

Prophecy and Apocalypse among the Oromo-Borana: The Power of Chiasmus

Marco Bassi - University of Palermo

POST-PRINT VERSION FOR OPEN ACCESS

(For quotation please refer to the printed version due to minor editing and different pagination)

Printed version:

Chapter in Section 5 of

Book Title: *Anthropology as Homage. Festschrift for Ivo Strecker*

Edited by: Felix Girke, Sophia Thubauville, Wolbert G.C. Smidt

Publisher: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag

Series: Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung (MBA)

ISBN: 978-3-89645-842-1

URL: https://www.koeppe.de/titel_anthropology-as-homage

Citation of the printed version:

Bassi, Marco. 2018. "Prophecy and Apocalypse among the Oromo-Borana: The Power of Chiasmus", in Felix Girke, Sophia Thubauville, Wolbert G.C. Smidt (eds.), *Anthropology as Homage. Festschrift for Ivo Strecker*, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Cologne, pp. 271-287.

PROPHECY AND APOCALYPSE AMONG THE OROMO-BORANA: THE POWER OF CHIASMUS

*Marco Bassi**

For some years, I worked at the Department of Sociology at Trento University. As the only anthropologist in the entire university, I had to adapt to the local context by getting acquainted with others' methodologies and carefully sifting out the different attitudes concerning the relation between data and theory. There was nothing wrong with the quantitative methods: they differed enough to be treated separately from my own. I felt at ease personally, but at the same time I experienced some discomfort over the qualitative approaches as practised by sociologists. This was especially the case with ethnography, to the point that I still have not decided if ethnography as practised by anthropologists is really the same method as the new ethnographies today fashionable in various disciplines, including, increasingly, in anthropological departments themselves. I was impressed by the energy sociologists put into spelling out the various ways in which theory can develop out of ethnographic data and, conversely, by how constrained they were to articulate theoretical frameworks in the construction of their ethnographies. I became more and more aware of how unconventional we as anthropologists are.

I struggled to find ways to explain anthropological methodology to sociologically trained students, who perceived simply an "absence" of method. I had to clarify that we do not start from a theory, but from many theories; that we read and forget to avoid just what they are taught to do: to orient data gathering. Again, I had to explain that we approach the field with an "empty mind"; we allow data to construct themselves by creating links and meanings in relation to each other and, in the lucky cases, by association with deep-seated theories stored somewhere in our consciousness. Sometimes the ethnographer fails to successfully connect data to theory. In this case, he has three options: to drop his ethnographic work; to limit himself to ethnographic description; or to engage in the difficult work of developing new theory that may help make sense of his ethnographic findings. I spent considerable time telling students how theories must be read and left to float in the brain while doing ethnography. Meaningful associations between data and theory may emerge directly in the field or later, when we work on our notes, recordings and other sets of data. Several times I had to reassure students and colleagues when, after experiencing the difficulties and intense engagement of anthropological fieldwork, they felt overwhelmed by an enormous quantity of disconnected and incoherent data making no sense and giving the impression that nothing could come out of it. Perhaps influenced by Ivo's "ethnographic chiasmus" (Strecker 2011), I like to call this feeling the "ethnographic chaos". By this, I am not referring to the epistemological relation of the ethnographer with the field, but to what I consider a normal phase of the ethnographic research cycle, usually occurring immediately after termination of fieldwork. The "ethnographic chaos" is an oxymoron: its objective is to encourage the disoriented ethnog-

* Associate, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany.

rapher with faith that, by reviewing and ordering his data, meanings will emerge. The chaos is the normal, ordinary outcome of the anthropological-style ethnographic endeavour, the price we pay for the “failure” to theoretically ground data collection during the planning phase of our research. However, I have to admit, getting out of the chaos may not always be so easy, as will be shown in the case I offer up below. It shows how the interpretation of data went through several phases, with its latest articulation emerging three decades after my fieldwork through a combining of rhetoric culture and anticipation theories.

I begin by presenting my initial doubts about the sociological relevance of rhetoric culture theory. I will then introduce the ethnographic data used in this analysis, which were collected in various phases, involving: Boku Tache, an indigenous anthropologist; Borbor Bule, an estimated oral historian of the Borana; and myself, an “Africanist” anthropologist. This section also introduces the reader to the prophetic practices of the Oromo and to their apocalyptic narratives. I will then explain why prophecy, a central theme in anthropology, does not apparently fit with contemporary understandings of anticipation. In the two central sections, I will review the chiasmic verses of the apocalyptic narrative of the Oromo in light of advanced elaborations of Rhetoric Culture Theory. This allows a re-interpretation of prophecy as key institutional settings for the dialogic production of innovative culture in situations of social change, in which chiasmus and other rhetorical devices are used as a way to structure thinking and stimulate innovative action. In the concluding paragraphs, I will discuss how the application of rhetoric culture enables a finer understanding of cultural and social processes, confirming the universality of anticipatory processes, while at the same time stressing the cultural specificity of the latter.

