

African Egalitarian Values and Indigenous Genres: The
Functional and Contextual Studies of Oromo Oral Literature in a
Contemporary Perspective

Ph.D. Dissertation

By

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PREFACE

In order for oral literary studies in Africa to make sense, it is always necessary to have insight into, and a feeling for, aspects of African experience and cultural life, which transcend the work itself and are the foundation for successful research. This kind of approach in the broadest sense implies that oral literary criticism should take into account everything within the societies that can lead to realistic investigation. It is probably more rewarding to try to trace the literary sensibility and aesthetic quality of African oral tradition from history, the established values and identities. Until the late 1960s, African indigenous literature was studied exclusively by traditional anthropologists and understood as casual utterance rather than being discussed in terms of aesthetic roots and national character. Such inadequate attempt not only limited oral tradition to the mythical level, but also separated the artists from the nature and substance of their work. We are still confronted with many problems and wrong impressions left by old anthropologists and formalist theoreticians.

When I say the Oromo oral narrative tradition is the representation of objective reality, I am referring to the practical function of each genre within the context of the daily life of the society. This means, each literary form is the result of what the society has experienced in the process of struggling for survival. It directly reflects problems, glorious times, behaviours, aspirations, identity, attitudes, ideology and values. This is discussed in terms of poetic character and socio-political situations (meta-communication). I have made clear that the non-literary and non-academic approach to folk-literature cannot give the succeeding generation an insight into fundamental creative spirit.

Oral literary studies become effective only if a peculiar context in which the deep structure or abstract narrative that has been continuously created by an individual performer is closely examined by a researcher. Without disregarding that there are general cultural conventions operating in the Oromo tradition to which folk-literature is subject, I have preferred to concentrate on giving more attention to re-creativity which the oral narrator has drawn in the scene of his/her performance to

achieve the intended social meaning. What makes oral literary studies so problematic is that the oral material is organized in a form of complex interpretive range of discourse and performance structures. Many literary scholars are unable to address the issue of making broad alternatives that can create new interests which enable them to make a shift of emphasis from traditional discourse to more possible linguistic patterning and findings. In this regard, I am guided by a pragmatic approach and problematic oriented considerations in the analysis of every genre. If a writer or folklorist scholar adheres to the traditional stereotypes and is convinced by an attitude of inequality, he or she may end up with negativity; and in this case, it is likely that lack of expanding appreciation of oral art disfigures the creative power of an individual performer. The ultimate goal of pursuing folklore studies must be directed toward comprehending the role of language in the conduct and constitution of social life. For the effective study of literary culture, there should be the liberation of scholarly vision from an abstractionist tone and the narrow constraints of an old model towards a broad frame of reference and new trends of the recognition of structural continuities. The contextual and functional study of the oral tradition is always recommendable simply because such an approach guides us to the view that verbal genres are the collective possessions of a society; and in this perspective, there is a possibility of recognizing its active role as identity marker.

In the treatment of literary tradition, as we do in the criticism of modern fiction, one of the major issues to be addressed is the interplay between linguistics and literary criticism and bringing the two related disciplines together within a broader range of national and international situations. For a theory of literary criticism to be adequate and effective, it should give an account of the nature of a particular work of art and provide readers with a framework of analysis and mode of evaluation. In stylistic terms, the artistic effect of any literary language is tested by what its particular scheme of concepts allows us to say in a practical criticism. The term practical here refers to the realistic approach which involves the analysis of constituent elements, sets out what is exactly to be evaluated in terms of history, culture, themes, subject-matter, aesthetics and attitudes.

In the context of the interest of a humane society, not only of a society and mankind as such, but of a free society and mankind, the interesting quality of the Oromo literary tradition is that it serves as a medium of all kinds of educative discourses that help perpetuate the continuity of the binding common ethos of a pluralistic democracy. The prose narratives and poems have been carefully preserved throughout generations merely because they contain the records of the whole

body of knowledge and valuable deeds that justify the people's sense of collective glory, identity, dignity, social justice (free social life), liberty and the fundamental cultural values which ensure social solidarity. The unique characteristics of Oromo oral literature is that it encompasses qualities that we find in all democratic cultures and the open-ended narrative techniques which contain egalitarian ideals give us more space for comparative analysis. In this study, I have made efforts to examine various problems, instructive moral issues, social and political concerns raised by traditional Oromo poetics within local, national and international contexts. Though the preoccupation of every society may differ depending on its peculiar characteristics, we need to make tireless efforts to project the beauty of all cultures and literatures so that we can overcome the differences for bad. "Though the vagaries of global politics have so painfully shaken our faith in universal ideals, there is still room for an honest observation of two ways of life that impress us by the degree to which they mirror each other" (Okpewho, 1979: 242). The burden of explaining the beauty of human cultures, traditions and literatures rests with writers and scholars who see diversity as the centre of fascination and pleasure. Every time I compare Oromo oral literary narrative with others, I have endeavoured to reflect the positive image that can bring us together.

