

Homage to the Cultures of South Omo

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Introduction

This report continues an autobiographical sketch, which Jean Lydall and I wrote in 2011 for *Paideuma*, the anthropological journal of the Frobenius Institute (Strecker and Lydall 2011). We called the sketch *Merging horizons* because we wanted to highlight processes of coming close to one another, of friendship, love and mutual understanding, which characterise ethnographic fieldwork. Here I pick up on some of these themes to show how our engagement with Ethiopia has entailed a kind of homage – ‘special honour or respect shown publicly’, as the dictionary says – to the people we came to study. To begin with, I return to the London School of Economics (LSE) where Jean and I first met and planned our joint venture into Ethiopia. Next, I tell again how we studied, and tried to document, the genius of Hamar culture in texts, sound recordings and films, and then I recall how the South Omo Research Center (SORC) was founded in order to pay homage to all the cultures in South Omo. Finally, in a postscript I tell how dramatic developments in the region have recently lead to new challenges as well as great opportunities for SORC.

From the London School of Economics to the Hamar in Southern Ethiopia

In the early Nineteen Sixties London was ‘swinging’ (Beatles, Rolling Stones etc.) and the London School of Economics (LSE) had become one of the most attractive colleges for anyone wanting to study anthropology. So my then future wife (Jean Lydall) and I independently decided to go there, Jean arriving from Melbourne and I from Hamburg. In the fall

of 1966, as we attended lectures and seminars by Raymond Firth, Isaac Shapera, Robin Fox, Ernest Gellner and other eminent anthropologists, we began to talk to each other. Realizing our mutual interests we soon shared a flat in Albert Square, from where we would cycle every day, crossing over Waterloo Bridge, to the LSE. In the evenings we read in the library until 10 pm, leaving just enough time to have a drink before the publicans in Covent Garden would announce, ‘Last orders, please’.

Time flew by, and as we were about to finish our dissertations, we needed to decide where and how we would do fieldwork. Jean had originally thought of the New Guinea highlands, and I of the Moluccas. But now we looked forward to doing research together, so we wanted to find a location new to us both. We agreed it should be somewhere not overshadowed by a European colonial past. In fact, generally speaking we were not keen on politics, cultural transformation and matters of development. Rather, we were interested in ethnographic research as a means of studying life in pre-industrial and pre-literate societies; we wanted to find and appreciate people who still lived without writing, and who used practically none of the mechanical and electrical devices of contemporary civilization. Jean had a first-hand glimpse of such a world when she visited the Huli of New Guinea in 1964, while my impressions came from reading ethnographies such as Raymond Firth’s ‘We the Tikopia’ and Collin Turnbull’s ‘The Forest People’.

The question remained unresolved until one day we discovered three reports on recent expeditions to southern Ethiopia undertaken by the Frobenius Institute (Frankfurt/Main). It was especially the first volume, *Altvölker Südäthiopiens* edited by A.E. Jensen (1959) with photographs and accounts of the Baka, Schangama, Ubamer, Basketto,

Dime, Male, Banna, Hammar and Tsamako, that mesmerized us: What an amazingly rich world which had yet escaped the onslaught of ‘development’! Surely, this was where we would go.

Documenting the genius and expressiveness of Hamar culture

In our *Work Journal* (Lydall and Strecker 1979a), we gave an account of how we reached the Hamar of southern Ethiopia in the spring of 1970, and immersed ourselves in their life. The better we learnt the language, the more we were struck by the way people would converse about social and cultural matters that included not only their own customs, mores and conventions but also the institutions and life-styles of their many neighbours, the Aari, Mursi, Kara, Nyangatom, Dassanech, Arbore, Tsamai, Maale, Konso and Borana. We came to admire the communicative competence and power of expression of the Hamar, and felt these merited special recognition. As I noted in our *Work Journal*:

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In the evening, as Baldambe and I talk and I record his narratives, the project of our first possible Hamar book takes shape in my head: Baldambe describing his country, his people, his family, his father and himself. There is so much poetry and expression in his descriptions. These and the rhythm of his speech should be reproduced in a book: the fast passages and interludes, the accelerations, the lingering of his voice. What a job it would be to translate such tapes! But if we were able to manage the translation without losing the quality of the actual speech, then something beautiful could result (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 52f.).

