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APPROACHING ABDUCTION THROUGH NARRATIVES
Love and violence in a Hadiya village, southwestern Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT. Marriage by abduction stands out prominently among what the Ethiopian government has conceived, and therefore prohibited, as being 'harmful traditional practices' (HTP).[1] The analysis of this kind of marriage, which is still commonplace in the Hadiya zone, aims at deconstructing the perception of violence that permeates life-cycle events from an ethical point of view. I discuss the gap between abduction as a 'harmful traditional practice' and contradictory findings, which show abductions are not always carried out without the consent of the girl and that many are even planned beforehand by the couple. I challenge stereotypical representations by discussing a selection of stories from some female actors living in a village buried deep in the countryside, which illustrate a version antithetical to western myths and in particular to the supposed universality of romantic love.

Introduction: ethnographic background

The material presented in this article is based on several field visits. Initially I carried out twelve months of research, from 2005 to 2009, in the district of Lemu in Ethiopia's Hadiya zone.[2] The fieldwork was carried out in the village of Kidigissa, with a special focus on a part of it called Lamsella, which has a population of about 600.[3] Hadiya people are nowadays mainly settled along the Ethiopian Rift Valley, between the Gibe and the northern part of the Omo.

At the end of the nineteenth century Ethiopian rulers made frequent incursions into the south with the aim of subjugating and Christianising local populations and spreading Amharic culture. When Emperor Menelik II eventually conquered the neighbouring regions in his endeavour to create a modern map of Ethiopia, the herdsmen and breeders, formally semi-nomadic warriors, were forced by the Amhara settlers

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1 I opt here for the term 'abduction' instead of 'capture' because the former definition has been employed in the political agenda of the Ethiopian government, then recycled by local people who learn it from, and currently raise the consciousness of it through, official sources. This vicious circle about nomenclature triggers in itself interesting issues about what happens to local custom once it becomes institutionalised, packaged, and thereafter applied outside its original context.

2 I carried out fieldwork in 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, for three months each year. Following that I have carried out other field visits up to and including 2013, each lasting from one to three months.

3 I have tried hard to learn the fundamentals of the Hadiya language, which belongs to the Cushitic linguistic cluster, but in the meantime my intensive fieldwork has had to be carried out with the help of some Hadiya girls acting as interpreters from the Hadiya or Amharic languages to English: a filter which often led to hesitation and restraint by our female interlocutors.

to adopt agriculture in order to pay taxes for their animals and land. Their society is now characterised by a predominant commitment to agricultural activities, especially the growing of *enset* (Ensete ventricosum) which plays a key role in both economic and family life, and generates many distinctions at the regional and national levels. The Hadiya deliberately refuse to introduce innovations into their diet and choose to be perceived as 'backward' by most city dwellers and the petty urban bourgeoisie in order to defend their food and political preferences. As with many other root crops *enset* is considered to be a poor people's food, especially by northern Ethiopians. The neglect of the south-central peoples by the northerners contributes to the debate between centres and peripheries.[4] The urgency of the government's desire to modernise the peripheral areas, I will argue in this article, may run the risk of overwhelming the politically weaker or voiceless agents.

In Hadiya a community – defined as a small group living and interacting face to face in a specific locality and sharing a morally significant history – is usually made up of clans (*sulla*) which are divided into lineages (*moollo*) and sub-lineages (*mine*). Each of them is overseen by its respective head (*daannuwwa*). The farmers generally live in village communities. Exogamy is the preferred option at the clan level. Marriage within lineages of the same clan is forbidden as it is considered incestuous and dangerous for the health of the children. Polygamous marriage was common in the past, but with the consolidation of Christianity polygamy has almost completely disappeared.[5]

From a theoretical point of view Hadiya society falls perfectly into the patrilineal model which, in its classic form, implies a so-called 'marriage by purchase' through the system of bridewealth. Girls are handed over at a young age and move to the houses of their husbands' fathers. Children inherit the social identity of their fathers through lineage and property rights, achieving in turn the status of members of the clan. Women have to move more often, especially because they are destined to follow their husbands after marriage. In a sense the new brides lose their biological age and enter into the man's lineage as new-borns and foreigners. Marriage is a key time in the female life cycle, which appears to be fractured in terms of identity and identification.[6]

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4 See Gabbert and Thubauville (2010), Markakis (2011) and Sorenson (1993).

5 Anglo-American missionaries officially settled in the Kambata/Hadiya area in 1929, representing themselves as the civilizers of a pagan world (Aasebø Rønne 1997). A phase of massive proselytism was started by evangelical Protestant churches in the Hadiya area in 1977. According to one of my informants, Hadiya people have abandoned many local customs for two reasons: church ('the struggle against Satan') and school.

6 For a context-sensitive approach to the social flexibility of women, see the contribution of Sophia Thubauville in this collection. It goes without saying that I owe a great deal of inspiration to the seminal work of Jean Lydall on womens' lives and relationships in southern Ethiopia.

