

# ETHIOPIAN WISDOM LITERATURE

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## 1. Introduction

When I had completed my five-volume series on *Ethiopian Philosophy*, which is based on five manuscripts written in the ancient Ethiopic Semitic language called ge'ez mostly in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, I was interested in investigating the wisdom of Ethiopia as expressed in its oral literature (especially proverbs). For this purpose I selected the Oromo people who speak a language which belongs to the extensive family of the so-called "Cushitic" languages, since the Oromo, having no written literature or language, were an ideal group for a study based on oral literature.

The result of this investigation, embodied in a book entitled *Ethiopian Wisdom Literature: Oromo Proverbs*, is now in the printing process, but before it appears in its printed garb, I thought of extracting an anthology of what I considered its most "beautiful" proverbs. When I first attempted to make a choice, from my total collection of 1,067 Oromo proverbs, of those I considered as worthy to be gathered in an anthology, I ended up with a list of some two hundred -- a sign that a remarkably high proportion deserves particular notice, namely about one fifth (209/1,067 or 1/5.1). On account of the limitation in length of this article, I have reduced this initial number to about a half (93/209). This constraint in its turn is most beneficial, for it obliges one to draw out explicitly one's principles of selection, which otherwise would tend to remain implicit, subjective, and even arbitrary. These principles of selection turn out to be: Depth of thought; Psychological insights; Literary beauty: imagery, rhythm, dramatic character, brevity; Humour; Frequency of choice in collections of proverbs; Affective connotation; Simplicity; and Multiple principles.

I shall therefore try to delineate these principles before I classify by subject what I consider the most beautiful proverbs and give a short commentary of each, thus establishing the most common notions or themes of Ethiopian Wisdom Literature as revealed in Oromo proverbs: Association, Deed, Religion, Foolishness, Consequence, Misfortune, Quarrel.

## 2. Principles of Selection

### 2.1. *Depth of Thought*

Exactness in observation, sapiential intuitions are an important and frequent touchstone. "Where the feet carry us, there the heart is already."<sup>1</sup> The heart moves us towards the good or the evil action, whichever it may be. In more abstract language, intention comes first, execution last. The Oromo proverb would not agree with William James' observation that fear for instance is a sequel of one's act of running away; for the Oromo, one flees because one is afraid, and not the other way round.<sup>2</sup>

The same thought is expressed in another form: "What is near is already here."<sup>3</sup> It is already present through desire or apprehension.

Another proverb seems to contradict these two: "The heart goes where the legs go."<sup>4</sup> But in reality there is no opposition here for the Oromo simply wish to underline that one does not always do what one wants, but that often one wants what can be done.

### 2.2. *Psychological Insights*

Psychological insights have to be singled out as particularly numerous and significant. "What the person hides, the complexion reveals."<sup>5</sup> The Oromo word here translated as "complexion" refers directly to the meat of the upper part of the arm. However, the general meaning is one of psychosomatic unity: even if one succeeds in hiding one's most intimate thought, the facial expression, the vocal intonation, a general nervousness or serenity will express them in body language.

"The one who is in difficulty has no eyes."<sup>6</sup> Modern psychiatry has described in a most precise way the narrowing of consciousness which accompanies a severe apprehension or anguish. However, the Oromo have worded this penetrating insight into emotional disturbances with an image that says immediately what clinical psychology has elaborately analyzed.

### 2.3. *Literary Beauty*

Literary beauty is one of the most common criteria of any anthology. In the particular case of Oromo proverbs, one can

underscore the following features of beauty in expression: imagery, rhythm, dramatic character, brevity.

2.3.1. The highly coloured *imagery* of many a proverb gives them an aesthetic quality which is immediately recognizable. "A person cannot see himself, as a stone cannot throw itself."<sup>7</sup> The thought contained in this proverb is already a value in itself: it is often the most difficult thing for a person to find fault with oneself. But the embodiment of this thought into the analogy of a stone that cannot throw itself makes up such a unit of intellectual intuition and daily observation that one understands why tradition has preserved this literary gem.

"One has recourse to teeth in order to untie what the hands have tied."<sup>8</sup> The disparity between the easiness of tying with the hands and the hardness of untying with the teeth is an image which gives this proverb a universal dimension: it applies to all situations in life where the consequences of an act are more difficult to cope with than the initial act itself. The Oromo may refer this proverb to a promise that is easily given, but followed by a host of painful sequels. However, the image endows it with a beauty and universality that transcend any localized application.