To our delight, Baldambe soon provided us with a comprehensive account of Hamar culture. We recorded his narrative (*donko*) in just five days, but it took several months to transcribe and translate the tapes, and several years before the final annotated, edited and typed up manuscript was published under the title *Baldambe Explains* (Lydall and Strecker 1979b).

In 1975, Baldambe provided a second substantial narrative – *Berimba's resistance. The life and times of a great Hamar spokesman* (Strecker

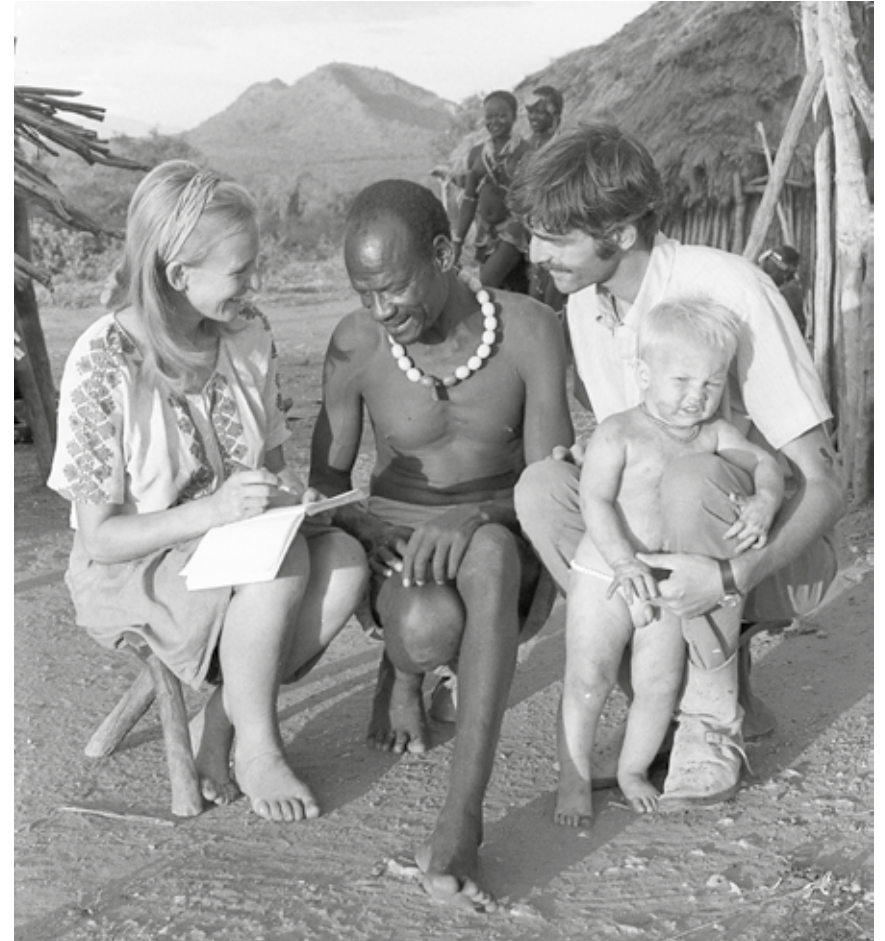


Fig. 1: Baldambe (Balambaras Aike Berinas) with Jean and Ivo, and their son Theo in 1970

2013). Here he took me by surprise because I had only wanted him ‘to speak a bit about his own, and by extension his father’s life, in order to make his upbringing and his position in Hamar society, as well as his general outlook on the world, more transparent’. But, ‘I had not reck-

oned with the nature of my friend, who likened himself to the whirlwind (*saile*) and the flood (*meri*). The whirlwind sweeps across the hard and sun-parched surface of the land, and the flood thunders along the dry riverbeds of Hamar country. They both move irresistibly and take along with them everything they meet on their way. No one can stop them. And so it was with Baldambe's thought and talk' (Strecker 2013: 1).

