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BRIDES BEHIND BARS
Maale women as captives between tradition and development*

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ABSTRACT. The seclusion of brides is an important transition period among the Maale of southern Ethiopia, which is still practised by all Maale today, regardless of the family's religious background. The seclusion of the bride is not only a way to accept a bride with respect and offer her safety during a dangerous period of transition, it also serves as a time of apprenticeship and of a deepening of traditional skills. Recently, brides who have attended school before getting married are taken to prison if they are absent from school while in seclusion, and then forced to carry on with formal education. The seclusion of brides has therefore been disturbed and may even vanish or be radically transformed in the future. The interference with this meaningful tradition for the sake of formal education shows the Ethiopian state's current preference for modernisation and development over cultural practices.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the seclusion period of brides among the Maale, a period which recently has been often interrupted by the imprisonment of brides who have dropped out of school because of their seclusion. The diversity and uniqueness of Ethiopian cultures has been acknowledged by the Ethiopian government in its constitution and cultural policy, which guarantee each group the right to live according to its traditions.[1] However, in the context of some practices, these rights collide with other interests, and, in the case of bride seclusion in Maale, they seem to be becoming neglected and even endangered at the expense of the government's efforts to modernise. Interference with the seclusion period among the Maale is meaning that not only the seclusion itself, but also several other cultural practices, above all handicrafts and musical skills, which brides usually learn or deepen during that period, are at risk.

First, I will provide an overview of Maale marriage practices and then describe the course and aims of the seclusion of brides and the knowledge that brides attain during

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* The data presented in this paper are based on field research that I carried out in the Maale villages of Gudo, Baneta and Bunka from June 2006 to May 2007, from October to December 2007, and from February to April 2008. I lived in the compounds of host-families, where I took part in the daily and ritual life of women. Apart from that I recorded interviews with female friends and informants and organised two workshops with female participants at the South Omo Research Center, outside the Maale area. During these workshops women's life histories and abstract life-cycles were discussed at a neutral location without the distractions of women's daily lives.

1 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995, 1997). See also the contribution by Susanne Epple and myself in this collection.

this period. I will then show how and since when formal education among the Maale has been implemented and how the seclusion of brides is being penalised today and banned as interfering with the policy of compulsory education.[2]

The Maale and their marriage practices

With a rapidly increasing population of about 85 000, the agro-pastoralist Maale (also Male, Malle) are the second largest of the many ethnic groups of the South Omo Zone in the far southwest of Ethiopia (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2008a:78). The centre of their territory is formed by a mountain chain surrounded by savannah. While agriculture is more important for the inhabitants of the mountainous areas, the economy in the lowlands is mainly defined by pastoralism. Since 2007 the Maale have had their own government district, the Maale Woreda, which exists in parallel to the thirteen traditional ritual and political leaders (*godda*) who are still in office, still carry out important ritual functions and are approached for advice by some inhabitants of their respective sub-districts. However, their power is decreasing. The indigenous belief of the Maale focuses on ancestor worship. Missionaries of the fundamentalist Protestant Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) arrived only as late as the 1960s from North America and Australia (Donham 1999:47–49, Thubauville 2010:50–54).

The Maale are organised patrilineally and patrilocally. The population is divided into more than thirty clans and two moieties (Jensen 1959:276–282). Polygynous marriages are still common among non-converted people, even though about fifty per cent of the population are already Protestants and therefore only tolerate monogamous marriages. For marriage the Maale observe clan exogamy and avoid outcaste craftsmen as marriage partners.[3] Apart from these rules most adolescents choose their spouses according to their own preference. Exceptions are cases of abduction, which were rather common in the past, and exchange marriage between the children of political leaders. Both of these practices are rare today, and as abduction is prosecuted (Thubauville 2010:109–120) it nowadays happens only in remote areas where there is little police presence.

