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Introduction to Qafar Oral Literature

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Abstract:

Background: Qafar oral literature remains an important but insufficiently systematized field within Afar linguistic and cultural studies. Although the Afar people have long recognized and practiced rich oral genres, the category of "literature" has not always been discussed through a single indigenous term.

Objective: This paper aims to define Qafar oral literature and to classify its principal traditional and modern genres through an analysis grounded in Afar linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Method: The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach based on the author's native-speaker expertise, textual interpretation, and review of existing oral and written materials on Afar literary forms.

Major Findings: The analysis shows that Qafar oral literature is composed of a diverse and highly structured set of genres, including children's rhymes, storytelling, riddles, oral communication and news exchange, proverbs, prayers, and oral poetry. It also demonstrates that modern forms such as songs, drama, novels, and journalistic writing have emerged alongside traditional oral forms. The study further shows that concepts such as repetition, rhythm, performance, and social interaction are central to the Afar understanding of literature.

Conclusion: Qafar oral literature constitutes a dynamic cultural system that preserves historical memory, social values, aesthetic expression, and indigenous knowledge. Its documentation and scholarly analysis are essential for the preservation and development of Afar cultural heritage.

Keywords

Qafar-Af, Afar, oral literature, orality, oral tradition, poetry, sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction

The expression *oral literature*, coined in 1881 by the French scholar Paul Sébillot to designate orality in general and African oral art in particular, has been regarded as contradictory by scholars such as G. Calame-Griaule. The objection arises from the fact that the Latin term *literatura*, from which the word *literature* is derived, originally refers to "writing." In oral literature, however, writing is precisely absent.

Nevertheless, scholars such as F. N. Ablemagnon (1968), Louis-Vincent Thomas (1960, 1969), Maurice Harris (1971), and Honorat Aguessy (1997) argue that orality in general, and African societies in particular, are characterized not merely by the absence or marginalization of writing, but also by systems of performance and behavior adapted to specific social contexts. These systems are no less meaningful than those of literate civilizations and are often richer in content and diversity than many cultural experiences based primarily on writing.

Oral literature may be defined as the aesthetic expression of a people's social values through vocal performance, transmitted from generation to generation. It relies on artistic and pleasing forms of expression, generally well structured and fluid, enriched by refined sounds and the continuous development of the language's phonetic and rhythmic qualities.

Other scholars, such as Lyliane Kesteloot, describe oral literature as both ancient and continuously active. According to her, African epics may be compared to the creations of the troubadours that captivated medieval Europe.

In Africa, oral literature is traditionally the oldest, most abundant, most widespread, and most familiar form of literary expression. Every African language possesses a rich repertoire of stories, songs, and oral narratives, while some of the continent's oldest epics date back to the thirteenth century. There is no African country without oral literature, just as there is no ethnic community that lacks an oral literary tradition.

Viewed as a whole, oral literature encompasses all aspects of society. Preserved and transmitted orally from generation to generation, it constitutes an immense cultural heritage and serves as a mirror of collectively shared values. It has sometimes been described as a form of "rural cinema" because it provides entertainment during evenings and harvest seasons, while also accompanying physical labor and everyday activities.

Oral literature can therefore be understood both as a social practice and as an artistic expression. It emerges from the circumstances of daily life—work, leisure, and emotional experience. It is closely connected to the performing arts, as some genres combine vocal expression with

gestures, dance, and other bodily movements. Within oral traditions, rhythm serves as the principal medium of communication. Aesthetic considerations are always central: beauty of form and content, emotional resonance through rhythm and melody, and balance in structure and meter. Consequently, audiences often listen to oral literary performances with greater attention than they give to ordinary speech.

Like millions of people across Africa, the Afar are traditionally a non-literate people with a rich heritage of unwritten literature. Oral literature forms an integral part of their daily life, work, leisure, and emotional expression. It is closely associated with artistic performance, as certain genres combine voice, gesture, movement, and other forms of bodily expression. As in many oral cultures, rhythm remains the principal medium of communication and artistic creation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore, document, and classify the major genres of Qafar oral literature. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding cultural expressions, oral traditions, indigenous literary forms, and their social functions within Afar society. The research sought to provide a systematic description and interpretation of oral literary genres rather than to test hypotheses or quantify literary phenomena.

2.2 Sources of Data

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data were derived from the author's extensive native-speaker knowledge of the Afar language (Qafar-af), cultural experiences, and familiarity with oral literary traditions practiced within Afar communities. Secondary data were obtained from published and unpublished materials related to Afar oral literature, including books, journal articles, cultural magazines, dictionaries, folklore collections, manuscripts, and previous linguistic and anthropological studies.

Particular attention was given to documented works on Afar oral poetry, storytelling, riddles, proverbs, prayers, oral communication systems, and modern literary forms. Relevant scholarly works by Morin, Parker, Andrzejewski, Hayward, and other researchers were reviewed to provide contextual and comparative insights.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a comprehensive review of existing literature and documentary sources. Oral literary texts, narratives, poems, proverbs, riddles, prayers, and other traditional forms were identified and compiled from available publications and cultural records. Additional information was drawn from the author's direct observations and personal experiences as a native speaker and participant in Afar cultural practices.

The collected materials were organized according to literary genres and subgenres. Both traditional and modern literary forms were included to provide a comprehensive overview of Qafar literature.

2.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic and descriptive content analysis. Literary forms were examined based on their linguistic characteristics, performance features, cultural functions, thematic content, and social significance. Similar literary forms were grouped into categories and subcategories to establish a systematic classification of Qafar oral literature.

The analysis also considered structural elements such as rhythm, repetition, meter, dialogue, symbolism, and oral performance techniques. Comparative interpretation was employed where necessary to highlight similarities and differences among various genres and to relate contemporary literary developments to traditional oral forms.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study relied primarily on publicly available literature and cultural materials. Proper acknowledgment was given to all sources consulted. The interpretation and presentation of oral traditions were conducted with respect for Afar cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, and community heritage.