The main wedding celebration (*bolocho'o*) is followed by other feasts.[7] The most important one, the wedding party (*dabacha* or *minaghisha*), is organised by the bride's family approximately two weeks after the main ceremony, when the bride and groom, who have already started living in the groom's father's homestead, their marital witnesses, and two or three relatives of the groom reach the girl's family and spend the night there. The bride's parents are forbidden to see their daughter before this event. The girl must stay alone in an unfamiliar place; she is fed with buttery and nutritious food and treated with the same special care that is usually reserved for new-born children. The ceremony represents the formal transition from being a daughter to becoming a wife. The third phase is represented by a ceremony called 'ille mo'isha' or 'ille mo'imma', which literally mean respectively 'looking in the eyes' or 'showing the face'. This is when the bride is allowed to see her in-laws for the first time after *bolocho'o*. The feast is arranged in great detail by the groom's mother about twenty days after the marriage. Then the bride is secluded for up to three months in her in-laws' home, this being called 'the house of the bride' (*idaich mine*) or 'the period of the bride' (*idayano*).[8] The new bride sits veiled in her own room. Shita, the most sarcastic informant I had, instructed me with great humour on the comedy of gestures that accompany the marriage. She started to sing a melody, clapping her hands with compelling cadence, and said, 'These are songs we women sing at the wedding ceremony. When the man comes to take the girl to his home, the women complain and weep. They play at beating the man who is depriving them of her. In the end he gets tired and acts as if he had taken her by force'. Shita tried to reconstruct the interior of the bride's room. She asked me to mime the very limited movements which she is allowed to make. She wrapped my body in a cotton blanket, pulling it down over my face, and sat me down on a mattress.

> Just pretend to be afraid. A married woman must use linguistic forms of respect towards all her husband's relatives, even to the children. The new bride is at the mercy of everyone. In that room the girl learns from her husband everything she needs to become familiar with. When the relatives of her husband, even young children, enter into the room, she stays covered from head to foot and turns her back on them. They say, 'If you want, I will bring you some soap'. But she should not reply immediately to the offer. This is the rule. First she must shy away and hold back. In the end she turns around and reveals her face.

When new brides enter their husbands' families, they are at the very beginning of a journey toward prestige and social recognition. This transition is a period of geographical and existential instability that characterises many cultures in south-central Ethiopia. The bride moves into the compound of the groom according to a virilocal preference.

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7 The *bolocho'o* is held in the compound of the bride's family. If the family has limited economic resources the guests of the bridegroom will be hosted only for a day, even though the most respectful and socially acceptable protocol would be to host them for at least one day and one night.

8 The same is reported for the Doko Masho of the Gamo Gofa plateau (Freeman 1997:349).

She must familiarise herself with her husband, his family and the children he may already have from previous marriages. The condition of staying in between highlights the underlying dichotomy between structure, which seems to characterise the men's existence, and fluidity, that of women's geographies. Yet, the fact that women walk on bumpy paths, are in motion and exchanged, does not exclude a training, at the very least in flexibility and resilience.

Development and harmful traditional practices

In several feminist accounts,[9] as well as in the eyes of occasional observers, voluntary workers, compassionate tourists and NGOs, gender issues are often dealt with in accordance with developmental ideals that aim at changing supposedly harmful traditional practices.

Among the activities prohibited by the Ethiopian government, the following are relevant in Hadiya: tonsillectomy (*sammagga*),[10] use of the purgative herb Hagenia Abyssinica (*suto*), circumcision (*bellechimma*) and marriage by abduction (*gossimma*).[11] According to Eleonora Lvova (1997), marriage forms affect the status of women in Ethiopia. She draws up a confusing list of marriage genres, for example, consecrated, de facto, temporary, by contract, or 'stolen'. Many of these unions seem to force the woman into the role of wife or mother. As keepers of the most ancient beliefs, Lvova argues, women, more than men, preserve what she calls 'a rural mentality' (1997:578).

The general perception is that harmful practices are restricted to the countryside, an area barely reached by services that are globally perceived as essential. In the implementation packages recently introduced by the Ethiopian government (Federal Republic of Ethiopia 2004a, b, c), the campaign to promote literacy is intertwined with an infusion of technology into farming, health protection and the promotion of those human rights that many African governments are now anxious to demonstrate to the international community. The notion of 'development' is not only a modern concept, but one with a long genealogy. It reshapes a biblical and classical evolutionary paradigm of a relentless march from tradition to modernity (Bayart 2006:62). According to Sarah Bracking (2006:87–90), whenever finance is invested in development, there is an intensification of interventionism; and statistical data are increasingly distorted in order to misrepresent Africans as poor, sick and illiterate.

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9 See Fisseha *et al.* (1994), Hirut (2000) and Negussie and Negussie (1994).

10 Traditional uvulectomy is a surgical practice well documented in Kenya, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Nigeria, and routinely performed in children due to the belief that an elongated uvula is responsible for all throat problems.

11 See the Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 414/2004 (art. 586–590) (Federal Republic of Ethiopia 2005), and the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (1998, 1999).

The zeal with which the Ethiopian government has committed itself to restructuring national resources has increased at such a rate since 2004 that its effects are being felt by even the remotest populations. Since 2009 certificates of vaccination and brochures for good nutrition have appeared in the village of Lamsella, hanging from the walls and ceilings as small flags fluttering in the country festivals. The people who come from the city educate the farmers in how to communicate and use formal instructions, which they do in a pedagogical or authoritarian manner. But words alone do not create obedience. The villagers sit in meetings and listen. Composed and silent, they nod in agreement in the tacit conviction that once they go back home they will continue to live as before, because 'It's our heads that drive our lives'.[12] While in the centres people assume that farmers have only a sketchy knowledge of the law, in fact it could be argued that it is active resistance, not a lack of information, that inspires their conduct.

Sexual practices are emerging as a major area of concern for reformers, in particular rape, early marriage and female genital mutilation. The target of this campaign against HTP is the typical rural custom of arranging marriages and 'marrying families' instead of individuals (Johnstone 2000:417). Among the social problems arising through these practices, one finds the phenomenon of rural girls dropping out of school for fear of being raped or abducted on their way back home. This theme has spread from the concerns of local administrators to the pages of a prestigious newspaper such as "The Independent" (Hari 2010), which addresses the topic in typical journalistic fashion, by modulating the key terms – 'forced', 'kidnapping', 'slave' – in order to offer the reader the up-to-date version of an ancient dichotomous tale: the male ogre and the enslaved woman who finally finds the strength to rise up against him. This article ignores the subtle nuances of such a scenario, and essentially manipulates the collected female stories to suit a particular view of gender inequality.