2.3.2. The heart of Ethiopian *rhythm* in written literature, both sapiential and philosophical, and in proverbs is parallelism. It is mainly of two types: synonymic and antithetic. It is difficult to perceive these rhythm patterns in a translation. However there are cases when the translation itself may do justice to the original binarism.

Here, for instance, is a proverb where the parallelism is "horizontal", and hence can be easily identified by the evident repetition of a word: "He who has nobody to *fear* is himself to be *feared*." "<sup>10</sup> Likewise contrast comes out very clearly in a translation: "One's own cottage is better than somebody else's palace."<sup>10</sup>

2.3.3. *The dramatic character* of a great number of proverbs is so striking that it may be identified as an outstanding feature of Oromo sapiential literature.

"This year it does not expand said the servant who pinch by pinch ended by eating the whole boiled corn."<sup>11</sup> One can easily imagine the old servant in her hut trying to keep the fire alive under

the earthen pot with a narrow neck, <tue> . The pot is well heated with a bundle of grass. In it boils the <mullu> grain by grain, and eats the grains in secret in order to assuage the overpowering pangs of her hunger. Far from expanding, the earthen pot is half empty. This flares up the anger of the mistress. The poor servant, in order to find an excuse, accuses the times, exclaiming that the <mullu> of the year does not expand with boiling.

It would be possible to make an anthology within the anthology only with the dramatic character as a standard of literary beauty: "Great lord!" From the bottom of my heart: "I!"<sup>12</sup> One can easily imagine the scene: someone hears himself being called: "Great lord~" As a matter of fact the Oromo expression: <abbo guddo> is an appellative of great consideration. The one who hears this exclamation wants to say: "Here am I!" Perhaps he turns towards the one who has uttered the flattering salutation and with a smile on his lips identifying himself: "I!" The natural tendency of all men to consider themselves as worthy of consideration has been evoked in a few traits of kinetic suggestiveness.

2.3.4. *Brevity* , conciseness, pungency should be qualities found in all proverbs, because of the narrow limits of their length. But in a few cases the contraction into few words is immediately apparent: "Friend before me, enemy behind."<sup>13</sup> "Health is wealth."<sup>14</sup>

## 2.4. *Humour*

Humour is frequently associated with the dramatic aspect mentioned above. "A chicken eaten unattentively will have feathers if you concentrate on it."<sup>15</sup> If you do not pay any attention to the chicken you eat, you will have the impression that it has no feathers. But if you concentrate on what you eat, it will seem it has. Likewise if you do not come back on what you did, it will seem it was correct; but if you concentrate on your past deeds, then defects will appear.

Humour lies in the irony of a vital situation. "The monkey that does not see its rump laughs at the others".<sup>16</sup> "The animal with no horn places itself in the shade of its own neck."<sup>17</sup> "The day the goat decides to die, it licks the nose of a leopard."<sup>18</sup> "Not aware of its own, the dog tells the goat to lower its tail."<sup>19</sup>

## 2.5. *The Frequency of Choice in Collections of Proverbs*

The choice of a proverb in a collection is not in itself a valid criterion; however, it has the value of a sign. If many paroemiologists have deemed it fit to place a proverb in their collection, it is an invitation to pay a special attention to it and to inquire if indeed it does not possess some intrinsic worth. "Good day~' Good evening~' He knows how to say; but how he has passed the time, his father alone knows."<sup>20</sup> This proverb, under one variant or another, is quoted in eight collections of proverbs.<sup>21</sup> And indeed it expresses the authenticity of knowledge by experience in a dramatic and simple way: "Good day~ Good evening~" with an undertone of irony: the disparity between the artificial and the real. No one knows the internal problems of someone else; only the man himself knows. No person suffers from mishaps or misfortunes vicariously. Anyone can exchange greetings, but only the family is truly interested in its own relative.

## 2.6. *Affective Connotation*

The choice of images entails a subjective appreciation. "'Look, it is day~' exclaimed the squint-eyed man who had set fire to the house."<sup>22</sup> The image of a myopic man setting fire with the beneficial early morning is tragical. The hut was intact. Now it is reduced to ashes and its owner to homelessness. The image connotes an affective dimension which is valid for all discourse using these images. Hence it applies to every situation where a man is degraded by his own action from the state he was in formerly. Thus through the symbol a relation between a physical infirmity and the burning of a house has been abstracted from its concrete particularities. When one hears this proverb, there is an immediate affective connotation: "This is very sad, tragical, ridiculous."

