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POWERFUL MOTHERS, RADICAL DAUGHTERS
Tales about and cases of women's agency among the Arbore of southern Ethiopia*

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ABSTRACT. The Arbore, also called the Hor, are a Cushitic agro-pastoral group of around 6,000 people living in the Rift Valley north of Lake Stephanie close to the Kenyan border in southwestern Ethiopia. Building on efforts to correct, often male-biased, stereotypical views on women in agro-pastoralists societies I present two tales and three cases from Arbore to shed light on women's particular interpretations of social categories such as patrilineage and patriarchy. While depicting arenas and examples of women's and and girls' agency my approach stresses the complementarity of male and female roles to state that androcentric perspectives must not be replaced by gynocentrism, but that male and female roles deserve a balanced approach.

Introduction

God (Wak') is a woman. She made all people, so she is female.[1]

As Leila Abu Lughod contends, analytical categories such as patrilineage, patriarchy and gerontocracy allow for a systemic understanding of people's social organisation, yet carry the danger of producing mechanistic views of society (1993:18). The Arbore's kinship system is organised patrilineally within a framework of patriarchal and gerontocratic givens that order social actions.[2] At first sight this framework seems to accord men more agency and prestige than women. Moreover, patriarchal patterns evoke a picture of the powerlessness or even oppression of women in a male-dominated society.

Yet, having spent much time with my female friends and informants, rather than dwelling on hierarchical and generalising notions of gendered social organisation, I wish to contribute to a number of works that reconsider the representation of women's roles in pastoralist societies by taking into account women's agency as an expression of multiple possibilities of social identifications.[3] My examples show the creative features

* I thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany, for continuous financial and academic support of my ethnographic research.

1 From an Arbore tale, told to me in Arbore language by Ginno Ballo (Berlin, 5 May 2007; all translations from Arbore E.Ch.G.).

2 In using the term 'patriarchy', I refer to the literal translation 'rule of father', not necessarily over women but also over a man's children. I understand gerontocracy as 'rule by elders' which includes both men and women as 'rulers'.

3 See Asmarom (1973:18–32), Cornwall (2005), Epple (2006), Hodgson (2000), Holtzman (2002), La-Tosky (2010), Lydall (2005), Sagawa (2006) and Thubauville (2010).

of women's choices that do not feed into notions of women as marginal actors in or even victims of a patriarchal and patrilineal system. In other words, the following examples show that, when we reflect on women's agency within social frameworks, 'things are and are not what they seem' (Abu Lughod 1993:19). Therefore people's particular interpretations of and around categories such as patrilineality and patriarchy, political and domestic or male or female need to be taken into account to give greater depth to their meaning and to put assumptions about gender issues, feminism and othering under scrutiny.

Women, men and pastoralism

Many tourists' and other travellers' first question to me is why Arbore women seem to do most of the community's heavy work after they have seen them carrying heavy loads of firewood and water to their homesteads. To them women appear 'exploited, while men sit lazily under the shades of trees all day'. I try to explain that this is only one (biased) interpretation of the picture and that other physically arduous tasks like land-clearing and cattle-herding and watering are mostly carried out by men, but this is less visible to tourists because it takes place off their routes and on a seasonal basis, while the daily and indeed strenuous tasks are women's affairs. Obviously life, pastoralism and agriculture in the arid plains of Arbore is challenging for everybody. One should add that there are also exceptions to this division of labour, because some women and girls are dedicated livestock herders and despise housework, while some men will carry firewood and water if their wives are sick or have just given birth. Such examples come closer to the particularities that are part of people's interpretation and enactment of the social order.

Indeed, women and girls in Arbore play an intrinsic part in all spheres and stages of earning a livelihood. They both own and sometimes tend cattle, and some are better at caring for the family herds (e.g., if their husbands have passed away or do not have the necessary skills). In such cases one could call them 'the better pastoralists'. Some women (young and old) have ritual power, and all women have exclusive power over food and its distribution. Women own ritually significant songs and contribute to major rituals that could not be performed without their attendance and knowledge. Unmarried girls are full members of age-sets, and at marriage they are integrated into their husbands age-sets and can immediately enter their prestigious position in the Arbore's genealogical system (*luba*), even before their husbands, which is different from groups where women are mainly associated after marriage through their husbands' age-sets.[4]

[4] See the contribution by Susanne Epple in this collection. Women enter the *luba* (the same as their husband's *luba*, even if he has not done so yet) after the establishment of their houses and thus achieve ritual importance. Men and boys enter according to their place in the order of seniority. This means that while a few boys join the *luba* at childhood, most men do so only years after their marriage.

These points need to be added to pictures about the purely patriarchal pastoralist, that is, about men's control over cattle, politics, rituals, social influence and pastoralist identity (Hodgson 2000:2).

