Oromo Fashion

Three Contemporary Body Art Practices among Afran Qallo Women

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In 1998, when I first visited Harar,1 a town in eastern Ethiopia, I was traveling with a young Muslim Oromo-American woman. Wherever we ventured in and around the old walled city, people stopped dead in their tracks and stared. Not at me, per se, although my light skin and hair color certainly attract attention, but at my traveling companion. She looked Ethiopian, certainly, and even Oromo. Her headscarf indicated her faith in the devoutly Islamic region of Harar and though I also covered my head as a sign of respect, for her it was culturally and religiously motivated. Unlike Oromo women in Harar, however, she usually wore the clothes of an American college student and she appeared heavier than most Ethiopian women in her T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. In Harar, those bold enough, usually men, stopped her on the street to ask her with some insistence: What is your father’s name? Where is your family’s house? Why do you dress this way? Those living in and near Harar, we learned, were particularly curious about my friend because she could not easily be identified. I, on the other hand, as a white foreigner, was either classified as part of the growing tourist presence in Harar or as an NGO worker on temporary leave.2

Categorizing people by ethnicity, religion, marital status, social and economic class, and occupation is by no means limited to the inhabitants of eastern Ethiopia. Throughout Africa, one could argue, those not easily deposited into recognized and accepted expressions of personhood are suspect and afforded considerable attention. In Harar, however, where four major ethnicities live and work within close proximity to one another, identifying and categorizing others through visual signifiers such as clothing, hairstyle, and body markings is crucial to formulating all future modes of interaction. This is particularly overt for women. Men from all local ethnicities—Harari, Argoba, Somali, and Oromo—wear similar types of clothing, including waist wraps made of imported Indonesian textiles or pants with T-shirts, dress shirts, and jackets, which render them virtually indistinguishable from one another (Klemm 2002:196). Women, on the other hand, clearly differentiate themselves through specific dress1 ensembles that convey their regional ties, clan affiliation, class, and life-cycle stage. This information is clearly communicated to individuals who understand the complex language of dress in eastern Ethiopia. Beyond the immediate visual correspondences, more subversive political references also exist, many of which have developed during the last generation. This
paper examines three body arts created and worn by Oromo women and explores how each communicates ethnic and politically seditious codes. Each is a relatively new art form created within the last fifty years, easily situated within the framework of fashion. In the following three examples—qarma, ambarka, and kula4—Oromo women have adapted wearable, imported commodities in ways that render them culturally appropriate and politically meaningful. In doing so, they claim a place for themselves in a rapidly changing and increasingly modern Ethiopian economy, while still maintaining ties to indigenous practices.

**OROMO AESTHETICS AND WOMEN’S DRESS**

Rural Oromo women are constantly on the move. As traders they haul heavy bundles of wood, coal, produce, and water along the main thoroughfare to and from local markets in the city of Harar and in surrounding communities (Fig. 1). Oromo women in eastern Ethiopia are currently facing a debilitating drought that is affecting livestock and crops and sending many to seek aid in urban centers in Jijiga, Dire Dawa, and Hargeisa and refugee camps near the border with Somalia. In addition, hunger, malaria, cholera, dysentery, and infectious diseases are a constant battle. Yet even in the face of these challenges, these same women, both young and old, are deeply invested in fashion. Oromo woman interviewed throughout eastern Hararghe confessed that they take fashion very seriously, for it provides them access to specific kinds of modernity. Through contemporary costume women reconfigure and make relevant the markers that connect them to their cultural, religious, and familial heritage.5 They also use dress to make sense of their current situations and to create visual networks to distant and often unfamiliar Oromo communities in the Diaspora, many of which are currently engaged in a struggle for nationalism and self-determination. Creating conscious connections to a larger Oromo identity is achieved through personal expressions found on the body, particularly around the neck and on the face, and in the hair. Herein I will discuss three parts of this ensemble of bodily embellishments used by unmarried, rural Oromo women in order to emphasize the importance of transnational fashion as a pliable medium used to communicate a political voice. These three body arts are: a beaded necklace called ambarka (Fig. 2), a beaded headband called qarma (Fig. 3), and temporary facial markings known as kula, literally ‘to color the face’ (Fig. 4). Each of these items is constructed with newly imported materials that travel from ports along the Somali coast to local markets in Ethiopia’s eastern Highlands. Each item is also filtered through specific design strategies that either directly copy or visually reference dress styles of the past. While Oromo women today are constantly redefining their individual tastes and priorities, they are collectively rooted in an indigenous aesthetic system and governed by culturally endorsed prescriptions surrounding the degree to which innovation is encouraged or discouraged in their personal arts. Within these prescriptions, fashion in the form of constantly changing, imported commodities can be manipulated to reflect meaningful connections to indigenous notions of family, individuality, value and memory.