Today, the ordinary age at marriage is between 16 and 18 years for women, for men slightly older. In former times it was difficult for young people to find spouses, and therefore the age at marriage was higher. In addition to following clan exogamy, the Maale married out of their own moiety, so that the circle of possible spouses was limit-

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2 Regarding formal education in Ethiopia's south, see also the contributions by Fabienne Braukman, Epple as well as by Epple and myself in this collection.

3 Potters (*manni*) and blacksmiths (*gito*) are excluded from the social and economic activities of the other inhabitants of the Maale area. They are not allowed to farm, nor are they permitted to enter the homesteads of others or share their meals. For more details about the special position of craftsmen in Ethiopia, see Freeman and Pankhurst (2003).

ed. Furthermore, opportunities to meet young people from other homesteads were rare. The settlement pattern was not as dense as today and there were no markets. Mourning ceremonies and work parties, during which dances took place, were the main events at which adolescents got together. However, they only happened irregularly (Thubauville 2010:107). Today, many of the villages in the Maale territory are densely populated and have a weekly market. These markets are definitely the most popular meeting places, but couples nowadays also often meet in school or at church.

While in former times lovers would meet for several months or even years regularly at night before they got married,[4] today most couples marry quite quickly, many even without informing their parents beforehand. My host-mother Danjite explained this change during an interview, exaggerating a little:

> When girls today go to a market and a man says 'Let us go to so-and-so's house and have a drink!', they enter, drink together and go [marry]. She doesn't take the clothes from the house [of her father]. She doesn't change the clothes which she wears. She marries on the market way. When she goes to the river, she leaves her water container at the river and marries on the river way. When she collects firewood, she leaves the firewood in the forest and marries on the firewood way. When you observe the children of today, you become scared.[5]

A marriage party usually starts with drinking and singing at the house of the bride or in the bush, the latter being the case when parents have not been informed of the wedding.[6] Friends and relatives are invited to such celebrations. The next morning, the wedding party moves towards the homestead of the groom's parents, singing as it goes. There the bride is welcomed and the party may stay for one day. The bride's guests will leave and give final instructions to the bride and her new in-laws. Finally, after the people have left, the bride will remain behind in seclusion.[7]

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4 This practice (*gochitsi*) was the favoured way of dating in former times (Thubauville 2010:112–114). It is still practised, especially in the southern parts of the Maale area. The boy visits his girlfriend at night in her homestead, creeping into her house and pulling her hand. The girl, understanding this sign of her boyfriend, follows him outside, where they place two stones to sit on and engage in long conversations. In this way they get to know each other and plan their marriage. Sexual intercourse is strongly forbidden at this time, as brides have to be virgins at marriage (Thubauville 2010:120–121).

5 Danjite (20 August 2008). This interview, as well as the others mentioned in this paper, was semi-structured and conducted by myself in Mallo Mucci, the local language. I recorded interviews with a mini-disc recorder and later transcribed and translated them with the help of my host-brother Abdela Alte Hilo.

6 If the party starts inside the bride's homestead, livestock may be slaughtered for the guests.

7 This is, of course, a very short and simplified version of marriage. For more details, see Thubauville (2010:117–123).

Course of the seclusion of the bride

The seclusion of the bride is the first *rite of passage* (van Gennep 1960) for Maale females, and it marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, or, more specifically, from girlhood to womanhood.[8] Until the day of their marriage women are considered girls (*wuduro*) and are addressed as such. On the day of marriage they become brides (*uta*) and, at the end of their seclusion, they finally become women (*lali*). The term for bride, 'uta', as well as the concept of a 'bride time', is common and very similar among many groups in southern Ethiopia like the Aari, Arbore, Bashada, Banna and Hamar (Epple and Brüderlin 2007, Epple 2010).