2.6 Study Scope and Limitations

The study focused primarily on the classification and description of major genres of Qafar oral literature. While efforts were made to cover both traditional and modern literary forms, some genres remain insufficiently documented due to the scarcity of written sources and limited previous research. Consequently, the study serves as an introductory framework for future scholarly investigations into Afar literary traditions.

3. Results and Discussion

Qafar Oral Literature

Qafar oral literature constitutes an important component of the cultural heritage of the Afar people. Although the Horn of Africa has experienced a long history of Islamic influence, resulting in the diminished prominence of some traditional literary forms, significant elements of Qafar oral traditions continue to survive. Unlike Somali oral literature, which achieved extensive recognition in the region, many ancient Qafar cosmogonic myths have survived only in fragmentary form. These myths are no longer considered active literary genres because they have largely lost their social functions. Traditional cosmological explanations have gradually been replaced by astronomical knowledge, which remains well developed among Afar nomadic communities.

Nevertheless, several myths concerning celestial bodies continue to occupy an important place in Afar cultural memory. Among these are narratives related to the Milky Way, the constellation known as the Sky Bear, and Orion, referred to in Afar as *Aftaala'q Qalii* and in astronomy as *Adalà*. The Afar interpretation of the Milky Way, known as *Dalciinàh Giito* ("the path where the hyena dragged his mother"), reflects a rich tradition of mythological storytelling. According to the legend, a hyena invited guests and brought home seven corn seeds, asking his mother to prepare them for a meal. While cooking the seeds, the mother repeatedly tasted them until none remained. Enraged by her actions, the hyena dragged his mother across the sky, creating the luminous path now identified as the Milky Way.

In the Awsi Rasu of the Afar region, Ethiopia, the seven stars associated with the Sky Bear are interpreted through another symbolic narrative. Two stars represent the "Two Cows" (*Namma-laa*), while two others symbolize the thieves (*Namma Garqa*) who stole them. Two additional stars are viewed as rescuers pursuing the thieves, and the final star is portrayed as a woman carrying water for the rescuers. These narratives illustrate the close relationship between Afar oral traditions, environmental observation, and social imagination.

Qafar oral traditions also include etiological legends explaining the origins and genealogies of clans. Although these narratives serve as repositories of historical memory and cultural identity, they are generally regarded as historical heritage rather than literary genres comparable to the epic traditions of West Africa. Like many African oral traditions, Qafar literature is primarily oral and consists of distinct genres that are widely recognized within the community.

The concept of "literature" itself has generated considerable debate among Afar intellectuals and traditional scholars. Historically, there was no single term in Qafar equivalent to the modern concept of literature. Instead, related concepts such as *Qaadà* (culture), *Abukraqtï* (tradition), and *Sugti* (memory) were frequently used, often leading to conceptual ambiguity. Discussions regarding the appropriate terminology have been conducted through cultural forums and publications such as *Yafyinti*, a cultural journal written in Qafar.

These debates gained additional importance with the establishment of Qafar Studies programs at Samara University, where efforts have been made to develop an appropriate literary vocabulary and facilitate systematic scholarly investigation of Afar oral traditions. The search for a suitable term for literature has produced several proposals, including *Warènta, Feeraysowàg*, *Tolaytu*, and *Maaqiità*.

Among these, *Tolaytu* emerged as a neologism derived from the name of the renowned poet Tola'c Canfaxe. The term is associated with poetic inspiration and creative expression. According to oral explanations, the word *Tolà* may derive from expressions meaning "he has something" or "something is revealed to him," suggesting a connection between poetry and inspiration. Consequently, *Tolaytu* came to signify literary creativity and artistic expression.

However, the term *Maaqiità*, meaning "something repeated," has gained broader acceptance among contemporary scholars and poets. This term reflects a fundamental characteristic of oral literature: its repeated performance, transmission, and preservation across generations. In this sense, *Maaqiità* provides a culturally grounded understanding of literature as a body of artistic expression sustained through continual repetition and collective memory.

Overall, Qafar oral literature remains a vital repository of indigenous knowledge, historical memory, cultural identity, and artistic creativity. Despite modernization and social transformation, efforts by scholars, traditionalists, and academic institutions continue to preserve, document, and promote this rich literary heritage for future generations.

Literary Genres in Qafar Oral Literature

Qafar oral literature is fundamentally oral in character and remains an important subject of scholarly discussion among Afar traditionalists, linguists, and cultural scholars. With the establishment of Qafar Studies programs at Samara University, efforts have intensified to identify, classify, and document the various literary genres (*Nado*) and to develop a standardized literary vocabulary that facilitates systematic academic study. Current debates focus on distinguishing literary language from ordinary language, prose from poetry, and

defining the criteria used to classify literary genres. These discussions also seek to understand newer literary forms, particularly theatrical writing, which emerged with urbanization and changing social conditions.

Traditionally, Qafar oral literature has been transmitted orally across generations and encompasses several well-established genres. These include:

- **Iniiniyyo** – children's rhymes and nursery recitations;
- **Hayyoonà** – folktales and stories;
- **Ixig-ixigà** – riddles;
- **Xaagu** – news and informative narratives;
- **Missila** – proverbs;
- **Qàdar** – traditional poetry;
- **Dooqà** – prayers, blessings, and public orations.

In addition to these traditional forms, new literary genres emerged during the early 1960s as a result of urbanization, increased social interaction, the spread of radio broadcasting, and public cultural performances. These modern literary forms include:

- **Gad** – modern songs;
- **Ransà** – drama and theater;
- **Hadalle** – novels;
- **Warènta / Iyyenta** – articles and journalistic writings.

These genres reflect the adaptation of Afar literary expression to modern social realities while maintaining connections to traditional oral culture.

Iniiniyyo (Children's Rhymes)

Among the traditional genres, *Iniiniyyo* occupies a special place in the socialization and linguistic development of children. Although oral literary exposure begins in infancy through lullabies (*Horrorriyo*), lullabies are generally classified under *Qàdar* rather than *Iniiniyyo* because their primary purpose is to soothe infants rather than to encourage memorization and participation.