What is worn is largely dictated by what is considered to be appropriate, financially viable, and above all, beautiful. But due to the limited repertoire of materials available for purchase in the urban markets, which are visited by the various ethnic groups who rely on these centers for their outfits, many of the same articles are incorporated into costumes across ethnic lines. Yet Oromo dress is distinctly Oromo in several ways. For example,
ing attention to the ensemble of things with which they decorated their bodies. These two ideals between hiding that which is most value-laden and making available the visual symbols of Oromo identity are brought into dialogue on the body through an aesthetic of accumulation that mixes the textures and colors of various body modifications and supplements (Klemm 2006:138, Rubin 1974:12). At her head, for example, an Oromo woman layers fiber, cloth, and beaded bands over and under a hairnet or headscarf that may be further ornamented with modern accessories like butterfly hairclips, while more potent medicines and amulets remain invisible, tucked under her hair (Fig. 5). The layering effect both disguises the clarity of individual objects and brings them into a relational patterning with other similar and different items. As objects shift in position or as they are replaced with items of more modern appeal, such as pink nail polish temporarily dabbed onto the face instead of permanently tattooed marks, they continue to be arranged appropriately, through an aesthetic of accumulation.

**THE AFRAQ QALLO OROMO OF EASTERN HARGHE**

The Oromo population resides primarily in Ethiopia but also in Somalia, Kenya, and abroad. Within Ethiopia, they number close to thirty million people, or 40 percent of the population. The Oromo in Ethiopia recognize their nation as Oromia, extending 600,000 square kilometers from the Nile River in the north to the Hararghe Plateau in the southeast. After Arabic and Hausa, the Oromo language, Afaan Oromo, is the most extensively spoken language on the African continent (Brooke 1956:69). Despite the wide use of the language, until the 1990s, Afaan Oromo was only formally recognized and taught in schools during Ethiopia's brief Italian Occupation (1936–41) and only under the present government has any significant progress been made in the development of the Oromo language at the national level, including the publication of the first texts exclusively in Afaan Oromo using the Latin
Oromo father and mother, and propagated through their two sons Barentuma, also known as Barentu, and Boran, also known as Borana (Bedri Kabir 1995:7). Those descendants of the Barentuma lineage near to Harar—the Ala, Oborra, Baabbile, and Daga—are known as the Afran Qallo, literally ‘the four sons of Qallo’ (ibid., p. 2). Each Oromo clan, or gosa, traces its line of descent to Ala, Oborra, Baabbile, or Daga. Thirty years ago, the Oromo of the former Eastern Hararghe province were conservatively estimated to number 1.5 million, although it is likely to be closer to 4 million today (Buschkens and Slikkerveer 1982:526). The Afran Qallo Oromo have largely given up pastoralism and RabaDori, their traditional governance system known among other Oromo groups as the gada system. Referred to as Qottu or ‘those that dig’ in the past, the Afran Qallo are principally rural agriculturalists today. The fact that they have remained settled in communities for the past century has meant that the Afran Qallo Oromo have had increasingly better access to markets and trade goods. This access is reflected in the types of materials incorporated into Oromo women’s dress.

**QARMA: HEADBAND**

Oromo dress has been subject to an array of imported trade goods including textiles, jewelry, and cosmetics that come into the markets in and around Harar from India and the Middle East and more recently from Taiwan and China. Under the Egyptian Occupation of Harar from 1875 to 1886, caravans from the east intensified, bringing a number of Indian, Turkish, and Yemeni merchants. Under Egyptian law, the Oromo were compulsorily confronted with a new religion and taxation system and a new administration that essentially banned their traditional socio-political age grade system, RabaDori (Mohammed Hassen 1980:224). Further changes in the first decades of the twentieth...
century, when Harar became part of the Ethiopian empire under Emperors Menilik II and Haile Selassie I, created closer alliances between Oromo and neighboring Argobba, Harari, and Somali groups due to their common experience with imposed feudalism, Orthodox Christianity, and growing poverty.

