

## NARRATING LOCAL IDENTITY AMONG THE SOUTHWESTERN OROMO OF ETHIOPIA: CASE OF THE JIMMA AND GERA

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**ABSTRACT** This paper explores narrative constructions and expressions of local identity among the southwestern Oromo of Ethiopia. It aims to clarify how, on what bases, and to what end each local group understands itself in relation to ‘others’ within and beyond the wider regional Oromo grouping. From an internal perspective, there are a number of local boundaries differentiating one’s own group from those of others. In oral societies like the Oromo, the bases for and contents of collective self-identifications and self-perceived differences from others are mainly constructed, interpreted, and articulated in various forms of folklore, especially in narrative performances. It is in and through conversational narrative performances that members of each local group (re-)create, perpetuate, or even challenge a prototypical and/or stereotypical portrait of their own selves and of others.

**Key Words:** Folklore; Local identity; Narrative; Narrative performance; Southwestern Oromo.

### INTRODUCTION

*...identity is constituted and reconstituted in the process of narrating it.*  
Elaine Moriarty, 2005

Interest in narrative has grown immensely over the past four decades, as demonstrated by the ‘narrative turn’ in the social and human sciences. Starting from debates in literature, historiography, and philosophy, narrative swiftly travelled into and within multiple disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, law, medicine, theology, sociolinguistics, media studies, political thought, and policy analysis. Although the narrative turn refers to a variety of research practices and perspectives, it denotes the common interest in and emphasis on meaning and narrative, on how people understand themselves, their lives, and lived experiences through narrative—the most important mode of knowledge whereby human life and experience is organized and made meaningful. More specifically, the narrative turn in cultural studies commonly denotes the subjective, multiple, social constructionist, and interpretive perspectives to human lives, actions, experiences, and identities. This focus is one of the major issues to distinguish narrative inquiry from the traditional positivist stance in the social sciences, especially in psychology. Correspondingly, there has been an increasing amount of research pointing to the storied nature of life, the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the inter-subjective construction of knowledge and experience, and the power of narrative practices in constructing and refashioning

personal as well as collective identity. It seems that narrative knowledge and the meta-reflexive commentary on and critique of the narrative forms have replaced other modes of cognition about the subject, self, agency, and personal identity (Bauman, 2004; Bruner, 1991; Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Kreiswirth, 1992; 2000; Somers, 1994; Stahl, 1989). Indeed, a glance through diverse literature in various fields reveals that today, more than ever before, narrative has become of fundamental concern in understanding the world of human practices and experiences in their full richness and complexity.<sup>(1)</sup>

Notwithstanding disciplinary differences of orientation and focus among narrativists, however, there has been an imbalance of interest in and preoccupation with defining and specifying generic features of the personal experience narrative, and hence a marked negligence to other narrative forms. Specifically, little attention has been paid to the group-oriented narrative, which I call local identity narrative, in and through which people living in a certain locality collaboratively construct, negotiate, and articulate their shared sense of identity within situational contexts of social interactions.

## THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Notable cues for local identity expression can be found in the folklore traditions of oral societies, even if these identities are developed within the same nominal language community. In this paper I explore the narrative constructions and expressions of local identity and their 'strategic use' in arenas of social interactions and in-group relations in the southwestern Oromo region of Ethiopia. This region, officially the 'national regional state of Oromia' in the post-1991 ethno-federal system of Ethiopia, has a large and very interesting number of Oromo subgroups, language dialects, and historical experiences that show both unity and opposition, expressed according to social and political conditions. Among these, this paper is concerned only with the Jimma Abba Jifar and the Gera, which were two of the five independent Oromo kingdoms in the Gibe Region that emerged in the 19th century. With their long history and experiences of interrelationships, shared culture, language, religion, coterminous geography, interactions, and more or less similar living conditions, the two Oromo groups' contemporary narrative performances make interesting cases for the empirical understanding of the dynamism, pragmatism, situational, relational, and creative construction and articulation of local identities and differences within and outside the larger ethno-regional boundary.

Although a number of anthropological and historical studies were conducted on the southwestern Oromo in the second half of the 20th century (e.g., Bartels, 1983; Gemed, 1993; Gidada, 2001; Hassen, 1994; Hultin, 1987; Huntingford, 1955; Knutsson, 1963; 1967; Lewis, 2001), hardly any attempt has been made to understand Oromo folklore in relation to its place and role in creating and enhancing a sense of community within, as well as in defining and perpetuating boundaries between, the numerous local groups in the region. Among these, Knutsson's (1967) study of changes in the Mecha authority system, Lewis' (2001) study of

the Oromo monarchy of the Jimma Abba Jifar, and Bartels' (1983) research on Oromo religion among the western Mecha have contributed substantially to our understanding of the society and culture. Gameda's (1993) and Hassen's (1994) historical studies of the Gibe Region, Hultin's (1987) ethno-historical study, and Gidada's (2001) study of socio-political history are also valuable contributions to our knowledge of southwestern Oromo history and ethnography. However, although these works are based on fieldwork, they made little use of the rich and untapped reservoir of local knowledge embedded in folklore. Above all, little attention has been paid to the dynamism of folklore and the importance of cross-group comparisons of local discourses and narrative performances for understanding the changing perceptions and local meanings of history, ethnic identity, and intra- and inter-ethnic relations within and outside the southwestern Oromo. The present article is an attempt to fill this lacuna. Seen both as a construction and expression of a people's view of themselves and 'others,' their shared historical memories, beliefs, values, concerns, and aspirations, and a critical cultural force that shapes worldview and behavior, folklore (narrative) performance is used as an apposite entry into understanding the dynamics of multiple local identities and patterns of interactions within and among the groups.

The Oromo are speakers of a Cushitic language and are the largest ethnic group or people of Ethiopia, constituting some 36.7% of the total population.<sup>(2)</sup> They are divided into numerous sub-ethnic clusters that largely coincide with regional and local groupings. As such there are six major Oromo groups: the southern (Borana, Arsi, and Guji), northern (Wollo), central (Shoa, Tullama), eastern (Harar), western (Sayyo), and southwestern (Mecha).

The southwestern Oromo, who are the subjects of this paper, consist of four sub-regional groupings inhabiting much of the present-day Jimma, East Wollega, Illu Abba Bor, and West Shoa administrative zones of Oromia. Within each of these, there are a large number of locales or districts (*wäräda*), which are largely based on pre-existing local groups. Members of each local group claim to be agnatically related and trace descent from a common ancestor, often the first pioneer who settled in the area generations ago. Hence group members share a local historical memory and sense of belonging to the common ancestral territory, which are constructed and articulated in narrative performances.

The several Oromo groups have their own specific migration histories. Mecha Oromo are said to have migrated from a place called Hooda Bisil, in the western Shoa area, and settled in the southwestern region at the end of the 16th century, displacing pre-existing peoples such as the Kafa and Ennarya (Hassen, 1994; Hultin, 1987). Initially the Mecha consisted of several named tribal and sub-tribal clusters. With the incorporation of the southwestern Oromo region into the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century, followed by an eight decades-long national assimilation process, however, the tribal organization came to have little political significance. Subsequently, tribal (clan) names are simply used as (sub-) regional and local designations (cf. Huntingford, 1955; Knutsson, 1963; Levine, 1974; Lewis, 2001). The tribal organization of the Oromo society and the relative value attached to its functions at different levels has surely changed over time. Nevertheless, changes are often masked or downplayed by the rhetoric of

historical and cultural continuity the members of each local group evoke in their folkloric constructions of history and social life.<sup>(3)</sup> As a repudiation of the general socio-ethnic hierarchy and cultural domination of the old imperial polity, the educated Oromo elite and the rural non-literate masses alike have rediscovered traditional structures, practices, and cultural values, up to a point. As noted by Hultin (2003: 402), the period after 1974 saw revival and reconstruction of ideas of Oromo culture and local identity. This is even more clearly observable since 1991 in the politicized environment of intra- and inter-ethnic relations in present-day ethno-federal Ethiopia.

The current ethno-federal state structure of Ethiopia has wrought significant socioeconomic and political changes in multi-ethnic Ethiopia, based on the political recognition of ethnicity. The new state structure introduced from above not only led to sharpened ethnic consciousnesses and differences between the various ethno-regional groups, but also to a resurgence of local boundaries and escalation of a sense of distinctiveness and tension between the major (sub-)ethnic groups. Correspondingly, old socio-political relations among the various groups in the country have been altered. For instance, the Amhara in the Oromia areas, once the dominant group, have been reduced to a minority (Gudina, 2003). In what is now Oromia, competition for political power (representation in the regional as well as federal government), resources, and privileges has tended to center within and between Oromo elites in the numerous sub-regional administrative units. As my Oromo informants in the southwestern region repeatedly stated, there is a subtle parochialism and favoritism within the regional government, and seeking grassroots support from one's locality in various social and political arenas has become the rule of the day. Under these circumstances, local history, traditional values, and territorial and genealogical connections have not only become important sources of group symbols and stereotypes, but have also been mobilized for political ends. Strong senses or displays of 'belonging' and 'identity' attached to one's locality and local 'traditional values' are today an advantage, and rivalry over 'boundaries' within and between the several southwestern (sub-)groups is rampant.