The performance of *Iniiniyyo* often begins during evening gatherings when children are summoned by one child using a traditional call inviting all children from nearby camps to join. Once assembled, children engage in rhythmic recitations, chants, and verbal games.

A notable subgenre is **Arrabaqqaynï** (tongue twisters), which serves as a pedagogical tool for developing pronunciation skills, phonological awareness, memory, and familiarity with poetic rhythm and rhetorical structures.

Children's rhymes are typically composed of repetitive sounds, rhythmic patterns, and playful word combinations. Their educational functions include:

1. **Language Development** – enhancing pronunciation and mastery of Afar phonology.
2. **Memory Training** – encouraging memorization through repetition and rhythmic recitation.
3. **Cognitive Development** – fostering attention, concentration, and verbal creativity.
4. **Cultural Transmission** – introducing children to indigenous linguistic and cultural traditions.
5. **Socialization** – promoting interaction, cooperation, and collective participation among peers.

The examples presented in traditional collections of *Iniiniyyo* demonstrate rich patterns of repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and sound symbolism. Although many of the expressions may not convey direct semantic meaning, their value lies in their phonetic structure and their role in teaching linguistic competence and oral performance skills.

Consequently, *Iniiniyyo* represents one of the foundational genres of Qafar oral literature, serving as an important mechanism through which language, culture, and communal identity are transmitted from one generation to the next.

According to the theory of orality, the oral compositional techniques employed in the texts above are clearly observable. In Texts 1–4, devices such as paired alliteration, holorhyme (or paired rhyme) based on both vowels and consonants, assonance on the vowel /i/, and anaphoric repetition are prominently used.

Texts 3, 6, and 7 share another characteristic feature: the apostrophic or vocative form of the noun, marked by the suffix *-y* for feminine words and *-ow* for masculine words. The stylistic devices identified above are likewise present in these texts.

A closer analysis reveals that this genre introduces children to the fundamental patterns of Afar poetic meter. In particular, it demonstrates how stress is produced and how its repetition

generates rhythm. Phonologically and graphically, the stress pattern is first illustrated through disyllabic forms such as *Eenà*, *intey*, and *keenày*, which can be heard and visually perceived as independent rhythmic units occupying a single line. The alternation of these forms with trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic words arranged vertically creates the rhythmic structure of the texts, most of which are based on counting sequences from one to ten.

This structure indicates that a verse may consist of a single word and that the metrical unit can be formed either through modification by a preceding element (*Xer rugày*) or through compounding (*keena-bbaxày*).

Texts 5 and 10 also serve as models of meter. Their rhythmic components are generated through the repetition of words in a genitive construction, where the possessor precedes the possessed noun. For example, the noun phrases *Teeru't teeru* and *Habbuyye'h habbuyye* illustrate how the genitive relationship is marked between a noun ending in a tonic vowel and a following noun beginning with a consonant, which is geminated in this context.

The structure of Text 4, however, is based on a syntactic relationship between a noun and its predicate. Its rhythmic organization follows a 2–4 meter, demonstrating that verse structure depends not only on phonological scansion but also on the regular syntactic arrangement of words. In this pattern, the initial word *Enek* appears in the nominative case rather than in its ablative form *Eneki*, as do *Nammàya* and *sidocu*. This distinction is significant because Afar numerals from one to ten (*Enek* "one" to *Taban* "ten"), when ending in a consonant, function as nouns rather than adjectives. Adjectival forms, by contrast, end in vowels, as in *Inkî* "one" and *Tabná* "ten."

Finally, Texts 8 and 9 are extracts from longer compositions that introduce children to additional rhetorical techniques, including rhetorical questions, dialogue, and the practical use of metathesis. Through these devices, children become familiar not only with the linguistic structures of the language but also with the rhetorical and aesthetic conventions that characterize Afar oral literature.

Hayyoonà (Storytelling)

Hayyoonà is one of the most important genres of Afar oral literature. Like storytelling traditions found in many traditional societies, Afar storytelling serves as both entertainment and an educational tool. Stories are typically created and narrated by adults for children with the purpose of shaping their moral character, emotional development, social awareness, and

humanitarian values. Through storytelling, children learn cultural norms, ethical behavior, and respect for family and community relationships.

Widely practiced across the Afar-speaking regions of the Horn of Africa, *Hayyoonà* is an oral prose genre characterized by simple and accessible language. Unlike traditional poetry, it does not rely on rhythmic patterns or metrical structures. The stories often feature animal characters, human beings, and occasionally animate or inanimate objects placed within realistic or imaginative settings. Among animal characters, the jackal occupies a prominent position as the embodiment of intelligence, cunning, and strategic thinking, reflecting a common motif found in many world folklore traditions.

A distinctive feature of Afar storytelling is its interactive nature. Narratives traditionally begin with the formulaic expression **"Awwal, awwalaa 'yyen"** ("A long, long time ago, they said"), spoken by the storyteller.

The audience responds with **"Hayyoonày,"** a term derived from *Hay* (a coordinating expression) and *iyyoonay* ("whatever they said"). Throughout the narration, the audience continues to participate by repeating this response whenever the storyteller concludes a phrase with **"Iyyen"** ("they said"). This call-and-response structure transforms storytelling into a collective performance rather than a one-sided narration.

At the conclusion of the story, the narrator traditionally recites the phrase **"Y'im dirabaay, Yallih'im nummà,"** which literally translates as, "What is mine is a lie, and what comes from God is true." This closing formula serves both as a cultural convention and as a reminder of the distinction between imaginative storytelling and divine truth.

Despite its historical importance, the tradition of *Hayyoonà* has experienced a significant decline in recent decades. Since storytelling has largely depended on oral transmission among children and community members, processes such as urbanization, formal education, technological change, and shifting lifestyles have reduced opportunities for its practice. Consequently, many traditional stories are at risk of disappearing unless deliberate efforts are undertaken to document, preserve, and promote this valuable component of Afar cultural heritage.