Approximately 100 years ago, when they could afford to do so, Oromo women in both farming and herding villages began replacing their leather skirts with cotton dresses and their leather headbands, or madiicha, with metal forehead bands known collectively as qarma (Fig. 3; Klemm 2002:206). The most common qarma, called qarma loti, or chain Headband, consists of a silver metal forehead piece made from silver beads or filigree fashioned into five triangles (Fig. 6). Both Harari and Oromo women wear these metal forehead bands today on special occasions. They are created by Harari smiths in Harar and sold in the gold and silver shops inside the walled city in the old horse market, Faras Magala. The wealthier Harari wear a kind of qarma loti made out of gold instead of the aluminum, tin, or nickel alloys created for the Oromo. The Harari headpiece also consists of seven triangles instead of five and displays more intricate filigree work. However, during the time of the Egyptian Occupation, the qarma loti worn by both Oromo and Harari women was identical in appearance and was created from silver by Harari smiths. The Maria Theresa dollar, a silver coin first minted in 1780 with the portrait of the Austro-Hungarian queen, was then the main source of silver for jewelry and other decorations throughout eastern Ethiopia and accounts for the similarity in design and use between Oromo and Harari headgear. However, when the Egyptians pulled out of Harar in 1886, they are believed to have taken countless sacks of Maria Theresa coins with them, thus depleting the local supply. Since many of these coins left Harar between 1875 and the turn of the century, silverwork has almost come to a complete halt.

In the 1970s, spools of low-grade metal chain began arriving in the marketplace, and local Oromo recreated qarma loti with this new readymade material (Fig. 7). This industrial chain was cheap and plentiful, and most importantly, its presence meant that Oromo women no longer had to enter affluent Harari jewelry shops, where they were often made to feel like second-class citizens. In the last twenty years this metal headpiece has been transformed again through a network of colorful seed beads that are either worn with the spool qarma loti or have replaced it entirely (Fig. 8). This modern beaded band is called challe qarma, or ‘beaded headpiece’. Challe qarma refers to both open interlaced strands of multicolored seed beads and horizontal strands of white seed beads connected with plastic, colored buttons.

This recent change in material can be viewed, first and foremost, as a political move by Oromo women to create new dress forms that no longer resemble Harari qarma as a means of creating distance from their Harari neighbors, an ethnic group with which they have growing tension over land and demographic representation. A headband is also one of the few ornaments shared by all divisions of the great Oromo confederacy throughout Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya, although materials and form vary widely. While women infrequently travel great distances, many of them express a desire to connect with the other groups that make up the thirty million Oromo population outside their own lineages with whom they share a language. Distinguishing themselves through forehead decorations is one way to create visual participation in emerging Oromo nationalism. Lastly, these new beads that flood the market are considered fashionable and young female traders spend their free time scouring bead kiosks for the latest colors and sizes with which to make their hairline most attractive and stylish.

**AMBARKA: BEADED NECKLACE**

For young, unmarried Oromo women living in and around the town of Fedis south of Harar, the ambarka necklace is their most prized possession. These women are born into generations of traders. Like their ancestors, they spend a great deal of their lives in transit, collecting necessities such as wood kindling in the rural areas, which they then sell in towns and along the main road that links Harar to Addis Ababa and the commercial railway town Dire Dawa (Fig. 1). A bundle of wood sticks for cooking, a scarcity in the almost completely deforested region, will fetch the equivalent of 50 US cents and take up to a week to collect and deliver. Economically these young women and their families are trapped within a system of poverty due to their limited, if not
nonexistent, access to education, high rates of malnutrition and disease, and low life expectancy. Within this system, the beaded 
ambarka, invented within the last fifteen years, has come to 
find a prominent place around the necks of young women. The 
ambarka distinguishes these women as traders, but more impor-
tantly, it is encoded with notions of modernity and nationalism.

In the areas east and south of Harar, the ambarka is regularly 
owned by young women who belong to the Ala and Baabile sub-
groups of the Afran Qallo. Slight variations in ambarka design 
are also worn in other Afran Qallo areas but are given different 
names. An ambarka is constructed either of two thick, single-
beaded bands joined at the bottom in a series of beaded rows 
ending with fringed beaded strands or two double-beaded bands 
connected at the bottom and fringed. In both cases, the neck-
laces, which are 4 to 8 centimeters (1½”–3”) in diameter, rest flat 
on the chest, reaching to the breastbone (Figs. 2, 9).