Men's and women's commitment to their roles serves as an organising principle that provides people with fields of expertise, and the division of labour is not necessarily hierarchized. Neither role is exclusive, neither role is marginal and neither role I consider either informal or formal. When a man's opinion is informed by his wife's advice, a distinction between informal or formal agency ultimately does not make much sense. In the same vein, are the constant meetings and discussions that women conduct on all communal issues no less formal because they happen at the watering place and not under the shade of a tree? Therefore I suggest redefining categories such as formal and informal, political and domestic, or else leaving them aside altogether because these divisions do not stand the test of being more or less significant. More useful terms in this regard, also concerning the following examples, could be 'influential' and 'persuasive'.

First tale: the jealousy of men

Feminist critique highlights the problems of analytical categories in social studies often being ill served to depict women's realities and women's status sufficiently and as serving androcentric perspectives instead (Leacock 1978, Abu Lughod 1993:13). The 'polarization of public male authority and private female influence as a given in the human condition' (Leacock 1978:248), or visions of a male-dominated political versus a disparaged female domestic domain (Hodgson 2000:12), have repeatedly justified questioning these very divisions. Dorothy Hodgson shows in detail how the myth of the patriarchal pastoralist leads to a misrepresentation of women's agency in pastoral societies, ranging from pastoral and cultural production to political and ritual status. When searching for reasons why these misrepresentations emerged, I return to Leacock's earlier contention: 'Too many questions about women have not been asked, or not of the right people' (1978:247).

With my choice of examples, I am humbly paying tribute to efforts in anthropology to correct accounts with a double male bias which neglects, ignores or misrepresents women and where information given to men by men was 'too often presented as a group's reality'.[5] It is worth mentioning that this bias was not paramount during my long-term experience in the field. On the contrary, I was fortunate to work with male informants who had very differentiated and critical views on gender issues and with women who differentially represented self-assured actors within their community. Let me start with an Arbore tale:

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5 Reiter (1975:12). See also Abu Lughod (1990) and Hodgson (2000:4).

This tale is about the jealousy of men.

Once there was a man who tried to fully control his wife. He suspected that she might have a lover, therefore he wanted to make sure that she could not meet her lover. When she went to fetch firewood, he would accompany her. When she tended cattle, he would accompany her. When she went to fetch water, he would accompany her. When she went to shit, he would accompany her. This way, he tried everything to prevent her from meeting a lover.

One day the woman cooked delicate sorghum rolls as fine and sweet as women only prepare for their lovers.[6] She put the sorghum rolls in a bowl and filled a wooden milk container with milk. Then she bound the bowl on her belt. She bound the milk container on her belt and covered everything with her thick cotton skirt. Then she sent a message to her lover and called him to a certain bush outside the settlement and said to her husband: 'Let us step out. I have to shit', and they stepped out of the house. When they reached a place with bushes that could well serve as a toilet, the woman disappeared behind a bush. Her husband stood at a distance to watch her. The bush was the one behind which the woman's lover was waiting. Behind the bush, the woman did not shit, instead she handed over food and milk to her lover. When her lover had finished eating and drinking she stood up and told her husband that they could return home, so they started walking, the husband walking in front, the wife behind him. Yet, earlier she had told her lover to stand up and leave only a moment after her. When she and her husband were walking she said to her husband: 'Look at me!' Her husband turned around. Then, pointing to her lover who was walking in a distance she asked: 'Do you see that man walking over there?' Her husband said: 'I see him'. The woman replied 'Well, that man is my lover I just met'. She showed the milk container and bowl that she had hidden under her skirt to her husband and asked: 'Did you just realise I carried these?' 'I did not see it', he replied. 'Did you realise when I gave food to my lover?' 'I did not', he replied. Then she said, 'I have done as I liked, I have given my lover the best food, and you could not see it. You tried everything to control me, but you cannot control me. You have to learn that women cannot be controlled and ordered against their will, you cannot outwit us women, it is not possible'.[7]

Second tale: the cleverness of women

One does not have to go back to 1965 when Paul Spencer, in his early study of the Samburu of Northern Kenya, wrote, 'On the whole I found women were quite ignorant of many aspects of the total society and usually unhelpful as informants [...]' (1965:231): it was in 2008 that a young male anthropologist stated in a convinced manner that women 'had nothing to say in the politics of the community' he studied. In the discussion that followed he had to concede that he actually did not know many women well and that he could have admitted his own ignorance, instead of attributing it to the women of 'his group'. Such 'instances of a deeply rooted male orientation' have given reasons for

6 Sorghum (Sorghum bicolor) and maize (Zea mays) provide the staple food of the Arbore.

7 Told to me by Ginno Ballo (Berlin, 6 May 2007).

calling 'the anthropological discourse suspect' (Reiter 1975:12). Yet, my first experience in the field in 1993 was guided by a much more reflective introduction by a male colleague.[8] He had worked in Arbore before and told me, 'It is good that you came now, you can learn many things from women that I will never find out'.