In the following, I discuss the gap between calling abduction a 'harmful traditional practice' and contradictory findings which show that abductions are often not carried out without the consent of the girl and can even be planned beforehand by the couple. Described as an illegal practice, kidnapping represents a frequent diversion from the archetypal marriage with a ceremony (*laddissima*) and substantial dowry payments (*ghegheya*). This ideal is generally more desirable to the girls, but it seldom occurs. I will therefore reinstate the ordinary voices of some female agents in relation to crucial aspects of gender relationships in a south-central area of Ethiopia. The analysis of the marriage forms, and more specifically of a special way into marriage, namely abduction,

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12 The development projects are sponsored by one of the local Protestant churches, Kale Hiwot, and by the health-care centre in the neighbouring village of Masoria. The pre-existing capillary network of medical stations infiltrates the communities through the selection of the promoters: exemplary farmers whom the government educates weekly about what has to be taught, for example, going to the nearest hospital in case of illness, avoiding home births assisted by the midwives and stopping circumcision. Despite all this effort, and according to the promoters whom I interviewed, 'the farmers take only the parts they want and leave the others'.

which is still commonplace in the Hadiya zone, aims at deconstructing the imaginary of violence that permeates the life-cycle events from an ethical point of view. The dominant narrative of the state aims at producing official truths, which in turn belittle the opinions of the witnesses. This sponsored politics of memory constructs rurality as one of many internal enemies. I will challenge these stereotypical representations by discussing a critical selection of stories, collected over five years, about (and from) women – who, after all, are the greatest authority to comment on the sexuality of African women.

Marriage by abduction: theoretical background

I heard about abduction as a somewhat 'paradoxically regular union' in October 2005, in the kitchen of Adanech, while she was grinding coffee and I was resting with a friend on the *enset* mat. At that stage, I had not read anything about abduction, but the remark did evoke something buried deep in my memory, specifically the legends concerning the history of Rome and the Sabine women, immortalised in the painting by Jacques-Louis David towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The number of authors who have studied abduction at a theoretical level is small. Maria Arioti includes it in the general framework of marriage as exchange (2006:203–220). Abduction held a great deal of fascination in the early days of anthropology, being connected to the evolutionism of John F. McLennan (1970). In his view abduction, whether real or simulated, was a survival of the most ancient form of marriage.

Abduction, after this fleeting appearance, faded away from the horizon of the discipline. According to Raymond Firth, the subject has been treated with a mixture of sadism and romanticism, so that it has caused more stereotypes than it could eradicate about the 'savage who goes to court his village beauty with a club instead of a bunch of flowers' (cited by Arioti 2006:205). Despite the fact that academia has disdainfully neglected the topic for a long time, considering the 'tribal' way of loving as no more than a side and perhaps embarrassing issue, soaked with subjectivity, there is in fact vast documentation from various contexts and historical periods where abduction took or still takes place (for example, among the Tallensi, Luo, Mundugumor, Tikopia and Inuit). Being in constant tension with the judicial system, abduction in the Hadiya zone is both performed (by indigenous people) and fought against (by the government and movements of female emancipation). And yet, whichever form marriage takes, it has to be understood as a rational response in adaptive terms. Currently, the Hadiya (and arguably many other groups) use abduction in marriage negotiations to oppose the classic system of marriage by dowry or brideprice in order to smooth competition between individuals or groups and to achieve specific goals (such as alliances or the transfer of goods).

Robert Barnes (1999) draws on an ethnographic corpus concerning Australia, New Guinea, the Caribbean and the Amazon, showing that abduction is highly variable and difficult to delineate. He describes various case studies: infatuated young men who go into action when their beloved puts up resistance; anxious parents who, knowing that their daughter is opposed to the marriage and using an excuse, force her to go to a location previously arranged with the family of the abductor. In other instances, there are sneak attacks to overcome the reluctance of the girl's parents. The woman's relatives can therefore resist courageously or agree reluctantly, connive with the kidnapper, or even play a leading role in organising the capture. In short, all the complicit actors seem to swing back and forth between rejection and determination, from formal to a more authentically violent retaliation. In the few works that deal with capture some recurring features can be identified.

The first element of abduction is violence. Abduction involves taking reproductive individuals away from others who prevent or delay their circulation or who want to exchange them with a third party. Some Ethiopian activists, who are wholeheartedly committed to enhancing the process of democratisation in the country with special focus on gender discrimination, firmly condemn the practice. In these accounts 'culture' and 'tradition' are reduced to the status of a predatory mechanism, an effective weapon in the hands of men. Original Wolde Giorgis (2002) examines the abuse of women from a practical perspective, discussing some of the cases collected by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA). The author reaches a drastic conclusion: the women in Ethiopia are amongst the poorest of the poor, trapped in the bureaucracy of the courts, disadvantaged in terms of property and inheritance rights, their dignity being violated by polygamous practices. The violence inherent in abduction stands out. The law is rendered impotent by the fact that in many cases women decide to marry the abductor. The question asked by the reformers – '(h)ow could a woman carried off through violence make a free contract of marriage?' (Wolde Giorgis 2002:179) – raises the controversial issue of the definition of free consent. 'Generic morals', endorsed by many militant groups and westernised feminisms, would answer that consent must come before any sexual advance is made. Nevertheless, the reader should take time and see how, in the case under examination, this perspective is entirely overruled by the abductees, and consent may instead follow a (sexual) encounter between the partners.

