib: Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer.”

²⁹ Marianne Nilson. *Melodies of Spiritual Songs from Ethiopia with Commentary*, 27.

³⁰ Some references to a Swedish hymnbook, a *Sion’s Tuner*, see Samuel Deressa. “Luther’s Work in Ethiopian Languages,” in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 34. No.2 (Spring 2020).

³¹ *Ibid*, 29.

³² *Ibid*, 28.

³³ Lamin Sanneh, “Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex,” *Christian Century* 104, no. 11 (April 8, 1987), 334.

- ³⁴ Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 262; Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib)*, 37. See also Samuel Deressa, “Onesimos Nesib, Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer,” in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 2018).
- ³⁵ Marianne Nilson, *Melodies of Spiritual Songs from Ethiopia with Commentary*, 36.
- ³⁶ Onesimos Nesib, *Galata Waaqayyoo Gofaa Maccaa* (Imkulu, 1886). Online at: [Onesimos Nesib, Oromo Writings - Ethiopian Gospel Music](#).
- ³⁷ Terfasa Digga. “A Short Biography of Onesimos Nasib: Oromo Bible Translator, Evangelist and Teacher,” BA Thesis in History, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa (1973), 49.
- ³⁸ Marianne Nilson, *Melodies of Spiritual Songs from Ethiopia with Commentary*, 36. This book is still used by Lutheran Oromo-speaking congregations in Ethiopia.
- ³⁹ See Martin Nordfeldt’s introduction in *Galata Waaqayyoo Gofaa Machaa*, 1935. Translated from Oromiffaa to English by the author.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ See the introduction, Lamessa Bato, *Sagaele Lubbuu Galaata Waaqayyoo*, 1960. Translated from Oromiffaa to English by the author. 21 songs were written by Lamessa Bato, and 2 songs by Gemechu Fufa.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Nilson, *Melodies of Spiritual Songs*, 36.
- ⁴⁴ Debela Birri, *Divine Plan Unfolding: The Story of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Bethel* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2014), 211–38.
- ⁴⁵ See *Macaafa Faarfannaa: Galata Waaqayyoo*, 1998, published by four EECMY Synods: Central Synod, Ellubabor Bethel Synod, Western Synod, and Wollega Bethel Synod. Online at: [Macaafa Faarfannaa \(1998\) - Ethiopian Gospel Music](#).
- ⁴⁶ Chali Fufa, *Waaqayyoon Jajadhaa: Faarfannaa Haafuura*, 1957, Song 22.
- ⁴⁷ Lamessa Bato, *Galata Waaqayyoo*, Song 8.
- ⁴⁸ Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner, eds. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 128.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 123.
- ⁵⁰ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood Ltd., 1985) 13.
- ⁵¹ Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 15.
- ⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey, trans. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 121.
- ⁵³ Newell S. Booth, Jr., ‘Tradition and Community in African Religion’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 9:2 (1978) 89.
- ⁵⁴ Claude Sumner, *Oromo Wisdom Literature Volume III*, 17, 374.
- ⁵⁵ Marcy Oduyoye also follows the same method to study African women’s theology. See Marcy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).