The encounter with rhetoric culture theory

I have been interacting with Ivo since doing my doctoral field research among the Oromo-Borana, a community neighbouring the Hamar in south Ethiopia. The Oromo is the largest national and linguistic group in Ethiopia. The Borana constitute their southern section; they stretch deep into Kenya and, like the Hamar, their livelihoods are centred on pastoralism. Ivo’s research among the Hamar went far beyond the classic anthropological exercise. The South Omo Research Centre was one of Ivo’s dreams, and he actively contributed to making it a reality by securing the land as well as support from both people and institutions, and by constructing the museum over a long period, bit by bit. Even before the buildings were completed, we researchers from “other groups” knew that a stay in Jinka would bring the most engaging intellectual entertainment with young and “old” international and Ethiopian anthropologists, as well as with knowledgeable elders. I do not remember in what year Ivo introduced me to the chiasmic figuration, but it was certainly when he was starting to speculate about the interdependence of culture and rhetoric – perhaps his theoretically oriented way out of the ethnographic chaos. We were enjoying a nice and peaceful sunset on the steps of the museum. I could hardly understand what he was talking about: what did that strange XYYX figure of Western literature have to do with our stay in such a fascinating and unpredictable place? And what was its relevance in relation to anthropology? As I started grasping what chiasmus

is – at that time only at the mere level of a formal feature of text – I suddenly realized that it was the dominant trope of a poetic oral text I had collected in the field during my doctoral research. We knew then that we had something on which to collaborate. Ivo kept inviting me to contribute to one of the “rhetoric culture” publications that later materialized. I did start working on such a text, but I never felt entirely satisfied with my elaboration. At that early stage of rhetoric culture thinking, I could not yet grasp how chiasmus (and other tropes) could be transferred from the realm of perception – and the power they have in creating new meanings within individuals’ mind – to the realm of culture, in the sense of its social and shared construction, as implied by Ivo’s assertion that “as rhetoric is grounded in culture, culture is grounded in rhetoric” (Strecker 2016: 23). While it was clear that culture could only develop in connection to humans’ capacity for symbolism (Geertz 1973), it was not so easy to understand how the same symbolic and rhetorical mechanisms apply to social interaction, beyond the value they have in communication. In other words, I felt I needed to think more about the dynamics implied by the second half of Ivo’s chiasmic statement.¹

Ethnographic elaboration

The chiasmic poetry presented here was recorded during a prophetic session in 1990. “Prophetic session” is perhaps not the best expression since we are talking about informal events: people simply listening to an elder reputed to be knowledgeable about the utterances of *ragaa* (prophets in Oromo) during ceremonies or gatherings, or in ordinary daily life.² The *ragaa* are recognized as individuals who lived in the past and who have the mystical capacity to be directly inspired by God (*Waaqaa*). Their utterances are, therefore, divine revelation and are often delivered in an ecstatic state. The Oromo prophetic tradition differs from the Judaeo-Christian in that it is orally transmitted. When I was in the field, I happened to hear people speaking about prophecy quite often, especially when unusual events occurred that seemed to have been prophesized. I went to interview Guyyoo Dambii, considered an expert on the matter and living in a nearby village. In his childhood, Guyyoo had met Areeroo Boosaroo, the last acknowledged prophet, who by then was already an elder. Guyyoo was 94 years old when I interviewed him. The interview soon developed into a prophetic session. As the news that Guyyoo was going to speak about Areeroo Boosaroo circulated, people came from nearby huts and villages. His house was too small to accommodate all and a spontaneous dialogue developed between him and his audience. I simply watched and recorded. Guyyoo alternated poetic text

-
- 1 I thank Anthony Paul for his valuable comments to an earlier unfinished version of this paper. I also thank Cristiana Facchini for insights on the relevance of chiasmus in Jewish and Christian scripture.
 - 2 Chikage Oba-Smidt (2016) recently published a detailed ethnographic study on the oral traditions of the Oromo-Borana, giving consideration to several prophets. Prophets appear in the oral historical traditions in connection to deviations from the expected cyclical flow of historical events.

with direct and indirect quotations from the prophet, sometimes recalling the sing-song voice by which Areeroo delivered his utterances. There was, however, a *leit-motif* throughout the session: the expectation of a forthcoming cataclysm, which had also been predicted by other prophets. The occurrence of events predicted by the prophet worked as evidence of the reliability of prophecy. Hence, they were also omens of the apocalypse, expected to take place very soon. However, since the predictions were expressed in a poetic and highly stylized form and in some case were very enigmatic or open to multiple readings, the occurrence of a predicted event was a matter of interpretation. Indeed, it was the major subject of discussion by the audience during the session: while interpreting verses, the community was actively engaged in commenting on their current society, or – to say it better – they were commenting and analyzing social, political, technological, cultural and ethical changes, whose relevance was brought about by the verses.

Some years later I shared the transcription of the session with Boku Tache, a Borana colleague who happened to have researched the same subject. Our ethnographies had many textual analogies, but they also differed in the range of collected text attributed to the prophet Areeroo Boosaroo. In 2005, Boku decided to submit the issue to the attention of Borbor Bulee, who I met many years later. Having dedicated his life to systematically collecting and memorizing Borana historical traditions, Borbor Bulee is recognized as an *arga daghattii* (oral historian) by his own community; he also has a philologist's capacity to systematically compare and evaluate the different oral traditions.³ Today, his reputation is widely acknowledged in Oromo studies in Ethiopia and internationally. Borbor clarified that what Guyyoo had presented as a single prophetic tradition revealed by Areeroo Boosaroo was in fact a combination of utterances made by various prophets at different times, with the addition of verses created by poets and other *arga daghattii* from the past. He explained that people tend to attribute all revealed text and other correlated poetic elaboration to Areeroo Boosaroo simply because the latter is very popular, being the latest fully acknowledged prophet in Borana land.

To summarize, we may say that my ethnography was only about the “consumption” of prophecy, while Boku and Borbor dug deeper into the “production” of prophetic text, which includes both revealed and secular text.

Boku and I decided to present our combined ethnographies in the *Journal of Oromo Studies* (Bassi and Boku Tache 2005), which was at that time the only academic forum for Oromo studies. Since we knew that other prophets lived in other Oromo areas, we were hoping to lay the ground for further research. The article was mainly ethnographic. It included both the text and Borbor's philological reconstruction, accompanied by an attempt to uncover the analogies with biblical prophets and a background use of modernity theory to account for the proliferation of prophetic utterance in periods of radical social change or environmental crisis.