During my long-term involvement in Arbore I was not confined to women's spheres, but was allowed to accompany men and women in their daily and ritual tasks, as well as attend exclusive men's and women's meetings and rituals. Being the only female attendant of many such men's rituals, I became, following initial instruction by my female friends, a specialist in smuggling good pieces of meat of sacrificed animals and information for women and children back to the homesteads. For us, the feast began when the men had finished theirs. This again would not have been possible without male allies who provided me with solid pieces of meat like a whole roasted leg of goat, knowing I would carry them home with me in my large camera bag. Women were happy to have a female friend who, in her role as an anthropologist, was integrated into men's affairs.

My experiences led me to recognise male and female spheres as complementary, in which men and women are fulfilling the tasks for which they are responsible in dynamic, not static, ways. This also makes it impossible for me to adopt notions about 'women as victims' or to define women as a group 'on the basis of a shared oppression' (Mohanty 2006:400), but rather serves to scrutinise Western assumptions that project feminist biases onto non-western societies.[9] This also bring me to a second example:

> This story is about the cleverness of women.
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> Once upon a time there were three men who went hunting together. Once a girl was kidnapped by a man-eater (*gorjante*). She had captured the girl and had climbed with her up a tree that stood in the middle of a lake. The three hunters saw the girl and said, 'We have found a person!' They came close and saw the girl with the *gorjante*. They discussed what they could do. One man said, 'I am good at shooting, I can kill the *gorjante*'. The other man said, 'I can swim well, but I cannot climb trees'. The third man said, 'I can climb trees, but I cannot swim'.
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> This is how they did it. The good shooter shot the *gorjante* and killed her. The girl was still up the tree. The man who could swim took the other man to the tree. When they reached the tree, the good climber, climbed the tree and took the girl. The good swimmer brought the girl and the other man to the shore.
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> Then the man who had killed the *gorjante* said, 'I will marry the girl'. The man who could swim said, 'I will marry the girl'. The man who could climb the tree said, 'I will marry the girl'. The one who shot the *gorjante* said, 'If it had not been for me, you could not have rescued the girl'. The good swimmer said, 'If it had not been for me, the girl would not

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8 Repeated thanks go to this colleague Yukio Miyawaki, with whom I can always discuss about our research among the Arbore.

9 See also Strathern (1987:279) and Mohanty (2006).

> have been rescued'. The one who had climbed the tree said, 'If it had not been for me, the girl would not have been rescued'. The one who had killed the *gorjante* said, 'If we cannot agree, we will just kill the girl, and this way nobody misses out'. Then the girl spoke: 'Why would you kill me? Be silent now. I can tell you how it works out fine for everybody'. The men listened to her talk. 'The one who killed the *gorjante* will become my husband, the good swimmer can become my lover, and the one who climbed the tree will be the one I secretly meet. See, there is no problem because I can manage the three of you, and you do not have to kill me'. The three men agreed.[10]

Both tales describe the choices women make in their relationships with men. Marriages in Arbore are usually arranged and negotiated between the husband's and wife's parents and result in a life-long partnership ideally with many children to continue the patrilineage. In recent decades love marriages with the consent of the families have been on the rise, but in former times arrangements between families were usually made on the basis of communal and economic rather than individual considerations, often leading to the breaking up of relationships between teenage lovers, affecting grooms and brides alike. Some of these marriage arrangements carry much emotional hardship for the separated lovers, whose break-ups are publicly sealed, that is, their farewells and their wedding gifts to their former lovers form part of the wedding preparations and sometimes of the wedding ceremony.

Yet, some love stories may have happier endings than others. In Arbore, the nuclear family is the norm, and most couples are mutually engaged in managing family, household, fields and livestock. Second or third marriages of men have declined in the past decade. Yet, while men can officially have several wives and more or less secret lovers, having an extramarital relationship is also regarded as a viable option not only for widows. Especially young women who are married to elderly men and women whose husbands are infertile can pursue their relationship with their former lovers or with a new one.[11] This is different for young women who are married to young husbands, who usually oppose and punish their wives' continued contacts with the latter's teenager lovers. Similarly, young women especially often resent their husbands pursuing relationships with former lovers or second wives, though others are happy to be relieved of their husbands when they have another relationship, and yet others are good friends with their husbands' lovers or second wives.[12] A woman who is married to a deceased man is

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10 Told to me by Ginno Ballo (Addis Ababa, 14 November 2012).