A further book – *Conversations in Dambaiti* (Strecker 1979a), as well as a double album *Music of the Hamar* (Strecker 1979b), and my



Fig. 2: Kairambe (Choke Bajje) in the film *Song of the Hamar Herdsman*

films: *The Leap across the Cattle* (1979c), *Father of the Goats* (1983) and *Song of the Hamar Herdsman* (1984), similarly documented the genius of Hamar culture.

While Jean's early analytic work on Hamar grammar (Lydall 1976) and colour symbolism (Lydall 1978) showed the creativity of Hamar language and ritual, it was by way of filming (*The Women who Smile* (1990), *Two Girls go Hunting* (1991), *Our Way of Loving* (1994) and *Duka's Dilemma* (2001)) that she was best able to do homage to her Hamar women friends. In all her films, as Jean writes in *Merging horizons*, 'the women were eager to provide commentaries that were reflective in the sense of being subjective and thoughtful, and reflexive in being adapted to what they thought I was interested in and would understand. They did far more than simply describe customs; they also



Fig. 3: Kaira Strecker (Ivo and Jean's daughter) with Duka (Baldambe's daughter) in *Duka's Dilemma*

analysed and evaluated them, doing so according to their own common sense' (Strecker and Lydall 2011: 25f.).

Through this close study and documentation of Hamar culture we came to realize the central role of rhetoric in the creation, continuation and contestation of culture. Later, this led me to embark together with Stephen Tyler (Rice University) and colleagues and students of Johannes Gutenberg University (Mainz) on an interdisciplinary venture – the *Rhetoric Culture Project* (www.rhetoricculture.org) – which has meanwhile produced six compendia in the Berghahn Books series *Studies in Rhetoric and Culture*. Currently, further volumes are in the making, among them *Culture and Rhetoric in Ethiopia*.

Founding a museum and research centre as homage to the cultures of South Omo

The idea of building a museum in South Omo first occurred to me once I had been offered a professorship in cultural anthropology at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. In the winter semester of 1986/87, I invited Baldambe to Germany to help me with my courses on Hamar ethnography. One day, as Baldambe was showing our students how to arrange an exhibition of Hamar objects, an important visitor joined us:

Dr. Peter Truhart of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He watched for a while, and when we got talking he asked whether we knew of the Ministry's program for the preservation of cultural heritage in 'developing' countries. Of course we didn't, but we immediately became excited when he suggested that we apply for funds to build our own museum in southern Ethiopia. Baldambe had by then visited museums with us in Berlin, London and Göttingen, and, as he said, already then he saw in his mind an ethnographic museum on the hills overlooking Jinka, the capital of the South Omo Province. Invited by Dr Truhart, we travelled together to Bonn, talked at length with members of the department and took all the background information with us that was needed for a full and well-formulated application. But although

he helped conceptualise the museum, Baldambe was never to witness its construction dying shortly after the foundation stone was laid (Strecker and Lydall 2011: 23).

Later, Kairambe (Choke Bajje), my age-mate and second best friend in Hamar, filled Baldambe's place. He too came to Mainz to assist me in my courses on Hamar culture; he too went with me to Bonn and persuaded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to give us further support (a lorry packed with tools, machines and other equipment); and even more than Baldambe he inspired a whole set of students to study the cultural heritage of South Omo. Many of them made substantial contributions to SORC. Among the students from Mainz were Susanne Epple, Nicole Mohaupt, Alke Dohrmann, Sandra Becker, Stefan Gottfried, Tabea Rittgasser, Lenka Tucek, Evelyn Bott, Sabine Elsässer, Tatjana Kranjc, Björn Schwartz, Judith Melzer, Tina Brüderlin, Konrad Licht, Peggy Elfmann, Sophia Thubauville, Felix Girke, and – in a round about way – also Shauna LaTosky.

The most important partners, both from within Ethiopia and from abroad, involved in constructing the South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) and making it fully functional were the Society of Friends of SORC; Jinka Municipality and the South Omo Zone; the Southern Ethiopian Nations; the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology as well as the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University; the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz with support of the German Research Society (DFG); the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD); the German Center for International Migration and Development (CIM); and - last but certainly not least - the cultural heritage program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany represented in Addis Ababa by the German Embassy.