The young women who make these necklaces string imported 
seed beads onto twine in diamond-shaped patterns framed within 
broad registers of a single color. The unused twine at the top is fur-
ther braided into two strands to secure the ambarka at the neck. 
The seed beads, which come from the Czech Republic and more 
recently China, are purchased in single-color strands and have been 
sold since 1990 in the markets of Harar, Fedis, and Baabile. They are 
most readily available in white, green, yellow, blue, and red.

Ambarka and challee qarma are most commonly worn together 
by unmarried girls, who are taught to bead in seclusion during 
menses as a way to pass the time. Young Oromo women gener-
ally only wear beaded items that they themselves have assembled 
and pride themselves in never creating the same pattern twice 
nor wearing the pattern of fellow Oromo traders. For this reason, 
beadwork provides a relatively recent avenue for personal creativ-
ity. Women who can afford the spectrum of bead colors can cre-
ate a variety of looks as long as they follow the prescribed stylistic 
code. This code requires a series of diamond shapes dissected by 
two diagonal lines situated within a sequence of horizontal bands. 
To create variety, a woman may vary the thickness, number of 
beads and diamonds, and color in each necklace (Fig. 11).

It may at first appear odd that necklaces only a decade and 
a half old would possess such rigid stylistic conventions. These 
necklaces are, however, actually very close in style and pro-
duction to a long-standing tradition of basket making (Fig. 11). 
Woven fiber baskets were used until fairly recently in almost 
every household activity and they served as the main decor-
ation in the home (Fig. 12) for both Oromo and Harari women, as 
Belle Tarstiani explores in her contribution to this issue. While 
baskets still play a role as household containers and make up part 
of a woman’s dowry, the laborious task of fine basket making is 
now less often practiced. As is true throughout Africa, in the last 
half century the introduction of plastic buckets and dishes, tin 
platters, and cast-iron cooking pots has slowed the production 
of pottery and basketry. Afran Qallo women have largely given 
up the personal control they once had in producing their own 
household and ceremonial wares. A woman’s financial resources 
and her desire for foreign manufactured goods now dictate the 
materials she uses in her home. In addition, the cement walls 
that are currently replacing traditional thatch or mud walls are 
not suited to displaying hand-made baskets or even modern 
metal-stenciled platters. Many women with whom I have spoken 
also state that the major famines since the 1980s coupled with 
the current political climate have created situations for migra-
tion and displacement among the Afran Qallo. Women do not 
pass time preparing beautiful houses as they did in the past, and 
notions of home are no longer rooted geographically. Instead, 
the creative energy previously spent in the decoration of interior 
spaces is now focused on the production of body art. Women 
hang beautifully patterned bead necklaces on themselves just as 
they once placed baskets on the walls of their homes. Express-
ions of an Afran Qallo identity are today located within the 
frame of the self.

Challee qarma worn with ambarka create a complete set of 
upper body jewelry. While earrings made of seed bead loops and 
other necklaces may be added and exposed arms may be dec-
Oran Qallo women resemble 
Harari baskets in their shape and 
construction, but Oromo baskets 
have less intricate patterns and 
use different materials. Today 
Oromo baskets are less frequently 
weaved but the diamond pattern 
seen here continues to be the 
dominant pattern in beadwork. 
PHOTO: RYAN BURNETT, 2008

11 Fine Oromo baskets made 
by Afran Qallo women resemble 
Harari baskets in their shape and 
construction, but Oromo baskets 
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Oromo baskets are less frequently 
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dominant pattern in beadwork. 
PHOTO: RYAN BURNETT, 2008

12 Afran Qallo Oromo women 
in the town of Jarso carry baskets 
of food during wadaaajaa, a prayer 
ceremony. When not in use, these 
baskets will be displayed in their 
homes. Jarso, Ethiopia. 
PHOTO: PERI KLEMM, 2000

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lee themselves. While they may work in groups when they have a free moment in the day, most women try to differentiate their own challee from others through individual choices in pattering and color. It is considered a shameful offense to copy the designs of others or to sell or trade one’s necklace. When a woman dies her daughters will cut and unravel her necklaces and headbands and distribute the beads for future jewelry rather than wear the challee or save it as a memento. Beaded bands, then, have a life-cycle dependent on the life length of their owner. When I asked why challee could not be exchanged (hoping to buy one myself) women laughed and I was told, “When the body dies it goes back to the earth. When the challee dies it goes back to other challees.”

