

# A Critical Investigation on the Cultural Role of Western Gurage Riddles

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is collecting, analyzing and interpreting Western Gurage riddles. Interview and document analysis were used as a data collection tool. Accordingly, nine riddles were chosen and translated in to English using literal approach. Then, they were classified into three main categories based on their function in relation to representing the culture of Gurage people. The finding showed that Western Gurage communities are rich in riddles. These riddles have a great role to reflect the culture of Gurage community in general. Their traditional foods, traditional drinking, materials that they use in their daily activities are reflected in their riddles. These are Bulla, Enset and Cabbage, Zemuamujate and Sehar, Mortar, Central pillar, Sack or Gibe and Kerosene lamp or Kuraze.*

**Key words:** Riddle, Culture, Western Gurage, Functional approach

## 1. Introduction

Oral literature is a verbal imaginative art of one's society; it is used to transmit the socio-cultural, political, economic, and historical aspects of any society. It keeps the cultural continuity of one's culture. Oral literature has different genres and riddle is one type of oral literature which is a kind of asking and cracking questions or statements. As Quneswar Saikia (2013: 37) define riddle, it is one type of oral literature, it is an astonishing statement related to any object, whereas the name of the object is stated mysteriously. Okumba Miruka (1999: 135) also states that riddles are word puzzles in which familiar objects or situations are referred in figurative terms for to decipher what is actually meant. From the above definitions the word "puzzle" is repeated, this shows that riddles are rich in language and meaning, and expressed in connotative form. They are recounted to challenge and make the respondents or participants more active.

Finnegan (2012:414) shows as riddle performance has a different structure from place to place by demonstrating the difference between African and European riddles. She states that for European, riddles are explicit questions to which the respondent must try to puzzle out the correct answer; however for Africans, they are not questions rather they have different forms like statement or simple phrases or etc.

Riddle performance has two groups: the questioner - who asks riddles, and the respondent- who gives solution or answer to the puzzling riddles. In line with the structure of riddle, Palm (1992) states that riddles consist of a single sentence question followed by a single sentence answer. Since riddles are indirect symbols, Sharndama (2004: 2) states the group draws their riddles from different sources especially natural phenomena e.g. heavenly bodies, landscape features, animals, plants, human body, daily activities or experiences.

Since riddle is a word puzzling game; its main purpose is entertaining the participants. However, it has many purposes like reflecting one's culture, teaching children about their world, improving cognitive skills, etc. In line with this, Sharndama and Magaji (2014:1) evokes that riddles are used to entertain as a game, test knowledge and aid minor works in the evening. According to Gachanja (2013:1) riddles have various functions to play in society such as cultural, social and historical; the study interrogates pedagogical values embedded in riddles. Quneswar Saikia (2013:37) express that riddles has a great role and they represent the vast experience of folk-life in general world. From these one can understand the great role of riddles in revealing not only the culture but also the every aspects of one's community.

Gurage people like other Ethiopian ethnic group have different norms, traditions, values and socio cultural practices. Though they are rich in oral traditions in general and riddle in particular there were no preliminary researchers established on the Gurage riddles. So far, only Gurage Zone culture and communication office collected riddles. Furthermore, our libraries and internet research results revealed that there is no literary study of riddles among Gurage community though some African riddles were studied. These are like

the pedagogical role of Abagusii riddles of Kenya by Gachanja and Kebaya in 2013, role of Shona riddles of Zimbabwe by Gwaravanda and Masaka in 2008, the structure of Kilba riddles of Nigeria by Sharndama and Magaji in 2014, the social role of Kasena riddles by Awedoba in 2000. In fact, there are some studies on the folklore of Gurage community like ‘The Representation of Women on Western Gurage Proverbs’ by Tigelu (PhD) and Shashetu in 2019; Mesqan Folktales by Alemayehu, G. in 2010; *The Guragé and Their Culture* by Gebreyesus, H. in 1991. However, no one of them conducted on riddle in general and the role of riddles in representing the culture of one society in particular. So, the study at hand scrutinizes the cultural role of riddles with reference to the western Gurage community.

**Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this study is to collect, analyze and interpret the function of riddles in Gurage culture. Moreover, this study has the following specific objectives:

- ✓ To identify the cultural role of riddles in Western Gurage community.
- ✓ To assess the analogy between the riddles and the culture that the riddles represent.