Like the religious crises in England during the mid-Victorian period, after the conquest of Oromiyaa in the 1880s, cultural confusion debilitated Oromo national feelings; and I think the language of literary culture can energize the fragile harmonious life and social solidarity. The Oromo dreams and basic principles that have been dislocated may be revived if the oral tradition is constructed as an academic subject to minimize and/or alleviate cultural crises. As part of the *Gadaa* tradition, oral literary narrative usually deals with the significant national issues that reflect Oromo values. I often stress the importance of studying Oromo literary tradition in its own right because it is a tool for preserving and enhancing social, cultural, and moral riches, which empower the people to have a greater control over their lives.

In order to discuss the Oromo oral literature as a field of scholarship and make some important new discoveries, we need to have useful sources and/or basic research tools which help us develop intellectual curiosity about the subject. Since this is a newly emerging field of research in the 'Federal State' of Oromiyaa, it is hard to find specialist intellectuals who are trained in the field of oral literary studies. I have made explicit that a lot of people tried to collect this body of literary culture, but it is hardly possible to find any Oromo scholar who has treated this corpus of narrative

as academic subject and field of scholarship. The problem of a comprehensive research work in this field of study shows that every researcher is obliged to start from scratch. He/she makes a long journey and invests unnecessary energy to put together and interpret the corpus of literature in a new fashion. In general, the scarcity of authentic documentation and lack of a broad range of reliable research sources have been one of the serious challenges I have witnessed in the course of writing this project. It is, therefore, so vital to develop a new research strategy (method) that can address aesthetic principles and guide scholars to acquire profound knowledge concerning the broader issues of the theory and practice of oral literary narrative. In dealing with Oromo oral narrative tradition, I have used both primary and secondary sources. As far as the former is concerned, I have largely depended on my own personal observation over years, together with the recorded materials of Tashite A. Adema, Wariyo, Kedir and Gaaddisa. In the treatment of the first part of this work (cultural tradition), Tufa A. Adema co-operated with me as informant. As regards the secondary sources, I have relied on several published and unpublished materials, especially African oral literature.

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I would like to thank the staff members of the Asian-Africa Institute Library of Hamburg University and Sønderborg Library personnel who have tirelessly co-operated with me by making all the documents and essential sources available to me. I am particularly indebted to the library personnel of Kolding and Sønderborg Universities whose genuine co-operation enabled me to get access to many relevant references.

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A Note on Transcription

There are the original texts written in the Oromo language (Oromiffa), which are difficult for non-natives. In order to minimize the problem of pronunciation, I have transcribed Oromiffa orthography and the sound system on the basis of “International Phonetic Alphabet” (IPA).

I. The Vowel

(A). Short Vowel Sound

The orthographically “*non-geminated*” vowels are pronounced as ‘*short*.’

a /ä/ = central open vowel; neutral posture of lips. It is pronounced as /ʌ/ or /ə/.

- arba /ʌ'rbə or ärbä/ → elephant
- bara /bʌrə or bärä/ → year

e /ě/ = half-open front vowel; half-spread lips. It is pronounced as /e/ or /ɛ/

- Ebla /eblə or ěblä/ → April
- edana /e'dʌnə or ědänä/ → tonight

i /ĩ or ɪ/ = half-open front vowel; spread lips. It is pronounced as /ɪ/

- isa /'ɪsə or ĩsă/ → he
- ĩbsa /ɪbsə or ĩbsă/ → explanation, verification

o /ɔ/ = half-open back vowel; rounded lips. It is pronounced as /o/ or /ɔ/.

- orma /ɔ'mə or örmă/ → alien
- ona /ɔnə or önä/ → empty house

u /ũ/ = close back vowel; rounded lips. It is pronounced as /u/.