3 Reciprocal feeding across different types of historical traditions is a normal feature of Oromo oral and historical literature (Oba-Smidt 2016).

The encounter with anticipation theory

In November 2015, the *First International Conference on Anticipation* was organized in the University of Trento as an attempt to progress towards a general theory created out of the various ways anticipation is understood and used in the different disciplines (Poli 2010; Miller forthcoming). I contributed by organizing a session dedicated to anthropology. The outcome of the session was rather heterogeneous, showing that even within anthropology the use of the notion of anticipation was just as diverse as across disciplines. Arjun Appadurai – one of the few anthropologists who, in his book *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), specifically addresses anticipation – showed that different social groups practise different anticipatory patterns according to their experience and values, thus injecting a good dose of relativism into this particular search for universal truth. There are, nevertheless, some features of anticipation worth noting for our analysis of chiasmus in prophecy. Anticipation is generally conceived as a rational exercise, consisting in “anticipating” future events and trends based on analysis of known facts from the near past and from the present, with the aim of orienting action accordingly. With the re-oriented action expected to take place immediately, anticipation concerns the near future. It has been noted that the incidence of anticipatory practices increases in connection to the occurrence of change and discontinuity. For example, in today’s environment of “intense globalization”, the standardized answers suggested by tradition are perceived to be inappropriate to the changing reality (Poli 2014). Anticipation, then, becomes intense under the same conditions that favour the proliferation of prophetic utterance; but the latter, being the result of divine revelation revealed during ecstatic practices, is usually not taken to be similarly “rational”. Also, incorporated as it is into eschatological and apocalyptic narratives, prophecy does not seem to refer very much to the near future. Indeed, a review of the anthropological literature on time shows a tendency to focus on a mythical past or transcendental future (Munn 1992). These are putative reasons why we cannot qualify prophecy as an anticipatory practice, even if prophets by definition foretell events expected to happen in the future.

The chiastic verses in the prophetic text

Borbor Bule attributed most of the chiastic verses contained in the Borana apocalyptic tradition to Harmiso. According to Borbor, Harmiso was an oral historian (*argaa dhageettii*) who lived shortly before Areero Boosaaro. As such, these verses were not strictly the product of divine revelation, but a poetic reformulation of older prophecy. My colleague Boku Tache, in cooperation with Borbor Bule, suggested that Harmiso’s creative work occurred during the *cinna tiittee gurraachaa* (“the time of the black flies”) – the great rinderpest pandemic and famine that affected the Borana during the *gadaa* of Guyyoo Boruu Ungulee (1880-1888). The Oromo reckon time according to *gadaa*, an 8-year long period, each led by a different generational class represented by selected officers. The senior officer of the class is the *abbaa gadaa*, meaning the “father of the *gadaa*”, and the period he is in charge is known by his

name (Asmarom Legesse 1973).⁴ The crisis peaked during the following *gadaa*, which is why most people locate the *cinna* during the *gadaa* of Liiban Jaldessaa (1888–1896).⁵

The sequence reported below comprises all the verses that Borbor attributed to Harmiso.⁶ During the prophetic session held by Guyyo Dambi, they were not recited in sequence. Instead, the verses were inserted here and there along with other poetry in the narration of the apocalypse to give rhythm and to grab the audience's attention. As mentioned, they were attributed to the prophet and the audience understood their actualization in the changing society as a sign of the proximity of the cataclysm.

1	Booranii dhugaa hin quufu	The Boorana will not be satisfied with truth ⁷
2	Boranii dhugee hin quufu	The Boorana will never have enough of drinking ⁸
3	Okoleen goofee okkotee bira tataa'a	The <i>okolee</i> becomes empty, people will sit by the <i>okkotee</i> ⁹
4	Doolii buullessa hin qabu carfiin bulaa hin qabdu	The <i>doola</i> will not have butter, the <i>carfii</i> will not have milk traces ¹⁰

-
- 4 The cyclical sequence of the *gadaa* periods, based on the succession of generational class lines, facilitates historical memorization of historical events, giving oral historians (*argaa dhageetti*) the capacity to reliably recall events at a distance of several centuries, even in the absence of written sources. Among the Oromo, oral historians are not associated with a royal court but are distributed throughout the major clan divisions in a system connected to the egalitarian distribution of power generated by the *gadaa* system of generational classes (Oba-Smidt 2016).
- 5 Waktole Tiki and Gufu Oba (2009) have provided a full discussion of the impact of this regional calamity on the Borana, and of their political and institutional response to the crisis.
- 6 This text was first published in Bassi and Boku Tache (2005). The translation was done by Boku Tache.
- 7 *Dhugaa* (truth) is one of the supreme social values of the Borana, connected to their customary juridical procedures.
- 8 Probably referring to drinking alcoholic beverages, a habit introduced by northern settlers and immigrants in towns after the Borana were conquered by the Abyssinians, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Drinking has been a constant social concern and was the subject of deliberations over restrictions in the recent Gumi Gayoo, the general assembly of the Borana, which is held once every *gadaa* period and has legislative capacity in the customary normative sector.
- 9 *Okolee*: a leather container used for milking cows. *Okkotee*: cooking pot made by the Waata, a hunter-gatherer occupational group living among the Borana. This metaphor refers to a shift in food habits (from milk products to grain) that became widespread only during the second half of the twentieth century.
- 10 *Doola*: large leather container for butter. *Carfii*: Milk-churning vessel made of wood or plant fiber. *Bulaa*: what remains sticking to the wall of the churning vessel from the process of butter making.