There is a massive body of folklore on and about these boundaries, breaking down the large group of southwestern Oromo into different local groups and serving as the expressive basis for collective identification and action. This folklore, much of which has been retrospectively reconstructed, is drawn upon in order to (re-)construct, articulate, perpetuate, or challenge perceived distinctions between the local groups. Folkloric performances provide a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in more formal and direct ways. It is in these performances that cultural pressure points as well as individual anxieties can be vented. Analysis of the folklore of a social group may succeed in 'making the unconscious conscious' (see, for example, Dundes, 1983; Finnegan, 1992; Oring, 1986). In the discussion that follows, local identities (self-perceived differences in local histories, genealogical and geographical connections, ethos, and values) of the Jimma Abba Jifar and Gera Oromo, two of the several local groups within the southwestern Oromo, are examined as constructed and articulated in and through oral narrative performances. A combination of a sub-group-

oriented comparative approach and an ethnographically informed rhetoric analysis of narrative discourses will be employed, with emphasis on the socio-historical context and actual performance situations. In so doing, my aim is not to compare the various narratives (whether historical or not) to the narrated actual events, or to investigate the ‘veracity’ or ‘historical truth value’ of the narratives. The issue of narrative truth is a matter for negotiation and hence difficult to determine. What is at issue is not whether the group identity narratives are ‘true,’ but how the narratives are adaptively constructed, interpreted, and rendered relevant to suit the situational needs of the interlocutors for making sense of themselves and their relations to the surrounding social world. My concern here is to explore the interactive, intersubjective production and interpretation of group experience narratives, the cultural resources, rhetoric strategies, and devices used therein, as well as the factors and situations that inform and shape the identity construction and meaning-making process. Such analysis may help to clarify how history and historical truth are matters of narrative construction and negotiation in specific contexts of social interactions.

The paper is framed within the theoretical assumption and consideration of the importance of *place* and *culture* as determinants of identity, the *relational and situational aspect of identity*, the *storied nature* of social life, and the idea that *narrative is an ontological condition of social life itself*. Accordingly, the concept of place (locale) is understood as a subjective and social construct more attentive to culture and agency, rather than as an objective and abstract entity, and space is understood 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. As King (2000) noted, identity or a sense of self is constructed by and through narratives: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives.

## I. The Jimma Oromo

As noted above, the Jimma are one of the four sub-regional Oromo groups that together constitute the southwestern Oromo of Ethiopia. The name refers both to the people and the land they inhabit, the area west of the Gibe River and east of the Gojeb River, what is now the Jimma administrative zone of Oromia. According to a widespread historical narrative (*seena*) recorded in the area, ‘Jimma’ is an eponym originating with a man called Jimma Sirba, who was the first to settle in the area. Although today the name Jimma refers to all of the Oromo of the Gibe, it was said to have originally referred only to five clans (local term: *gosa*), the descendants of Jimma Sirba, who happened to be the first to arrive and settle in the Jimma area, the 19th century Jimma Abba Jifar. These were the Qore, Harsu, Lalo, Bilo, and Badi.<sup>(4)</sup> These five clans are said to have been consolidated into the kingdom of Jimma Kaka in the first decade of the 19th century, which was later named after its founder, Jimma Abba Jifar. The other four clans, namely Hagalo, Sadacha, Hariro, and Batu, were said to have arrived later and settled in the adjacent areas that were to become the small kingdoms of Gera, Gomma, Guma, and Limmu. These, together with Jimma, constituted the Five Gibe States in the 19th century. A brief introduction follows on

the Jimma Abba Jifar and Gera.

## II. Jimma Abba Jifar

Historically, Jimma Abba Jifar was the strongest of the five monarchic Oromo states in the Gibe Region that emerged around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Jimma consolidated into a strong kingdom under the rule of a powerful warlord called Abba Jifar Abba Magal (r. 1830–1855), often known as Abba Jifar I.

The Jimma, and the Oromo of the former Five Gibe States in general, underwent early changes in three important spheres: they became sedentary agriculturalists, developed a monarchical political system, and subsequently embraced Islam. The transformation from a pastoral mode of production to sedentary agriculture with a coffee-based cash-crop economy was believed to have been one of the decisive agents of change and differentiation experienced by many of the Gibe Oromo beginning from or prior to the 19th century.

The memory of the last king of Jimma, Abba Jifar II (r. 1878–1932), is still fresh in the minds of the people today. My informants claimed that, as also noted by writers such as Gemedda (1993), Hassen (1994), and Lewis (2001), Jimma was a strong and prosperous kingdom during the reign of Abba Jifar II. It was said that Abba Jifar also tried to make his kingdom “a center of Islamic studies, for he was regarded as a strict Muslim, and encouraged *fuqahā* [experts in Islamic law] to settle there and teach” (Trimingham, 1952: 204). According to Lewis (2001: xiv), the kingdom of Jimma was “a remarkably centralized, well-organized, and powerful monarchy.”

The southwestern region was incorporated into the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century by the military force of Emperor Menelik II, led by his general Ras Gobena Dacche. Abba Jifar II submitted peacefully. He agreed to pay annual tribute to the Emperor, as a result of which he was allowed to maintain the internal political autonomy of his state until his death in 1932. Today Abba Jifar’s reign is remembered as the ‘good old times,’ in which Jimma was a prosperous and powerful independent state.

Jimma was then also one of the most important centers of commerce in the country, controlling the local markets and long-distance trade route that connected the southwestern region with the north. Trade between the northern parts of the country passed through Jimma to the south: the Kafa, Maji, Gimira, Kullo, and Illubabor regions. Coffee, civet, elephant tusks, gold, and slaves from the southwest were brought to Hirmata, the commercial center of Jimma, and taken by caravan to different parts of the country to be exported abroad. Foreign imports such as glass, weapons, and ornaments followed the opposite course into Jimma and then to the adjacent states. As a result, Jimma established a strong relation with and received a number of immigrants and cultural influences from Arabia, India, the Sudan, Egypt, and some European countries.

Jimma ceased to be an internally autonomous kingdom in 1932. After the death of Abba Jifar II, Emperor Haile Selassie I took over the administration of Jimma from Abba Jobir, the grandson of Abba Jifar, on the basis of his failure to coop-

erate with the central government. Consequently, Jimma assumed a new status as one district (*awraja*) and the capital city of Kafa Province, in which the other formerly independent Gibe States were also included. It was to be administered directly from Addis Ababa by a governor-general appointed by Emperor Haile Selassie I.

Since the downfall of the military dictatorship and the establishment of the ethno-federal structure of the country in 1991, Jimma has become one of the 12 administrative zones of the Oromia Regional State. The Jimma zone consists of 17 local administrative districts (*wäräda* or *anaa*) including the formerly independent kingdoms of Jimma Abba Jifar, Gera, Gomma, Gumma, and Limmu. In this paper, the name Jimma refers both to the old kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar and the present-day Jimma administrative zone of Oromia.

### III. Gera

Gera, also a former kingdom that emerged in the 19th century, is today one of the 17 local administrative districts of the Jimma zone. It is located 90 km southwest of Jimma town, and its capital is Chira. According to the 2007 national census report, Gera has an estimated total population of 115,307, of which 95.9% live in rural areas subsisting on mixed agriculture (CSA, 2008: 47). Apart from coffee, Gera is known for its dense forest, rich wildlife, and production of honey, spices, and *teff* (*Eragrostis abyssinica*).

According to oral tradition, the forefathers of the present Gera Oromo fought with their neighbors over land and pasture. They were known in the whole Gibe region for their bravery and their use of a long spear called a *gera*. Adept with using their *gera* and famous for their fighting skills, they were feared by their enemies. It is because of this that their land became known as Gera. Even today the people of Gera consider themselves and are considered by the Jimma Oromo as a whole as ‘men of war and adventure.’

The old kingdom of Gera is said to have been founded by a warlord called Gunji in the second quarter of the 19th century. According to oral tradition, Gera was established as an independent monarchic state after the establishment of the other Gibe states and as a result of the victory Gunji won in the wars he fought against Jimma and Gomma. Gunji did not live long after his kingship and was succeeded by his son Tullu Gunji, who was said to exceed his father in bravery and shrewdness. He is still remembered as an unflinching warrior king and war strategist, who won for himself and his people the respect and recognition of his rivals in the whole Gibe region.

Gera was incorporated into the Ethiopian state in the last quarter of the 19th century after a year of strong resistance against the armed military force of Menelik II led by his general Ras Tessema Nadew. It then fell under the administration of Jimma Abba Jifar. In 1932 it became one district (*wäräda*) in Kafa Province. Oral tradition alleges that the warriors of Gera would not have stopped fighting and given in to their conquerors had it not been for the ill advice of Abba Jifar, who tricked the king of Gera into submission under a false promise that the internal autonomy of his state would be maintained. Due to this, the

Jimma Abba Jifar king was considered to be a traitor. Today, the Gera still define themselves as distinct from the Jimma and other local Oromo groups in the Gibe region mainly on the basis of their historical memory, moral values, and sense of belonging to their own ancestral territory.