- ulee /uleɪ or ũlē/ → stick
- umrii /'um'riɪ or ũmrī/ → age

(B). Long Vowel Sound

If the vowels are “*geminated or doubled* orthographically,” their sounds are always ‘long.’

aa / aː or ā= central open vowel; neutral posture of the lips. It is pronounced as /aː/

- gaala /'gaːlə or gālǎ/ → camel
- karaaa /kʌ'raː or kārā/ → road, path, street

ee / eː or ē= open front vowel; half-spread lips. It is pronounced as /eː/ or /ɛː/

- eegi /'eːgɪ or ēgī/ → wait
- eebbā /'eːbbə or ēbbǎ/ → blessing

ii / iː or ī= half-open front vowel; spread lips. It is pronounced as /iː/.

- biifuu /'biː'fuː or bīfū/ → spray
- doonii /'dɔːniː or dōnī/ → ship

oo / ɔː or ō= open back vowel; rounded lips. It is pronounced as /ɔː/ or /oː/.

- looni /'lɔːni or lōnī/ → cattle
- goota /'gɔːtə or gōtǎ/ → brave

uu / ū or uː= close back vowel; rounded lips. It is pronounced as /uː/.

- fuula /'fuːlə or fūlǎ/ → face
- duula /'duːlə or dūlǎ/ → campaign, expedition

II. The Consonant: Digraphic and Non-digraphic Representations

The “*geminated*” (doubled) consonants are always ‘*heavily stressed*.’

- tokko /'tɔkkɔ or tōkkō/ → one
- ganna /'gʌnnə or gǎnnǎ/ → winter
- amma /ʌmmə or ämmǎ/ → now

- madda /mʌddə or mǎddǎ/ → source

(A). Non-digraphic Representation

c /c'/ = as in caasaa /'c'a:sa:/ → structure

- alveopalatal
- glottalized

q /k'/ = as in qaama /'k'a:mə/ → body

- uvular
- voiceless glottalized stop

x /t'/ = as in xaarii /'t'a:ri:/ → effort, endeavour, labouring hard

- dental
- voiced stop

(B). Digraphic Representation

ch /tʃ/ = as in bakkalcha /bʌ'kkəltʃə/ → full moon

- alveopalatal
- voiceless affricative

dh /d'/ = as in haadha /'ha:d'ə/ → mother

- alveolar
- voiced stop

ny /ñ/ = as in nyaara /'ña:rə/ → eyebrow(s)

- alveopalatal
- nasal stop

ph /p'/ = as in hirpha /hirp'ə/ → donation

- bilabial
- voiceless stop

sh /ʃ/ = as in shakkii /ʃə'kki: or ʃǎ'kkī/ → suspicion, doubt

- alveopalatal
- voiceless fricative

Explanation for phonological Properties of Folklore

The Standard Feet

1. *Iambic* = A light/weak syllable followed by a *heavy/stronger* syllable (unstressed + stressed = $\sim + \text{'}$)
2. *Anapestic* = Two light syllables followed by a heavy syllable (unstressed + unstressed + stressed = $\sim + \sim + \text{'}$)
3. *Trochaic* = A heavy syllable followed by a light syllable (stressed + unstressed = $\text{' } + \sim$)
4. *Dactylic* = A heavy syllable followed by two light syllables (stressed + unstressed + unstressed = $\text{' } + \sim + \sim$)
5. *Spondaic* = A heavy syllable followed by another heavy syllable (stressed + stressed = $\text{' } + \text{'}$)
6. *Rising Metre* = A heavy syllable at the beginning with long/extra-long sound followed by a light syllable having long/extra-long sound

For further understanding of long and short sounds, see note on transcription (p. xi).

Types of Feet

1. Rhythmic feet with one branch = *Unary feet*
2. Rhythmic feet with two branches = *Binary feet*
3. Rhythmic feet with three branches = *Ternary feet*

In the context of the rhyming verses, the three types of feet also represent the pattern of prominence in Oromiffa pronunciation. This means the syllables in a word are not all pronounced with the same degree of being noticeable in the level of stress. They vary in *emphasis*, *length* and *tone* of voice or *pitch* (see proverbs and folk songs).

Metric Feet (Poetic Measure)

1. Rhythmic feet having two syllables = *Double Meter*
2. Rhythmic feet having three syllables = *Triple meter*
3. Rhythmic feet having more than three syllables = *Multiple Meter*

The Sign/symbol

An asterisk (*) I have placed in front of the chorus stands for 'repeating two times.'