How is it that there are so many proverbs in Oromo for the same norm? For instance, there are thirty-five proverbs for the norm of "caution" in my collection. Oftentimes the difference between one proverb on caution and another very similar one lies only in the emotional sphere. One may wish to advise the imprudent person in a light manner and even with a touch of friendly humour: "One does not cut the tusks of an elephant."<sup>23</sup>

Or the connotation for the same counsel of prudence may be more serious: do not trust easy thriving beginnings: "The beautiful weather in the morning made the shepherd forget his umbrella."<sup>24</sup>

## 2.7. *Simplicity*

'Simplicity' is here taken in a very special sense. In a way all Oromo proverbs are marked with this great quality; none show the intricacies and subtleties of the "Gold and Wax" pattern. However, quite a number are not easily understandable by one who does not have a first-hand knowledge of Oromo language or culture. For instance the following proverb: "If they speak, people call them a hurricane; if they keep quiet, people call them block-heads"<sup>25</sup> is missed to a great extent if one does not know that the proverb plays on two assonances: <*bubbe*> and <*buk'k'e*> .

Likewise the proverb: "A sole javelin is a remedy for fifty glasses"<sup>26</sup> requires quite a bit of erudition to be understood by a general public, although it is quite clear to the Oromo or to anyone acquainted with their culture. The term < *burt— >uk >k >o >* , "drinking glass", is a neologism borrowed from Amharic to indicate any glass object, in particular drinking glasses imported from Europe. Before its appearance on the < *burt— >uk >k >o >* , market, the Oromo were using the < *want— >a >* , a glass in the form of a truncated cone turned upside down, a segment of a bull's horn: its smallest part was closed in its bottom with a wooden plug. He who during his life time had killed a buffalo, and who consequently was held in particular consideration in the chivalrous order of the "worthy hunters", besides having the right of carrying an earring made from the horn of a buffalo -- a small bright section drawn from the point of his victim's horn -- was entitled to use at table a < *want— >a >* made from his hunting trophy, a < *want— >a >* that he always carried with him whenever he was invited in order to use it in those embarrassing situations where the host did not have such prestige glasses. In poorer houses and in greater gatherings, when the < *want— >a >* was not available the < *folle* > , "stone bottle", was used: it was a shafted flask whose external surface was decorated with a branding point.

The meaning of the proverb is the following: a strong man sets fifty weak ones running away, and a resolute man upsets an entire market.

Such types of proverbs I have eliminated from this anthology, because they require too much erudition.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.8. Multiple Principles .

It would be an error to think that each individual proverb is selected for a single principle: usually the same proverb is recommendable for a multiplicity of reasons. For instance the following proverb: "If I would say: 'Your mother is dead', she would answer: 'I'm alive~'"<sup>28</sup> is remarkable for its humouristic depiction of the spirit of contradiction; but the dramatic aspect is as underlined as the comical inconsistency. Synonymic parallelism as well as psychological insight distinguish this other proverb on apprehension resulting in the feared event: "A hated thing happens to the one who hates it."<sup>29</sup>

## 3. Principles of Classification

It will escape no one that the principles of selection given above are already an anthology, since this first section contains twenty-six beautiful proverbs belonging to nineteen different subjects.<sup>30</sup> It only remains that I classify the other sixty-seven proverbs according to the remaining subjects they express; I shall do so in the order of decreasing frequency.

### 3.1 Association

The notion of "Association" is the most frequently represented among the above-mentioned remaining subjects. Many proverbs deal with the fact of association, irrespective of its value or difficulties. "The mother of the leech is the fountain, and the mother of the fountain is water."<sup>31</sup> The strength of union, for good or for bad, is vividly expressed. "Big or small, the horse runs away from the ants."<sup>32</sup> The voracity and the fighting spirit of the wild < *gonda* > overcome not only small animals, but even the horse that fears them and runs away from them. Imitation, social conformism are noted in many proverbs. "The flood looks into the one that goes before it."<sup>33</sup> People follow their leader. It is believed that children copy the behaviour of those who are older than them. The force of social conformism is likened to people rhythmically shaking their necks during dance: "As one dances, he makes the people shake their neck."<sup>34</sup> The Oromo dances consist in small jumps, shaking of the bust, balancing of the head, rhythmic beating of hands and bodily movements that accompany the drummers' beating. The dancer's neck plays a great role and involves in its gymnastics the spectators' necks. Hence the Oromo proverb to indicate the force which the example of others exerts upon man.