**2. Methodology**

The study is a descriptive study; it is a corpus based analysis on the functions of the Western Gurage riddles. Interview and document analysis were used as a data collection tools. The informants were collected using random sampling technique from Western people and from documents. The participants of the study were elders, youths and children (both sexes) of Cheha, Gumer, Inor and Ezha Woredas people. To select them, random sampling technique we as carried out. Descriptive and functional approaches were used in order to explain the functions of the riddles and their answers. Since the language of the community is *Guragegna*, the data were collected in *Guragegna* and transcribed into English as carefully as possible to keep their original meanings and analysis and interpretation is given.

**3. Data analysis and Interpretation**

This part mainly focuses on the analysis and interpretation of Western Gurage communities riddles based on their role in representing Gurage culture. Since one of the main characteristics of oral literature is ‘audience participation’, riddles need the active participation of the audience. In other words, riddle game is played in a group or it needs more than two participants. Western Gurage riddle game has unwritten structure: there should be a starter and respondent. The opener or challenger should have to ask the puzzled riddles by saying ‘ኔሐ እንቁጥ/niha inqut/ which means try to know my question, and the respondent should have to say ‘ንቁ/’nequ/ which means ‘what shall I know’. Then, the opener starts to ask his/her riddle, and the respondent should have to give the solution (answer to the riddle). The riddles are either in statement or question form. If the answerer gets the correct answer, he/ she get a turn to ask the riddle. However, if he /she lose the answer, he / she will be asked to give a country. In Guragegna the challenger will say ‘ገገናጫ/gnenamie’ which means give me country. As soon as the challenger gets a country, the challenger recites a poem for having a county. For instance, if the loser gives ‘Agena’ town, the opener will say

‘Going to Agena,  
I can get everything  
Everything is in my hand and in my home.’

The purpose of reciting this poem is to implore the answerer and feel him/her regret. Most of the time, the answerers do not want to give a country; however after many trials they will be forced to give their country for the continual of the riddling game. Finally the challenger tells the answer and plays the game turn by turn.

**3.1 The Cultural Role of Western Gurage Riddles**

This part deals with the function of riddles which are recited in Western Gurage community. Western Gurage riddles provoke the social, cultural and traditional life of the society. Since riddle is believed as the game of children, it helps to equip children about their society and the world in addition to developing their cognition. According to the informants’ elucidation, riddles in Western Gurage are one of the main sources of family entertainment. Moreover, they are a means of reflecting the culture and tradition of Gurage people in general and Western Gurage community in particular.

**3.1.1 Riddles that Represent the Cultural Food and Drinking of Western Gurage People**

Western Gurage riddles are used as a means of reflecting the traditional foods. These foods are common to Gurage people. The following riddles verify this fact:

1. **Asker/Challenger-** በሰቻ ያመጥ በቁራ ይጫን  
After it straining on above, it gives fillets  
**Respondent/Answerer-** አጥጫጥ  
Bulla (traditional gruel of Gurage people)
2. **Asker /Challenger-** ምሽት ያረሽኝን ጌዖ ምስ ያገንገር  
The biggest house done by the women is demolished by my father

**Respondent /Answerer- ዝሞላ ምግብ**

*Zemuamujate (traditional food of Gurage people)*

The above riddles represent the traditional food and drinking of Gurage people which are cooked mainly from *Enset*. For example, riddle (1) refers to the common food of Gurage people which is prepared from *Enset* plant and milk; it is called ‘ቡላ’/*Bulla*. According to the informants, in Gurage culture there are three types of *Bulla* such as *Bulla Genfo*, *Bulla Firfir* and *Bulla Dabo*. *Bulla Genfo* is cooked when members of the family gathered. They believe that this food brings good appetite. In addition to this, it is believed that this food is used to give strength to drench mothers. The second type is *Bulla Firfir*; it is prepared differently in specific occasions like at the time of plowing and planting *Enset*; when a recognized person is died; when relatives sit together to a traditional court or when one of the family members gets diarrhea diseases. They believe that this food helps to cure diarrhea and make the sick person feel better. From this, one can understand that Gurage foods have a function of treating diseases. In short, the association between the riddle and the answer ‘*bull*’ is in terms of the process of preparing *Bulla*.

Cabbage is also the main source of food to Gurage people. The communities prepare different types of foods using cabbage such as *Gomen Kitefo*, *Quaquasiye*, *Kashiye*, and *Zemuamujat*. Riddle (2), refers to the other traditional food of Gurage people which is made from the ripe cabbage and cheese. By mingling them well with butter, chili and other spices, they cook very delicious food. As indicated above, one of the purposes of cabbage in Western Gurage communities is to prepare the food called *Zemuamujat*. Most of the time, this food is cooked to the children because the communities believe that *Zemuamujat* is very important to the growth of children. When it is served, it has similar image with the encircled traditional house of Gurage people. That is why *Zumamujat* is represented by a traditional Gurage house.