Ixig-Ixigà (Riddles)

Ixig-Ixigà (riddles) constitutes an important genre of Afar oral literature and is commonly performed during children's evening gatherings. Similar to riddling traditions found in many cultures worldwide, Afar riddles serve both recreational and educational purposes. They may

be presented before or after storytelling sessions (*Hayyoonà*) and are primarily intended to stimulate children's reasoning abilities, imagination, observation, and problem-solving skills.

Riddles are generally based on metaphorical descriptions of concrete or abstract objects familiar to the participants. Their content is closely linked to the Afar environment, including natural phenomena, animals, household objects, pastoral life, and everyday social experiences. Through these symbolic descriptions, children are encouraged to analyze clues, draw connections, and identify the object or concept being described.

Etymologically, the term *Ixig-Ixigà* derives from the imperative form of the Afar verb *Aaxigiyya* ("to know" or "to understand"). The word is formed through the reduplication of the imperative *Ixig* ("know"), producing a feminine noun that literally conveys the idea of "guessing" or "discovering through knowledge."

The riddling process follows a structured interactive dialogue between the challenger and the respondent. It commonly begins with an introductory formula:

Challenger: *Ahak ixigey!*
("Know what that is!")

Respondent: *Bahitey!*
("Go on!")

The challenger then provides a clue, such as:

Challenger: *Ah kaay mablak ixigey!*
("It is here, but I cannot see it.")

Respondent: *Ufùyu*
("Air.")

This dialogic structure transforms riddling into a participatory intellectual game. If the respondent fails to identify the correct answer despite receiving clues, they are considered to have lost the contest. In such cases, the winner humorously declares:

"Abu kok oxeeh"
("I have tied up your uncle.")

and

"Damaqqali'qale kaak xiiroonul"
("I make him carry the mountain of Damaqqali.")

These expressions are symbolic rather than literal and serve as playful penalties within the game. The “captured uncle” is released once the participant correctly solves the riddle. At that point, roles are reversed, and the successful participant becomes the new challenger, continuing the cycle of questioning and answering.

Beyond entertainment, *Ixig-Ixigà* plays a significant educational role within Afar society. The genre promotes critical thinking, linguistic competence, memory development, creativity, and familiarity with cultural knowledge. It also serves as a mechanism for transmitting indigenous environmental knowledge and social values from one generation to the next. As such, riddles remain an important component of Afar oral tradition and an effective tool for informal learning and cultural preservation.

Xaagu (Oral Communication and News Exchange)

Xaagu refers to the traditional Afar system of oral communication and Information exchange. Although not conventionally classified as a literary genre, it possesses distinctive narrative and performative characteristics that justify its consideration as a unique genre or subgenre of Afar oral literature. The proposition to regard *Xaagu* as a literary genre is based on its structured communicative form, ritualized dialogue, social significance, and its role in preserving and transmitting information within Afar society.

The importance of *Xaagu* has been recognized by several scholars. Parker (1971) observed that the transmission of news constitutes a vital aspect of Afar life, encompassing topics such as births, deaths, marriages, accidents, rainfall, livestock conditions, conflicts, illnesses, visitors, newcomers, and the outcomes of community councils. Similarly, Gopinath described *Xaagu* as a sophisticated indigenous communication network designed to identify potential threats to community survival and disseminate critical information across Afar society.

The centrality of news exchange in Afar culture is reflected in the proverb:

“Xaagi daaco-h gexe numu-t'uuy yanih.”

“Information can be heard even from someone who has gone out merely to relieve himself.”

This proverb emphasizes the pervasive nature of information sharing and the cultural expectation that news should circulate continuously throughout the community.

Within Afar society, the exchange of *Xaagu* is regarded as a social obligation. Whenever individuals meet after being apart, they are expected to exchange information concerning family members, neighbors, livestock, environmental conditions, and community affairs. Even

when there is no significant news to report, participation in the ritual remains important for maintaining social relationships and communal solidarity.

The process generally begins after the customary Islamic greetings, such as *Salaamaqle* and *Waqleyku salaam*. The younger participant, whether host or guest, initiates the exchange with expressions indicating personal well-being, such as:

- **Maquk xinne** – "We passed the night well."
- **Maquk asne** – "We passed the day well."

The elder then encourages further communication by asking:

- **Maca xintee?** – "What happened?" or "What news is there?"

This invitation is followed by a structured sequence of statements reporting the absence of misfortune, illness, death, or other adverse events. Throughout the exchange, the elder actively participates by repeating key words, offering blessings, or asking follow-up questions. This dialogic structure transforms *Xaagu* into a performative oral event characterized by participation, repetition, and ritualized interaction.

The communicative significance of *Xaagu* extends beyond ordinary conversation. It serves practical functions such as identifying visitors, assessing social connections, monitoring security conditions, and maintaining awareness of regional developments. Traditionally, hosts often determined whether a traveler required hospitality by establishing whether he was a *Yalla-yaaxigi* ("one who knows God") or a *Baaxo-yaaxigi* ("one who knows the country"), indicating the visitor's social affiliations and support networks.

The influence of *Xaagu* is also evident in several Afar oral literary forms. In *Kassow* poetry and performance traditions, exchanges of greetings and inquiries concerning family, livestock, and community well-being serve as ritual prologues before the main poetic contest begins. Similarly, in *Saxxàq* performances, although less elaborate, forms of *Xaagu* remain embedded in the opening greetings. In the *Ginnili* tradition, described by Morin (1991), *Xaagu* constitutes part of the ritual introduction (*Yaabisso*) and appears throughout the performance through audience interaction and responses.

Beyond its communicative function, *Xaagu* contributes to social cohesion, collective memory, conflict prevention, and the dissemination of indigenous knowledge. It operates as an informal information network through which communities remain informed about environmental conditions, pastoral resources, political developments, and social events. Through this system,

Afar society has historically maintained effective communication across geographically dispersed pastoral communities.

Given its structured form, ritualized performance, dialogic nature, and cultural significance, *Xaagu* deserves greater scholarly attention than it has received to date. Further research may establish it not only as a mechanism of communication but also as a distinctive genre of Afar oral literature that bridges storytelling, social interaction, and indigenous information systems.