The value of companionship is the main topic of several proverbs: "Seven ignorant persons are worth more than one wise man alone."<sup>35</sup> "One finger does not catch a fly."<sup>36</sup> This latter proverb is often said to indicate that many are better than one.

Whatever the value of association, the difficulties inherent in it are described with much greater detail than its advantages: a phenomenon that seems to be prevalent in all Ethiopian sapiential literature, where the negative is underlined more than the positive. A great number of proverbs simply express these difficulties of social life, their sundry literary quality being their sole distinguishing factor. "Villages are thorns that lacerate man."<sup>37</sup> "The relative of the fire, ash, also burns."<sup>38</sup> The latter proverb is said in particular when a relative or a friend of an evil person acts in the same way. Humour may occasionally enliven these rather depressing sayings: "He has stayed with the ass; he emits farts like the ass."<sup>39</sup> But behind the humour lies contempt for those who are alike in evil action or behaviour. For indeed one may obtain a benefit at the expense of another man who suffers for it. "No one is afraid of touching fire with someone else's hand."<sup>40</sup> Some proverbs contain deep intuitions into the very psychology of interpersonal relations: Self and Others are related. "He who does not help his own self does not help others."<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2. *Deed*

There is strictly no equivalent, in Ethiopian written sapiential and philosophical literature, to what the Oromo proverbs mean by < *hodzi* > . < *Hodzi* > signifies first of all the accomplishment: not the promise only, not the conditional "if", not the good intention, but the real thing; the actual "deed", the realization in time and space of the promise or condition or intention. Evaluation and reward follow upon it.

In the second place, < *hodzi* > conveys more or less the idea of authenticity. The accomplishment is not enough; it must also be one's own, not someone else's. Otherwise one is reduced to one's original nakedness. It is usually in difficult times, when one is left to oneself, that the deed really springs from the depths of one's nature. Such a deed cannot be satisfied with words. It is an actualization of one's true potentialities, and comes forward with benefit for one's self.

"In return for an 'if I could give you a black horse."<sup>42</sup> "The old woman who wanted to re-enter the region of Wellega sat down and warmed herself in the sun."<sup>43</sup> Wellega is one of the most beautiful and rich regions of Oromo country; it is abundant in metals, crops and water. The etymology of the name says it well: "Between the rivers". This little old woman had good intentions, but what strength did she have to realize them, she who needs the sun to warm her old limbs?

"Never mind about the matter of this year; come and pull out my arm~"<sup>44</sup> It is said that a robber, who had entered a woman's house, thrust his arm into a vessel of grain, but could not pull it out again. The woman, who had been to the spring to draw water, came back, set down the large jug without noticing the thief and, as she was tired, exclaimed: "Oh, this unlucky year~" The thief burst out with the exclamation: "Never mind the unlucky year~ Do the real thing: pull out my arm." This proverb not only illustrates the Oromo notion of < *hodzi* > , but by the combination of dramatic character and humour, and the affective connotation of pity for the exhausted woman, and of amusement for the self-denouncement of the thief, perfectly exemplifies the anthological criterion of the selection which in the first section we have identified as "Multiple principles".

The intention does not make one a robber, but only the actual deed. "The eye does not steal things belonging to others."<sup>45</sup> The reward corresponds to action. "A drum sounds as loudly as it is beaten."<sup>46</sup> "The combatant is not praised while going to war, but after the battle."<sup>47</sup> Deeds prove one's manhood. It is after accomplishing something that one will be evaluated.

"One man's clothes do not cover someone else's nakedness."<sup>48</sup> Someone else's clothes will never solve your own nakedness. "Good night, good night~' and thus we are alone for the whole night."<sup>49</sup> All know how to greet people and many are generous in words; but then in difficult times, we are ordinarily left to ourselves. "To say: 'O poor fellow' does not appease hunger, but setting up the oven for baking bread does."<sup>50</sup> One should help the other not only in words but also in deeds. "The pot burns for the food it does not eat."<sup>51</sup> If you do something from which you derive no benefit, you are simply burning yourself.