## LOCAL IDENTITY NARRATIVES OF THE SOUTHWESTERN OROMO

Somers & Gibson (1994: 59) defined narratives as “*constellations of relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*.” The assumption is that the meaning of any event can be discerned only in its temporal and spatial relationships to other events. According to Moriarty (2005: 5), “by emplotment, events and topics are drawn together enabling the linking of what can appear disparate discourses and events to form a meaningful story.” In line with the growing emphasis on agency and the development referred to as the ‘narrative turn’ in the human sciences, the link between narrative and identity formation has been posited. According to Hinchman & Hinchman (2001: xiv), narratives emphasize “the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity.” In other words, life becomes human by being articulated in a narrative way (Ricoeur, 1991); meaning is created and identity is constructed, constituted, and reconstituted in the process of narration (Moriarty, 2005).

As the focus of this paper is more on the function of oral narratives as a cultural means for constructing and articulating local identity vis-à-vis self-perceived differences among the several local groups within the southwestern Oromo, the use of the term *local identity narrative* over *narrative identity* seems justifiable. A local identity narrative or narrative of local identity is a group-oriented narrative (re-)constructing, interpreting, and displaying a ‘shared’ sense of local identity and belonging to a specific local group in terms of collective experiences, character traits, and values. This narrative is generally told and accepted as ‘true’ local history—exempla of local character traits, norms and moral values, accounts of historical events and experiences that combine to define the group vis-à-vis others—with corroborating details and other discursive strategies and rhetoric devices of verisimilitude. It is a conversational narrative blending elements of other folklore genres or discourses in other situational contexts, which is collaboratively performed by respectable ‘senior’ men in and during the course of social interactions and spontaneously organized formal occasions. If the personal experience narrative relates ‘personal experience’ (non-traditional content), usually told in and/or interpreted from the perspective of the first person (I),<sup>(5)</sup> local identity narrative is essentially a group-oriented narrative which relates collective group experiences, told in and from the perspective of the first person plural (we/us/our), with the primary concern of the tellers (the we-group-members) being collective self-fashioning, self-understanding, and self-definition vis-à-vis others. In parallel with Ricoeur’s (1991: 188) definition of narrative identity—“the kind of identity that human beings acquire through the mediation of the narrative function”—local identity narratives may be defined as a narrative form in and through



which people come to grips with their local identity. I thus use the term ‘identity narrative’ to refer to narratives or stories people tell about themselves and at the same time to narratives or stories people tell about other people. According to Whitebrook (2001: 22), any detailed examination of narrative construction of identity should pay attention to “how the story is told, the mode of construction, structures and techniques, and why the story—‘*this story*’—is being told, and whether it is convincing.”

Many of the narratives I used for the purpose of this paper are locally referred to as *seena*<sup>(6)</sup> (historical narratives). Generally told and accepted as *true history*, the category of *seena* consists of putatively true stories or factual oral documents whereby the cumulative and shared socio-political experiences, ideologies, traditions, norms, knowledge, and values of the people are repeatedly constructed, negotiated and transmitted from generation to generation. Such narratives constitute or are used to constitute, (re-)construct, shape, evoke, evaluate, and exemplify the identities and values—qualities, ideals, aspirations, roles, statuses, realities, meanings, concerns, histories, landscapes, institutions and communities—within which the people (represented by the interlocutors) choose to identify, position, experience, and understand themselves in order to define who they are and/or who they are not in specific situations. Hence they are local identity narratives, or to use Boas’ phrase, “the autobiography of the people” (as cited by Herskovits & Herskovits, 1958: 8).

*Seena* is taken seriously and performed with much importance placed on the maintenance of its validity. To this end, it is usually performed in formal social contexts involving only adult men, mostly influential figures in their respective communities.<sup>(7)</sup> Interestingly, most of the narrators are literate and able to reinforce their repertoire of narrated events by reading and note-taking. As noted by Bauman (1992), identity narratives, like other communicative forms and practices of any society such as ways of speaking, dressing, dancing, and playing music constitute *social resources*. They are “social means that are available to members for the accomplishment of social ends...these communicative resources are differentially accessible to members of society...” (Bauman, 1992: xiv).

Identity narratives may not necessarily be in a form of stories in the strict sense of the term; they are often presented as conversations or reminiscences of past experiences and as explanations of the present state of affairs. Of course, they include selected examples of myths, historical narratives, personal experience narratives or (auto-)biographies, anecdotes, and jokes defining or stereotyping the self and others. Hence they are characterized by ‘generic mixing’—adaptive manipulation of formal and/or thematic elements of related cultural expressive forms needed to substantiate the narrative definition or stereotyping of the collective self and/or others. At work here is what Bauman (2004: 7) refers to as ‘generic intertextuality’—“the relational orientation of a text to other texts...the assimilation of a text to more than one generic framework, drawing upon and blending the formal and functional capacities of each of the genres thus invoked.” This selective appropriation of various generic elements affords effective orienting frameworks for the production and reception of identity narrative texts. According to Bauman (2004: 7), the need for and significance of establishing a relation-

ship of texts to other texts suggest that “generic convention alone is insufficient to account for the formal-pragmatic-thematic configuration of any given utterance.” Most of the narratives in this paper were performed in this general context as expressions of, arguments for, or evidence to the claims of ‘who we are’ and ‘who we are not.’ In constructing and articulating the ‘self’ as well as the ‘other,’ the identity narratives of each group express a more primordial or commonsense view of identity.

The content of the identity narratives of the southwestern Oromo varies from group to group, depending upon the specific social contexts and communicative situations in which they are performed.<sup>(8)</sup> Generally speaking, however, they are constructed on the bases of three interrelated and commonly shared elements that are recognized as important distinguishing features of each group. These are elements related to selectively (re-)constructed (remembered) local history, ancestral territory, and moral values or character traits. As a corollary, one common factor running through the different elements of construction and expression of local identity narratives is related to issues that are believed to genuinely or authentically characterize each group. In other words, whatever the content of such an identity narrative may be, it serves the major purpose of constructing and expressing the self-identification by the narrator and the audience, through defining the specificity of one’s own group, and the shared characteristics, values, orientations, and processes that bind them together and render their sense of identity as a local community or group ‘different’ from others. Identity narratives aim at building consensus and public agreement in a region or locality on the basis of self-perceived distinctiveness or difference from others. Such an expression of distinctiveness often points in two directions. As noted by Amundsen (2000: 14), it either means, “*our region is better, more developed, more active or prosperous than neighboring regions*, or: *our region is underdeveloped, marginalized and less successful than others*, so we deserve national support programs, economical assistance, or simply: We have to try harder!” (emphasis added). As is to be expected, a familiar ethnocentric bias is evident.

In the following, an ethnographically informed rhetoric analysis, rather than generic classification, of selected identity narratives of the Jimma Abba Jifar and the Gera is presented.

#### I. “We Are Different from Others”: Contemporary Identity Narratives of the Jimma Abba Jifar

- (1) As a native Jimma Oromo, I have a lot to say about who the Jimma are and how we differ from the other southwestern Oromo groups.
- (2) As you know, long ago the Oromo used to administer themselves under the *Gada* system. Then the Abba *Gada* (head of the *Gada*)...one of the duties of the Abba *Gada* was to acquire more and more land for the people.
- (3) The original homeland of our ancestors was Bisil, in the west Shoa area. Later on they were forced to migrate to and settle in this Jimma area, which was largely uninhabited except for a few Kafa people.
- (4) As everywhere in the world, the expansion of the Oromo was necessitated

- by population growth.
- (5) It was a small group of hunters who first crossed the Gibe River and discovered the beautiful land endowed with much water, pasture, favorable climate, and forest rich with wildlife.
  - (6) When the hunters returned back to Bisil, they told the people about the beautiful land they found beyond the Gibe River.
  - (7) Then they came to settle in the area thenceforward named Jimma, after our ancestor Jimma Sirba, chasing away the Kafa to the lowland region beyond the Gojeb River.
  - (8) In the old days, Jimma served as a trade center for traders from the north, which brought our forefathers into contact with other peoples, leading them to form a monarchic state [giving up the traditional Gada system] and accept Islam.
  - (9) This is the first point that makes the Jimma different from other Oromo groups in the region.
  - (10) Then followed the development of agriculture, cattle rearing, crafts, and trading.
  - (11) We are also the forerunners in silk production.
  - (12) It is true, silk was produced in Jimma as early as the 1860s [confirmation from one of the audience].
  - (13) Yes, Jimma was economically stronger than others, as strong as some African countries like Egypt.
  - (14) There are even some historians who wrote that the Jimma Abba Jifar was as developed as England, in terms of its economy, political system, and social life.
  - (15) Our forebears are known to have been very rich people, living a much better life than we are living today.
  - (16) We all know such wealthy men as Abba Chabsa, who was able to lend money even to the then government.
  - (17) It is said that Emperor Menelik often asked King Abba Jifar to get him loans from the rich Jimma men. This shows how much Jimma was economically stronger than the Ethiopian state itself.
  - (18) In comparison with others, we consider ourselves as earlier civilized people, the forerunners in trade, crafts, and agriculture.
  - (19) We the Jimma say, “We are the first Oromo to adopt modernity, monarchic political system, to establish trade contacts with the rest of the world, to export civet, elephant tusks, and handcraft products.”
  - (20) It is well known that Jimma is the origin and introducer of coffee to the world.
  - (21) I believe the Jimma differs from the other Oromo such as the Wollega, Shoa, and Illu Abba Bor in adopting civilization and a modern way of life.
  - (22) As the earlier trade center in the region...traders from different parts of the world especially from the Middle East, such as Turkey, were coming to Jimma.
  - (23) This is why we and the Arabs similarly call coffee as *qaawaa* and *gawa*, respectively.
  - (24) As a result of the influence of the Arab world and peoples of northern Ethi-