A Brief Account of the Oromo and Oromiyaa

The People and History

The Cushitic Oromo constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa, and are approximately 32,000,000- of the 73,908,000 inhabitants of Ethiopia. With the exception of Begemdir and Tigray, they inhabit all the regions (provinces) of the country. They make up the largest proportion in Arsii, Bale, Hararge, Shawa, Wallegga, Wollo, Ilu-Abbabor, and Kafa; but they constitute the minority in Gamu Gofa, Gojjam and Kenya (see the map).

Following the power shift of the 1880s, the name “Oromo” vanished and was replaced by the derogatory term “Galla.” The Oromo have been called by this fabricated name nearly for a century, though the natives have not called themselves so. Huntingford (1955: 9) who witnessed the shifting of discourse of the post-conquest period has pointed out that the origin of this unrelated term was uncertain. Moreover, the destructive land-holding system of several decades and the imposition of the *gabbaar* (serfdom) relegated the rural population to landlessness. It was during the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 that the Oromo got back their true name and their land though marginalization continued.

The Oromo have developed a complex socio-political and ritualistic system (the *Gadaa*) in which the male members of the society are organized on the basis of age groups (*hiriyyaa*). This ritualized egalitarian system had effectively been in use in Oromiyaa for the last 587 years (1300-1887); but it came to an end when Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia took political upper hand and empowered warlords and landed gentry.

Genealogically, the Oromo refer their origin to two great ancestors; namely “*Borena*” and “*Barentumma*,” and these lines of ancestors or ancestral divisions characterize the cultural and national identity of the nation. Like other black Africans, the Oromo people have inhabited the Horn of Africa for as long as recorded history-that is from time immemorial and are indigenous to Africa.

The Families and Social Structure

The Oromo are known for their solid social and cultural ties and corporate identities. Besides the material and ideal interests characterized by corporate affiliations, most activities in the society are carried out on a highly organized co-operative basis.

Like other Sub-Saharan Africans, the majority Oromo reside in scattered homesteads or thatched houses; and the basic unit is the patrilineal extended nuclear family unit. Next to the family are relatives (*fira*), neighbours (*ollaa*), lineage (*balbala or qomoo*), community (*ganda*) and clan (*gosa*) are important social networks. All these social groups act as the corporate identity- that is, as the collective image in which all the members share common interests and values. The lineage groups not only work to bring about the welfare of the society and locate Oromo with respect to one another, but also to take action as corporate bodies so as to protect the collective interests and benefits of the society. They are agents of social, cultural and moral control over their members.

In every community, the senior men, especially the *hayyuus* (wise men) often hold meetings to settle dispute, discuss offences and determine punishments when an individual or a group has committed an offence within a community. They also debate on the day-to-day social, political and economic affairs. The *Gadaa* cultural tradition emphasizes the importance of checking everyday problems in the society; and hence negotiations and reconciliations are often carried out by the prominent figures and leaders who are elected by the community.

The Oromo are both polygamous and monogamous. The Christians are monogamous whereas the Muslims and those who hold the traditional religion (*waaqeffataa*) are monogamous and/or polygamous. Almost all the educated sections of Muslims and the followers of traditional religion are monogamous.

The Oromo marriage does not often end in conflict and divorce simply because sharp contradictions between the couples rarely occur. The relation between the families is more friendly and harmonious. Though deference among the members is observable, we do not see the conservative type of deference, which instead of true respect and love may create superordinate positions and fear. Though the totalitarian regimes of years, especially the uncultured communist way of life of 17 years have eroded the harmonious life of the society, the Oromo families are generally stable.

Language

The Oromo people speak ‘Oromiffa,’ a language that belongs to the extensive family of the Cushitic languages. The name ‘Cushitic’ is derived from “*Nubia*” or “*Cush*,” that is, the Biblical term for ancient Ethiopia or ‘Africa South of the Sahara.’ The Oromo language, *Oromiffa*, is akin to the eastern Cushitic group of languages: Saho, Afar, Konso and Somali. It is the mother tongue of the majority of the population in eight provinces of Oromiyaa: Shawa, Arsii, Hararge, Bale, Wallegga, Ilu-Abbabor, Wollo, and Jimma. It is natively spoken by the minority Oromo in Kenya and three other provinces; namely Gamu Gofa, Sidamo and Gojjam. Generally, the major Oromo dialects fall into four groups: southern (Borana, Arsii, Shawa), eastern (Hararge), western (Wallegga, Ilu-Abbabor, Jimma) and northern (Wollo). Like other indigenous African languages, Oromiffa is written in “Latin Script.” “With the exception of a small minority who adopted Amharic as their language, Oromo speak a mutually intelligible language of their own” (Sumner, 1995: 32).