11 Arbore settlements are not very distant from each other.

12 I cannot discuss the dynamics of polygyny at this point, but want to mention that jealousy is considered as one of the worst character traits in Arbore. I observed that harmonious relationships between first and second wives or between a wife and her husband's lover can lead to alliances between women against their husband in times of crisis, but that they can also foster better understanding of all partners through more common discussion and reflection.

even expected to keep or find a lover so that she can bear children in order to carry on the deceased husband's patrilineage.[13]

These examples show that marriages are firstly rational arrangements to organise reproduction and social succession and to build ties between families and clans; only secondarily are they emotionally grounded. As one Arbore friend told me, 'Loving a person does not mean that I can manage a family with a person for a lifetime. As a wife I'd rather choose someone with whom I see a good chance of growing old together. These are two different things'.

Extramarital relationships can be a source of both sorrow and pride, and can be boycotted, e.g., by the husband, or the clan through prohibition and punishment, but they can also be disguised, openly tolerated, or even considered necessary, depending on the circumstances. When couples quarrel about extramarital relationships, negotiation and possibly retaliation, divorce is not the usual option in Arbore. However, when problems between married couples persist and cannot be reconciled, a man might marry another wife, and the first wife, without a divorce, often pursues a relationship with a lover. As narrated in the first tale, women, who have the sole control over the family's food reserves, often prepare better food for their lovers than for their husbands. A woman's biological children with her lover are always categorically the children of her husband. These 'children born of the woods', a friendly term for cuckoo children, are usually well integrated into their families, and I did not observe such children being socially excluded, except in one clan.[14] In cases where a man has proof of a cuckoo child, the genitor might have to pay a one-time compensation in form of livestock and tobacco as symbol of peace. For a man, cuckoo children are not exactly good to boast about, yet some men speak openly about them, while others prefer to pretend not to know. A child's clear and valued position within a patrilineal system cannot be underestimated, and even more than in arranged marriages the formal status usually goes hand in hand with respectful relationships, especially of a non-biological father to the child. This is very different from social settings where children born out of an affair might bear a painful and negative social stigma and where paternity fraud is a serious and complicated legal offence and a possible reason for divorce.[15]

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13 This rare marriage arrangement (*gare*) happens entirely without a vicarious husband and is different from the ghost marriages described by Edward Evans-Pritchard (1945) among the Nuer of southern Sudan. The new wife lives with the widow of the deceased man.

14 The Olmok clan is known to curse cuckoo children whose biological father is from another clan, and it is said that they usually die shortly after birth. Cuckoo children with genitors from the same clan are more often accepted. Olmok also believe that a specific clan's potion given to a new-born child will be deadly only for cuckoo children. Therefore women often only pretend to feed the new-born child with the potion.

15 This brief mention of the topic of paternity fraud does not pay tribute to its complexity, which has led to controversial discussions worldwide. I have discussed 'children of the woods' openly with my male and female Arbore friends.

These examples briefly indicate the many facets and variations that marriage arrangements in Arbore can take. They also show that marriage is a new and negotiable start, rather than a definite ending of choices over partners. Many couples who opposed their own marriages when younger have down the years become mutually respectful partners.[16] There are also women who were married at a young age to elderly men and who, according to the gerontocratic principle, became ritually and politically influential members of the community while still relatively young.[17]

First case: the power of women

I often compared women's roles in my native Western environment in Germany to women's roles in Arbore. Among the things that struck me most was the resilience I observed in people in times of hardship. One obvious source for groundedness was a strong positive belief in Wak', the Arbore sky god, in combination with agricultural and pastoral expertise which enabled people to manage and endure food crises with confidence. Female self-assertion displayed by Arbore women was another factor in this respect. In the Western environment in which I grew up, and in spite (or because) of all political agendas, women struggle with (a) the challenges of combining motherhood, family management and an additional profession and (b) the lack of financial, social and moral acknowledgment of their multiple roles and duties. In comparison, it was instructive to observe how much respect most Arbore women received for their commitment to their roles as mothers and the female heads of the household, which provided a stable basis for their self-assured conflict management. Arbore men frequently mentioned and praised the incredible workload that women carry, though not all men did so.

Of course the picture is greater than its parts. Women, as described in the first tale, generate their particular solutions to difficult marital relationships. A man who scorns his wife without reason can be taken to a family and elders' council. The beating of women by their spouses, would usually not get out of hand as neighbours and family members are always controlling each other.[18] Additionally men can be punished

16 Both boys and girls suffer and quarrel with their parents over the selection of unwanted spouses. In some cases girls refuse to eat and grow visibly thin, while boys often react by concentrating on their herding duties.