- opia, Jimma also became the first Islamic center in the region.
- (25) And our way of life, food habits, costumes, mourning rites, marital customs, and such practices are all characterized by our religion.
- (26) Although the Oromo as a whole share the same language and a similar culture, we the Jimma exhibit a certain level of peculiarity. This is evident, for instance, in our marital custom (*nikha*), practice of the *salat*, and duty of cleanliness.
- (27) Even the way we speak, and the words and expressions we use in our daily life all have an Islamic touch.
- (28) As Muslims, we the Jimma understand the importance of cleanliness and clean living.
- (29) You know how failure to wash one's hair after anointing it with butter results in an offensive smell...which is a common hygienic problem to most women in the other groups. The Muslim Jimma women are immune to such malpractice.
- (30) There are a lot of things that are unique to Jimma. One example is the *akaafa* (spade), which originated in Jimma. Yes, it is the Jimma craftsmen who extracted iron from soil and made it into *akaafa*.
- (31) Our elders tell us that it was designed by an Indian man called Tickum and then forged by the Jimma craftsmen.
- (32) The other thing is the sickle (*hamtuu*). We have different types of sickles. One is the ordinary type, which is imported from abroad and used for cutting grasses. The other, which is unique to Jimma, is what we call *Hamtuu Jimma* (Jimma's sickle), a long sickle usually used by older men who find it difficult to stoop down.
- (33) You know *maxabirii* [a set of leather straps decorated with silver and fitted to the mane of a horse] originated in Jimma.
- (34) We have also a special type of rein, which is made and used only here in Jimma, different from the one imported from abroad.
- (35) You know the song:  
 Who but the Jimma Abba Jifar  
 Can break in the horse to the harness,  
 What but love  
 Can force one to make a trip in darkness.
- (36) In short, our history, our culture, our tradition, and our religion make us different from others, though we share many common features with them.<sup>(9)</sup>

In the transcribed text above, the narrator highlights his cultural affiliation to and knowledge of the Jimma Oromo by linking the ongoing conversational discourse and narration (1). He also gives some indexical information concerning his status, lineage, age, place of birth, and personal experiences, thereby displaying his knowledge of the specific group-experience narrative for evaluation by the audience, establishing his temporary position of narrative authority.<sup>(10)</sup> This generally constitutes the opening of identity narrative performances in the southwestern Oromo.

The text is a conversational narrative that aims at definition of who the Jimma

Oromo are and argues for how they ‘differ’ from the other Oromo groups in the region. The conversational form enables the narrator to selectively present a blend of fragments of historical narratives and other generic texts in support of his argument. The narrative is set in a wide historical context ranging from the 16th century Oromo expansion to the 18th century monarchic state formation and Islamization of the Jimma. Note that expansion is defined as *a universal social phenomenon caused by demographic pressure* (4) and *a function of the traditional Oromo political system, the Gada* (2). Moreover, the Jimma area is said to have been largely uninhabited before the arrival of the Oromo (3), and it is endowed with abundant water resources, pasture, dense forest rich with wildlife, and a favorable climate, which make it the ‘dreamland’ of all of the agro-pastoral Oromo (5–6). Self-consciously making reference to the pre-existence and conquest of the Kafa by the brave Jimma men (7), the narrator not only establishes the military superiority and victory of his own group over the other, but also legitimizes the land as ancestral Jimma territory. This underscores the importance of place as a basis for local identity construction.

Having set the background, the narrator goes on to relate the early establishment of the long trade route, the formation of the monarchic state, and the Islamization of the Jimma in the 19th century as historical evidence to establish his group’s identity as different from and superior to others (8–9), thereby evoking nostalgia in the audience for the glorious past of their forefathers. Furthermore, there is repeated reference to Jimma as the origin of coffee cultivation (20) and the center of agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts, and even silk production early in the 1860s (10, 12, 18). The narrator also appeals to anonymous experts that are alleged to have testified to the early development of Jimma on par with England (14). The Jimma Oromo is said to have been a civilized society, which was able to form a monarchic state, and which practiced the traditional Gada system, established foreign relations with the Arab world, accepted the Islamic religion, and adopted a modern way of life (24–26). Appealing to tradition, the narrator recites a song to establish the Jimma as proprietors of well-developed material culture and skills (35).

The central point or intention of the narrator is to convince his audience, especially his intended audience (myself), that the Jimma are different from and superior to the other Mecha groups. To this end, the narrative consists of explanations of difference and history-based arguments. Hence recounting the history of Jimma constitutes both the intended endpoint of the narration around which related issues of local identity revolve and the major rhetorical strategy for establishing the authenticity of the Jimma identity. In this respect, shared knowledge of history serves both as a source of narrative authority (relative to the audience) and a crucial element for the construction of the local identity of the speaker and the audience.

As depicted in the narrative, the Jimma are not only ‘different’ from others but also are known to have been the most powerful of all in the past, who also have the potential to recover their lost powerful identity provided that the necessary preconditions are fulfilled. Such grievance of loss and urge for change covertly run through most of the identity narratives recorded in the entire southwestern

region. As noted by Bitzer (1968: 4), the urge for change resides at the center of any work of rhetoric that occurs as a response to a certain situation:

In order to clarify rhetoric-as-essentially-related-to-situation, we should acknowledge a viewpoint that is a common place but fundamental: a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetoric alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes a mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive.

Maintenance of memory of the past seems to be a form of protest or reaction against the present state of affairs, which is implicitly referred to as deplorable (15). The Jimma delve into their memory of the past as a way of shutting themselves away from their current state of life and yearning for self-recognition and fulfillment. In fact, the present-day ethno-federal state of Ethiopia seems to encourage the construction and articulation of (sub-)ethnic local identities by the glorification of local histories and traditions as a way to legitimize the ideology that emphasizes socio-cultural differences among ethno-regional groups and thereby the need for ethno-regional autonomy. This is evident in the pervasive post-1991 inter- and intra-ethnic competitions for power and collective resources, which often take the heat off the central government and re-orient responsibility on the regional and local levels.

The nostalgia for the glorious past of Jimma and the corresponding urge for change, which run through the whole narrative, are anchored in the recurring ideological theme of ‘difference’ from and ‘superiority’ to familiar others in various aspects of life past and present. For the Jimma Oromo, the past is not something romantic or mythic but recent and fresh in the memory of every sensible person. It is the time of glory in which Jimma was an independent state and the most powerful of all the Gibe states, the time when “Jimma was economically stronger than the Ethiopian state itself” (17). This is substantiated by the historical allusion to Emperor Menelik’s letter of request for a loan to King Abba Jifar (17). Furthermore, the popular wealthy man in the area, Abba Chabsa (16), and the so-called “Indian designer” of the special Jimma spade (*akaafaa*) (31), and the general reference to historians that have testified to the glorious past of Jimma (14) are all rhetorical devices used to support the argument that ‘the Jimma are different from and superior to others.’

As indicated above, the intention of the narrator is to reconfirm to (rather than to inform) the audience, who are supposed to be familiar with the narrated events, how the Jimma are different and superior to other southwestern Oromo groups. To this effect, the narrator’s usage of seemingly meretricious phrases such as “you/we know,” “we the Jimma say” (2, 16, 19, 29), “our ancestors,” “our fore-

fathers,” “our forebears,” “our way of life,” “our daily life,” and “our elders” (3, 8, 15, 25, 27, 31), all serve to draw the narrator and his audience closer and construct their shared sense of local identity. The narrator’s selective manipulation of historical allusions and explanations—the rhetorical strategy—is in turn shaped by the communicative situation in which he undertakes the responsibility of leading the conversational narrative performance.

The ideological theme of the narrative is clearly revealed in its coda. On the basis of the narrated historical events and daily life experiences of ‘difference’—in terms of local history, cultural traditions, and the Islamic values and practices such as the marital custom of *nikha* (26), the five times of daily prayer of the *salat*, and the duty of cleanliness (26, 27)—the narrator concludes that the Jimma are different from and, by implication, superior to others in the southwestern region, a point that is in the foreground of the entire narrative text. Hence local history, traditions, and Islamic values constitute the most relevant elements and the basis for the narrative construction of the Jimma identity.