The Land, Climate and the Economy

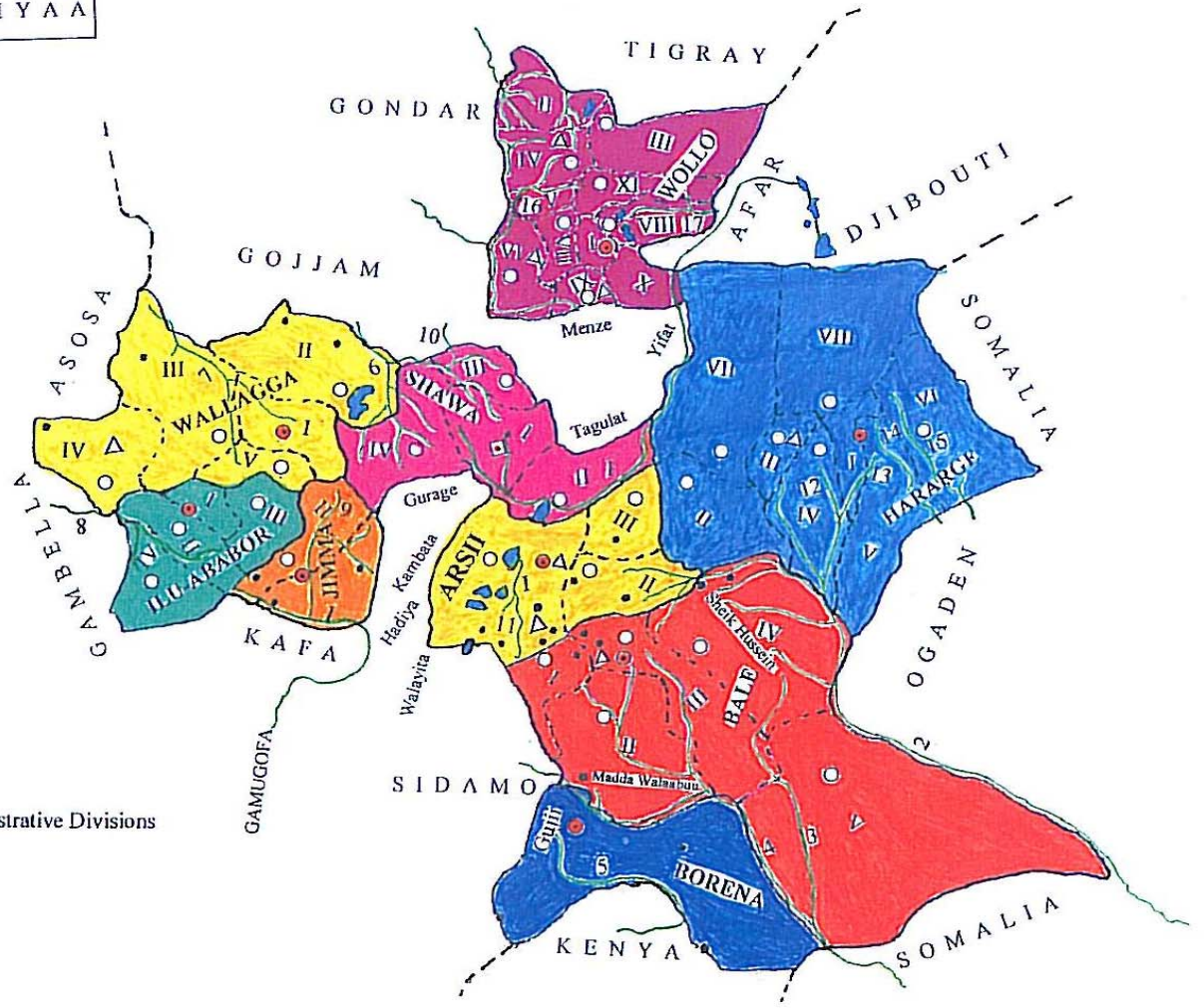
After the crumbling of the communist regime of Mengistu Haile-Mariam in 1991, *Biyya Oromoo*, Oromiyaa (Oromo homeland), became a ‘Federal State’ having its own regional President. This happened when the American government put pressure on the current minority regime of Ethiopia to give cultural and political space to the marginalized peoples in the country. Oromiyaa covers about 600,000 square miles, and this is nearly more than half of the 1,133,380 square kilometres of the present land area of Ethiopia. It is located approximately between 2 degrees and 12 degrees North, and between 34 degrees and 44 degrees East. Geographically, *Oromiyaa* consists of chains of mountain ranges and rift valleys in the centre and the north, and flat grassland in most of the lowlands and semi-lowlands of the west, east and south. Oromiyaa is one of the largest and richest lands in the Horn of Africa. “Much of the country’s best land is Oromo land” (Sumner, 1995: 29). Traditional agricultural production, including the raising of livestock, is the most characteristic form of Oromo economy. Due to its favourable climate and rich soil, almost all kinds