The second element of abduction is exchange. This is an undeniable function in the society in spite of its violent expression. Marriage by abduction is only erroneously interpreted as a denial of reciprocity (Herzfeld 1985). Although from a conventional human rights' perspective it may bring to mind negative activities such as rape, plunder, raids to capture slaves and the trading of wives and daughters for money, abduction differs significantly. For instance, it is enacted by a man, often from the local area, who has no intention of taking the woman to remote areas: the abductor is determined to become her husband (McLaren 2001:959). In addition, it has positive consequences for the local men and women in terms of status acquisition and community integration: the

end result is a lasting alliance in which the predatory family will acquire a lower status than the bride's relatives and will be obliged to repay them considerably (Kaj Århem, cited in Barnes 1999:64).

Only a few scholars suggest that a third element of abduction can be simulation. In such cases 'abduction' becomes a misnomer for elopement. It is not uncommon that the woman consents or plays an active part in her own capture. This controversial fact leads to a delicate hotchpotch of sexual violence and the victim's testimony and consent, which, in western contexts, usually gives rise to a thorough legal examination of the time of the refusal, the quality of the consent, the reliability of the witnesses and the plausibility of the evidence (Barnes 1999:59). Sometimes, rather than an out-and-out rape, the practice represents a flight arranged by a young couple in order to force their respective kin groups to accept the match. This is also practiced in Western societies as a consensual premarital flight (a 'fuitina' in the southern Italian version). Likewise, in the cases documented by ethnographers, the performance is never enveloped in secrecy; on the contrary, a large part of the community is nearby to attend and participate (McLaren 2001:957).

The fourth element, at least in some cases of abduction, is theatricalism: the fringe activities can change, but the main script does not. The action may be carefully planned and entail more than one attempt. The man, supported by a group of friends or relatives, kidnaps the girl. This can be done by ambushing her in her house, or in the streets or fields. Her relatives chase the abductor, while at the same time cursing him loudly; his relatives welcome the fleeing couple on the run and protect them from counter-attacks. Passers-by and neighbours gather in small crowds, commenting on this unusual and yet repeated wedding march, often with indulgence toward the kidnapper. There may be a fight. The abductee will stay in the house of the groom-to-be for a few months or a year, until the situation has cooled down enough to be able to open negotiations. During that time the bride-to-be is kept under close surveillance; the parents would anyway be reluctant to take her back after her defloration. Some authors (Irving Goldman cited in Barnes 1999:63) consider any attempt by the woman to run away as an almost ritual act at the early stages of the union – the exact counterpart of the male muscular trial implied by the strength and skill required to abduct the woman. It is rare that one of the parties could (or would wish to) avoid the marriage. Sometimes the woman thwarts the plans, resulting in domestic unhappiness, which may even lead to a separation. But perhaps the most surprising fact is that, according to Barnes, the young woman needs only a few days to calm herself and decide to stay with good grace: 'Since no woman today can be taken from her home completely against her will, the bride must have consented to some degree, though she should not appear to do so [...] the ceremony demonstrates her proper ambivalence and hesitation' (Barnes 1999:64).

The fifth element of abduction is a reference, both in the literature and eyewitness accounts, to the outdatedness of the custom. Informants give assurances that abduction, like other prosecuted cultural habits, is no longer practised, and even if it were,

it would be certain to cause fierce disapproval within the community. They express in words the desire that the practice be relegated to the past or, more specifically, to e t h n i c others.[13] In an essay on this type of marriage in twentieth-century China, Anne E. McLaren argues that abduction has been downgraded by historical sources to a deviant form, a sort of fossil, restricted to the ignorant classes (2001). She instead strives to reinterpret it as a meaningful answer to the protocol of the 'dowry/brideprice'. The classical model, in accordance with Confucian decorum, has held the non-conforming voices back; and customs that were nevertheless locally accepted (and extensively practised) remained at the edges of knowledge, shrouded in silence. At a textual level they were constructed as a carnival masquerade – ceremonial among the élites, barbaric among the national minorities. This is a prime example of how evolutionism, from which the interest in abduction originally stemmed, resurfaces in authoritative sources that consider capture a phenomenon typical of immature races.

Abduction is a Janus-faced conundrum, which at this point indicates a seemingly dichotomous interpretation: first, the brutal capture at the expense of an unwilling woman; and secondly, the organised flight of two willing partners who desire the marriage. In between, just to make things complicated, there is a gradation of different case studies.

The concepts of segregation and oppression have been mechanically superimposed on to 'exotic' realities. The voices of some peasant women, living in a village buried deep in the countryside, will illustrate a version antithetical to western myths and in particular to the western representation of romantic passion (Luhmann 1998). Oddly enough, the actions of the plunderer, offensive though they might appear in relation to national standards and to sensitive people trained in human rights, in fact lead to marriage where the woman only rarely has been abducted against her will, even less frequently can be considered as a victim, and most of the time enjoys the highest esteem inside the family and in the eyes of the whole community.