In other narratives, the claims to ‘common territory’ and ‘ancestral descent’ (from the first-comers) are emphasized in the construction and interpretation of the shared local identity. This type of narrative aims to make two interrelated points. First, it reaffirms the ‘historical connection’ of the present Jimma Oromo to the land they inhabit today, which at the same time is defined as the ‘ancestral homeland’ of the Oromo since time immemorial. This is often done by understatement, instead of outright denial, of the historical pre-existence of the Kafa in and their occupation of the Gibe region prior to the 16th century Oromo expansion.<sup>(11)</sup> Second, by constructing the putative (sub-)divisions or clans (*gosa*) within the Jimma and their genealogical inter-relationships, such narratives establish the solidarity of the Jimma people on the ‘natural’ foundation of ‘blood-relationship.’

In other narratives, the Jimma are identified with certain moral values such as peacefulness, pragmatism (wisdom), generosity, and a sense of justice, as opposed to other Oromo groups characterized by ‘warmongering’ and ‘irrationalism.’ The following narrative synopsis is a typical example of its kind.

We the Jimma are peace-loving people. We are generous and friendly to others. We do not like war. That is why the Jimma did not fight against Menelik II. Abba Jifar was a wise king. Considering the military might of Menelik, he decided to submit peacefully. He saved his people from the enemy armed with guns. Jimma lost only two persons, while Gera, Gumma, Illu Abba Bor, and Wollega lost thousands of men fighting the futile war. They are such warmongering and foolhardy people. They even have the dangerous tradition of hunting wild animals. They often put themselves in danger while hunting big game. The Jimma are never involved in this kind of fool’s errand. We are interested only in trade and agriculture and peaceful living.<sup>(12)</sup>

In the above narrative, the peace-loving nature and pragmatism (wisdom) of the Jimma is foregrounded against the ‘warmongering’ and ‘foolhardiness’ of the Gera, Gumma, Illu Abba Bor, and Wollega. This is exemplified by the historical

allusion to Jimma's peaceful submission to the conquest of Menelik in contrast to the other groups' resistance. Furthermore, the popular tradition of hunting big game, which is generally considered to be a display of manhood and heroism, is condemned as a dangerous game and act of 'foolishness' on the part of others.

The peaceful submission of the Jimma is one of the most recurring themes in Jimma folklore. This seems to be aimed at counteracting others' stereotyping of the Jimma as 'cowards,' as well as against the Oromo nationalists' censure of King Abba Jifar's decision to submit as 'an act of treason,' which has also been highlighted in the post-1991 Ethiopian ethno-federal and ethno-regional state propaganda. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and its supporters that aspire to an independent nation-state of Oromia often lament and consider the incorporation of the Oromo into Ethiopia as 'colonialism' (see, for example, Bulcha, 1997; Gemeda, 2002; Haji, 1995; Hassen, 1994; Jalata, 1993). In this regard, the military general of Menelik, Ras Gobena Dacche, who successfully incorporated southwestern Oromo, as well as Abba Jifar of Jimma, Kumsa Moroda of Leqa Neqemte, and other Oromo leaders who submitted to and joined in alliance with Menelik in his subsequent conquest of the region, have been condemned by Oromo nationalists.

It is against this backdrop of 'criticism of submissiveness' that the narrator appropriates the universal values of peace and rationality to (re-)construct and reaffirm his own group identity and superiority over the rival groups. By putting a positive spin on what has been counted as 'an historical black mark' against Jimma—through the meta-reflexive interpretation of the narrated event—the narrator and his audience highlight the character flaws and misbehavior of the neighboring groups, thereby establishing the 'correctness' of their own group behavior and ethos. In a nutshell, the narrative discourse provides an historical framework for the important Jimma myth and reinforces the self-understanding of the local group as a 'pragmatic moral community.'

The other moral value that occupies a central place in identity narratives of the Jimma is generosity. 'The Jimma are generous people' is one of the common 'esoteric beliefs' held by my informants about themselves. Such esoteric beliefs, as well as 'exoteric beliefs' about other groups, are often exemplified by popular sayings, jokes, and stories within conversational interactions of the in-group members. The following brief narrative text is a good example of its kind.

We the Jimma are generous people. As the saying goes, 'The response of a Jimma to a thirsty person's request for water is nothing but a glass of milk with a piece of bread.' And Abba Jifar was well known for his generosity and sense of justice. May I tell you a story about his generosity? Yes, please [my response].

There was a man who loyally served Abba Jifar for many years. He often ran errands for the king, making long trips to neighboring states. One day he was sent to the king of Kafa, who was married to the daughter of Abba Rebu, to buy slaves for Abba Jifar. While he was in the Kafa land buying slaves he fell ill and remained there for so long. He fell ill after he bought 45 slaves. Abba Jifar heard that his servant suffered a lot of pain in the



land of others. When the servant came back to Jimma with the slaves, Abba Jifar received him warmly and arranged several things for his recovery. When he recuperated, Abba Jifar gave him all of the 45 slaves as a reward for the pains he suffered while on the errand for his king. Abba Jifar was such a generous man. It is not that easy to give a man 45 slaves...too much to give away.

Within the flow of conversational self-interpretation, the speaker asserts the generosity of the Jimma in general and of the king Abba Jifar in particular and relates the above saying and the narrative account in support of his point. At the outset, the narrator poses a prefatory question to his audience—"May I tell you a story about his [Abba Jifar's] generosity?"—sparking their curiosity and involvement in his narration of how Abba Jifar gave 45 slaves to his servant as a reward for his loyal service and having "suffered a lot of pain in the land of others." It is notable that the servant was rewarded more for the pain he experienced "in the land of others" than for his service to the king, which implies distaste for the very experience of 'otherness,' and, inversely, a strong sense of local identity and belonging to one's own group.

In his selective appropriation of the ethic of generosity as the ethos of the Jimma, the narrator draws on Islamic moral teachings. *Zakah* or alms-giving is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, which requires all able Muslims to be generous to the needy. It is a moral obligation of the well-to-do to offer a fixed portion of their wealth to the needy so as to curb economic hardship and inequality among society. Every good Muslim is also expected to make donations as an act of voluntary charity (*sadaqah*) in return for their divine reward. The narrator effectively used this universal Islamic value as a defining feature of Jimma identity.

In other narratives, Abba Jifar is portrayed as the wisest king of all both in the region and the whole country. In comparison with Emperor Menelik, who owes his successful annexation of the Oromo to the human and material support of his Oromo allies and the firearms he obtained from Europe, Abba Jifar is characterized as more powerful and intelligent king. He was said to have economic and intellectual dominance over Menelik. He was able not only to neutralize and nullify Menelik's military power by using his abundant economic resources, buying off his political autonomy for an enormous amount of tribute to Menelik, but also to play a critical role in the very process of the reunification. He supplied a great deal of human as well as material resources to Menelik without which the reunification would not have been realized.

Whereas the selection and incorporation of the ethic of generosity into the esoteric-interpretations of the Jimma have been drawn from Islamic teachings, the values of peace and justice seem to have been influenced by the political discourse of democracy and good governance that has gained wide currency since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-dominated Ethiopian government came to power in 1991. As confirmation of the principle of democracy, Abba Jifar is presented as a model of leadership endowed with the all-important characteristics of good leaders including consultative and participatory decision-making, farsightedness, and indiscriminate and fair treatment of the

governed. Hence the aspiration of the Jimma elite for leadership in the regional as well as federal state of Oromia finds artistic expression.

The peace-loving and serene ‘nature’ of the Jimma is often expressed and perpetuated by stereotyping other groups as fierce and pugnacious. There are many such stereotypes of the several local groups in the Jimma area. For instance, the Gummai are often stereotyped as impatient (*jarjaraa*) people who always deal with each other as well as others in a hurry. To the contrary, the Jimma portray themselves as a patient and serene people who like to proceed in a slow and wise manner. They have the tradition of dealing with things in an unperturbed manner. As the saying goes, the Jimma motto is, ‘let us sleep on the matter and decide it tomorrow’ (*Jimman haabulu beeka*). One of my informants in Jimma noted: “The Jimma do not make decisions in a hurry; they like to discuss every matter thoroughly before making their decisions. But the Gummai do not take time for discussion; they are always in a state of haste.” Similarly, the peace-loving nature of the Jimma is highlighted against the war-loving and pugnacious nature of other groups. For example, another Jimma informant expressed the two opposing characteristics of the Jimma and Gera Oromo as follows:

When a Jimma man wants to buy a knife in a market, he usually makes his choice by testing the sharpness of the knife by putting his fingers to the edge, and examining whether or not the handle is intact. Whereas a Gera man tests the sharpness of the knife by aiming or slashing at (acting as if he were to stab) someone [laughter of audience].

As shown in the discussion, the main purpose of identity narratives is not only defining the identity of the narrator and his audience in relation to and in contrast with other groups, by extension the local group to which they belong. It is also to place the group (the self) at the top of the various southwestern Oromo groupings. It is an attempt to convince the self and others that one’s group is superior to others and hence that it deserves better status and position in the ethno-federal structure of the region and the country at large. To this effect, influenced by the political discourse of the day on democracy, self-administration, good governance, and development, the qualities and character traits of good leadership, such as farsightedness, wisdom, consultative and participatory decision making, deliberation, negotiation, compromise, tolerance, sense of justice, and even intelligence become important elements in the construction and articulation of local identity.