17 See also the contribution by Epple in this collection. The biographies of Arbore women still await being compiled. One extraordinary case is a woman who, as a teenager, has been married to a very old man of ritual importance within the genealogical system (*luba*). Through the marriage the girl immediately achieved a high ritual status, as well as attending and hosting numerous important meetings and negotiations with her husband and speakers of the community. Now in her fifties and with her husband long deceased, she is the sole woman of an otherwise defunct generation who has a superior historical knowledge, as well as an extraordinary ritual power and agency.

18 Arbore houses are built from wood and thatch. The light structure readily allows people to conduct conversations from house to house.

for abusive behaviour against their wives. Yet, women also scorn men who are treated disrespectfully by their wives and show too much 'weakness'.[19] Women seem to have larger private networks of allies and can call on councils when in difficulties, whereas men are initially expected to solve their problems on their own or with the help of their closest age-mates or family elders before taking problems to family or clan councils. These examples can only sketch how conflict resolution is gender-specific. A case of this being applied in reaction to outsiders is given in the following story. It is told especially by Arbore men, as evidence that women can indeed be more powerful than men, and it has become a symbol of women's strength, courage and resilience – an emic case in point against stereotypes about women's inferiority.

> In the 1970s one of the first and major goals promoted by the Derg, the communist military regime, was school education. At a time when there were no schools in Arbore, administrators, in the company of armed soldiers, came to Arbore to gather Arbore girls and take them to faraway boarding schools. They threatened the Arbore with guns to hand over girls from each family to load them on a truck. The Arbore all refused. The Arbore male elders argued ceaselessly, while the administrators insisted that the girls would be loaded onto a truck. The Arbore men tried to convince the administrators rhetorically, because if they had used force or guns, this could have escalated into armed violence. The dispute lasted for two days, and the chosen girls were finally brought together to be taken away. While the men were still arguing with the administrators, the Arbore women gathered and stepped in. They formed a line between the girls and the soldiers. Then they declared loudly that if the soldiers wanted to take any of their daughters they would have to shoot them, their mothers, first. Although the women were intimidated and were told that they would be put in prison or shot, they stood there for a whole day protecting their daughters. At the end of the day administrators and soldiers left without the girls.[20]

The Arbore, far from being hostile to education, knew that school children become estranged from their families and culture, as has happened to boys who were taken individually to schools in, for example, Addis Ababa. They assumed that this kind of schooling would result in the loss of the girls to the Arbore. Girls in Arbore symbolise abundance and well-being (*geen*). They are a source of pride and they are well protected. In addition to the psychological consequences of detaching children from their families, the girls had important roles in the subsistence economy of the pastoral community. If they were all taken away – and there must have been several dozens just from one village – this would have led to a weakening of the village's reproductive resources. Normally school children would be converted to Christianity and would be educated in the northern Ethiopian value system which has a distinct paternalistic character towards people in the peripheries (see Dereje 2013, Markakis 2011:7). Parents complained that

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19 See also Lydall (1994) and Epple's contribution in this volume.

20 Told to me by an Arbore elder (Arbore, 2 July 2004).

this estranged the children in psychologically harsh ways by giving them a picture of their own families as backward and primitive.[21]

The power of agency in this example lies in the switching of gender roles, which confused the counterparts. Whereas it is the men's role to protect their families, if need be by armed force, this could have led to escalation of the conflict, with the imprisonment or even killing of Arbore men. Instead the women formed an unarmed front, and the soldiers, who were ready to fight armed men, did not know how to deal with them. Indeed, the existential threat of losing their children must have triggered enormous energies in the mothers, making their action convincing in its way and resulting in a successful example of peaceful resistance.

Second case: radical daughters

The Arbore (used to) circumcise girls during marriage at ages of approximately sixteen to twenty-six.[22] Female circumcision, though prohibited under Ethiopian law, is a female affair, and normally men are not present. With the increasing impact of opinion-building projects, pursued by the government, NGOs and missionaries, the Arbore have for decades been confronted with many projects and people trying to abolish circumcision. The first who supported these efforts were Arbore men. The second to become convinced were elderly Arbore women who had taken part in anti-circumcision campaigns. I happened to be present in 2007 when, after long discussions with administrators, the elders – Arbore men and women – agreed to abolish circumcision altogether. However, this failed, as one Arbore teenage girl explained in impressive intensity:

> We, the girls, all of a sudden we were told that we should not be circumcised anymore. Everybody had been called to the meetings but us. Our fathers went to the talks; our mothers went to the talks. We were not informed, we just heard about it. We had not been asked to attend the meetings. Secretly they call the men and talk, secretly they call

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21 Often school-children, boys still more than girls, are not only raised with other values (e.g. after conversion to Christianity), but learn to despise Arbore culture and with it the values of their parents. Cases of school-children who refuse to bury their parents in 'pagan' ways or to eat with their parents from animals they consider unclean, have caused much conflict, estrangement and resentment within families. If returning school-children cannot be reintegrated, their social isolation, among other reasons, results in increased alcoholism among youth and crime within families, such as domestic violence by sons against mothers (unheard of in former times). In the past decade, however, more school-children have been partly reintegrated into the community and are in a position to contribute to the well-being of the community in positive ways, for example, as health workers. On the complex issue of the education of nomadic and pastoral people, see Dyer (2006).