Challee worn at the forehead and at the neck functions as a statement about a woman’s financial position, her capacity as a skilled artisan, and her desire to accentuate and draw attention to her torso and head, the area that attracts the gaze. By extension, unmarried women further advertise their skills and mark their interest in future mates through the necklaces they bead for young men (Fig. 13). The distinctive diamond-shaped patterns and primary colors of beaded headbands and necklaces also signal a more personal transformation of the wearer herself. While girls may wear a single beaded strand, young Afran Qallo women begin wearing complete beaded sets after their excision ceremonies. At the onset of menses, which usually follows this earlier rite, young women receive strands of beads from their relatives and are encouraged to bead while they sit in seclusion.

Lastly, Oromo women describe the strands of the fashionable beads that flood the market as progressive and worldly. They point out that women all over Africa wear jewelry made of these beads and even visitors from outside Africa seem to want them. Thus, women use these new plastic and glass beads from India, China, and the Czech Republic to create global allegiances to notions of Africa and the world beyond. Like the qarma, a necklace is one of these ornaments shared by all Oromo throughout eastern Africa, although, as with the headband, materials and forms vary widely.

The stylistic choices of diamonds and horizontal bands are also significant in this discussion of nationalism and Oromo identity. Certainly women are drawing on basketry as a model in their ambarka beading through the same concerns with containment of shapes, the repetition of form and pattern and the use of primary color sets of stripes and diamonds. We know from Phillip Paulitschke, the Viennese ethnographer who visited Harar in the 1880s, that 120 years ago, the rhombus was the most reproduced figure in dress and jewelry designs and on the flat expanses of everyday objects (1896:162). This shape is still visible on the incised gourds made by Oromo men. Yet a review of the ambarka reveals that ambarka diamonds are further divided into four by two strong diagonals (Fig. 14). When I asked what this division of the diamond was called, women told me it was simply known as “Afran Qallo” and I dismissed the divided diamond design as nothing more than a genealogical identifier. In hindsight, however, I believe that there is more to it. This divided diamond pattern is unique to the ambarka and is a very recent bead pattern. It emerged at a time when the EPRDF government was attempting to suppress all forms of Oromo nationalism. In this context, this divided diamond pattern may directly represent the Afran Qallo or more specifically ‘the four sons of Qallo.’ The larger diamond is Afran Qallo and the four smaller diamonds are his four sons from which all Afran Qallo trace their genealogy: Ala, Oborraa, Baabbile, and Daga. Each of these clan names is thought of as a large shade tree, the symbolic location for traditional worship, court counsel, and business matters for the Oromo, and today a metaphor of cultural vitality and unity.

KULA: COLOR

Throw up your head in the air,
tilt it and lay your naanmoon in harmony
Shaggee of straight nose
black edged eyelids and close eye brows
that look as if they are carved
your kula and qarma
farora and kulkultaar
I saw, they look as if they are flawlessly created
—From the song Mari Mee, recorded in 1994

In the song Mari Mee quoted above, the singer compliments the decorated space between the young Oromo woman’s eyes, the central focus for cosmetics. Adorning the eye area and the cheeks with colored pigment known as kula is a recent phenomenon. Today, women no longer utilize natural mineral pigments on the face but instead invest in more fashionable and easily applicable substances: bottles of nail polish. Nail polish is today applied to the bridge of the nose, between the eyebrows, and to the cheeks (Figs.
policy, the complete eradication of the traditional socio-political
distances leader called Haile Selassie I. Radical changes to land use
of exposure to Ethiopia's government or state-sponsored education
ing in great number. As most Afran Qallo Oromo had had little
time in the 1920s when young men and women began disappear-
ugly, rather than to beautify. The Oromo speak of a turbulent
leather, and fashion pots as their primary means of livelihood
buda, a term which references both the inherent eye power and
eye as a pan-Ethiopian phenomenon is most widely known as
potentially inflict harm through attack with the evil eye. The evil
eyes are also meant to divert the gaze of strangers who could
intended to heal, protect, and beautify. But marks around the
marks on the cheeks further beautify a woman's face and can suggest geographical identity. Often haaxixa are
enhanced with tumtuu, in which a green-black paste made of
soot and plant extract is applied with thorns pricked under the
skin. Today, the process of scarification and tattooing is usu-
ally discussed as a feature-enhancing cosmetic that, like dots of
polish, adds to a woman's attractiveness. Haaxixa placed above
the eyebrow, along the bridge of the nose, and on the cheeks are
intended to heal, protect, and beautify. But marks around the
eyes are also meant to divert the gaze of strangers who could
potentially inflict harm through attack with the evil eye. The evil
eye as a pan-Ethiopian phenomenon is most widely known as
buda, a term which references both the inherent eye power and
the individuals who possess it, usually casts that smelt iron, tan
leather, and fashion pots as their primary means of livelihood
(Klemm 2007:99).