5	Mirgisaan mucha hin qabu	The very good milk yielding cow will not have teats ¹¹
6	Mirgoon gabbina hin qabdu	The steer will not have fat
7	Waan arra arge bor hin argu	What is seen today will not be seen tomorrow
8	Waan bor arge iftaan hin argu	What is seen tomorrow will not be seen the day after tomorrow
9	Wa hin qorinaa	Do not talk at public meetings
10	Wa hin murinaa	Do not make judicial decisions (also: do not have political/judicial authority)
11	Wa hin tolinaa	Do not support those in need
12	Afaan cufadhaa	Shut your mouth
13	Gurra hin cufatinaa	Do not close your ears
14	Shanan keessan bobbaasaa	The few cows you have, take them to pasture
15	Shantii teessan qaladhaa	The few goats you have, kill and eat them
16	Adoo jiruu jaarsii qeerroo taha	There is an elder, he behaves like an unmarried/inexperienced youth
17	Ijoollee qeerroo ta affarroo hin dotteesinitti abbaa warraa taha	Young boys without moustaches behave/act like the head of a family
18	Angafii maandhaa taha	The senior (first born) becomes the junior (last born)
19	Maandhaatti angafa taha	The junior (last born) becomes the senior (first born)
20	Gursumeettiin gammee taati	The wife taken in second marriage becomes the legitimate (first) wife
21	Gammeen gursumaha taati	The legitimate (first) wife becomes the wife in second marriage
22	Balchaan budaa taati	The clean person becomes the one with the evil eye
23	Budaan balchaa taati	The person with the evil eye becomes the clean one
24	Dhartii dhugaa taati	The false becomes truth
25	Dhugaan dhara taati	Truth becomes false
26	Ilmii warraa garbicha taha	The son of the family becomes (lives) like the servants
27	Garbichii ilma warraa taha	The servants become (live) like the son of the family

11 Meaning the cow will yield only very little milk.

28	Fardii harree taha	The horse becomes the donkey
29	Harreen farda taati	The donkey becomes the horse ¹²
30	Waraabessii nyeenca taha	The hyena becomes the lion
31	Nyeencii waraabessa taha	The lion becomes the hyena ¹³
32	Jaldeessii gaaraalleen egeri nama nyaataa qeerramsa taha	In future, the baboons will eat men like the leopard
33	Wannii duraa cuftii duubatti deebiti	The things that were in front will go to the back
34	Wannii duubaa cufa egerii duratti deebiti	The things that were in the back will go to the front
35	Qaroon daallee	The clever/famous become ignorant
36	Daalleen qaroo	The ignorant become clever/famous
37	Hamaan tolaa	The stingy person (is) generous
38	Tolaan hamaa	The generous becomes stingy
39	Aadmaleen aadaa	Normlessness becomes a norm
40	Aadaan hin gaggabdi	<i>Aadaa</i> (social norm) faints ¹⁴

The power of chiasmus

Verses 16 to 40 are a series of chiasmic elements. For clarity, I recall that, at the level of *elocutio* – defined by Wiseman as “the part of rhetoric that studies the choice and arrangement of words” (2009: 87) – chiasmus implies a reverse parallelism, as in the highly debated Shakespearean phrase “fair is foul and foul is fair”¹⁵ in the witches’ chant at the beginning of *Macbeth* (Paul 2009). In the effort to go beyond formal analysis, Paul has identified four types of chiasmus based on semantic content. Harmiso’s poetry fits with Paul’s “mirroring” chiasmus since “it combines formal symmetry with paradox or contradiction” (Paul 2014: 23). According to Paul, mirror chiasmus “presents irreconcilable oppositions” between the first and the second part: it brings unresolved tension, doubts, the impossibility of arriving at a synthesis,

12 Horses are highly valued by the Borana, as evident in ritual and in various forms of respect and priority accorded to them in customary law.

13 Lion and hyena are often used as metaphors for strong and weak persons respectively. This verse is probably a variant of the proverb recalled by Baldambe among the neighbouring Hamar – ‘the hyena, its son is a lion; the lion, its son is a hyena’ – which includes an additional reference to notions of fatherhood and was accordingly considered by Ivo Strecker as a combination of chiasmus and metaphor (2014: 84-85).

14 *Aadaa* is a complex concept, central to Borana political and juridical culture. It can also be taken to express the notion of ‘social order’, *tout court*.

15 It is a simple YXXY figure, where ‘fair’ corresponds to Y and ‘foul’ to X.

stasis, and even mental paralysis and cognitive dissonance (Paul 2014: 23, 28). Indeed, Harmiso's sequence 16 to 40 is dominated by irreconcilable oppositions, with verses 22 to 25 sounding extremely similar to Paul's Shakespearean example.

Wiseman's use of the rhetorical notion of *dipositio* – "the arrangement of the parts of an argument" (2009: 87) – is useful for the analysis of Harmiso's poetry. To consider this, it is important to first consider the broader narrative of which the chiasmic component is part. Some of Harmiso's verses (1 and 2) refer to changes in social values and to bad habits. Others (9 to 12) indicate the subversion of political order and political culture. Many (3 to 6 and 11 to 12) are indicative of a food crisis, probably induced by the pandemic at Harmiso's time. Overall, they depict a context of change in the social, political and environmental domains. Many of the elements mentioned in these rhymes also convey dense symbolic meanings. They call for additional rhetoric analysis, but for the sake of the argument I will simply report the commentary provided to me by Borana friends: the various domains are connected by the fact that during a protracted famine, the political system cannot operate and human behaviour deviates from ordinary social norms.¹⁶ Verse 7 and 8 are particularly telling, since – by adopting the structure of an open chiasmus – they qualify the ongoing changes as an irreversible (linear)¹⁷ process: "what is seen today will not be seen tomorrow, what is seen tomorrow will not be seen the day after tomorrow". Hence YXX with a final variation of Y that opens up, like in Paul's "spiral" type of chiasmus (2014: 24).