22 Until the 1990s, the Arbore practiced excision or infibulation. Since the turn of the millennium they have increasingly changed to clitoridectomy. The circumcision is done by experienced female elders. I do not discuss the complex socio-cultural implications of circumcision among the Arbore here. See Peller (2002).

> the women and talk, they spend their days under the shade of a tree. Two months, three months, these talks continued. Our fathers, they perform the rituals for us. Our mothers bless us. They all seem to have forgotten our culture. They have signed the Northerners' paper, they have clapped their hands, but we have been cut off from the culture (*aada*) of our forefathers, we have been told to leave our culture behind. This we do not like. We want to be circumcised. We made that statement clear. 'Stand up!', we said. We stopped going to dances; we, the girls, spent two days together discussing the matter. We said, 'We want to be circumcised'. We discussed and we made our decision. We called our mothers and said, 'You have ignored us. We have our belief in Wak". If we marry tomorrow, we will be the object of humiliation if we are not circumcised. Hamar can be scorned like that [because they are not circumcised], but for us Arbore girls this is not an option. We do not want to be scorned; we want to be cut like our mothers were cut. This is what we want, but we do not want to become just like any uncircumcised person. This is what we said and what we have decided.
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> We told our mothers, 'You have ignored us. We do not accept that you in the future secretly spend your days together talking with the Northerners. Show them to us'. Our mothers said, 'Yes, yes, yes, we understand, do not get too excited'. But we sat together and continued discussing. But that was not all. Another morning we saw our fathers discussing under the shade of a tree. We went there and confronted them. They said that important Northerners would arrive the next day. We told them that we would come then to meet them and tell them our opinion about circumcision campaigns. Five or six of us went to the meeting. Our fathers said, 'Turn around! Get away!' We said, 'You cannot tell us to turn around: we also have something to say in this'. We had not sat together with the Northerners once. Then we talked [to the Northerners], 'We do not want to stay uncircumcised. The culture of our father, our grandfathers. How we originated. We will not give it up. We will leave our culture if you leave yours – the day you stop going to school we will stop circumcising. This is our culture and we will not leave it. If our mothers should refuse to continue cutting us, we will cut ourselves. If the Northerners continue making decisions without our consent, we will go and sit in front of them and cut ourselves in front of their eyes'. [...]
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> In the end we did not talk to the Northerners directly anymore, but we explained it clearly to our parents. We said, 'If you stop circumcising us, we will do it by ourselves; this is much more dangerous than if it were done by a traditional specialist'. [...] We talked and insisted; we are still talking about it. When the Northerners appear again, they ask, 'Have you refrained from circumcision', and the elders will say, 'Yes', but we have not. They are lying, see, because they know our strength. They now say that there just will be a minor cut. This talk is new. We have decided what we want, and our parents had to accept that.[23]

I happened to be in Arbore when the girls had just found out about the agreement the elders had made with the officials. Their outrage was immense. The result of the girl's intervention was that officials were not told the truth anymore. The deeply rooted identification with the symbolism of the ritual made it impossible for the girls to detach the circumcision of their rite of passage from their important position as wives and their cultural identity as Arbore. They often argued that, when they gave up circumcision,

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[23] Interview with Arbore girl (Arbore, 7 December 2007)

Arbore would disappear and be assimilated by the 'others'. It is astonishing that the rhetoric initially used by the girls was later adopted by the Arbore elders and circumcision continued. The issues radically defined by the girls were accepted by the community in 2007, yet individuals, especially men, were repeatedly punished (e.g., excluded from administrative positions) if their brides underwent circumcision. In 2012, repeated anti-circumcision efforts and arrests because of circumcision triggered more resistance by the girls, who attacked the administrators and threw stones at them during an anti-circumcision meeting. In October 2013, circumcision was officially declared to have been abolished in another meeting between administrators and Arbore elders.