Love stories

One day in March 2009, four years after our first meeting, Adanech proposed to help me create order out of the chaos of my field notes with a Hadiya proverb on the truth: 'The day and the night, the moon and the darkness do not come together' ('himi belli agani tunsi meker maroyo'). I was enchanted by her rationalistic faith in indicating to me such a sharp method of sorting out the women's stories, by then so complicated as to seem labyrinthine. The stories changed over time, and there were differences between informants' accounts, with ever floating and conflicting versions from each woman. I

[13] 'Obviously, this situation is exactly like the eating of rats and mice, which also only one's lovely neighbors ever do' (Ernst Vatter cited in Barnes 1999:58).

needed an antidote to the fact that the women have in their mouths 'not one but two or more tongues', as they were used to saying, accusing each other. They have a genius for whispering and gossiping; sometimes they deliberately lie. Each of them in turn warned me against the others. In order to discover the truth, and far beyond the optimistic advice of Adanech, I had to use a recursive technique, like an inquisitor: asking the same thing of least three witnesses, and then comparing the versions to the bare bones (Langness and Frank 1981:44, cited in Crapanzano 1984:955) – a truth by subtraction, then, and approximate (Kondo 1986:82, Ochs and Capps 1996:24).

The more accurate method of recording women's oral history[14] is to follow Ariadne's thread to its source, venturing into the subjectivity and whirling rhetoric of these narratives, in which the female narrators blend fiction, history and persuasiveness (Ochs and Capps 1996:28). My premise here rests on the idea that individuals move back and forth between cynicism and sincerity about their own acts, and draw on different options without establishing a preferential way. What they can therefore offer to the ethnographer is not an overarching truth that is sharply opposed to a lie, but a mosaic of fractured, yet so exquisitely human, performances of sincerity (Handler and Saxton 1988).

Autumn 2005: first version

Adanech was forty years old in October 2005 and the mother of seven children. She received my visits with formal respect. She bustled about, smiling enigmatically. But it was her husband Wolloro who replied to the questions I asked her, because, as he let me know later: 'I fear you; when you came the first time, you said you wanted to work only with women; but you can trust me: I can interpret for her, I can tell you everything about her. I am like her brother'. Adanech submitted with docility to various others – her husband, children, and even neighbours – who were relating her story. As a result I gave up visiting her house. Only later did she have a chance of explaining to me the origin of her turbulent relationship with her husband, which, now that time has passed, is considered one based on brotherly love. She waited until we were alone,

> I was kidnapped on the road, while coming back from the market. My husband and seven other men kidnapped me. I was 26 years old. My parents hadn't promised me yet in marriage, even though many had already asked for my hand. My husband and the other men carried me to Lamsella, to the house of Wolloro's aunt. Afterwards they gave money to me and my family, and bought clothes. Three months later my family gave a house party and invited us. Thirty relatives of my husband and some of his friends came there. My parents

14 See Gabbert (2012:30–33), Kondo (1986) and Kuwayama (2003).

> gave me *wecheta*,[15] two oxen and slaughtered the third one. I also received some cookware as a gift.[16]

I asked her to come back to the exact moment at which she was taken: 'When I was kidnapped I cried for help. I got to know my husband only later. Before that I had never seen any of them. I did not know which one of those eight men would become my husband'. As she stood before me, grinding barley, I began to question her more closely about what had happened that day, when she had finally arrived at the man's house. My questioning had the effect of slowing her actions. I could see in her frozen smile a great deal of unexpressed emotion. She turned her gaze toward me and, after a brief pause, slowly shook her head as if to say 'do not ask'. Eventually she seemed to recover some of her composure and continued:

> I had no idea what an abduction was. They came forward and told me that they just wanted to say hello. I said, 'But I do not know you'. Then I thought that greeting that man would not create any problem. I was with a girlfriend. After I greeted him, he kicked and pushed her out of the way, saying, 'Get lost, you are not the one I want'. She began screaming, but the other seven men turned up and carried her by force to a faraway place. Other people who were on the street came to help me, but the men said to them, 'She has already agreed to marry him. We are taking her by force because now she has changed her mind and wants to marry another one'. They lied, but people stopped helping. Many of the people who had gathered, I found out later, were relatives of my husband. They preferred to help him rather than me. I cried and tried to tell them my reasons, but people didn't help because they didn't believe me. And even if they believed me, seven men would have clashed with them.

Her family would have had the legal right to protest and bring her home before the marriage took place. After the ceremony, if the relationship between the partners cannot continue because of a deep incompatibility, the woman's family may file a lawsuit against the kidnapper and even the men who helped him. The family receives a financial redress, which is higher if the woman already had an agreement to marry someone else or if she is a student. In Adanech's case her claims were weak: she was not promised to anyone else, and she was neither too young nor a student. The family could barely afford to squander its economic resources to obtain such a small compensation. The wrangling between the parties lasted three days. On the fourth day after the kidnapping, Adanech signed a promise of marriage: 'there were many elderly people plus my older sister, all of them asking me politely to marry him. They told me he would make a good husband. And I signed'. It was a marriage without any ceremony. 'There was the wedding party

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15 This is the term for a decorated pot which represents a special gift and stands for respect and love. It is filled with very important materials of a symbolic nature such as butter and barley, and is usually offered to brides, women during postpartum and the elderly.

16 This conversation took place on 29 November 2005 at the woman's house; it was recorded in my field journal and translated from the Hadiya language to English.

(*minaghisha*)', she said with an air of melancholy, 'but no other feasts'. Along with the celebration she had been imagining since her teenage years, other desires went by the board in those short, intense days. Adanech continued:

> For three days I stayed in the house of my husband's aunt, just sitting there. I got up to go to the bathroom. Sometimes I saw my husband to be. I was calm and silent, and didn't say anything to him. I was very angry. I thought at that time it would have been better to die or kill myself rather than marry him. But he came close and tried to talk. Up to fifteen days after the abduction I had not even said a word to him. Before they kidnapped me, I dreamed that my marriage would have been with a feast, but he left me without any feast: because of that I was so angry.