During the seclusion a bride is locally separated from her in-laws. She either stays behind a partition (*kol'a*) in the residential house of her parents-in-law, in a loft (*k'ubo*) inside the same house, or in a separate house inside the compound.[9] The place of seclusion symbolises her current position of being 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969), which is generated through the recent separation from her paternal family, as well as her momentary ambiguity, being neither a girl nor a woman and belonging neither to her parental family anymore nor as yet to her in-laws. A bride only leaves this place of seclusion when she needs to relieve herself. She is not allowed to see or speak to her parents-in-law or other older in-laws (Jensen 1959:294), but is allowed to meet her husband and his siblings. They visit her regularly, spend time with her and bring her water, special food and presents. The food and drinks a bride consumes are kept inside special gourds that are ornamented.[10] The bride herself is not expected to do any household chores or physical work. Instead she immerses herself in learning handicrafts such as spinning, burning ornaments on gourds, or playing lyre and in socialisation with her husband and brothers and sisters-in-law.

This period of seclusion typically lasts around three months, but this depends on several factors. As the bride is fed with special food, the duration is limited by the economic resources of the family. Moreover, the food has to be prepared by the mother-in-law, a sister-in-law or a co-wife, who must have sufficient time to spare for such a task. Ilpo, one of my female informants, explained during an interview why her period of seclusion was rather short:

> As he [my husband] married me as a second wife, I stayed as a bride only for one month. You need someone to cook for you to stay a bride for a longer period. It is because my

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8 Further rites of passage turn women into full members of their husband's lineage. See Thubauville (2010:196–205).

9 Thubauville (2010:129–132). Among the Hamar and Bashada – ethnic neighbours of the Maale – brides also stay in a loft during their seclusion (Epple and Brüderlin 2007:51, Epple 2010:183).

10 The Maale do not decorate gourds with beads or other materials. Only the drinking and eating vessels for brides and bond friends have burnt ornaments, usually lines, circles and semi-circles. The use of these special gourds indicates that brides and bond friends are alike in another respect, namely they are both taking cattle from the homestead (Thubauville 2005:106, 2010:197).

> co-wife didn't like me and she no longer cooked for me; that's why I had a short seclusion (Ilpo, 23 January 2007).

Other women must have spare time to prepare special foods for the bride and, furthermore, as long as she stays in seclusion her labour is not yet available. Thus the duration also depends on the agricultural season, as women are needed for the transportation of crops.[11] Moreover, the amount of bride-wealth to be given is discussed during the seclusion of the bride, which cannot end before these discussions are finalised and the bride-wealth has begun to be transferred.

Contrary to many other societies in Africa, the bride and the groom are already allowed to have sexual intercourse during the seclusion period.[12] In rich houses, where families can offer special food to the bride for a long time, the bride's seclusion may end with the birth of the bride's first child. As Danjite explained in an interview, the pregnancy and delivery of a bride may even be welcomed by her in-laws: 'It is our culture for brides to become pregnant. If she becomes pregnant during the bride seclusion, it is good for her. Then the family feels as if she had stayed already for a long time together with them' (Danjite, 12 May 2007).

The seclusion has both advantages and disadvantages for the bride. The Maale have a proverb that says, 'To marry again [and have a bride time again] is to a woman like being a king' ('Lammi le'itsi laliko katako ke'), which implies that women appreciate the special food and care they receive as brides. Eating and gaining weight is seen as such a central element of the seclusion period among the Maale, that in former times grooms whipped their brides playfully when they didn't eat as much as was expected of them. A special leather whip (*chalakko*) was used only for this purpose (Thubauville 2010:131). Many of my informants stressed the importance given to the visibly increased weight of the bride. Zeleketch, an elderly woman, explained that this showed that the groom's family treated the bride well:

> She [the bride] gains weight. She doesn't work, she doesn't grind grain, the water for washing her body is brought to the house for her. If she lives in a rich household, one slaughters livestock for her and feeds her with the meat. Once she has become beautiful and plump, she gets out. Then people say: 'They have treated her as an *utasenne* [bride] very well' (Zeleketch, 2 May 2007).