### 3.3. Religion

From the viewpoint of an anthology, it is noteworthy that, although I have retained only five proverbs on religion out of the thirty-four of my original collection, these five represent each of the aspects of the theodicy in concrete language which these thirty-four make up: God's attributes; His relation to man; man's relation to God. I am not implying that the religion of the Oromo, as such, is a theodicy, in the sense, which is generally accepted today, of the ensemble of philosophical questions relative to the existence of God - not in the Leibnizian sense of a vindication of the justice of God in permitting evil to exist. If we disengage their abstract content from the metaphorical language of Oromo proverbs, then we delineate a kind of theodicy concerning God's nature (not His existence) and His relation to man, with the complementary aspect of man's relation to Him.

"Only God stands without a pole."<sup>52</sup> "God supporting himself without poles has extended the earth without pegs."<sup>53</sup> The comparison is with the hut or < *mana* > . In the first form of the proverb, it is said that God supports everything without Himself being supported. In the second form is added the idea of extending the earth. In the *Psalms* , it is said that Yahweh stretches "the heavens out like a tent."<sup>54</sup> Transcendence would be the abstract term corresponding to the concretely expressed nature of the divine being.

According to Oromo proverbs, what is it that comes from God? The Oromo know that what comes from Him, whether it is adversity or prosperity, is the best. The important thing is that one should go forth before God: to do otherwise is reprehensible. As < *Wak 'a* > means sky/or God, the greatest blessing falls from the sky down on earth, in particular under the form of rain. "Things that fall down from the sky surely come down on earth."<sup>55</sup>

These relations of the divine to the human are understood, traditionally, in the light of a communal religious experience, and not of a positive revelation.

Creatures depend for their whole being and operation upon God. Creatures are effected and affected essentially by God; God is not affected at all by creatures. Hence there is no real relation to the creatures on the part of God, while there is an essential and real relation to God on the part of creatures. How is this relation expressed in Oromo proverbs? It is experienced and expressed by a

total dependence on < *Wak 'a* > . "< *Wak 'a* > is there, therefore the sun rises."<sup>56</sup> "God's gift is better than that of man."<sup>57</sup> "God's gift is not heard."<sup>58</sup> What God gives, He gives without noise, that is, in a discreet way.

### 3.4. *Foolishness*

Oromo proverbs are very eloquent in all aspects of foolishness: its characterization, the description of the fool's behaviour and the consequences of foolishness: twenty nine proverbs in my total collection, or 0.03%. But if we come to proverbs which I consider worthy of an anthology for the reasons given in the first section, only six would be retained. Not only the number is reduced to one-fifth, but some aspects of foolishness, namely its consequences, are completely omitted.

Oromo proverbs put across the idea that foolishness is a disease, and wisdom, the cure. The fool is a donkey, and a blind one at that. He is obtuse, and fights to the end like a sheep. He is lazy, unable to see himself as he is; he has no judgement; his knowledge of things is utterly inadequate; he has no ways and means as the wise man has; he is envious of other men's understanding. Two proverbs characterize the fool most aptly: "The foolish person does not see himself for what he is until he has fallen."<sup>59</sup> "The milk has entered the stomach, but judgement has not entered."<sup>60</sup>

The main features of a fool's behaviour noted by the Oromo are his confusion, his instability, and his inability to adapt to water. The fool is confused in the perception of a situation. "Night is day for a fool."<sup>61</sup>

The fool's inability to remain stable in one dwelling place is described with some insistence. "The fool takes the grave for his home."<sup>62</sup>

The Oromo have underlined a special inability of the fool to cope with water. "The fool tries to empty the lake by drawing water from it"<sup>63</sup> "The fool was thirsty in the midst of water."<sup>64</sup>

### 3.5. *Death*

It is noteworthy that "Death" has not been considered as a "Notion" or "Theme" in the strict sense, because the total number of the proverbs devoted to this "Subject" is too low: only thirteen.

However, the number of proverbs worthy of an anthology is proportionately high. Everything takes place as if the quality of observations on death surpasses their quantity. What is it that has stricken the Oromo? It is first of all the inevitable, unforeseeable character of death; it reveals human nothingness, and leaves the deceased to his solitude.

"While the old cow lives, the calf dies."<sup>65</sup> < *Gurba* > literally means "the young in general, boys; calves; offspring." Here it is taken for "young calves", those that still pass the night in the master's hut, before being sent to the < *dalla* > , the common open sky enclosure. The proverb says that death sometimes spares the old and takes the young. Everything cannot be done as foreseen.

"When cows are about to go out, they lick one another; when men are about to die, they love one another."<sup>55</sup> This proverb, perfect in its parallelism, says that enmity does not matter any more in front of death.