The practice of scarring the face is also reported to have been
used specifically during the first reign of Haile Selassie I to make
ugly, rather than to beautify. The Oromo speak of a turbulent
time in the 1920s when young men and women began disappear-
ing in great number. As most Afran Qallo Oromo had had little
exposure to Ethiopia's government or state-sponsored education
at this period, an uncertainty grew concerning the motivations of
a distant leader called Haile Selassie I. Radical changes to land use
policy, the complete eradication of the traditional socio-political
governing institutions, and new demands for labor and a national
militia, created mounting distrust toward the Ethiopian state.
Informants state that in the 1930s it was confirmed by a famous
Oromo mantiyya, a jarrii spirit expert, that Haile Selassie was
himself possessed by a jarrii spirit.17 This spirit was said to inhabit
his dog, a Chihuahua with bulging eyes that often appeared with
his master in official photographs and news broadcasts. Afran
Qallo Oromo feared that the small dog was masterfully control-
ning Haile Selassie to tour the country to collect and consume the
most attractive people.18 As a result, people believed that the most
beautiful Oromo men and women were being confiscated by gov-
ernment troops and eaten by this insatiable ruler. Mothers began
to hide their children and disfigure their faces to keep them from
abduction.

In this sense, excessive haaxixa was used as a means of marring
beauty and keeping young men and women safe. While haaxixa
was practiced much earlier than this, it was because of the harsh-
ness of the Amhara administration, especially from 1887 to 1936,
that Oromo tradition emphasized the importance of heavy haax-
ixa in the 1930s. This visual and oral evidence suggests that fear of
buda and the foreign administration of the imperial Ethiopian gov-
ernments was not prevalent in Oromo belief until the first reign of
Haile Selassie, a time when the wearing of scars was on the increase.

Nail polish operates both within this belief system as a way of
diverting the gaze from the eye area but also as a beautifying
agent intended to harness visual attention. Adorning the body
to invite the attention of mates or to hide from those with budu
speaks to issues of disclosure and concealment inherent in all of
the body arts used by Oromo women.

Women say they like nail polish for its impermanence, its color
variety, and its foreign manufacture. While permanent scars and
tattoos bleed, fade, and shift over time, nail polish can be applied
quickly and painlessly, then scraped off and reapplied again. Applied
polish also promotes personal expression. Dabs of polish allow a
young woman creative space to articulate an individual style that
will catch the attention of potential suitors she might meet on her way to and from market or on wood gathering excursions (Fig. 5). Decorating with polish also suggests a high economic status. The price of an imported bottle of polish fetches the equivalent of four days work for a wood or coal seller. Despite the cost, women are reluctant to collectively buy a bottle since styles copied in a communal color from one face to another would not give the woman her unique look and promote her individual appeal.

Polish is rarely wasted on the fingernails, since that is not an area that traditionally gets painted and thus, not a candidate for the dissemination of cultural meaning. Young men, however, who travel broader distances than women and come into contact with nail salons or fashion magazines, commonly wear polish on their nails. This again suggests women’s astute decision to limit cosmetics to places on the body that continue to be decorated in traditional ways and whose decoration conveys important cultural meaning. Even though *kula* made with bright pink and red polish is becoming increasingly popular, the practices of scarring and tattooing persist. As a personal art, polish can literally exist alongside meanings. Even though *kula* made with bright pink and red polish is becoming increasingly popular, the practices of scarring and tattooing persist. As a personal art, polish can literally exist alongside meanings. Even though *kula* made with bright pink and red polish is becoming increasingly popular, the practices of scarring and tattooing persist. As a personal art, polish can literally exist alongside meanings. Even though *kula* made with bright pink and red polish is becoming increasingly popular, the practices of scarring and tattooing persist. As a personal art, polish can literally exist alongside meanings.