The increase in the bride's weight also illustrates the wealth of the family:

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11 Women transport crops on their backs in backpacks made of goat's leather or in baskets made of bamboo.

12 However, as already mentioned, women in Maale are supposed to stay virgins until the day of their marriage. If they do not, they are not considered to be 'full' (*kummutsi*) brides, and their relatives and friends are only offered a part of the usual wedding meal by the groom's family (Thubauville 2010:120–121).

> They [the brides] hide from the parents of the husband for three or four months and eat everything. People even bring water to them for washing. The reason for all of that is to show the wealth of the husband. If the bride[s] become[s] fat, the[ir] husband[s] will be well respected' (Zeleketch, 11 May 2007).

But apart from the pleasant treatment one receives as a bride, many women also recall the boredom of not being able to leave the seclusion room and their grief over their separation from their paternal family and childhood friends. One woman told me that during her seclusion she even missed grinding grain, a task that women usually complain about. She said that she ground it secretly to help out her sister-in-law when no one else was around (Thubauville 2010:131).

When the in-laws decide that the seclusion should come to an end, a feast (*uta kedenne*) is organised during which the bride is symbolically returned to the community. During this ceremony the bride is supposed to kiss the chests of all old in-laws who are present and they bless her in return. Often a sister-in-law accompanies and introduces the shy bride to the family members and neighbours of her husband. The feast is organised in the compound of the parents-in-law and only family members and friends of the groom participate. If the homestead of the bride's parents is not too far away or if she has other family members in the area, she can go with a small group of youngsters to see them on that day. The group will move around singing and dancing to inform people in the neighbourhood that the bride's seclusion has ended (Thubauville 2010:132–133), after which she starts to join the everyday activities of the husband's family. However, even after their seclusion women may still be addressed as 'brides' until they give birth.

Purposes of the bride's seclusion

The central implication of the bride's seclusion is the transition from girl to woman. Not a girl anymore nor yet a woman, a bride is in a state of in-between and is therefore seen as endangered.[13] Another meaning of the seclusion is to make a display of respect towards the bride and her natal family. By offering special food to the new family member and by sparing her drudgery, the new in-laws welcome the bride as a special and honoured guest. While the bride-wealth is actually paid in return for the bride's labour, the bride is welcomed by not doing what she actually came for: hard physical work.[14]

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13 For a detailed description of the connection between times of seclusion and ideas of danger and pollution, see Thubauville (2010:176–209), also Blystad, Rekdal, and Malleyeck (2007:331).

14 Among the Maale the main tasks of women besides preparing meals and taking care of the compound are collecting firewood, fetching water – often from faraway rivers – and carrying grain, pulses and pumpkins at harvest time. The work done by a woman is also the main reason that enters discussions about a back payment of the bride-wealth when there is an early divorce. In such cases the bride-price may be returned with the argument that the bride has not stayed with and worked long enough for

The seclusion is therefore a period of reversal. Danjite verbalised this fact as follows: 'After marriage you will always grind. But in a house that respects you, you will not be allowed to grind for four months. They put you inside a house and give you the prepared food and you eat it together with your husband only' (6 August 2006).

As is common in rites of passage, bride seclusion in Maale not only means a new social status for the bride, it also aims to create new relationships and linked obligations between people (Davies 1994:8–9). The bride is expected to return the respect she enjoys during this period to her in-laws later. Furthermore, she has to return the labour these people did for her. Once I was told by a woman that her seclusion ended when her mother-in-law told her to look after herself again by saying 'Bride! Get out! Now eat after having ground yourself! Now eat after having cooked yourself!' (Thubauville 2010:132). During her seclusion the bride is taken care of and cooked for like a child, but afterwards she is considered a full woman who is able to look after herself, as well as other family members.[15]

In addition the seclusion can be seen as a mental and emotional preparation. Brides move away from their own family to their in-laws, with whom they will live and for whom they will work in the future. The many weeks of their seclusion get them gently used to their new social environment. They have enough time to become accustomed to their closest allies and age-mates: their husbands and siblings-in-law. If they do not live too far away from their paternal family, childhood friends and relatives also visit them frequently to overcome the separation from home. Another advantage of the seclusion is of a physiological nature: brides, who are often very young, are given especially nutritious food during their seclusion. The combination of eating nutritious food and not doing bodily work lets them gain weight, which may help them to get through their first delivery in good health.