Spring 2008: second version

The first version of the above story is in line with the interpretation of abduction as involving violence. I am assuming that the influence of propaganda from the urban centres played a great role in sterilising the rhetoric of Adanech, who at first presented herself as a victim of a criminal action. The strategy of deleting humourous, light-hearted and positive data from the account served at the beginning the purpose of appeasing the ethnographer, the stranger to the village and someone who might be there to give the government a report on human rights violation. Over the years, however, the first version has crumbled away, leaving a multilayered picture. Adanech's original text becomes defective when other women enter into the debate on abduction. The simplistic form of abduction is replaced by a description of detailed circumstances. Araggash, one of Adanech's neighbours, speaking about abduction more generally, suggested at least six different cases. (a) A girl has agreed to marry a boy, then she changes her mind. Without revealing this to her family, she cultivates a new preference in secret. If the groom-to-be is aware of her intentions, he can decide to kidnap the girl. Her family will support the action because, as the arrangement has already been made, they would have to return all the goods that his family has already paid towards the marriage. (b) There has been an agreement between the families for a long time, but the young man kidnaps her on the eve of the wedding ceremony to save the bridal payments (paying for the feasts at the homes of the groom's family and the woman). (c) There is no agreement between the families. The boy takes a girl he likes from the street. The plot is known by everyone: having slept together the first night, they are caught by the police, who imprison the man for a few days. In the meantime, at the village, the council of elders gathers; the boy's family pays compensation to the girl's family, and the case is closed. (d) Both partners have agreed. She is wearing the engagement ring and clothes her official boyfriend, supported by her family, has already bought. A second admirer kidnaps her and pays the amount due directly to the boyfriend. (e) The two partners love each other, but the families have not agreed. Hence they stage an abduction, forc-

ing the families to reach an agreement. And finally the extreme case of (f): risqué jokes and flirtation among young people, which can result in sexual violence and then in the woman being abandoned; even this situation may, however, end in an agreement (the so-called shotgun wedding).

Abduction nevertheless requires further explanation. The informants insinuate that the abductee, perhaps in subtle ways, broke the code of propriety: if she appears to be dissipated, the family organises the abduction to save her reputation. The criteria with which to judge bad behaviour, as well as the reasons behind it, are always expressed through gossip and insinuation: betraying signs of interest in a man, flirting frivolously and 'showing her teeth when she smiled' (McLaren 2001:959–60). In Lamsella, elderly women weave around unmarried girls webs of intimidation, which are very similar to those expressed by mothers and grandmothers in some western countries: 'If you don't go to sleep, the bogeyman will come', or: 'If you are not good, the gypsies will take you away'. Daughters are pushed to comply with the ideal of a good woman by listening to old wives' tales about rape: 'If you do not behave well, you will be kidnapped!' The story of Adanech was recalled around the fireplace along with jokes and wisecracks. Hadiya people have developed a taste for sensing love under the mise-en-scène of violence. Adanech herself played persuasively on the topic at every reappearance of the anthropologist: 'You have been away for so long: did you get married? Have you come back here for *minaghisha*? Was it abduction?'

Abduction is always hard to pin down. Recommendations of how to prevent it indicate that the girl has to avoid pandering to men, accepting their gifts and hobnobbing with them on the road to the market, 'otherwise he will think that she is shy, but actually wants to marry him'. In addition, it is said that a refusal uttered with determination, without becoming confused with flirtation, prevents anyone from planning a woman's capture. Therefore, I asked the neighbours if Adanech wanted to be taken away. The responses came sporadically: 'she knew him'; 'they spoke to each other'; 'she had joked with him'; 'Wolloro had asked her to marry him, she laughed saying nothing. Another suitor popped the question and Wolloro was afraid of losing her'. Bakkalech summed up the common-sense female perspective:

> Someone steals a woman only if she has refused marriage. Perhaps he asked her, she played without answering, so he forced her to sleep with him. I do not know if she laughed, but she is beautiful, and when she refused to marry him, he stole her. Having seen her on the street with him, people think that she may have played a role in the abduction.[17]

On a local level, and contrary to what one would expect, a strong sympathy is expressed, especially by women, with the abductor. They look on abduction as if it were a heroic and glamorous action, an affair of male honour. Love taken by force is a public and

[17] This conversation took place on 1 April 2008 at the woman's house; it was recorded in my field journal and translated from the Hadiya language to English.

noisy matter. People seem ultimately to appreciate men's vigour. This attitude can be conceived as a public way of bringing social value back to (and save the face of) men who would otherwise be precluded from paying a high bridewealth and thereby gaining credibility (McLaren 2001:982). The position of the abductee is in most cases interpreted as part of a usual role-playing game between the proactive male and the modest female, a game that of course is extreme at the time of 'effervescence' (abduction), and soft ordinarily. In the social drama that actors renew at every 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks 2002), the woman is the one who is supposed to have a dread of marriage, not create sweet-talk, or provoke erotic games.

The group that finds abduction less acceptable is, of course, that of the abductees. Oddly enough, however, and as the evidence indicates, complaints relate to the loss of the elaborate celebrations of a traditional marriage, which represent the most important part of what a woman inherits from her family. The aspect of abduction that women hold to be most offensive is the loss of the feast's embellishments – the dress, the round bread, the dancing and the blessing through butter. Once all these traditional preparations have been taken away, abduction does not produce very different consequences from the standard marriage. No local accounts speak of it as a form of abuse or disrespect towards women. The couple is considered quite average; none of the players involved in it suffers a loss of status in the eyes of the community (McLaren 2001:960).