Women's participation in Oromo nationalism

Turner writes, “every society is confronted by four tasks: the reproduction of populations in time, the regulation of bodies in space, the restraint of the ‘interior’ body through disciplines, and the representation of the ‘exterior’ body in social space” (1985:2). Among the Afan Qallo Oromo, a series of moral codes shaped through a shared past, common religious belief, and conditions of subordination dictate bodily restraints and determine which collective physical representations are withheld or reproduced at particular moments and within specific contexts. The collective presentation of the Afan Qallo female body “in social space” runs parallel today to the emergence of an Oromo national consciousness, one that extends beyond the borders of present-day Ethiopia into the surrounding nation-states that are also home to large Oromo populations. This consciousness is largely informed by a debate centered on whether the Oromo in their nation of Oromia should attempt to secede from the Ethiopian state or rally for equal treatment and self-determination as members of a unified Ethiopia.

The cultural glue of this nationalist movement within Oromia, which is the Oromo regional state within Ethiopia, and the Oromo Diaspora is largely founded on the shared experience of language, history, and political domination. The historic *gada* or Raba Dori system, common to all Oromo, is often promoted as a socio-political organizing ideology through which to mold an independent Oromo nation. While both Oromo men and women throughout Oromia can lay claim to a shared experience, including the move from the stratified grades of the Raba Dori institution to the court system enforced by the Ethiopian state, the loss of rights to grazing and farm lands, and increased state-sponsored violence, Oromo nationalism has been most publicly formulated and articulated by educated Oromo men in a male-centered paradigm. Kuwee Kumsa reports that Oromo national movements, particularly the Oromo Liberation Front, have not adequately acknowledged the role of women in its formation and struggle nor has the organization included a women’s voice (1998:155). Further, the place of women and the roles played by women’s arts have not been formally acknowledged as a relevant component of nationalist sentiment.

Yet, as these three examples have shown, women’s bodies and their personal arts are instrumental in the production, albeit subtle and symbolic, of Oromo identity and Oromo consciousness. Further, Oromo society views women as the dominant creators and assimilators of cultural symbols. The reason the decorated body is left out of this debate has much to do with the ways in which Oromo nationalism was first conceptualized as an abstract ideal. The establishment of the Macha-Tuluma self-help organization among western Oromo in Ethiopia in the 1960s and the participation in government-sponsored programs under the Derg regime in the late 1970s, coupled with an increased exposure to secondary education and urban jobs, created a uniquely modern Oromo consciousness for young men. As Mekuria Bulcha has written, “the role of articulating, defining and promoting Oromo identity was assumed by a fledgling intelligentsia beginning in the mid-1960s” (1996:49). In this male-centered political climate, the expressions of rural women in localized areas went largely unnoticed. At this time, however, women were independently creating their own material expressions based on the emerging nationalist consciousness sweeping the Oromo countryside, and these practices continue today through the manipulation of new materials in the production of upper torso body art.

In her comparative piece on gendered dress among Kalabari and Americans, Joanne Eicher finds that while the ideal body type in each case study is inherently different, in both the Nigerian and American examples, women are expected to display a sexed body through the exposure of skin (2001:246). She writes that men’s dress is named for their top garment while “the names for women’s ensembles refer to the bottom items or garments that cover the genitalia, the reproductive site” (ibid., p. 242). Like the Oromo, Kalabari women’s dress is most closely associated with the lower body and its association with procreation. For the Oromo, the lower body is connected to the past through its link to the ground, to birthing, and to containment. This is a space where loose, layered skirts and a tight, cloth belt become metaphors for the opening and closing of the body. The upper body, on the other hand, is where the future rests, and a whole host of objects, including amulets, beadwork, and face paint, are brought together here to assert a national identity in anticipation of future encounters.