Missila (Proverb)

Missila (proverb) is one of the most important and widely used genres of Afar oral literature. In the Afar language (*Qafar-af*), the term *Missila* is etymologically derived from the root *Missa*, meaning "rightness," combined with the suffix *-la*, associated with the verb *aalliyya* ("to contain" or "to possess"). Consequently, *Missila* may be understood as a form of speech that embodies wisdom, correctness, and noble expression. The concept is closely related to *Misli*, a term used to describe a noble or honorable person, emphasizing the social prestige attached to wise speech in Afar culture.

The significance of proverbs is expressed in the following traditional saying:

"Missîli yabti'meerraytuuy, caacày robti'meerraytu."

"A proverb introduces a discussion just as the wind announces the coming rain."

This proverb illustrates the important role of proverbs as initiators of conversation, reflection, and social discourse. In Afar society, proverbs function not only as rhetorical devices but also as instruments for teaching, advising, persuading, resolving disputes, and transmitting cultural values.

Like many African oral traditions, Afar proverbs are used across a variety of communicative contexts. They frequently appear in storytelling (*Hayyoonà*), oral communication (*Xaagu*), songs, poetry, public speeches, and discussions among elders. Their widespread use demonstrates their importance as repositories of collective wisdom and indigenous knowledge.

A distinguishing characteristic of *Missila* is its aesthetic and poetic structure. Many proverbs exhibit rhythmic balance, parallelism, and a binary construction that enhances memorability and oral transmission. Some proverbs are metrically identical to verses found in other poetic genres. For example:

- **12 syllables:** *Labhà culte mogoytà saaqàtah gacta* (Kassow)
- **11 syllables:** *Caney iyya num cane'd duufut gexa* (Ginnili)

These examples demonstrate the close relationship between proverbs and Afar poetic traditions.

In addition to their independent use, proverbs often serve as titles or thematic summaries for stories. Within *Hayyoonà* (storytelling), the term *Missila* may designate the title of a tale. For example:

“Ah lubàk kee wakri'm missila”

“This is the story of the lion and the Fox”

As noted by Parker (1971), proverbs frequently encapsulate the moral lesson or central message of a story. Similarly, modern Afar literature has incorporated proverbs as titles for plays, dramas, and literary works since the 1960s, illustrating their continuing relevance in contemporary literary expression.

The scholarly study of Afar proverbs has developed gradually over the past century. One of the earliest documented collections appeared in KER 68, which included a small number of proverbs accompanied by explanatory notes (Andrzejewski, 1978). Later, Enid Parker (1971) devoted a section of her work to Afar proverbs and compiled a collection of 115 proverbs written in Ge'ez script. During the 1990s, native Afar scholars produced a bilingual collection of proverbs, and further studies appeared in publications such as the CERD Review in 2003 (Ancient Pount Review).

Beyond their literary value, Afar proverbs serve important social functions. They preserve indigenous knowledge, reinforce moral principles, transmit cultural norms, and provide guidance for decision-making in everyday life. Through concise and metaphorical language, they communicate complex ideas in ways that are memorable, persuasive, and culturally meaningful. As such, *Missila* remains a cornerstone of Afar oral literature and an enduring expression of the collective wisdom of the Afar people.

Dooqà (Prayer and Oration)

Dooqà constitutes an important genre of Afar oral literature and refers to prayers, blessings, invocations, and ritual orations performed in various social and cultural contexts. Although contemporary Afar prayer traditions have been profoundly influenced by Islam, *Dooqà* is believed to have roots in pre-Islamic Afar cultural practices. Over time, Islamic beliefs and values have become integrated into these traditional forms, creating a unique synthesis of indigenous and religious expressions.

In literary terms, *Dooqà* differs from Islamic devotional texts such as *Mawlid* (*Mablud*) and *Qasā'id* (*Qhasayid*), which are generally composed and written forms of religious poetry. By contrast, *Dooqà* is predominantly oral, spontaneous, and situational. As noted by Morin (1996), *Dooqà* corresponds to a spontaneous practice performed on the occasion of significant social, religious, and communal events rather than being a fixed written text.

The oral and performative nature of *Dooqà* makes it an important component of Afar cultural expression. It functions as a means of invoking divine protection, expressing gratitude, seeking blessings, addressing communal concerns, and responding to life-cycle events. Because it is embedded within everyday social life, *Dooqà* serves not only a religious purpose but also reinforces social solidarity and cultural identity.

Available collections of Afar prayers indicate the existence of several thematic categories of *Dooqà*, including:

1. **Salat'dooqà** – Prayer performed after the Islamic prayer (*Salat*).
2. **Gaali'dooqà** – Prayer for camels and livestock well-being.
3. **Robti'dooqà** – Prayer for rain.
4. **Qusba-gub'dooqà** – Prayer offered when establishing a new settlement.
5. **Fiqma'd dooqà** – Prayer for clan unity and confederation.
6. **Xigla'd dooqà** – Prayer associated with feasts and celebrations.
7. **Safar'dooqà** – Prayer for travelers and safe journeys.
8. **Digib'd dooqà** – Prayer connected to agricultural activities such as weeding.
9. **Bala'd dooqà** – Prayer seeking protection from disasters and catastrophes.
10. **Cakki' dooqà** – Prayer for justice, righteousness, and truth.
11. **Rabto'd dooqà** – Prayer for the spirits of deceased persons.
12. **Qaafiyat' dooqà** – Prayer for health, well-being, and recovery from illness.

These categories demonstrate the extensive role of *Dooqà* in addressing virtually every aspect of individual and communal life. The themes reflect the pastoral economy, environmental challenges, religious values, and social relationships that characterize Afar society.

Beyond its independent performance, *Dooqà* is also integrated into other genres of Afar oral literature. In traditional poetic performances, particularly *Kassow*, prayers and blessings frequently form part of the ceremonial prologue. During such performances, singers and

participants invoke divine blessings upon organizers, elders, guests, and the community before proceeding to the main event. Similar practices are found in modern Afar songs, theatrical performances, and public ceremonies.