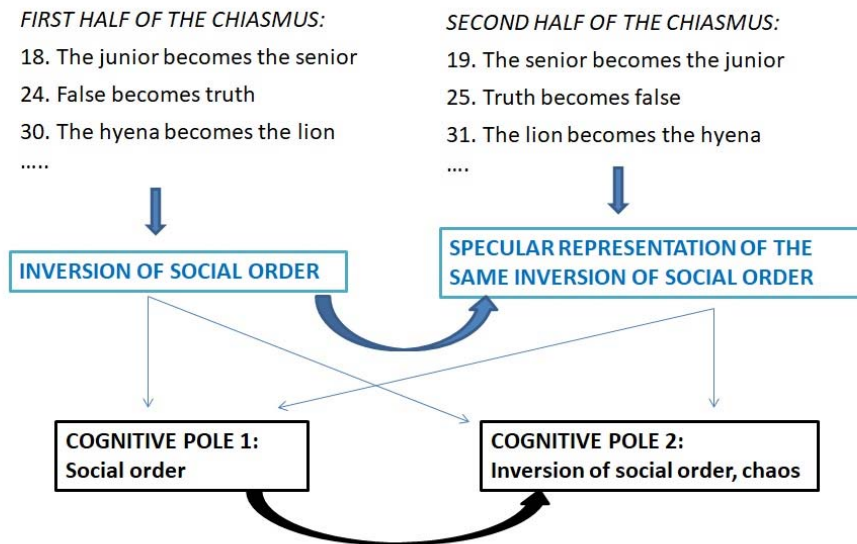
Harmiso's chiasmic sequence elaborates the same themes, but it produces structural meanings. Verses 16 to 21 and 26 to 27 represent inverted social hierarchies, both within the domestic and the political spheres. Verses 22 to 25 and 35 to 40 refer to inverted values and hence depict a different (inverted) social order, closing with a verse on the subversion of *aadaa*, the supreme Borana value invoked on all political and social occasions in ceremonies and prayers. Verses 28 to 32¹⁸ refer to an inverted natural order by referencing animals; but by including animals that metaphorically recall the social qualities of individuals, they on the whole they give a picture of a cosmological inversion. It has been observed that some chiasmi leave the audience in suspense over the possibility of making a judgement. This is not the case with this apocalyptic poetry. What is appropriate and what is deviation, what is order and what is its reverse, are very clear since people know what the good values are, espe-

16 My mind goes here to Turnbull's merciless representation of the culture of the Ik in Uganda (1972), which most likely was motivated by the fact that the ethnographer did his fieldwork during a famine.

17 It is known that linear conceptions of time can co-exist with cyclical ones. Among the Oromo, time is conceived as a sequence of epochs (*jaatama*). The end of the *jaatama* is characterized by chaos and confusion in all aspects of life, at the societal but also at the global level, followed by the emergence of a new order (Gemetchu Megeressa and Aneesa Kassam 2005). The cataclysm of the Apocalypse described here does correspond to the end of the current *jaatama*, with linear, cumulative change occurring until the end of the current civilization.

18 At the formal level, verse 32 is not a complete chiasmus; but, coming after a series of cognitively analogous chiasmi and implying a subversion, it is perceived as such.

cially because of the explicit verses on famine. Each chiasmic pair represents an inversion, the mirror representation of orderly social life, the transformation of order in disorder, and of order in disorder, with reference to one selected, symbolic element. Interestingly, in verses 33 and 34, the poet makes this chiasmic construction explicit – “the things that were in front will go to the back; the things that were in the back will go to the front” – while at the same time he addresses the level of *dipositio* (of words) and the level of *elocutio* (inverted social order). At this second level, each of the two halves of the chiasmus is a complete representation of the cognitive inversion, with the second half simply confirming the first half by closing the poetic circle and creating an analogic shortcut between the formal (*dipositio*) and the cognitive (*elocutio*) levels, as represented in scheme 1.



Scheme 1. The chiasmic construction of cognitive poles

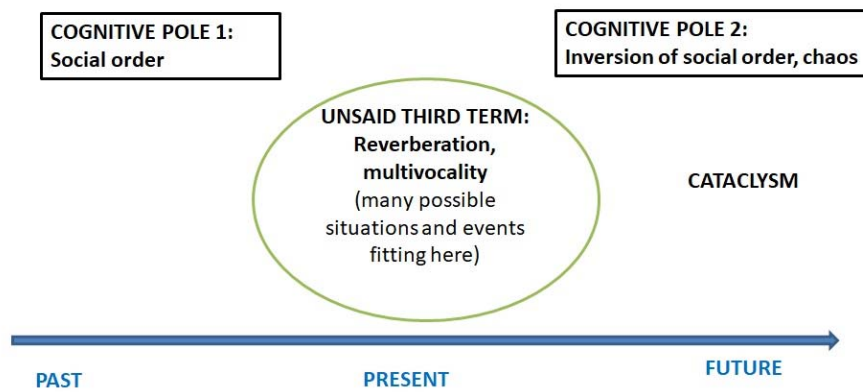
At this stage of the analysis we have identified prophetic chiasmus as expressing two juxtaposed, contrasting (inverted) cognitive poles: orderly social life and chaos, culture (in the sense of “good behaviour”) and anti-culture, (social) structure and anti-structure.¹⁹ The overall apocalyptic narrative further qualifies the second pole as cosmological chaos, symbolically expressed by the cataclysm.