of cereal crops, cash crops, fruits and vegetables are cultivated. Coffee is the main cash crop. Besides cash crops, minerals are the major sources of revenue for the Oromo. Some of the minerals include gold, iron-ore, silver, sulphur and platinum. Of these, gold is mined in large quantities. Food crops include barley, wheat, pea, bean, xaafii (xeef), soya bean, millet, sorghum, maize, lentil, nuts, false banana and others. The larger species of African birds and wildlife are also native to Oromiyaa.

The climate of Oromiyaa varies mainly according to the degree of elevation. The tropical zone below approximately 1,830 metres has an annual average of temperature of about 27⁰c. The sub-tropical zone which includes most of the semi-highland areas is between 1,830 and 2,440 metres in elevation. It has an average temperature of about 22⁰c. Above 2,440 metres approximately, there is a temperate zone with an average temperature of about 16⁰c. The winter season is between June and late August. The summer season occurs between December and late February. The spring season covers September, October and November; and the autumn season starts in March and lasts till the end of May.








The great variations in elevation are directly reflected in the kinds of vegetation. The lowland areas of the tropical zone have sparse vegetation consisting of desert shrubs, thorn bushes and coarse savannah grasses. In the valleys, almost every form of African vegetation grows in profusion. The temperate zones or semi-lowland areas are largely covered with grasslands; whereas Afro-alpine vegetation is found on the highest slopes or mountains.

OROMIYAA



Map 1: Administrative Divisions

Explanation for the Map

-  -----Capital city
-  -----Provincial capital
-  -----District Towns
-  -----Other Towns
-  -----Lakes and Dams
-  -----Peaks (Mountains)
-  -----Rivers
- 1-17 -----Names of rivers

BALE

Districts

- I. Genale IV. Wabe
- II. Dallo V. Elkarre
- III. Mandoyu

ARSII

Districts

- I. Cilao (Chilalo)
- II. Xicho
- III. Arba Guugu

HARARGE

Districts

- I. Harar V. Gursum
- II. Habbri VI. Jijjiga
- III Wobarra VII. Chercher & Gaara Gurracha
- IV. Gaaramulata VIII. Dire Dawa

SHAWA**Districts**

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| I. Menagesha | III. Selale |
| II. Yerer Kereyu | IV. Jibaat & Mecha |

WOLLO**Districts**

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| I. Dese | VII. Warra Himeno |
| II. Waag | VIII. Ambasel |
| III. Rayya and Azebo | IX. Warra Ilu |
| IV. Lasta | X. Qaallu |
| V. Wadla Delanta | XI. Yejju |
| VI. Borena | |

WALLAGGA**Districts**

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|
| I. Naqamte | III. Gimbi | V. Arjo |
| II. Horo Guduru | IV. Qeellam | |

ILU-ABBABOR**Districts**

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| I. Sor and Gabba | III. Buno Baddalle |
| II. Gore | IV. Mocha |

JIMMA**Districts**

- | |
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| I. Jimma |
| II. Limu |

RIVERS

1. Awaas (Awash)
2. Wabe Shabele
3. Weyib
4. Ganale
5. Dawa
6. Guder
7. Dhedhessa
8. Baro
9. Gibe
10. Muger
11. Bulbulaa
12. Gobebe
13. Erer
14. Fafen
15. Jerjer
16. Bashilo
17. Mile