The term 'heramimma' (elopement) indicates the initiative of two lovers who flee by arrangement. Interestingly enough, in either case (elopement or abduction, whose prerequisites and objectives in fact frequently overlap in the informants' narrative), reconciliation may be conducted inside the community or through the bureaucracy of the national law. Whereas the council of elders works slowly in search of a positive solution, 'cooling the situation' until the offended family is ready to accept the boy as a lawful husband, modern jurisprudence condemns him to imprisonment for up to ten years. Once released, he will be warned against approaching the woman, and, according to my Hadiya informants, she will be lost forever because she will never have a good marriage.[18]

Spring 2009: behind the curtain

The final word in this complex web of narratives should go to the supposedly oppressed woman. Later on, Adanech voluntarily resumed her own story and reshuffled the cards to allow other motives to emerge that, for undisclosed reasons, she had concealed previously. Wolloro went to ask her hand in marriage, and both she and her family agreed. He wished to marry her at once; having lost his mother, and having to care for an elderly

[18] For a penetrating study of the informal procedures of mediation and conflict solving (in cases such as marriage negotiation, bride abduction, physical injury and homicide) conducted by the elders in a peasant society of Central Ethiopia, see Nicolas (2011).

father, a brother and a sister, he needed the assistance of a woman. Adanech's family asked for a delay of a year because she was helping at home and could not be given away immediately. So, in order to expedite the situation the boy stole her from the street. He had already paid money and cattle. Many people claimed her, but she liked none of them. I pushed her further on this point: 'Was it therefore abduction?' In March 2009 she seraphically replied: 'Only because of the violent way in which they took and forced me to live with him'.

Here again is Ariadne's thread: recurring elements of simulation, theatrical and scripted violence coexist with previous agreements and perhaps an already ongoing love affair. Abduction, seen as a public symbol of female passivity, and elopement, seen as an apology of romantic love at war with convention, have become fibres so well interwoven that they cannot be untangled. Moreover, the idea of men as simply dominating subdued women, whom they can eventually have at their sexual disposal and marry at their discretion, reveals itself as highly inaccurate (Cornwall 2007). The implicit aim of both sexes is a balance: men and women are always somehow cooperative, even during seeming violence (Lydall 1994a). The victory of men (a conquest) and that of women (a submission) are heavily complicit in masking the lovers' personal desires.[19]

Passion by constraint

In several African contexts adolescent advances are described through the metaphor of males hunting for prey, where challenging eye-contact on the street among peer groups and hot flirtation – from gallantry to a request for marriage – epitomise the proactive attitude flaunted by the seducer.[20] The girl declines the invitation, or pretends not to have heard it, shutting herself up in a disdainful silence, which at the same time humiliates the young man and amuses the audience. Skirmishes and tokens of love come one after the other in the subsequent weeks, until the boy ambushes her on the road to the spring or the forest. Later they will dance together, whispering (sweet? provocative?) words in each other's ears. Premarital sex is described as turbulent, with no tenderness; the sexual encounter is assimilated to a hand-to-hand fight in which the man plays the role of aggressor (p'Bitek 1964:32). Eros manifests itself as pre-linguistic behaviour, as

19 To put it in Lydall's words, they are 'slaves together' (1994b:7). Submission should be interpreted here as an active performance which is chosen by, instead of inflicted on, women. When scholars argue that women pander to men's interests in securing social relations of a patriarchal nature, they forget to ask themselves the logically following question: is it a sign of passivity or a straightforward expression of a genuine desire? Dependence implies subordination, but it can also offer substantial rewards, such as protection and the privilege of being located a certain distance from the official power and its inherent perils.

20 Among the Ba-Nande of Zaire, women are conceived as game caught in a trap (Remotti 1994:90). The same connection is to be found among the Acholi of Uganda (p'Bitek 1964:30) and in the Maghreb (Chebel 2001:81).

harshness (strength), which is actively exerted by men and suffered by women (docility) (Remotti 1994:124).

Among the Hadiya both standard marriage and marriage by abduction represent an alternative to love born of passion as cherished by western myths, showing us the discipline of men and women who have devised strategies of verbal frugality, emotional economy and a clear gendered division of labour to resist the whirlwind of emotions and organise them into civil love. The assumption of romantic love's universality wavers once it comes into contact with local theories drawn from ethnographies.[21]

On the evidence of women in Lamsella, the thread that holds together love and violence has led me to explore issues that modern rationalism is prone to keep clearly distinct: on the one hand, expressions of personal choice and freedom from rules, and on the other, restriction as a denial of the ability for self-determination. In many societies in southern Ethiopia, on the contrary, love is not a vital prerequisite to the success of a union, in the sense that the husband's wealth, the good name of the families and the existence of property as a guarantee for the woman are more valuable. Among the Hamar, a girl usually marries a stranger with whom she has never spoken or danced (Lydall 2006:311). Likewise, in the Hadiya area, marriage is a starting point, and seduction is a matter of etiquette and discipline rather than of personal initiative.

If the reader considers the matter in a clear-headed way, the stoicism with which women come to accept the inevitable – be they promised in marriage or kidnapped – would appear to be more a cultural style than a sign of passivity.[22] If the reader ceases here to refer to the regulatory definition of abduction and replaces it with a new one moulded by ethnography, (s)he could then argue that, for the most part and according to both the Hadiya men and women, marriages by abduction turn out satisfactorily. Women involved in the action would have little room for decision about their choice of partner in any case: given the context, abduction can be considered to have elements in common with the more usual arranged marriage. In both arranged and abduction marriages, partners do not know each other well before the ceremony. According to one of my informants, 'When you have many boyfriends, you can make a comparison; but when you stay with the same one all the days of your life, you start loving him and accept his whole behaviour. It is better because you have no choice and no doubts'. The

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21 'Acholi love is certainly not a kind of pond into which the lovers fall together. And the idea of romantic love, which looks upon the love object as precious and exceedingly difficult to possess and involves a devotion to it which is associated with a reverence so profound it almost necessarily excludes all desire for intimacy; this kind of love that the poets and troubadours sang about was unknown among the Acholi' (p'Bitek 1964:33). A similar, irreverent position in relation to romantic love and the sophistication it entails was expressed by Edward Evans-Pritchard in his famous Fawcett Lecture (1965).