Rhetoric culture theorists have shown that yet another level of organization of thought and discourse needs to be investigated. Wiseman refers to *inventio*, “the subject matter and the logical arguments that give form to” *dipositio* (2009: 87). Ivo Strecker invites us to look at “ways chiasmus can operate within text as system of

19 I refer here to Victor Turner’s analysis of the liminal phase in ritual (1969).

thoughts structurally and as a figure constitutive of meaning” (Paul and Wiseman 2014: 7). While Paul speaks about the properties of rhetorical schemes that “are not confined to language and literature but represent structures”, capable of constructing meanings for “ordering and understanding” many aspect of life (Paul 2014: 21). Enquiring into the structural implications of prophetic chiasmus requires consideration of two additional dimensions: time and the differentiation between production and consumption of prophecy.

The common understandings of prophecy and the apocalyptic narrative fix the key elements in a time framework: prophecy is made in the past, in the present people identify the occurrence of social facts that fit the prophecy, taking them as omens of the cataclysm, expected to occur in the future (scheme 2).



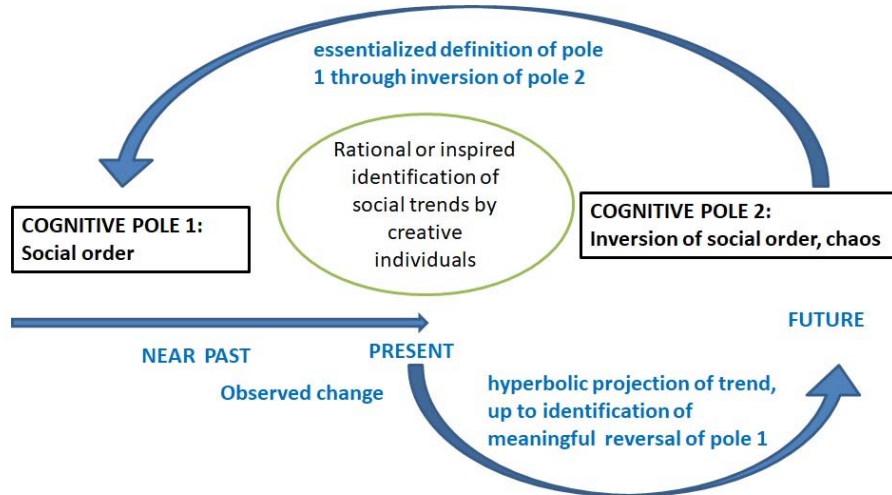
Scheme 2. Catalysed thinking during consumption of prophecy

Absolute chaos is situated in the future, while the present only contains elements of it. But what elements are they? How are they identified? Here, Hariman’s intuition about the generation of a third term is very helpful:

Chiasmus works not simply through a logic of crossing or exchange between two terms, but also through the generation of a third term that becomes the bridge between the original pairing. Thus, in the ABBA format, A and B are not changed into one another, but generate a third term, C, to mediate their relationship. (Hariman 2014: 52)

In Hariman’s analysis, the reverberations and adjustments between the two irreconcilable terms lead consciousness to produce a third term – capable of building a common ground that keeps the two together – that he calls a different “ontological claim” (2014: 52).

In the case of Harmiso’s poetry, the third term (C) is something that is logically situated between A and B, but it does not help make sense of the antithetical assertions. It is rather about something in between, both in time and content. Nothing is told about it in the chiasmic construction; it is, in Tyler’s sense (1978), an “unsaid”.



Scheme 3. Construction of Cognitive Poles in the production of prophecy

We can better qualify this unsaid by recalling the construction of prophecy. In line with Tyler's qualification of the "said" as the retrospective reconstruction of remembered utterance (1978), Harmiso formulates his poetry by re-interpreting old prophecy based on the observed reality in a time of environmental crisis. There are two distinct operations here: a rational one, consisting in looking to current society to identify deviations from the past and social trends; and an artistic one, condensing those deviations into poetry. The artistic operation consists in projecting an identified social trend into the future, and expressing it in the form of a reversal of a known selected element. It is actually the hyperbolic representation of deviation from proper behaviour and social order in the near past (scheme 3). In the resulting chiasmic construction – the medium term – the present of the artist simply disappears. We can therefore outline that, in the process of constructing prophetic chiasmi, hyperbole prevails over paradox. During future consumption of prophecy, the two extremes – cognitive poles 1 and 2 – remain essentialized expressions of social change, accompanied by highly symbolic elements, identified by inspired and creative individuals. The strength of chiasmus in prophecy lies exactly in the unsaid as the created chiasmus can be re-actualized in any subsequent situation. Whatever the event that first inspired the chiasmic verse, the audience is left with the possibility of filling that empty space with any fitting observed social event. We can immediately identify this vacuum, the unsaid third term of chiasmus, as a dialogic space; but, in order to grasp its real power as a dialogic device, we need to consider Ivo Strecker's exploration of the combination of chiasmus with other forms of rhetoric figuration and symbolization (Strecker 2014). In his critique on the possibility of chiasmus creating a stable third term, he remarks:

Yet Hariman states elsewhere that (a) the "void" or "abyss" between the two primary terms of a chiasmus produce "reverberations", and (b) that chiasmus generates a "continual movement secured only in the illusory permanence of the gaze [...]. And so as one

thinks with chiasmus, the doubled modality of the term offers stability only to oscillate and then to spin off something beyond the binary, something asymmetrical" (ibid.). If (a) and (b) are true, then there cannot really be a single, clear and stable third term, and chiasmus must be considered to be a thoroughly multi-vocal trope. Its rhetorical strength would derive from its power to cause oscillations and reverberations in ways that are similar to metaphor. (Strecker 2014: 75)

Indeed, Harmiso's chiasmi are highly asymmetrical, with one pole entirely connoted with negative terms and the other with positive ones. It is this multi-vocality and mental reverberation that opens up creative thinking at prophetic sessions, where people critically review current changes to identify possible associations between observed reality and prophetic utterance.