In addition to reflecting the traditional food of Western Gurage people, riddles have also a function of reflecting the traditional drinking of the society. The following riddle reflects the traditional drinking of the society.

**3. Asker/Challenger - አጩ ም ይደርስ**

*It dances closing its door*

**Respondent /Answerer- ሰሐር**

*Sehar (traditional drinking of the community)*

Riddle (3) shows the representation of traditional drinking in riddles of Western Gurage community. “It dances closing its door” refers to the preparation of the *Sehar*. The association between ‘*it dances closing its door*’ and ‘*sehar*’ is in terms of the process of preparing ‘*sehar*’. To understand this riddle, the children should have to observe their surroundings and relate to the riddle. To prepare this traditional drinking, one should have to follow the steps. In the above riddle, dancing refers the fermentation stage of ‘*sehar*’.

Generally, from the above riddles, one can understand that riddles have a great role in reflecting the traditional foods and drinking of Gurage people in general and Western Gurage community in particular. In other words, riddles are a means of transferring Western Gurage People’s cultural practices and their way of life from generation to generation. The society represents their foods and drinking in their riddles based on their image and process. This shows how much they are wise and want to keep their culture and traditions using different mechanisms such as riddle. As a result, their children are equipped about their culture in their early age since riddle is the game of children.

**4.2 Riddles that Reflect the Material culture of Western Gurage People**

Western Gurage people use different materials to perform different activities. These materials are represented in their riddles. In other words, riddles in Western Gurage have a function of expressing the materials that the community uses to do their daily activities. Some of these materials are found only in Gurage.

**4. Asker/Challenger- አዱት ተትከ ቲትራከቦ ይረቆ**

*Both mother and child shout when they meet each other*

**Respondent/Answerer - ሙቀጥቀጥ ት**

*Mortar – the child is the pestle and the mother is the main grinding material*

**5. Asker/Challenger- ባንጨነው ስሙት እንቆፈረም**

*Though he couldn’t give birth, he carried eight children.*

**Respondent/Answerer - አኝባ**

*Central pillar*

**6. Asker/Challenger- ገፍት ባር ያህር ቅረረ እንጣር ያህር**

*It is spread out at night; it looks bludgeon in the morning.*

**Respondent/Answerer - ጂፕ**

*Sack (a handcraft sleeping material named Gibe)*

7. **Asker/Challenger-** አሀም ገረድ ጉኑኔታ ይነድ  
*The little girl's hair is burning*  
**Respondent/Answerer -** ኩራዝ  
*Kerosene lamp*

Riddle (4), expresses one of the main materials of the Gurage women in general and Western Gurage women in particular. Mortar has different purposes and has different sizes. The smallest one is used to pound coffee and relish. The biggest one is used to pound grains which are ingredients to prepare traditional foods and drinking. In Western Gurage, the pestle is named the child, and the mortar is also named the mother. The analogy of this riddle is associated with the sound which is produced when the woman grinds.

Unlike Ethiopian nation and nationalities, Gurage people have their own way of building a traditional house which has circular shape. Riddle (5) reflects the fact that how Gurage people build their house. According to their culture, there are three types of houses which are built in one compound: *ጃዖ/Guaye* (the main large living house), *ኸራር/hrare* (the decorated gusts house) and *ዘገረ/zege* (kitchen house). All these houses have circular shape. The above riddle reflects the main part of the house which is called አቸባ/ *achiba* (pillar). It is forced in to ground at the middle of the house, and it is used to carry the beams of the house. The beams are eight in number that is why “he carried eight children” is stated in the riddle. Analogically, the person who carried eight children who are not his own is the same as the pillar because the pillar carries eight beams which are collected from different trees. To give the correct answer to this riddle, one should have to relate with things which carry eight elements in the real world and. As a result, Western Gurage children should have to observe and know how their society builds houses to win the challenger. In short, both are associated in terms of having eight children which are weaker than them.

Riddle (6) represents the hand craft sleeping material of the community. According to the informants, it is prepared from sisal which is made from *Enset* plant and sedge. It has different size and quality. The very best *Gibes* are used in big festivals whereas the medium sizes are used in the everyday life of the people. In short, the purpose of this traditional hand craft (*Gibe*) is either for sleeping or as a carpet. The riddle associated with *Gibe* on how it looks like when they unroll and enfold it. It looks like a bludgeon when they unfold it.

The other material that the communities use in their daily life is Kerosene lamp (*kuraze*); it is represented in riddle (7). In rural areas has a great value because it is the only source of light. The riddle symbolizes the Kerosene lamp with a girl whose hair is burned. The analogy is in terms of their image. The hair represents the thread in the lamb. To give the correct response, the answerer should have to imagine and think critically about what the girl with her burning hair represents in their culture. Since Kerosene lamp one of their materials, it will be simple to guess the answer.