In other narratives, the wisdom and astuteness of the Jimma are expressed through adventurous accounts of a legendary hero known as Yanfo Sefhin. Yanfo is believed to have been a wise man of Jimma who lived during the reign of Abba Jifar I (r. 1830–1855). Accordingly, he was the kind of man to whom the king and the people turned whenever a problem threatened the interests and existence of the Jimma. His adventures were narrated as exempla of wisdom and craftiness of the Jimma, showing how they can outdo their neighboring Oromo groups.

As indicated earlier, the identity narratives discussed above were performed

and recorded in the towns of Jimma and Yabbu, which constitute central parts of the formerly Jimma Abba Jifar kingdom and the present-day Jimma Administrative Zone of Oromia. The narrators in the center of the sub-regional administrative zone tend to place much more importance on the larger sub-regional Jimma identity, encompassing several local groups that were brought under the control of Jimma Abba Jifar and later the central government of Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century. The wider Jimma identity is constructed and articulated more often in relation to and contrast with other sub-regional groups such as the Illu Abba Bor, Wollega, and Shoa than with the smaller local groups within the present-day Jimma zone. Among the local groups such as the Gera and Gomma, however, the construction of identity takes a different course. In these groups, identity construction is more often done to create contrast between the Jimma and other neighboring groups within the Jimma zone than to show solidarity between the Jimma and other sub-regional groups, which are rarely mentioned at all. A few examples of identity narratives of the Gera may help to explain this situational and shifting aspect of local identity construction.

## II. “We Are Like a Handful of Pepper”: Contemporary Identity Narratives of the Gera

- (1) *Seena* says that this area, Gera, got its name from the Oromo word gera, which means ‘spear.’ It is said that our forefathers were continuously fighting with their neighbors, using the traditional spear (*gera*), and always defeated their enemies.
- (2) There is also another *seena* which says that Gera is the name of the man, our forefather, who was the first to come and settle in the area.
- (3) I do not exactly know which of the two stories is correct. However, I learned from my own father that the designation of this area as Gera and its state formation took place before the formation of the other states in the Gibe region. The state of Gera was well known to exist before Jimma, Gomma, Limmu, and Gumma came into existence.
- (4) When our forefathers first came to this area from Bisil, they were 15 in number. They came to this area where there was a mineral water (*hora*). Among the 15 men, Gera was said to be the first to see the water. So the mineral water as well as the area as a whole was designated after him as Gera.
- (5) Later on the other groups, the Jimma, Limmu, Gomma, and Gumma, came to settle in the adjacent areas.
- (6) These groups wanted to have a share of the land where the mineral water was found. When they heard that 15 men (the Gera) had settled in the area, they decided to chase them away.
- (7) Accordingly, first the Jimma sent some hundred men to chase away the 15 Gera men and hold control of the area.
- (8) The Gera, however, had heard about the Jimma plan and prepared themselves and worked out a strategy on how to counterattack the numerically larger enemy. They divided themselves into five groups of three men each and ambushed the enemy in different places.
- (9) When the Jimma men came to the outskirts of the area, the Gera men attacked

them from their hidden places; they killed and wounded many of the enemy. Taken by surprise, the remaining Jimma men fled for their lives, carrying their wounded fellow men.

- (10) When the other three groups learnt what happened to the Jimma men, they sent a large number of fresh soldiers to fight the Gera. However, the Gera were too clever for them. They sent a group of three men to each of the four groups to set fire on their houses at the same time in the night.
- (11) So, many of the houses of the Jimma, Gumma, Gomma, and Limmu were burned down at the same time in the night.
- (12) Then the four groups thought that the Gera were too many and too strong to defeat and decided to leave them alone to live independently in their own territory and under their own government. It was in this way that Gera became an independent state in the area and the people gradually grew in number.
- (13) Gera resisted the military force of Menelik II for a period of two years. Even after the rest of the Gibe states submitted to Menelik, the Gera fought strongly.
- (14) After two years of fierce fighting, the Gera were betrayed and tricked by the Jimma to submit. It was only because of the Jimma that the brave Gera men were subdued.
- (15) Then the king of Gera was Abba Simal Karamo. He was a brave man. There are a lot of songs in which his bravery is expressed. One song runs as follows:
- (16) *Caccabaa galaakoo midhaan dulli nyaatuu,*  
*Gaggabaa Karaamoo Simal dulli waamuu.*

Small pieces are provision of the army,

It is Karamo's son, Simal, that the army turns to at a time of defeat.

- (17) During the war against Menelik, the Gera inflicted a lot of loss on the enemy force. For example, there was Ras Emiru, who was one of the prominent war generals of Menelik. Ras Emiru, who was able to subdue the Gomma and others with little resistance, was captured and taken war prisoner by the Gera. It was the Gera that captured Ras Emiru. The Gera are well known for their military prowess and bravery.
- (18) There was also a brave man of Gera called Jagan Abba Liban. He had a horse named Fayyisa. The horse does not drink water like an ordinary horse, but honey mead. It drinks mead and often jumps big trenches. Once the horse was wounded in a battle but managed to carry his master safely to his home. And the people sang in praise of the horse.
- (19) Fayyisa, oh, Fayyisa,  
It drags its left leg,  
Wounded in the battle of Thursday.  
I am so furious about it,  
I am filled with tears.
- (20) The Gera fought the Jimma even after their incorporation into the Ethiopian state. *Seenaa* says that the king of Gera accused Abba Jifar for his aligning with Menelik's military force against Gera.

- (21) The King Abba Jifar became furious at the allegation and sent his troops to punish Gera. But the brave Gera men defeated the Jimma and drove them back. Abba Jifar sent two other groups of soldiers and Gera beat them again.
- (22) Then Abba Jifar was surprised at how the numerically fewer Gera men could defeat the more numerous Jimma. So he decided to settle the problem with Gera peacefully.
- (23) He sent his delegates to Gera for reconciliation; he sent his delegates with a bowl of *teff* to show the numerical dominance of the Jimma over the Gera.
- (24) When the delegates arrived at Gera and delivered their message, the king of Gera sent them back to Abba Jifar with a handful of pepper.
- (25) The message was clear: the Gera are like a handful of pepper, few in number but ferocious and unbeatable in battle [laughter of the audience].

The above narrative was performed and recorded in a focus group discussion held in the town of Cira, the capital of Gera, on November 21, 2006. Five senior men of Gera and I participated in the discussion. The topic of the discussion was similar to that of the discussions in Jimma—‘Who are the Gera?’ The narrator as well as the four Gera men in the audience shared the view that “the Gera are one of the Oromo people in the Gibe region; they are well known for and different from the Jimma as well as the other Oromo groups within and out of the Gibe region because of their history of bravery.” The narrative, which consists of several fragmented narratives, was performed as an exemplum to validate this claim of bravery and difference from other groups in that respect. Thus local patriotism becomes a major element for the construction and expression of local identity of the Gera.

The Gera are widely considered, and consider themselves, to be ferocious fighters. The metaphor, “we are a handful of pepper,” signifies the Gera as a people small in number but invincible in battle. The very self-identification of ‘Gera,’ which in Oromo means spear (1), also suggests their self-perception as warrior people. What is more, the very genesis and independent existence of the Gera, in the same manner as that of the Jimma, is constructed and expressed on the historical basis of being the ‘firstcomers’ (2–3) and ‘triumphant’ over the other Gibe groups—15 men of Gera beat 100 men of Jimma and later on more men from the other three groups (4–7, 10–12).

The claim to and argument for being recognized as the ‘first-comers’ to an area seems to be a widespread and recurrent cultural theme in African history. In Donham’s (2000: 23) words, “the way that African frontiersmen typically constructed new societies was by claiming (and having their claim at least partially recognized) as ‘firstcomers.’ ... The argument for being recognized as having come first rested upon an idiom common to much of Africa: namely, the power to promote the fertility of people, animals, and land in the area, often through sacrifices to ancestors.”

In line with this, the narrator and his audience defined themselves (the Gera) and constructed their identity on the basis of local patriotism—Gera’s ‘history of strong resistance’ against Menelik’s project of incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century. It was said that the Gera resisted

the military conquest for two years, for example, “Even after the rest of the Gibe states submitted to Menelik, the Gera fought strongly” (13). Although the Gera were finally defeated and incorporated into the Ethiopian state, more because of the ‘betrayal of the Jimma’ than because of their own weakness (14), the brave men of Gera were said to have fought fiercely and inflicted much loss on the army of Menelik (17). As evidence to this, the narrator mentions one of the prominent war generals of Menelik, Ras Emiru, who was captured and taken war prisoner by the Gera (17). Here it is interesting to note how the ‘history’ of Ras Emiru is modified and used as a rhetorical resource to amplify and authenticate the positive self-presentation (bravery) of the Gera. It is common knowledge that Ras Emiru (b. 1892) was not one of the military generals of Menelik who led the conquest of the southwestern region at the end of the 19th century. He was the commander of the patriotic forces in the Shere front during the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–1936 and leader of the Black Lion Resistance operations in southwestern Ethiopia, who was captured by the Italians in late 1936 and imprisoned in Italy for seven years (Zewde, 2002).