As a literary genre, *Dooqà* represents a unique combination of spirituality, oral artistry, and cultural expression. Through its rich repertoire of prayers and invocations, it preserves indigenous values, reinforces communal bonds, and provides insight into the worldview of the Afar people. Consequently, *Dooqà* remains a significant component of Afar oral literature and an important subject for further scholarly investigation.

Qàdar (Oral Poetry)

Qàdar represents one of the most significant genres of Afar oral literature and serves as the principal form of poetic expression within Afar society. Traditionally, Afar oral poetry encompasses a wide variety of folk songs and poetic performances, each recognized as a distinct genre with its own themes, melodies, performance styles, and social functions. According to Morin (1996), every folk song may be regarded as a genre in its own right, often exhibiting regional variations and multiple melodic forms.

The rich diversity of Afar oral poetry is reflected in genres such as *Malaabo*, *Keeke*, *Laale*, *Saxxaq*, *Kassow*, *Horra*, and *Royyan*. Each of these genres possesses unique stylistic and functional characteristics, contributing to the complexity of Afar poetic traditions. Together with broader classificatory terms such as *Gad*, *Saare*, and *Qàdar*, these genre names constitute the foundation of Afar oral poetry.

Among the traditional generic terms used to classify poetry, *Qàdar* appears to be the most comprehensive and appropriate designation for Afar poetry as a whole. While *Saare* ("praise") generally refers to individually performed poetic genres and *Gad* commonly denotes collective performances accompanied by hand-clapping, drumming, dancing, or communal participation, *Qàdar* encompasses both individual and collective forms of poetic expression. Although not all collective genres are categorized as *Gad*, and many retain distinct names based on their particular characteristics, *Qàdar* functions as the broadest and most inclusive classification.

Morin (1996) recognized this relationship and noted that:

"Le terme de qadar renvoie génériquement à toute poésie et est synonyme de Gad."

("The term *Qàdar* refers generically to all poetry and is synonymous with *Gad*.")

Historically, the term *Qàdar* was also associated with a specific genre known as *Faras Qàdar* ("Horse Praise Poetry"). This genre celebrated horses, warriors, and heroic achievements, reflecting the importance of equestrian culture within Afar society. However, the genre gradually disappeared during the twentieth century due to the decline of horse ownership and changing social conditions that reduced the prominence of traditional warrior culture. Today, similar poetic forms survive primarily within Saho oral traditions.

Within the broader framework of Afar oral literature, the term *oral poetry* is preferable to *traditional poetry* because Afar poetic expression has evolved beyond exclusively oral performance. Since the contributions of the renowned poet Tola'c Canfaxe, several poetic genres have existed simultaneously in oral and written forms. Poems may be recited orally during traditional performances, recorded through modern media, or adapted into contemporary musical compositions. This transition illustrates the dynamic nature of Afar poetry and its capacity to adapt to changing technological and cultural contexts.

Afar oral poetry fulfills numerous social and cultural functions. It serves as a medium for praise, historical remembrance, entertainment, moral instruction, conflict resolution, social commentary, and the expression of collective identity. Through poetic performance, communities preserve historical memories, celebrate cultural values, and transmit indigenous knowledge across generations. Poetry also provides a forum for public dialogue, allowing poets to comment on social issues, honor respected individuals, and articulate communal aspirations.

As a central component of Afar oral literature, *Qàdar* embodies the creativity, wisdom, and cultural heritage of the Afar people. Its diverse forms, rich symbolism, and enduring social significance make it one of the most important vehicles for preserving and transmitting Afar history, values, and identity. Consequently, the study of *Qàdar* is essential for understanding both the literary traditions and the broader cultural worldview of the Afar community.

Metrical Forms of Qafar Oral Poetry

The defining feature of Qafar oral poetry is its metrical organization, which distinguishes poetic expression from ordinary prose and differentiates one poetic genre from another. The structure of Afar poetry is based primarily on syllabic patterns, rhythm, and accentuation rather than on rhyme or alliteration. These metrical principles provide the framework through which poetic genres are composed, performed, and recognized.

In the Afar language, syllables may be either short or long. The combination of syllables generates stress patterns, and the regular recurrence of stressed syllables creates rhythm.

Consequently, Qafar poetic rhythm is organized through two principal mechanisms: tonic accents and pauses. Unlike many poetic traditions, rhyme and alliteration are not obligatory features of Afar verse. Instead, the rhythmic arrangement of accents and pauses determines the aesthetic structure of the poem.

The regular alternation of accents and pauses establishes verse boundaries and produces metrical forms ranging from four to twelve syllables per line. Oral conventions impose implicit compositional rules that regulate both the horizontal length of verses and the vertical arrangement of parallel lines. As a result, Afar poetry exhibits not only isometric structure but also isosyllabic organization, whereby corresponding lines maintain equal syllable counts.

Although Afar poetry is fundamentally oral and often performed through singing, it can also be represented in written form. Genres such as *Boorita*, *Royyan*, and *Halilalle* may be viewed as variations of the same underlying poetic structure and are frequently adapted into contemporary musical compositions. This demonstrates the continuity between traditional oral performance and modern literary expression.

Based on syllabic structure, Afar poetic genres can be classified into several metrical categories:

Genre	Syllabic Structure
Gadgadï	4 syllables
Tirtira / Horra	6 syllables
Diide	8 syllables
Adal (Ginnili)	9 syllables
Boorita / Royyan / Maxhaxis	10 syllables
Ginnili	11 syllables
Kassow / Saxxaq	12 syllables

The analysis of Afar poetic meter has often been complicated by transcription problems. Many non-native researchers have relied on oral recordings narrated rather than sung, leading to inaccuracies in syllable counting. In some cases, verses classified as containing eleven syllables are more accurately analyzed as ten-syllable lines organized within a binary rhythmic structure.