To summarize this part, the above riddles show how Gurage community teaches their children about their culture and the surrounding via such simple and entertaining way. Correspondingly, Awedoba (2000: 42) riddle didacticism lies in the knowledge that can be acquired directly or indirectly through the riddle itself. Riddles will be realized based on critical observation of the environment in which the society finds itself. This includes the physical environment, human society, its organization and how that society operates, how animals and other living organisms behave, the relationship of divinity to man and the physical environment, etc. In other words, to provide knowledge to the children about the culture, riddles are the precedent or the sequent. By playing the above riddles, Gurage children learn and understand their culture and their society. If they give the correct responses to the puzzled riddles, it shows they are equipped about not only their culture but also about the world because to answer the riddles, one should have to relate the riddle with the real world facts in terms of their image, structure, role and etc.

### 4.3. Riddles, reflecting the Agriculture of Western Gurage community.

The life of Gurage people is associated with agriculture. They represent their main agricultural products in their riddles to show their closeness to their main agricultural products of the community. The following riddles strength this fact:

8. **Asker/Challenger-** ያባና ሸህ አፈር ያኾን ያይተና ሸሕ ስቁር ያኾን  
*My father guardian spirit looks downward; my mother's looks upward*  
**Respondent/Answerer -** ሸራም አምብር  
*Enset and Cabbage*
9. **Asker/Challenger-** ቲዌ እማተታ ቲወጣ ሰባተታ  
*It is buried alone but grew being seven*  
**Respondent/Answerer -** ፎንፎ  
*Enset plant*

Here *Enset* is a plant in which the common food of Gurage people like *Kocho* and *Bulla* are made from. According to Wikipidiya, *Enset* is also called Ethiopian banana, Abyssinian banana, and false banana. *Enset* is a noon-woody root crop. This plant takes around 4 or 5 years to be matured. A single root gives around 35-50 kg food. The food is prepared from the center or heart of the plant. This

part or the trunk is pulverized and buried on the burrow for the fermentation purpose. After three or four years, it is equipped for food in the form of *Kocho* and *Bulla*.

In riddle (8), *Enset* is symbolized by the father guardian who looks into downward. The analogy is when the *Enset* grow, its leaves turned in to downward whereas when the cabbage grew its leaves grow upward. In addition, there is work division in Gurage community like other Ethiopian ethnic groups. *Enset* is planted only by man, whereas cabbage is planted by a woman. As a result they are represented based on their structure. Riddle (9) also shows the attachment of Gurage people to *Enset* which is the main source of food to Gurage people.

To sum up the role of riddles in representing the culture of Western Gurage society, the finding shows that riddles play a great role to reflect the culture of their society. Here, riddles are considered as one of the children's games in Western Gurage community. So, through the process of riddling, children learn about their culture and the world in their early age. In addition to this, it helps them in enriching vocabulary since riddles are the metaphorical expressions. In line with this, Awedoba (2000:43) riddles, among other things, children are also being introduced to a variety of vocabulary items including the names of artifacts, animals, trees, etc.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to collect, interpret and analyze the representation of Gurage culture in Western Gurage riddles. Accordingly, in this research attempts have been made to make a descriptive analysis of cultural-based oral traditions with special reference to riddles. To collect the riddles, appropriate data gathering tools were used: interview and document. The data collected for this study showed that Gurage culture in general and Western Gurage cultures in particular are represented in their riddles. Based on the analysis of the data, the following conclusion is made:

- The study showed that Western Gurage community represents their traditional foods in their riddles. Throughout the riddling process, children become familiar with the traditional foods and drinking. Moreover, these riddles support them to know the preparation of their traditional foods and drinking because since riddle is a game, to win the challenger they should have to associate the riddles with different things from different aspects. Some of these foods are *Bulla*, *Enset* and *Cabbage*, *Zemuamujate* and *Sehar*.
- The other cultural role of Western Gurage riddles is to reflect and teach the cultural materials that the Gurage people in general and Western community in particular uses to perform their daily activities. These materials are like *Mortar*, *Central pillar*, *Sack or Gibe* and *Kerosene lamp or Kuraze*

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Image 1: Gurage traditional house called 'Gojjo'



Image 2: Sack /a handcraft sleeping material named called 'Gibe'



Image 3: Enset plant and its process



Image 4: Cultural food of Gurage people called 'Zumamujat'



Image 4: Traditional wooden mortar and pestle



Image 5: Traditional grinding stone