The patriotism of the Gera was concretized by oral songs about the brave kings Abba Simal Karamo (15–16) and Jagan Abba Liban (18–19). Abba Simal Karamo, who was said to have been king of Gera during the war against the army of Menelik, is glorified as someone to whom an army turns for assistance at times of defeat. He was said to have been a military strategist, a single powerful military man equivalent to an army of a hundred fighters. Correspondingly, the bravery of Jagan Abba Liban is expressed in the praise song to his horse, Fayyisa, which was able to bring his master safely home although wounded in battle. The horse was praised for its loyalty to its master, which seems a projection of the narrator and his audience’s strong sense of belonging to the same local group and locality, Gera.

The last episode of the war the Gera fought against the numerically larger Jimma (20–25) is additional evidence presented to substantiate the local patriotism of the Gera. It presents the numerically fewer Gera as militarily superior to the larger Jimma group and hence symbolically establishes their sense of distinctive local identity as “a handful of pepper, few in number but ferocious and unbeatable in battle.”

This distinctive feature of the Gera is often expressed in jokes (*qoosaa*) stereotyping the Jimma as ‘cowards.’ In one joke, a Gera man quarrels with a Jimma man over the price of an item in a market. After the exchange of a few heated words, the Gera snatches his knife and slashes at the Jimma man. Taken by fear and shock, the Jimma says, “what are you doing man, do you think I am the sheath of your knife?” Unable to defend himself, let alone take an equal and opposite offensive action, the Jimma cries for mercy, reducing himself to a helpless object—the sheath of a knife.

In another story a Gera man was said to have caught a leopard and brought it to the king Abba Jifar, who became afraid of the beast and ordered the man to take it back to its home, Gera. The story goes as follows:

Once there was a Gera man called Abba Sese, who bare-handedly caught a leopard. The leopard was first reported to have blocked the way from Gera to Jimma. The news of the leopard reached Abba Jifar, the then king of the whole Gibe region, and he brought the matter to his councilors. And there was this Gera man, Abba Sese, among the council of Abba Jifar, who said that he would catch and bring the leopard alive to Abba Jifar's palace. Then no one believed him. After the meeting Abba Sese went to Gera and caught the leopard and took it to Abba Jifar's palace. The guards at the gate reported the arrival of the man with the leopard to the king. Abba Jifar pondered over the matter for a while: "where is he going to place the beast? And what will happen if it attacks me?" [laughter of the audience]. Having considered the pros and cons of the matter, the king decided that the man should take the leopard back to its home, Gera. Abba Jifar said to his guards, "tell the man to take his cat back to Gera, hurry up!" [laughter of the audience].

The laughter of the audience and their comments at the end of the narration strengthen the stereotyped image of the Jimma as 'cowards.' The audience took their time laughing and interjecting funny comments, such as "I can imagine how much Abba Jifar terrified visualizing the tiger was jumping on him" and "one can sense the urgency of his order to avoid the tiger in his voice, 'hurry up!'" Each comment was followed by laughter and another narration of a similar story. At the end of the laughter and comments invoked by this particular story, one of the audience remarked that the brave Gera men used to benefit much from the cowardice of the Jimma men and recounted the following story to illustrate his point.

### III. The Reward of Bravery

Once Abba Jifar assembled his men and asked them to kill elephants and bring him their tusks. He ordered them to kill 23 big elephants. All of his fellow Jimma men protested against his order. They said that they could not find such big elephants in the area. Among the assembled men was one Gera man called Abba Waji, who stood up and said that he would kill the elephants and bring the tusks to the king. When Abba Waji said this, the Jimma men laughed at him. They said, "Your bald head [Abba Waji's head] would grow hair if you killed the elephants." They made fun of him. Then Abba Waji made his preparations and went out to the forest to kill the elephants. After six months of tiring efforts, Abba Waji had found and killed 35 elephants (instead of the required 23 elephants) and brought their tusks to Abba Jifar. Abba Jifar was very surprised at the determination and bravery of the Gera man, and asked him what he would like to have as his reward. Abba Waji said that he would like to have some portion of the land of the Jimma men who made fun of him when he had said he would kill the elephants. Accordingly, Abba Jifar took some plot of land from that

of each man who made fun of Abba Waji and gave it to the latter. So, Hawas, Gajara, Sayyo, Awule, Ashadash, and Walensuu all lost some portion of their land to Abba Waji Abba Qorbi of Gera [laughter of the audience].

This short narrative text shows how identity narratives in general function in the construction and expression of a sense of local identity on the basis of self-perceived differences to and superiority over others. In this particular narrative, the Gera man, Abba Waji Abba Qorbi, accomplishes something that others fail to accomplish, killing 35 elephants, which is considered a heroic deed. The reward for accomplishing this difficult, nearly impossible task is taking over a plot of land of the rival group. This has a symbolic significance in showing how each group claims more shares of rare resources including land and political power in the regional as well as federal state structure on the basis of being more qualified and endowed with character traits and values such as bravery and courage. Interestingly, the narration was followed by commentary from the audience which revealed that Abba Waji, and by implication the brave men of Gera in general, deserved the reward. The commentary was expressed in a form of the proverb, 'it is the brave who always takes the land of the coward' (*laffa dabeessaa jagnatu fudhata*). Hence the narrator and the audience define themselves and construct their sense of identity as brave men who accomplish something that the other group, in this case the Jimma, could not accomplish and thus deserve better treatment and reward than the 'undeserving others.' The bravery of the Gera was further expressed in a popular heroic song (*gerarsa*) widely known in the area and sung by one of the audience members:

A man of *gerarsa* is found but in Gera,  
It is only the Gera that will never tire of *gerarsa*.

This song was followed by an explanation from the singer. The song shows that the Gera are well known for their tradition of *gerarsa*, which is the song of the brave men. Wherever there is a Gera man, there is a *gerarsa* song, for no one else can sing the *gerarsa* in the presence of Gera men, who are known for their bravery. Therefore, even in Jimma, Gomma, Gumma, and Limmu, the Gera men are given priority to sing the *gerarsa* song. Traditionally, only the brave and fearless men who proved their manhood in battle or killing big game have the prerogative in performing *gerarsa*. In taking turns in performing the *gerarsa* song, priority was given to those who killed enemies (human beings) to be followed by those who killed giraffes and other big game. In this context, the Gera men defined themselves as people of much bravery and heroism, well recognized in the whole Jimma area for their fearlessness and long tradition of killing big game.

In another story, it was said that once there was a Gera man called Abba Bulggu Abba Gidoo, who was well known in the entire Jimma area for his bravery. Once he shot at and wounded a lion. Then the lion dashed at Abba Bulggu and the brave man tackled the wounded beast bare-handedly and wrestled it to the ground. He threw the lion into a river and went after it, swimming and wres-



ting with it. Finally, he was able to free himself from the grasp of the lion. He came out of the river, took up his gun, and killed the lion. Then he fainted and fell down to the ground in exhaustion. Long after, Abba Bulggu was said to have recounted his adventure and the traumatic experience he had on that particular day by singing the following *gerarsa* song:

On one cruel day,  
On one cruel day,  
The crow fled the tree,  
The ape left the tree,  
The land was devoid of hope and dream.  
Then it is me, the first born of Abba Gido,  
Who killed a lion with a hole-like nose,  
I made him to sleep forever,  
Deprived him of his dreams.

Apart from bravery and local patriotism, the Gera claim that their ancestral territory (Gera) is endowed with fertile soil, a favorable climate, natural forest, and wildlife, which make it unequal to any other place in the entire Gibe region. The inheritance of common ancestral territory and the high value attached to that become another element for the construction of local identity, the sense that ‘we are the same type of people who value and live in this place.’ The narrator and his audience show how much they value the symbols of the locality—the land, the pasture, the water resource, the forest, and the wildlife it shelters, which matter to and are commonly shared by all of them. An account of the natural abundance of Gera, which forms one of the bases of the construction and expression of local identity of the people, was presented by one of my informants in the area as follows:

#### IV. Gera Is the Land of Abundance

Gera is endowed with invaluable natural resources. It is rich in its forestry and wildlife. The dense forest of Gera makes it very favorable for honey production. Gera is the major source of food crops, honey, cattle, and wood products to Oromia and Ethiopia as a whole. The Jimma as well as all of the other Oromo of the southwestern region have nothing but use Gera as their source of food crops, milk and milk products, meat, honey, and the like. In the old days, tusks of elephants and civets were all imported from Gera. Gera has fertile soil and favorable climate for growing all types of food crops, grains, and cereals. It also has great tourist attraction sites. Take for example the Gomma; we are neighbors and we know each other. Currently the Gomma have coffee plants. But if you want the truth, only the third generations of the Gomma have coffee plants. The old generations, their fathers and their grandfathers, did not have coffee plants. The Gera have always had coffee plants. You know not only we and our sons have

owned coffee plants, but our fathers as well as their fathers and grandfathers and forefathers all were rich in coffee plants. The problem is that the resources of Gera are abused by the government officials. The government does not give any attention to Gera and its resources. There is no more beautiful country than Gera. However, Gera does not have all-weather roads; nor does it have a hospital, electricity, and such social facilities and infrastructures that the Jimma and the Gomma have.