For example, the stereotypical refrain associated with *Boorita* follows a ten-syllable pattern:

HELLAL LIYOY HALILOY HALELLE

Similarly, a nine-syllable variant forms the metrical basis of *Adal*, while the addition of further rhythmic segments transforms the pattern into the twelve-syllable structure characteristic of *Kassow*.

Examples include:

- **Adal (9 syllables):**
    - *Yi nagasse xer rikek maabin*
- **Boorita/Royyan (10 syllables):**
    - *Yi nagasse xer rikek maabiney*
- **Kassow (12 syllables):**
    - *Yi nagasse xer rikek maabin yol gacis*

The transition from one metrical form to another demonstrates the flexibility of Afar poetic composition while preserving strict syllabic regularity.

A major challenge in the study of Afar poetry concerns the accurate transcription of oral performances. Researchers unfamiliar with the language may overlook phonological processes such as vowel contraction, rhythmic elision, and poetic license. Variations in pronunciation, performance style, and recording quality may result in incorrect syllable counts and the mistaken assumption that irregular metrical forms exist. Native poets, however, generally maintain strict adherence to established metrical conventions.

In addition, performers occasionally omit repetitive particles, refrain elements, or formulaic expressions without affecting meaning. Such omissions may create the appearance of metrical irregularity in written transcriptions even though the original sung performance conforms perfectly to traditional rhythmic patterns.

Among the longer metrical genres, *Saxxaq* is particularly notable for its complexity. It can be performed using several distinct melodic patterns while maintaining a twelve-syllable structure. Likewise, *Kassow*, one of the most prestigious Afar poetic genres, relies on carefully regulated metrical arrangements that combine rhythm, melody, and parallelism.

The study of Afar metrics demonstrates that oral poetry is governed by sophisticated compositional principles. Far from being spontaneous or irregular, Afar poetic traditions employ highly structured syllabic systems that ensure rhythmic harmony, aesthetic balance, and memorability. Understanding these metrical forms is essential for the accurate analysis, preservation, and appreciation of Afar oral literature.

Modern Genres

The oldest known body of written Afar literature dates back to the nineteenth century and consists of religious poetry known as *Dikri* or *Mayluud*. These texts were written in *Qajami* (Ajami script), and in recent years two preservation projects have been launched to digitize, scan, and safeguard surviving manuscript collections.

From the late 1950s onward, new literary genres began to emerge in the urban environment of the French colony. Their development was encouraged through cultural associations, radio broadcasting by the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (ORTF), and later through public performances and stage productions. These modern genres included the contemporary song, drama, and epistolary and journalistic writing. However, written literature in the Afar Horn remains insufficiently promoted and developed compared to oral forms of expression.

During the French colonial period, efforts were also made to collect and preserve oral traditions. In the 1930s, a project was undertaken to record oral texts, and three short audio recordings from this initiative are currently available through the archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Later, at the beginning of the 1960s, the establishment of ORTF facilitated the recording and broadcasting of traditional Afar songs. Unfortunately, many of these recordings have not been preserved in accessible archives.

At the same time, attempts were made to adapt traditional poetic genres such as *Saxxaq* and *Saare* for performance with musical accompaniment, including instruments such as the violin. Building upon these innovations, a pioneering Afar author eventually organized what is considered the first Afar theatrical production, entitled *Naharsi Maaqattà*. This production combined songs and dramatic performances and gave rise to stage forms generally known as *Gad* and *Ransà*.

The emergence of these modern genres marked an important transition in Afar literary history, extending literary expression beyond traditional oral forms while preserving many of the aesthetic and cultural features inherited from the oral tradition.

Gad (Modern Song)

Gad is a modern form of artistic expression in which a song is first written, then set to music and performed on stage. Unlike the improvisational techniques characteristic of oral tradition, the compositional process of *Gad* involves prior textual creation. Nevertheless, *Gad* retains the same aesthetic function as traditional poetic art, in which poetry is enhanced and communicated through melody.

The first modern Afar song, written and performed by Hamad-Laqde, was metrically composed according to the same twelve-syllable pattern found in *Saxxaq*. Several of his later compositions were likewise written in the nine-syllable meter of *Ginnili* or in the metrical pattern known as *Halilalle*.

These correspondences demonstrate the influence of *Qadar* (oral poetry) on modern song. However, *Gad* also encompasses a variety of metrical forms that have been created independently since its emergence, distinguishing it from traditional genres. Such influences are not always consciously recognized, either by audiences or by songwriters, many of whom compose intuitively rather than according to explicit metrical rules.

In its written form, every *Gad* song may be regarded as a *Qadar* poem composed of verses that generally do not exceed twenty lines. These verses are organized into stanzas of two, three, or four lines. Within the same stanza, the length and structure of individual verses may vary, reflecting the flexibility and creativity that characterize modern Afar song composition.

As a result, *Gad* represents both continuity and innovation within Afar literary culture. While it draws upon the metrical and aesthetic principles of traditional oral poetry, it simultaneously develops new poetic forms adapted to written composition, musical performance, and the modern stage.

Ransà (Theater)

Ransà (theater) is one of the most recent genres in Afar literature and represents a significant development in the transition from purely oral traditions to modern literary expression. Unlike traditional genres that evolved over centuries within pastoral society, Afar theater emerged in an urban and cosmopolitan environment, particularly in Djibouti during the 1960s.

The origins of *Ransà* can be traced to approximately 1960, when it developed alongside the modern Afar song (*Gad*). Although storytelling (*Hayyoonà*) may have provided some inspiration for theatrical narratives, no traditional genre appears to have directly influenced its emergence. Rather, the development of theater was likely stimulated by urbanization, cultural interaction, modern education, and exposure to diverse artistic traditions within the city environment.

In its early form, *Ransà* served as a dramatic complement to modern songs. While songs conveyed emotions, social criticism, and cultural values through poetic performance, theater employed prose dialogue to present stories, characters, and social situations in a more elaborate

manner. Unlike *Gad*, theatrical texts were not necessarily structured around rhythm or melody. Instead, they utilized a simple, humorous, and conversational style that remained distinct from ordinary everyday speech.