"Until they die, they are as great as the seas."<sup>67</sup> "As long as one lives, one swims in the pond. However, when death comes, one shrinks."<sup>68</sup> Both proverbs express the same basic idea with the same basic image of water: each one values himself up to the day when he sees his nothingness -- on the day of his death.

"Living with people, but later being alone."<sup>69</sup> Once buried one is alone, says this proverb, even if one has been living with people all one's life. Here the rhythmic antithetic parallelism expresses a contrast which is deeply embedded in traditional thought.

### 3.6. Conformity

With the notion of "conformity" we are coming back to a theme abundantly represented, not only in Oromo proverbs, but in Ethiopian written philosophy: for indeed at the end of the 17th century or in early 18th century, the Ethiopian rationalist philosopher *Walda Heywat* devoted a whole chapter of his *Treatise* to social conformism which for him was linked up with the principle of creationism. Its consequence is that men, being creatures of the same God, should live among themselves as brothers in love and peace and mutual charity. If one does not conform to local customs, quarrels and endless evil speaking will follow. For the sake of mutual understanding, *Walda Heywat* proposes social conformism.<sup>70</sup>

In Oromo proverbs, no initial principle is given to social conformism, but it is presented in vivid colours; its importance and value are underlined; men are exhorted to abide by local customs, if they do not, all kinds of evil consequences follow.

Dance, singing, clothing afford apt imagery for conformity to others. "Shout like the people of the country."<sup>71</sup> Some of the images used to inculcate the value of conformity are very beautiful. "It is not the lamp but manners that give light to a home."<sup>72</sup>

As in *Walda Heywat* who gathered the idea from traditional wisdom in Ethiopia, it is recommended that one follow the customs of the new country one goes to. Hence social conformism is often presented as an exhortation to preserve the traditions. "Your deceased relative has left the traces of his sandals."<sup>73</sup>

However, whether one adapts to circumstances or not, customs remain the same. "Whether it rains or stops raining, the lentils have two eyes."<sup>74</sup> One must not imitate persons beyond one's power; this truth has given rise to one of the most delightful proverbs: "Through imitating people, the hen stoops to enter the door."<sup>76</sup>

### 3.7. *Danger*

"Danger" is not considered as a 'notion' in Oromo proverbs: only seven proverbs are classified under this topic; neither is it a theme anywhere else in written Ethiopian sapiential and philosophical literature. Yet four beautiful proverbs on this subject have been preserved in the anthology; it is not without reason that the allied notions of "Caution" and "Fear" group some fifty-eight proverbs.

The Oromo have been observant of the attraction-repulsion attitude towards danger; one fears it, and yet one braves it. "The dog that barks during the day does not bite."<sup>76</sup> "Fire burns the one who comes near it."<sup>77</sup> "The hyena has already gone by; the dog barks."<sup>78</sup> If well protected behind the house enclosure, dogs make an uproar at the nocturnal passage of hyenas and alert the masters; but if free and face to face with them, they stay secure. In the latter proverb the dog barks too late; the danger is already passed.

Danger is always a risk: one must not run into it, or else one will perish therein. "One does not carry meat on a hyena's back."<sup>79</sup>

### 3.8. *Discrimination*

In Oromo proverbs the notion of "discrimination" is always a positive value: hence the great number of proverbs it attributes to the merits of discernment and the smaller number of proverbs to the deficiency of its absence.

A wise man is called upon to make a great number of judgements; but if we limit our enquiry to the anthological proverbs I have retained, this discernment is limited to three cases: between what is good for one person and what is not necessarily good for another; between yesterday and today; between what is lucky for a tortoise and what is not for a cat. "The light in one house does not shine for another house."<sup>80</sup> "Yesterday cannot be today."<sup>81</sup> "The luck that God reserved for the tortoise, the cat cannot get."<sup>82</sup>

Hardly anything is said on discernment as such in Ethiopian written sapiential and philosophical literature. However, it is noted that conscience, *lebbuna*, whose root is the very word for "heart", endows man with the dignity of knowledge and the capacity of distinguishing between good and evil.<sup>83</sup>

Lack of discrimination is considered a serious shortcoming. "Light is light for the house, but it consumes itself."<sup>84</sup> There are people who are unable to distinguish between a proposed course of action which is good for others but not for themselves.