About the similarity with metaphor, Ivo adds:

Thus, "reverberation" and a concomitant state of mental and emotional "confusion" are characteristic of both metaphor and chiasmus. (Strecker 2014: 75)

and

This "interactional theory" (implicit already in Richards 1936, and explicit in Black 1962) points out that metaphor creates a "new entity", or a mental and emotional space that induces the mind to oscillate between the poles of likeness and non-likeness. (Strecker 2014: 74)

As evident in scheme 1, in Harmiso's poetry the contrasting poles – the matrix of reverberation – are not the two halves of the chiasmus but the symbolic meanings of the selected elements in each of the two halves; the unsaid third term, the dialogical space, is obtained independently of the chiastic construction.

Finally, in his comments about the effect of mental stasis or paralysis, Ivo adds that,

in the light of the internal dynamics of metaphor and chiasmus outlined in the second part of this chapter, we can understand why chiasmus combined with metaphor must be doubly multivocal: the first multiplication of meaning is enshrined in the structure of the chiastic expression itself, the second multiplication derives from the reverberations between the pathetic and the sympathetic parts of the metaphors used in the chiasmus. Shakespeare's line, "Fair is foul and foul is fair", which Paul has chosen as a paragon of mirror chiasmus, carries such doubly multi-vocal meanings. This is why I think that the line does not produce stasis. [...] Rather, its chiastic use of metaphors fires the imagination, lets both mind and emotion spin, and generally has a "bewitching" effect. (Strecker 2014: 80)

The "firing" capacity created by the multiplying effect of combined tropes further stimulates people's imagination during prophetic sessions. What may at first be a shocking effect is the starting point of a public dialogue on identified social problems, problems for which new answers need to be found. The social order of the first cognitive pole is essentialized as well: it is retrospectively built by the poet during his construction of the chiasmus. It is not a remote past, but something that each actor can find in his own memory and experience, at any given historical time. During prophetic sessions, or at any time when they are commenting on prophetic text, people start exploring and sharing their own perceptions of the near past and into

the present. As they identify present events that fit with the “prophetic” verses – in any of the possible ways generated by rhetorical multivocality – then the chiasmic construction, by way of its destabilizing effect and its hyperbolic capacity to shortcut time and trends, stimulates the search for a way out – the search for innovative action to be actualized in the present and in the near future (see Scheme 4 below).

Culture is grounded in rhetoric

Rhetoric culture theorists have clearly identified the key to the connection between rhetoric and culture in the communication mechanisms that underpin cultural production:

Here we align ourselves with Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, who in their introduction to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (1995) have claimed that “cultures are continuously produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members” [...] Tedlock and Mannheim also emphasize the role of “tacit collusion” in discourse. “All social events,” they write, “require the tacit collusion of the participants, who implicitly agree that they are interpreting the events within the same general framework.” [...] Yet, although they are fully aware of the role of “collusion” in culture, none of the contributors to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* takes recourse to rhetoric, the discipline that since antiquity has been concerned with the ubiquity of inward and outward persuasion. (Paul and Wiseman 2014: 3)

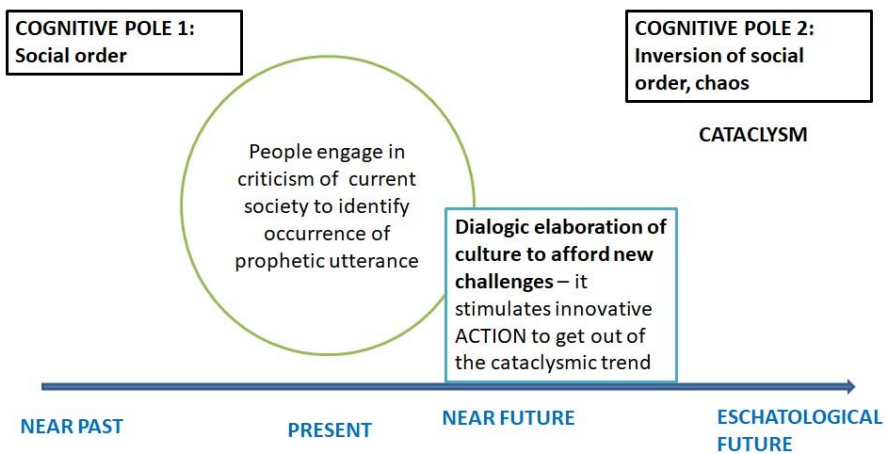
They have also noted the wide use of chiasmus in Hebrew and Greek biblical texts – either in its simple YXXY shape or in more complex configurations extending over several pages – capable of shaping meanings and acting as a dialogic tool (Welch 1981; Thomson 1995; Wiseman 2009: 88; Paul and Wiseman 2014: 2-3; Paul 2014: 22). It is probably worth considering whether the frequency of chiasmus in biblical texts – including the New Testament and the Apocrypha – might also be related to the two key properties identified in the Oromo apocalyptic genre: the capacity to shortcut time in the trajectory of social change through the hyperbolic representation of reality; and building multiple meanings through combination with other tropes.

As noted, prophecy, like anticipation, abounds in situations of radical change. It is codified and can be regarded as the institutional setting capable of generating new cultural solutions to difficult problems. Prophetic sessions are the social occasions that build shared understandings about what to do in a changing environment. They are knots of cultural production, with the unsaid third term of chiasmus stimulating the collective critics of society and opening up the dialogic space.