Despite its importance in contemporary Afar culture, *Ransà* remains one of the least studied genres of Afar literature. Existing scholarship is extremely limited. Morin (1996) examined excerpts from a theatrical work written in 1969 and observed that its language largely resembles informal conversation while incorporating poetic elements similar to those found in *Gad*. This observation suggests that Afar theater occupies an intermediate position between prose and poetry.

A notable characteristic of Afar theatrical language is the use of rhythmic and parallel structures. Although it does not consistently employ the strict metrical patterns found in traditional poetry, theatrical discourse frequently relies on repetition, syntactic parallelism, and balanced phrase construction. For example, certain passages consist of repeated four-syllable units or six-syllable syntactic segments arranged in binary or ternary patterns:

Bar gexak sugte'kke maaxigaay
Koo beyte makko maaxigaay
Ginnik gaantaay guuroh sugtek
Hunuun gaantak addàt raddeeh

Other passages exhibit three parallel groups of four syllables:

Liyoomul kaa maaluk ruubak mananniyok

These stylistic features demonstrate that Afar theater possesses literary qualities beyond simple conversational language. Through repetition, rhythm, and structural parallelism, theatrical texts achieve artistic expression while remaining accessible to audiences.

Additional examples reveal similar rhetorical structures:

Saytun Rabbiiy kullim gineh amri cineh, Sudududuh malaykà inkîh kah radde Aadamah sabannàh asdude cineh.

Such examples indicate that Afar theater combines narrative prose with poetic devices, creating a unique dramatic style that reflects both traditional oral aesthetics and modern literary innovation.

Hadalle (Romance and Written Narrative Literature)

Hadalle represents another modern literary development within Afar literature. Unlike traditional oral genres, *Hadalle* refers to written narrative literature, including novels, stories, and articles. Although the adoption of a standardized Afar orthography in 1975 created favorable conditions for literary production, written literature in Afar remains relatively underdeveloped.

The genre can be divided into three principal subcategories:

- **Warènta** – novel;
- **Iyyènta** – article or journalistic writing;
- **Maaqiità** – story or literary narrative.

The terminology associated with these genres emerged through discussions among Afar intellectuals and language activists seeking to expand literary vocabulary in the Afar language. Consequently, these terms represent relatively recent developments in literary classification.

The term *Hadalle* itself is derived from the imperative form of the verb *Hadàl* and the possessive suffix *-le*, producing a noun that conveys the idea of "that which contains creation of discourse or narration." It therefore functions as a general designation for written literary expression.

Similarly, *Warènta* and *Iyyènta* are derived from the roots *Ware (information)* and *Iyye/Iyyen* ("to say" or "said"), combined with diminutive nominal suffixes. These formations illustrate the creative processes through which new literary terminology has been developed within the Afar language.

Despite the existence of these categories, written Afar literature remains limited in both quantity and circulation. Only a small number of novels, stories, and articles have been published, and many literary works continue to be transmitted orally rather than through print. Consequently, the promotion of *Hadalle* remains an important challenge for contemporary Afar literary development.

The emergence of *Ransà* and *Hadalle* reflects the capacity of Afar literature to adapt to changing social and cultural conditions. These modern genres demonstrate the transition from exclusively oral forms of expression toward written and performative literary traditions, while maintaining strong connections with the linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural foundations of Afar society.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that Qafar oral literature constitutes a rich and diverse cultural heritage that reflects the history, values, indigenous knowledge, and artistic creativity of the Afar people. The findings reveal that Qafar oral literature encompasses a wide range of traditional and modern genres, including children's rhymes, storytelling, riddles, oral communication systems, proverbs, prayers, oral poetry, songs, drama, and written narratives. These literary forms continue to play significant roles in cultural transmission, socialization, education, entertainment, and the preservation of collective memory.

Despite its cultural significance, scholarly attention to Qafar oral literature remains limited. Among the various genres, the proverb (Missila) is the only literary form that has received relatively substantial scholarly attention and publication in the Afar language. Storytelling, riddles, and other oral traditions have been discussed only briefly in a limited number of studies, while oral poetry, theater (Ransà), and modern songs (Gad) remain insufficiently documented and analyzed. The study further reveals that many traditional literary forms are facing challenges associated with modernization, urbanization, changing lifestyles, and the increasing influence of global media.

Overall, the findings highlight a significant gap in the documentation, preservation, and academic study of Qafar literary traditions. Without systematic efforts to record, analyze, and promote these literary forms, valuable elements of Afar cultural heritage may gradually disappear. Therefore, preserving and strengthening Qafar oral literature is essential for safeguarding the linguistic, cultural, and historical identity of the Afar people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Research and Documentation: Universities, research institutions, and independent scholars should undertake comprehensive studies to document, classify, and analyze the various genres of Qafar oral literature before valuable traditions are lost.

2. Promote Publication in the Afar Language: Efforts should be made to encourage the publication of oral literary texts, collections of proverbs, poetry, stories, and other genres in both Afar and international languages to increase accessibility and scholarly engagement.

3. Support Cultural Preservation Programs: Government agencies, cultural institutions, and community organizations should establish programs aimed at preserving, archiving, and promoting Afar oral traditions through print, audio, video, and digital platforms.

4. Integrate Oral Literature into Education: Elements of Qafar oral literature should be incorporated into school and university curricula to promote cultural awareness, language preservation, and appreciation of indigenous knowledge among younger generations.

5. Encourage Digital Archiving and Media Production: Modern technologies should be utilized to record performances, songs, storytelling sessions, and poetic recitations to ensure their long-term preservation and wider dissemination.

6. Promote Further Research on Understudied Genres: Future studies should focus particularly on oral poetry (Qàdar), theater (Ransà), modern songs (Gad), and emerging written literary forms, which remain among the least explored areas of Afar literary scholarship. By implementing these recommendations, scholars, educational institutions, cultural organizations, and policymakers can contribute significantly to the preservation, revitalization, and sustainable development of Qafar literary heritage for future generations.

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