### 3.9. *Ignorance*

The proverbs on ignorance which I have retained for this anthology stress two aspects: the ridiculousness of incompetence and the risk and difficulty of the unknown. "'Learn~' exclaimed the cock that gave kicks to the horse."<sup>85</sup> A cock is ridiculous if, while scratching in the stable, it tries to teach a horse how to kick: the horse is already competent in that skill~ A man is no less ridiculous if he wants to base his case on arguments about which he is entirely ignorant. Incompetence is indeed childish. "Children take the moon's light for that of the sun."<sup>86</sup> It is the equivalent of a physical handicap. "The ignorant person is like someone deprived of fingers."<sup>87</sup>

The difficulty of the unknown has been expressed in one of the most vivid metaphors of the whole collection: "An unknown country is full of reeds and unknown things are full of sweat."<sup>88</sup>

### 3.10. *Consequence, Misfortune, Quarrel*

When we come to the lowest level in the principles of classification: the frequency of three anthological proverbs for each subject, the number of gems for each subject is so rare that they do not enter into any "Notion" or "Theme": we may consider that we have reached the basement in our classification. Below it, there is but a minimal representation of two proverbs,<sup>89</sup> or even of one proverb<sup>90</sup> per subject.

"What has been blown away is not found again."<sup>91</sup> Such is the natural consequence of being blown away, although in some condition the Oromo proverb, like the Amharic one, has identified man with quarrel: "A man comes, a quarrel comes."<sup>99</sup>

## 4. *Conclusion*

An anthology is necessarily incomplete by its very nature: it is a selection, to a great extent motivated by subjective criteria. Yet this limited anthology of Oromo proverbs has given an idea of the multiplicity of principles of selection involved: depth of thought; psychological insights; literary beauty resulting from imagery, rhythm, dramatic character, concision; humour; affective connotation, and simplicity. The anthology also evokes another multiplicity, that of the subjects that are touched upon: thirty-one.

But multiplicity, of whatever type it may be, is not all: the proverb is much more linked to *unity* than to multiplicity. The type of logic that these proverbs express: figurative logic, is related to man as he attempts to find his place in the world. For the proverb summons up affectivity, and it is essentially social. There is therefore for the human being a domain where figurative thought is more adapted than conceptual thought. There is no question of the former taking the place of the latter. There are, however, human and social realities which conceptual logic cannot apprehend. It is useless to think that this type of symbolic logic will disappear: that would be the equivalent of reducing man to the state of a robot, unable to freely situate himself in the universe.

These two types of thought are linked together: trying to formulate a unitive vision of the world, man utilizes his knowledge of the nature of things in a conceptual logic. Thus he knows the *why* of things.

But, either because his knowledge of the nature of things is limited, or because he needs to express realities which escape this knowledge (affectivity, society), his world view will be inclined to organize itself from these similitudes. He knows what things are like.

In both cases, the dualities of the world are unified by the human mind: the concept accounts for the profound unity of things. The symbol mediates diversity by relating it to a known and approved unity. How the Oromo have achieved this unity through the diversity of the world is what this anthology of proverbs attempts to portray.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Proverb 501
2. See Claude Sumner, **The Philosophy of Man, Volume II From Kant to the Situation in 1963**, p. 131. Addis Ababa, Central Printing Press 1974.
3. Proverb 310
4. Proverb 311
5. Proverb 530
6. Proverb 892
7. Proverb 637
8. Proverb 351
9. Proverb 428
10. Proverb 502
11. Proverb 236
12. Proverb 733
13. Proverb 370
14. Proverb 498

15. Proverb 615
16. Proverb 376
17. Proverb 429
18. Proverb 538
19. Proverb 561
20. Proverb 624
21. Onesimus Nesib, **The Galla Spelling Book** (in Oromo, p.66, No.3. Moncullo near Massowah, Swedish Mission Press, 1894. Enrico Cerulli, "The Folk-Literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia." **Harvard African Studies** , Vol.3, **Varia Africana** 3 (1922) p. 191, No. 3. Angelo Miz`zi, **I Proverbi Galla** (Prima Serie), p. 21, No. 100; p. 28, No. 158. Malta-Valletta, Tipografia del "Malta", 1935. Kabbada Ferrisa, ed., **Kana Beketa?** (in Oromo). Lesson I, No. 1 (1/6/61 E.C.; 8 February 1969 G.C.) p. 2, No. 3. Lesson II, No. 2 (30 Furma/Tahasas 1962 E.C., 8 January 1970) p. 3. Lesson II, No. 2 (30 Furma/Tahammed Korran, "Oromo Proverbs (Part 2)". **Journal of Ethiorello**, "Proverbi galla (quarta serie)". **Rassegna di Studi Etiopici**. Vol. 24 (1979) p. 49, No. 228.
22. Proverb 226
23. Proverb 130
24. Proverb 95
25. Proverb 918
26. Proverb 780
27. I have also done the same for my anthology of Ethiopic written "philosophy". See **The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man**, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1986. p. 81.
28. Proverb 546