Most girls have not agreed with this decision, insisting that if they were to do so the cultural identity of the Arbore would be lost forever. I have often observed my friends' decision to be circumcised, expressed my pain about it and decided not to assist in or photograph any circumcision ritual down the years, even when it was expected of me because of my close relationship to the girl.[24] I do not see the Arbore identity as being dependent on circumcision, but I also recognise that, even more than peer pressure and traditionalism, the element of cultural identity has been intrinsically and increasingly linked to the topic. The girls express their profound fear about losing their cultural identity while finding limited room for trust in or understanding of change.[25]

Whereas most Arbore have accepted abandoning circumcision, the girls' radical resistance remains and needs to be reflected upon as an expression of a feeling of being overwhelmed and governed by others. To understand this, one should know that Arbore girls like to call themselves 'mothers of fancy' (*ege mir*). Whereas Arbore boys appear to be the most gentle characters within Arbore society and are expected to be obedient and engaged in work for their family, Arbore girls can be loud, unafraid and sometimes remarkably disobedient. Although they work a great deal in the household and fields, they have the freedom to refuse work without being punished.[26] Their repeated threats to engage in circumcision privately should be taken seriously,[27] but more than that a historical dimension has to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the suspicion and resistance of the girls towards 'Northerners' or 'the centre'.[28] The girl's

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24 The hours surrounding my friends' circumcisions as part of their weddings belonged to my most difficult moments as an anthropologist. My experience is that personal discussions about circumcision in Arbore have very few, very sensitive and very private windows of opportunity if one wants to avoid detrimental consequences such as medically more harmful self-circumcisions. In my opinion this expression of resistance is one negative outcome of generalised and high-publicity approaches to this very personal matter.

25 For a detailed discussion of the resistance to abandoning circumcision, see Boyden, Pankhurst and Yisak (2013).

26 See also Epple and Brüderlin (2004:125–126).

27 Boyden, Pankhurst and Yisak also describe cases of self-circumcision as a reaction to its prohibition (2013:37–39).

28 See Dereje (2013:164). The Arbore look back on a long history of violent encounters with early explorers, Menelik's troops, Italian troops and a history of paternalistic encounters with the policies of the centre, displaying an openly negative attitude towards people of the South. This history of violent and

account show that the circumcision debate in Arbore has become symbolically loaded, as the girls' protest against paternalism and loss of identity.

The girls' reaction has to be understood within the wider picture: Arbore, like many other regions in Ethiopia, is undergoing massive changes in the course of the fast-track development plans of the government and national and international investment schemes. This is a time when others seem to be deciding what is best for the Arbore. Some missionaries consider the Arbore's believe in Wak' to be 'devil's work', some government policies disregard the Arbore's knowledge and eloquence as agro-pastoralists and depict them as backwards, while failing to integrate them fully and cooperatively into developments on their own territory that are decided at other unknown places by unknown national and global actors. Prohibition of circumcision therefore appears to be only one decision among others that was made for Arbore by people most of whom have never been in southern Ethiopia and who have not sufficiently integrated the voices of the people, in this case the girls, involved.[29]

The girl's resistance mirrors distrust as well as feelings of loss and betrayal because their mothers and fathers ally themselves with strangers instead of with their daughters. Thus the girls denounce their parents' alliance with paternalistic others who have historically failed to prove that they respect the Arbore. The situation in Arbore is also symptomatic of unresolved puzzles of transnational law, when human rights concerning, for example, gender violence and cultural rights clash.[30] Both the abolition of circumcision and the girls' resistance remain unresolved and show the need for continuous and respectful efforts to create a basis for mutual communication that could lead to less fear, serious discussion and less harm for everybody.

Third case: 'Why we left war'

The Arbore can look back on a long history of warfare and conflict and Arbore women historically play influential and decisive roles in warfare and peace-making.[31] Within the politics of warfare, women provoked men's aggression through formalised interaction. In times of war, women's praise of or reproaches against male behaviour and their affirmation or denial of men's self-esteem were significant aspects of female warfare-supporting activities. Among the many everyday situations in which women could trigger men's aggression, the most formalised expression was called *koor*: the insulting mockery

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paternalistic experience still plays into the distrust of people of the South concerning national and international policies. For a historical overview, see Gabbert (2012:39–53).

29 See also (Østebø and Østebø forthcoming).

30 Among human rights violations, gender violence was integrated into the canon in the 1990s (Merry 2006:56). The right for culture with explicit reference to women was referred to the UN General Assembly in 2012 (Shaheed 2012).

31 For a detailed analysis of women's roles in war and peacemaking, see Gabbert (2012).

that girls and women directed at men who were courting them. In heightened fighting situations, women carried out their role of encouraging the men through a ritualised form of insult, combined with a shrill and provocative sound (*ililshin*). *Koor* and *ililshin* both served as inspirers of men's aggressiveness. In addition, when men were on the battlefield, women's actions, such as blessings or ritualised tasks such as coffee preparation and the kindling of the fire in the cattle kraal, were protective. Praise from a woman when a man returned from a successful battle or hunt would ideally close the cycle affirming the status of the killer and his family.