In the very recent past, there was a man called Sheikh Mohammad Fedlu in Gera. This Sheikh was known for his knowledge of traditional medicine. Once he was looking for a medicinal plant when he came across a small hot spring of holy water, which had high medicinal value. He found the hot spring of holy water in the village called Walla. He tasted the water and immediately discovered that it had medicinal value. Then he went to king Abba Jifar and told him that he found a spring of mineral water that could heal many types of disease. He said that he wanted tools to enlarge the spring and make it accessible to users. Abba Jifar provided the Sheikh with all the tools he demanded. The Sheikh toiled to pave the way to the spring and made it accessible to the public. It took him a total of 10 years to do so. Now the spring is used by a large number of people from Jimma and the country as a whole. The hot spring heals stomach disturbances and all sort of dermatological problems. It heals all sort of disease. I myself benefited a lot from the mineral water. I used to suffer from gastritis for a long period of time, for which I was often treated at the hospital in Jimma. But the medical doctors could not give me any relief from the pain. Finally I was advised by certain friends to try the spring. I went to the spring and drank the holy water for a week. As a result I have been completely cured from the disease. Today I eat whatever I want to eat without any inhibition. I even chew *chat* (*Catha edulis*), which I could not do previously. The spring is today being visited and used by thousands of people from the whole Jimma and Ethiopia at large. In fact it would have benefited much more people if it were accessible by motor transportation. But the government has so far paid hardly any attention to develop the necessary infrastructures and facilities in Gera. We have no all-weather roads, electricity, hospital, and such services. It is a pity that we are much-neglected people.

As can be seen from this account, the narrator and the audience defined their own group (the Gera) in terms of their high valuation of and inextricable interconnections to the land and its abundant resources. This may be due to the fact that 90% of the people are sedentary farmers whose livelihood predominantly depends on agricultural production of food crops such as *teff*, wheat, barley, maize, sorghum, and livestock, and cash crops including coffee, spices, and honey. In fact, according to a recent report compiled by the Department of Finance and Economic Development of Jimma Zone (DFEDJZ, 2005), the district of Gera is endowed with, among others, high natural forest, woodland, plantation forests, wildlife, abundant water resources, hot springs, and high-quality and exportable

honey products. What is important, however, is that the physical as well as economic features of the locality are manipulated in the social construction of shared local history and identity. This is in response to the urge for self-realization and the recognition of ‘others,’ as a community with its own shared historical memory and with its own territory (Gera) endowed with “abundant natural resources” and much potential for development.

In this connection, it should also be noted that the narrator used an ambivalent tone of voice in defining his own group (the Gera) as well as the others (the Jimma and the Gomma). On the one hand, he seems to take pride in and describes the Gera people with reference to their connection to the land, which is endowed with natural abundance and hence is a ‘bread basket’ for the region and the country as a whole. Besides, Gera is described as a land of hot springs and holy water, which has high medicinal value and healing effects on all sorts of diseases and ailments; not only the Gera but many people from Jimma and the whole country have benefited from the medicinal water of Gera. Here the symbolic significance of the holy water should be noted—Gera as a healing land used by all ailing people of the entire country. On the other hand, the narrator effectively employs the negative strategy of self-identification to define his own group as an ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘marginalized’ people, which is clearly expressed in the reflexive commentary at the end of the narration: “*it is a pity that we are much-neglected people.*” The lack of social infrastructure and services such as all-weather roads, electricity, and hospitals, which are accessible to other groups such as the Jimma and Gomma, seems to be a source of resentment. In mentioning this, the narrator expresses and reinforces his and his audiences’ sense of shared identity and belonging to the same local group or community on the basis of shared ‘experiences of marginality’ (injustice and underdevelopment) in which, in spite of their abundant natural resources and potential for development, they have been ‘undeservingly marginalized’ and are ‘less developed’ than others such as the Jimma and Gomma. The narrator also articulates his group’s legitimate demand for change, recognition, and respect for themselves and their values and aspirations that have previously been neglected.

## CONCLUSION

The folkloric expressions and identity narratives examined in this paper construct and articulate perceived durable properties of local identity and differences among the several local groups within the southwestern Oromo. As identity is relational, the local identity of each group is constructed, negotiated, and expressed through the relation to and difference from the ‘other,’ i.e., the relation to what it is not (Moriarty, 2005). Hence local identities are constituted and the self and other dichotomies are (re-)produced in the narrative performances of each group. Apart from providing historical information, definitions, and explanations of shared local traditional values and experiences needed for security and continuity of social life, identity narratives serve as models for future action aimed at advancing common interests and transformation of the group in which they are enacted.

The several southwestern Oromo groups in general and the Jimma and the Gera in particular define themselves in terms of certain commonly recognized and shared ‘essential’ elements such as local history, moral values, ancestral territory, and genealogical affiliations. These elements, which are considered to be the most important distinguishing features of local identity, are repeatedly communicated in the narrative performances of each group so as to establish the group members’ sense of shared identity and belonging to a specific locale based on an unassailable ‘natural’ closure of solidarity and allegiance. Based on this ‘objective’ foundation, most of the folklore forms and oral narratives define the performers’ ‘self’ and their respective groups and locales as having some things ‘special’ that ‘others’ do not have; i.e., defining the ‘self’ through clarifying the perceived difference from others. In this respect, the role of local Oromo elites (the narrators) seems to be one of (re-)producing local cultural ‘variations’—then (re-)producing and articulating a common cultural identity of the Oromo in general and the southwestern Oromo in particular—in order to ensure recognition of their own and their group’s importance. By doing so, these elites create grounds for the pursuit of collective interests and meaningful local leadership roles and enhance their participation not only in local and (sub-)regional affairs but also in matters of the larger ethno-federal state structure of the country.

#### NOTES

- (1) It should also be noted how this growing popularity of narrative has of late awakened critical writings and warnings against ‘narrativity’ (Strawson, 2004) and ‘narrative imperialism’—the marked tendency of narrative researchers “to claim more and more territory, more and more power for our object of study and our ways of studying it” (Phelan, 2005: 206).
- (2) The 2007 national census report gives a total of 27,158,471 people for the Oromia Region (within the national total of 73.9 million), occupying an estimated area of 353,006 km<sup>2</sup> (CSA, 2008: 1).
- (3) Anthony P. Cohen (1982) has made a similar observation in his study of the social organization and local identity among British rural cultures.
- (4) The number and names of the first clans to arrive in the area vary considerably. In another version of the Jimma origin narrative, for example, Diggo, the clan to which the Abba Jifar family belongs, was mentioned in the list. In another narrative, Diggo was one of the families in the Lalo clan.
- (5) For in-depth definition of the characteristic features of the personal experience narrative, see Sandra Stahl’s seminal work (1989).
- (6) *Seenaa* is an Oromo word for history; neither its origin nor its etymological meaning could be traced.
- (7) The performance of *seenaa* is the prerogative of senior men (*manguddoo*). This does not mean that women and children are prohibited from attending and/or participating in narrative performances. There is no explicit rule prohibiting their participation. However, as emphasized by informants of both sexes, and confirmed by my own observation in the field, women have little to do with *seenaa* (for detailed explanation, see Fanta, 2007).
- (8) The bulk of the narrative texts examined in this paper were recorded from actual performance events in the southwestern region, where I conducted field research from 2006 to

2007. The fieldwork was geared toward my PhD study entitled, “Ethnicity, Local Identity, and Folklore among the Southwestern Oromo of Ethiopia: A Comparative Study.” Thus the issue of local identity and the use of folklore, specifically oral narratives, for construction and negotiation of shared sense of identity were at the center of the field research. The major field methods used in collecting the necessary data (folkloric as well as ethnographic) were unstructured (informal) interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation of daily life activities and interactions. Many of the interview sessions and focus group discussions revolved around the main question of local identity: how do members of each local group understand and define themselves in relation to other groups within and outside the southwestern Oromo?
- (9) This narrative was performed by Obbo Tayib Abba Foggi, an educated and influential man of 54, in a focus-group discussion held on November 13, 2006, in Jimma. In addition to the narrator and me, three Jimma men participated in the discussion within which this and other group-experience narratives occurred.
  - (10) For detailed illustration of the connection between indexicality, narrative authority, and communication, see Butler (1992).
  - (11) In many narratives, the present Jimma area is said to have largely been uninhabited except for a few Keffa people, who “temporarily visited the area in search of mineral water (*hora*) for their cattle.”
  - (12) The complete version of this summarized narrative was recorded in Yebbu, capital of Manna *wäräda*, on November 11, 2006. Manna is the origin of Abba Jifar and of all members of the ruling house of Jimma. The narrator, Abba Zinab, is a respectable elderly man of 98 who speaks with a voice of authority earned from his longevity and claims of having eyewitnessed the narrated events.

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