22 The notion of self-control is very common among the cultural codes found in Africa: 'It is an implicit feature of the code that to be a person is a struggle, since adherence to the code presupposes the existence of those unruly needs and impulses that we are trying to master. Thus to become human is to become something we in a sense are not' (Riesman 1986:106).

fact that there is no choice between a man and a woman is said to be a characteristic feature of the best relationships.

To this day Adanech emphatically defends her marriage by force. One element is never overlooked by women while talking of flights and kidnapping; according to my informants, 'the man took the girl on purpose, loving her'. Disturbing as it might appear to an outsider, violence is locally the most eloquent way by which women estimate the love of those who choose them. Given that a man earns the bridewealth and assets in any marriage, the wealthy man is perceived as not valuing the bride because he may marry another woman at his discretion. On the contrary, the poor man, who is forced to kidnap a woman, will treasure his wife (McLaren 2001:965–66). According to the narratives of my informants, it is my assertion that abduction reveals preferences which would otherwise remain unexpressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would argue, albeit with some hesitation, that there is an intermediate way of interpreting abduction, one that lies between the description of it (a) as a purely criminal act and (b) as a shared practice within the community between partners. This in-betweenness depends on the degree of the social acceptability a practice has in specific socio-cultural contexts. Feminist fairy tales abound of gender myths that justify rescue packages with no memory of the fact 'that "gender" as it is understood in Western feminist discourse did not exist in Africa prior to the colonial imposition of a dichotomous model of sexual difference that rendered women subordinate, residual and inferior to men' (Cornwall 2005:5; emphasis in the original). The ethnographer must apply caution when using concepts such as oppression, subordination and even violence that are drawn from a particularly western way of creating a sense of difference in other cultures by advocating the universality of human rights. The majority of recent accounts still tenaciously cling to a generalising definition of 'patriarchy'. There are, of course, practices that curtail opportunities for achievement for both sexes. Nevertheless, from an analytical point of view, anthropology should attempt to understand men and women in other cultures as reflexive agents who try to fulfil their personal life plans, instead of looking at them as objects created as such by European interventionism. Only this intellectual discipline will allow us to put a bridle on emotional overreaction, to keep ourselves at a safe distance and to perform a hermeneutics that is equidistant from both militancy and cold positivism.

The strategy of violence, which abduction performances show off to a wide audience, works perhaps as a form of wordless love communication between husbands and their wives. Aberrant as it may seem to common perception, it indicates how meaning

is produced in ways that may disturb our 'western' morality.[23] Nevertheless, diverting our attention to other forms of humanity turns out to be fruitful in order to see how the meanings of love are culturally determined, which in turn invites us to reflect upon the equally context-related configuration of partnerships in our society.

The project of solidarity in striving to live side by side, maintaining continuity over time and without the magic of a 'pleasant fever' (love as mere passion), holds little appeal for people tempted by the idea that love is a spontaneous herb, not a cultivated garden plant. Idealised romance ranges from the climax of Tristan and Iseult, through the sufferings of young Werther, to the extremes of a Wagnerian furore. The courtly ideals of western tradition – sacrificing in the name of love, despairing in search of the unattainable, in short the binomial of love and death – have undermined marriage as a procreative and proprietary alliance. This mythology has led us over the centuries to think romantically about love as if it were well-grounded in an ethic of emotions that glorify adventure and adultery (Guiducci 2006). The testimonies of other women, in other places, demystify such a pattern by demonstrating its culturally specific – and not universal – nature.

The narrative of Adanech, as well as those of other women in Lamsella – whom I had the chance of listening to repeatedly over an extended period, constantly reflecting on inconsistencies and fabrications – is eloquent in promoting a redefinition of abduction. In their accounts these women combine the idea of marriage by force with the pain of physical violence and yet hint at cases in which women play active roles. Every time I came back to the village, these stories gained new aspects. The second and third drafts typically swept away the previous versions. In fact, in several cases, the actual desires of the women appear to be highly ambiguous and hard to determine, reminiscent perhaps of the issue of consent in alleged rape (Barnes 1999:59).

Abduction is not necessarily experienced passively by women. Therefore, its standard laconic definition should be widened far beyond the premature and impossibly narrow explanation that often occurs in the agenda of public policies. It seems useful to temper the commonly held view of abduction as a criminal act with a more holistic, ethnographically inspired approach. The labelling of abduction as 'harmful traditional practice' by the Ethiopian government or NGOs should be rephrased and balanced by the taste, colour and texture of valuable primary sources, by the voices of local actors, both men and women. The question remains: Are we ready to challenge our current perspective, which equates love, choice and marriage, and read alternative ways of loving on their own terms?

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[23] Lydall (1994a:213) discusses, thereby disorienting the reader, the convention among Hamar of beating the wife, and puts it in dialogue with domestic violence against women in Europe and the United States. The differences between these contexts in terms of practical and symbolic meanings, of positive or negative outcomes of wife-battering, offer the reader helpful insights into this multifaceted phenomenon.

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