There is not enough space here to give full credit to the contributions made by these institutions, but I have described the early initiatives in *Some steps in the planning of a research centre at Jinka, South Omo* (Strecker 1992) and in *Museum of South Omo Cultural and Natural Heritage: Principles of construction* (Strecker 1994), and later developments in *Merging horizons* where I wrote:



Fig. 4: Alula Pankhurst and Fasil Giorgis with members of the local 'Society of Friends' at the future building site of the *South Omo Research Center* 1991

Overcoming innumerable vicissitudes, the museum was finally built, and what was first conceived as a simple cultural heritage museum became a research center and 'forum for transcultural debate'. This change of focus had to do with funding: Once the main construction work had been completed, funding through the German cultural heritage program came to an end. But at the same time the SFB 295 of Mainz University – devoted to a study of contact phenomena in eastern Africa and western Asia – had come into existence. I was allowed to join and became director of a project on 'Cultural contact, respect and self-esteem in southern Ethiopia'.

The project provided funds not only for fieldwork, but also to complete interior work to furnish the centre with an exhibition hall, library and offices. That is, in many ways it helped us achieve precisely what we had wanted originally: to create a place that pays homage to cultural

ingenuity. My students (see above) collected items and arranged beautiful permanent exhibits in the museum, not because this was demanded of them as part of their work for the SFB, but because it was their way of expressing thanks to the people whose way of life they had come to love and admire. However, the argument that legitimised our work had changed. It no longer addressed the joy of being at home in one's own place, but rather the often agonising problems of cultural contact, as expressed in the title of the book that resulted from our studies: 'The perils of face' (Strecker and Lydall 2006).

We moved even further in this direction when, in addition to the SFB, we received funds from a German good governance program (CIM). From then on peaceful accommodation and the transformation of existing cultural and social differences became the explicit goal of the centre. We postulated that seeking an understanding of one's own and other people's culture would enhance friendship. If people had an opportunity to debate their differences together, they would also soon



Fig. 5: Shauna LaTosky introduces school children to the Museum 2005

come to discuss their similarities and the possibility of working together. In accordance with this aim, a number of exciting workshops and symposia were held dealing with such topics as the diversity of material culture, tourism, peace through intermarriage, culture contact and cultural self-esteem, and the pride and social worth of women' (Strecker and Lydall 2011: 23f.).

Postscript

For eight years I demonstrated that scholars from abroad could devise research programmes and secure funds that would finance most of the running costs and even part of the building of SORC. At the beginning of 2009 I retired as director of SORC and passed this responsibility on to two junior colleagues: Prof. Günther Schlee of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Halle/Saale (Germany), and to Dr. Masayoshi Shigeta of Kyoto University (Japan). But theirs was no easy task because the regional over-all situation had begun to change drastically. South Omo went through a lot of changes, followed by changes in the SORC and doubts about the role of anthropologists.

Fortunately, a better understanding of the constructive role of anthropologists emerged in 2013 when Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, then Director of the Institute of Peace and Security Studies in Addis Ababa, invited Dr Echi Gabbert and myself to a conference on land use, minority rights and social stability in the Horn of Africa. This allowed us to explain why the study of cultural heritage is indispensable for appropriate – that is equitable – development, one that harnesses the knowledge and interests of local people for the benefit of everyone concerned. To this end, we need long-term in-depth studies such as those that have always been conducted at SORC, and which are not simply retrospective, but entail prospective interests (Strecker 2014: 57).

In a similar vein, Prof Günther Schlee recently initiated a debating platform – overseen by Dr Gabbert and Dr LaTosky – under the heading: 'Lands of the Future: Transforming Pastoral Lands and Livelihoods in East Africa' (see Abbink et al. 2014). I think this initiative points in the right direction because the future prosperity of Ethiopia

depends not only on the acquisition of know-how that comes from abroad, but also in the close study and full utilization of knowledge that already exists within the country.

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