Prophecy as a practice of anticipation

The insights gained through rhetoric culture theory allow us to re-qualify prophecy in terms of anticipatory practices. Many of the prophetic chiasmi are poetic re-elaborations made by oral historians or creative individuals based on their rational interpretation of the present and of the social trends from the near past in what can be

considered an elitist rational exercise (scheme 2).²⁰ This component is therefore in line with anticipatory practices. However, the projection of those social trends into the future differs, being either a hyperbolic representation or transcendental in nature (the expectation of the apocalypse). It is in the consumption of prophecy that all the elements fit together. Once codified into coherent, highly structured and symbolic narratives, prophetic texts continue to be used by the critics of the present until radical change produces a wave of new prophetic production. The analysis so far presented shows that the polarized representation of social change from a positive past to a negative, apocalyptic future works as a powerful device that stimulates people to self-reflexion during collective sessions (scheme 4). Under the stimulus of chiasmus and other rhetorical constructions, each individual is induced to explore his own experience of the past, again a rational exercise. “Collusion” is here produced by the apocalyptic narrative, capable of collectively “structuring” thought and stimulating dialogue around pre-identified, selected – by the creative individuals that create the narrative – features. This is an ongoing dialogical process of elaboration of culture: the collective search for answers to new and old problems that affect social life. Since action capable of correcting trends develops from awareness, such elaboration of new culture is an anticipatory practice in the proper sense. Indeed, we can recognize functions and mechanisms in prophetic practices that are analogous to those in secular societies that are today enhanced by anticipatory practices such as coscientization (Freire 1970) and visioning in community development. The coming of the cataclysm in the eschatological future is just an additional element signalling the urgency of taking action.



Scheme 4. Anticipatory practices during the consumption of prophecy

20 Similar insertions of profane text are reported as a common feature of prophetic narratives beyond the Oromo context (Davies 1990; Emmet 1956).

A good theory is one that helps make sense of ethnographic data. Rhetoric culture, even if it is not immediately obvious in some of its aspects, is a gold mine. Thirty years after my fieldwork, it helped me get out of my own ethnographic chaos in unpredictable and unforeseen ways. I feel I have now experienced the message Ivo conveyed when he spoke of the debate raised by Tyler's criticism of anthropologists aligned "with the ruling epistemologies of the natural sciences" (Tyler 1987 in Strecker 2014: 85):

[T]hose who were not prepared to put their minds to these complicated spiralling chiasmi dismissed them as "mere rhetoric". But others, who understood that they were meant as mind teasers, used them to better understand the complexities involved in the study of culture and of social life.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun, 2013: *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London and New York, NY: Verso Books.
- Asmarom Legesse, 1973: *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Bassi, Marco and Boku Tache, 2005: "The Oromo eschatology: the prophecy of Areeroo Boosaroo, narrated by Borbor Bulee and Guyyoo Dambii". *Journal of Oromo Studies* 12 (1 & 2), 174-222.
- Black, Max, 1962: *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Davies, Philip R., 1990: "Qumran and apocalyptic or obscurum per obscurius". *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (2), 127-134.
- Emmet, Dorothy, 1956: "Prophets and their societies". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 86 (1), 13-23.
- Freire, Paulo, 1970 (1968): *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: H&H.
- Gemetchu Megeressa and Aneesa Kassam, 2004: "The 'rounds' of time: time, history and society in Borana Oromo". In: Wendy James and David Mills (eds.): *The Qualities of Time: Anthropological Approaches*. London: Berg, 251-265.
- Hariman, Robert, 2014: "What is a chiasmus? Or, why the abyss stares back". In: Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (eds.): *Chiasmus and Culture*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 45-68.
- Miller, Riel (ed.), forthcoming: *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Oba-Smidt, Chikage, 2016: *The Oral Chronicle of the Boorana in Southern Ethiopia: Modes of Construction and Preservation of History among People without Writing*. Zürich: LIT.
- Paul, Anthony, 2009: "When fair is foul and foul is fair: lessons from Macbeth". In: Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler (eds.): *Culture and Rhetoric*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 104-114.
- Paul, Anthony, 2014: "From stasis to ek-stasis: four types of chiasmus". In: Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (eds.): *Chiasmus and Culture*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 19-44.

- Paul, Anthony and Boris Wiseman, 2014. "Introduction". In: Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (eds.): *Chiasmus and Culture*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 1-16.
- Poli, Roberto, 2010: "The many aspects of anticipation". *Foresight* 12 (3), 7-17.
- Poli, Roberto, 2014: "Anticipation: a new thread for the human and social sciences?" *Cadmus* 2 (3), 23-36.
- Richards, Ivor A., 1936: *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strecker, Ivo 2011: *The Ethnographic Chiasmus: Essays on Culture, Conflict, and Rhetoric*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University and Berlin: LIT.
- Strecker, Ivo, 2014: "Chiasmus and metaphor". In: Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (eds.): *Chiasmus and Culture*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 69-88.
- Strecker, Ivo, 2016: "From Hamar ethnography to Rhetoric Culture Theory". In: Eloi Ficqet, Aimed Hassen Omer and Thomas Osmond (eds.): *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 23-32.
- Strecker, Ivo and Stephen Tyler, 2009: "Introduction". In: Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler (eds.): *Culture and Rhetoric*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 1-18.
- Tedlock, Dennis and Bruce Mannheim (eds.), 1995: *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Thomson, Ian H., 1995: *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Turnbull, Colin M., 1972: *The Mountain People*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Turner, Victor, 1969: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Tyler, Stephen, 1978: *The Said and the Unsaid: Mind, Meaning, and Culture*. New York, NY and London: Academic Press.
- Tyler, Stephen, 1987: *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Waktole Tiki and Gufu Oba, 2009: "Ciinna: the Borana Oromo narration of the 1890's Great Rinderpest epizootic in North Eastern Africa". *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3 (3), 479-508.
- Welch, John W., 1981: *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg.
- Wiseman, Boris, 2009: "Chiastic thought and culture: a reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss". In: Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler (eds.): *Culture and Rhetoric*. Oxford and New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 85-103.