For their role in prompting a man to achieve the status of a killer, Arbore women not only benefited by receiving a generous share of beads and necklaces. The girl or woman who, through her insults, had sent a man raiding could be rewarded with a share of cattle, and she could even be formally considered as the man's hunting friend. Because she had initiated and thus energised the man to carry out a raid, she became in a sense a partner to his actions. As a consequence, the attributes of power, prestige and accomplishment that were bestowed on the killer were also bestowed on the people around him, and more often than not on the women who stood behind him.

Yet, for a good decade the Arbore have deliberately decided to refrain from all forms of violent conflict in the area, instead developing ways of promoting peace on the basis of their traditional institutions. The patriarchal framework was important in holding young potential fighters in check. Women also took over important parts of the peace-making process. For one thing, very early in the peace process, they reflected on their role as the instigators of aggression, as expressed in the words of a female Arbore elder in 2005: 'The place where they [the men] went out [of the house], why we started to hate war, here we insulted the men, then we saw how they did not come back, and we became afraid. This is how we let go of war'.

Women discarded the practice of insult very early in the peace process, and many other peace-building actions followed. As of 2012, peace among the Arbore has been a lived reality for more than a decade, and the Arbore's peaceful identity has been established and acknowledged within their cultural neighbourhood and beyond. To have an idea of 'the type of peace envisaged in a particular situation' by particular actors is one of the first and fundamental questions in achieving peace (Richmond 2007:212). Women's visions of peace were formative in the Arbore's peace efforts as expressed in a conversation recorded in Arbore in 2006 that describes the value of a functioning and peaceful everyday life:

> Female elder (C): The morning, the morning. The morning when the cattle are let out this I have, later the hoe with which I dig up the ground that I have, the sack I wear on my back that I have, the children I bring up those I have.
> Female elder (D): The grass I cut.
> C: The grass I cut to build the house that I have.
> D: The child I handed over [for marriage].

C: Yes, the child I hand over, I follow the custom, our customs (*aada*), [addresses the anthropologist]: You came in search of them, you saw them, how sweet it is, one sits down, you have your calabash, call for Wak', you came here and saw it, Wak' may tomorrow help you understand what I mean. As long as I have that, we are at peace. What I hate, though, is war, *eeeet* [imitates sneezing her nose, indicating something that stinks],[32] I am a powerful person.[33] I cursed it [war]. Say, that is what I said. War is what I insulted, say, I said this.

D: Peace.

Conclusion

In Arbore the actions and duties of men and women are based on gendered commitments to roles that makes these actions and this communication predictable. Using this approach, I regard dichotomies such as female/male, private/public and political/domestic with respect to their complementary rather than their divisive character. Indeed the examples show that such dichotomies often become conflated, as is evident in the first case, when women became a successful unarmed front to protect their children and husbands from military forces or, as depicted in the second tale, where a girl deliberately combines her public, private and secret relations to men in order to save her life.

The examples provided here are therefore particular stories of particular times that reflect writings against homogeneity, timelessness and coherence (Abu Lughod 1993). These are not cases of the 'informal' or secretly pursued possibilities of pastoralist women under patrilineal or patriarchal order. They picture women's and girl's fields of influence and persuasion by highlighting their means, agency and power to activate, adjust or change notions of gender roles in very confrontational and visible ways in both private and public arenas. Because I was socialised into the outspoken and often witty ways of Arbore women from the outset, I never shared notions of them as victims, but observed in a culturally relative manner how Arbore women are respected above all in their role as mothers and wives – much more clearly than I had experienced in my native Western environment. This respect provides the necessary self-assurance for being critical, active and innovative members of the community, which only at first sight seems to be ruled by men.

By looking at the differences between male and female agency, and while adding women's stories to the whole picture, I always return to the paradigm that, like men, women are not 'the measure of that which is human, but men and women are' (Lerner 1986:13). This statement is indeed the core of my research approach and field-

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32 Ideophones (onomatopoeic words) like this are vividly used in Arbore.

33 The woman quoted here achieved the powerful position she is referring to through her early marriage to an elder of ritual importance within the genealogical and generation-set system. She is mentioned in footnote 17.

experience. As my examples show, there is no gendered monopoly of either stereotypical representations or differentiated reflections about gender issues: stories, stereotypes and reflections about weak or strong men and women were conveyed to me by men and women alike, covering a wide range of variation in gender relations in Arbore. In short, there were always too many opinions available to fall for a generalised way of seeing and systematising things, and way too many moments where there were no boundaries between Self and Other.

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