29. Proverb 584

30. Caution, pp. 95, 130; Crime, pp. 226, 236; Desire, pp. 310, 311; Disparity, p. 352; Enemy, p. 370; Error, p. 376; Fear, pp. 428, 429; Health, pp. 498, 501; Heart, p. 501; Home, p. 502; Hypocrisy, p. 530; Inconsequence, p. 538; Inconsistency, p. 546; Independence, p. 561; Inevitableness, p. 584; Knowledge, pp. 615, 624, 637; Ostentation, p. 733; sorrow, p. 892; speaking, p. 918.

31. Proverb 59

32. Proverb 58

33. Proverb 52

34. Proverb 46

35. Proverb 68

36. Proverb 50

37. Proverb 72

38. Proverb 38

39. Proverb 39

40. Proverb 56

41. Proverb 67

42. Proverb 303

43. Proverb 305

44. Proverb 304

45. Proverb 298

46. Proverb 297

47. Proverb 293

48. Proverb 292

49. Proverb 301
50. Proverb 302
51. Proverb 291
52. Proverb 819-a
53. Proverb 819-b
54. Psalm 104:2
55. Proverb 828
56. Proverb 835
57. Proverb 817
58. Proverb 818
59. Proverb 460
60. Proverb 466
61. Proverb 441
62. Proverb 457
63. Proverb 459
64. Proverb 468
65. Proverb 276
66. Proverb 277
67. Proverb 281
68. Proverb 288
69. Proverb 286

70. See **The Treatise of Walda Heywat**, Chapter XV. The complete text of this chapter is given in C. Sumner, **Ethiopian**

**Philosophy, Vol. III, The Treatise of Zar>a Ya<eqob and of Walda Heywat, Text and Authorship.** Printed for Addis Ababa University by Commercial Printing Press, 1976 pp. 41 - 42. An explanation of his "social conformism" is given in Vol. III, an Analysis, pp. 228 - 30. Also printed for Addis Ababa University by Commercial Printing Press in 1978.

71. Proverb 186

72. Proverb 180

73. Proverb 174

74. Proverb 184

75. Proverb 178

76. Proverb 266

77. Proverb 267

78. Proverb 268

79. Proverb 269

80. Proverb 336

81. Proverb 344

82. Proverb 342

83. See C. Sumner, **Ethiopian Philosophy, Vol. I, The Book of the Wise Philosophers.** Addis Ababa, Central Printing Press, 1974 p. 246.

84. Proverb 337

85. Proverb 527-B

86. Proverb 531-B

87. Proverb 529-B

88. Proverb 533-B

89. Abuse, pp. 10, 11; Advice, pp. 14, 16; Beginning, pp. 80, 84; Charity, pp. 151, 161; Courage, pp. 194, 201; Discourtesy, pp. 325, 329; Exaggeration, pp. 383, 386; Failure, pp. 397, 404; Falsehood, pp. 408, 409; Power, pp. 777, 779; Riches, p. 849; Time, pp. 941, 944; Victory, pp. 1012, 1013.
90. Abundance, p. 5; Anger, p.19; Appearances, p. 25; Begging, p. 78; Character, p. 142; Consistency, p. 193; Concupiscence, p. 195; Contentedness, p. 196; Courtesy, p. 206; Dependence, p. 307; Diplomacy, p. 313; Familiarity, p. 415; Happiness, p. 488; Haste, p. 494; Humility, p. 515; Husband, p. 519; Illness, p. 534-B; Ingratitude, p. 590; Mother, p. 691; Old age, p. 703; Persistence, p. 759; Secret, p. 864; Slowness, p. 890; Theft, p. 938; Unexpectedness, p. 968; Untrustworthiness, p. 974; Utility, p. 992; Work, p. 1054.
91. Proverb 188
92. Proverb 189
93. Proverb 191
94. Proverb 681
95. Proverb 688
96. Proverb 685
97. Proverb 791
98. Proverb 793
99. Proverb 792