Conclusion

I have introduced three body art practices that underscore how fashion can be manipulated to resonate meaningful connections to indigenous notions of individuality, community, and memory. These beaded bands and color swatches celebrate the individual style of each young woman and therefore, no two should look identical. Yet, in this multiethnic environment, these body arts are clearly a communal Oromo visual expression. The beaded *ambarka* necklace and the beaded *qarma* headband are both patterned with the diamond—a shape that dominates older basket forms—while the *kula* face paint is modeled after older permanent facial markings. To be fashionable among the Oromo, then, carries with it the limitations imposed by a bounded aesthetic system, one that Afan Qallo women are largely responsible for gen-
erating, maintaining, and communicating both as objects and as subjects. This system requires the layering of old and new forms, intended to both catch and confuse the eye, simultaneously revealing and concealing, beautifying and repelling, personalizing and unifying to those that understand the language of dress.

Throughout the historical period discussed, Oromo women have developed a clear, cultivated fashion sense that connects them to peoples and places beyond their region. As increasingly active agents, Afran Qallo women are creating new looks that draw from and resonate with historically relevant body art practices and which link them to a wider global world. Further, contemporary dress is a symbolic means through which Afran Qallo women come to understand and make sense of their sociopolitical and economic experiences and their identity as Oromo within the Ethiopian state today.

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Notes
1 Harar is situated in the central highlands of Ethiopia, 340 miles east of Addis Ababa and 175 miles west of the port of Zela on the Somali coast.
2 The category of “foreign scholar,” still in its infancy, has, as yet, no predetermined dress code.
3 The bodily alterations addressed in this paper fall under the rubric of “dress,” defined by Eicher and Roach-Higgins as “an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings” (1992:15).
4 The italicized words that appear throughout this text are in the Afaan Oromo language and appear without diacritical marks. Since there is, as yet, no standard transliteration for Afaan Oromo, and many variations exist, the spellings used were chosen by my primary research collaborator and me for the most accurate pronunciation for American English speakers. All sounds are pronounced as in English except the “x,” which represents an explosive “c” sound, and the “q,” which is pronounced as a “v-velar-palatal ejective, with a sharp sound in the throat” (Wood 1999:xxv). When sounds are lengthened, vowels and/or consonants have been doubled. Any inconsistencies in the written pronunciation of Afaan Oromo are my own.
5 “Costume,” after all, is historically derived from “custom.” Both terms indicate that material culture and social forms are used contextually to construct identities through the medium of social relations.
6 For further discussion see Asmaron Legesse 2000, the collection of essays in Baxter, Huttlin, and Triulzi 1996, and Asafa Jalata 1998.
8 Among the Jarso beaded necklaces are called chale atete (‘the beads of atete’) and among the Nole and Ala, quliba (ten).
9 J.A., interview, Jarso, Ethiopia, February 3, 2000 (this name is abbreviated to protect anonymity).
10 Paulitschke also finds it strange that the Somalis, Afar and Oromo seem never to have tried to reproduce human images, animal figures, or vegetal forms in jewelry or on household objects (1896:162). The prevalence of Sharia Law in this region since at least the fifteenth century may have restricted women from producing iconic images on objects they created.
11 While representational imagery rarely appears in personal arts, the tree shape is the central image on the flag of Oromia and the Oromo Liberation Front as well as patriotic manufactured items.
12 Naannoo is the braided hairstyle of an unmarried girl. This line refers to the movement of the naannoo. If the head movement is abrupt, it makes the sound “fash.” If the head is gently rotated, the sound of the naannoo is referred to as wave-like and designated as “lash” or “rapee” (Guutamma Aammalle, personal communication, March 1, 2002).
13 The singer is chiefly admiring the area between the eyes that is often scarred, tattooed, or decorated with dabs of nail polish.
14 The two meanings for kula apply here. Kula (‘to apply color’) can refer to the blue-black pigment used as eyeliner and as a tattooing substance or it may signify the threads or fibers worn around a woman’s forehead (Taman Youssof, personal communication, February 26, 2002).
15 This refers to metal, crescent-shaped earrings.
16 This refers to a necklace made of circular-shaped metal beads.
17 A.S.J., interview, Harar, Ethiopia, February 25, 2000 (this name is abbreviated to protect anonymity).
18 M.M., interview, Harar, Ethiopia, March 10, 2000 (this name is abbreviated to protect anonymity).
19 S.A., interview, Harar, Ethiopia, April 4, 2000 (this name is abbreviated to protect anonymity).

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