Knowledge consolidation

Providing the brides with enough time to deepen their knowledge of traditional manual and musical skills, the seclusion period among the Maale is also – as among many other cultures – a period of apprenticeship (van Gennep 1960:136). While elsewhere this time is designated to instructions and teaching (Lydall n.d.:4), brides in Maale are free to do anything that is not physically demanding. Most brides therefore spend their time learning and consolidating skills such as spinning cotton or decorating gourd bowls. Brides

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the husband, or it may be kept by her paternal family if the bride has stayed and worked hard for more than a year.

15 Among neighbouring groups, e.g. the Hamar, the treatment of the bride is even more similar to that of a small child. Mothers-in-law among the Hamar say that at the beginning of the seclusion period they give birth to a bride anew and, as with a new-born baby, they rub the brides with butter and feed them with milk and good food (Lydall 2005).

who enjoy music may improve their skills in playing lyre and composing song lyrics. They may engage in these tasks either alone or collectively with visitors to overcome loneliness and boredom.

Below I will briefly introduce three skills that, according to my interviews and observations, were the most popular amongst brides in the villages I stayed in.

Spinning

All over the Maale area people grow cotton in their gardens. Different kinds and sizes of cotton blankets and shawls are used daily by both men and women (Thubauville 2005:101). Spinning is done manually with small spindles made of a bamboo stick and a top of clay (Thubauville 2005:117) and constitutes a very time-consuming activity for which one needs a lot of exercise. In Maale both the preparation of cotton for spinning and spinning itself is done only by women. I was able to observe that girls often start learning to spin in their teens, but as adolescents they do not take the task seriously and are also not expected to spin large amounts. While it does not take long to learn the basics of spinning, it needs a lot of exercise to spin equal threads. During the seclusion period brides have an opportunity to deepen their knowledge and to bring their skills to perfection. In former times they were expected to spin enough cotton for at least one large blanket (*bulukko*) and one shawl (*natzalla*) before their seclusion ended. During seclusion women also attend their first spinning groups, when sisters-in-law or other female friends come to accompany the bride. Spinning groups (*mol'a*) aim to finish enough spindles for a certain product in one or two days.[16]

Ornamenting of gourds

The Maale use gourds to carry water and beer, to store drinks and foods and as drinking and eating vessels. Usually they leave their gourds undecorated but, as stated above, special gourds are made for brides and bond friends which are decorated with burned ornaments (Thubauville 2010:130). Women make them with small wooden sticks that must be kept glowing throughout the process. The women burn circles, semi-circles and lines into the gourds and later anoint them with butter. This needs many hours of patience.

Playing the lyre

The five-string lyre of the Maale is played by women and men, usually within the homestead to entertain guests and family who gather to drink tea or sorghum beer. Men

16 A blanket is made of forty spindles of cotton string (*shallo*), a shawl of only six spindles. While the cotton is spun by women, the weaving is done afterwards by professional weavers who are male.

usually pluck the strings of the lyre with a small wooden disc, while women pick the strings with their fingers. A song usually consists of a sequence of not more than ten notes which is repeated several times with minor variations. Depending on their interests children may start playing a simple melody at about twelve years of age, but usually adults do not have the patience to teach children and to listen to their experiments. Thus children are most of the time confined to listening to older peoples' music and may only be allowed to practice when they stay with their age-mates.[17] Most women I asked told me that they had learned to play lyre during their seclusion. Then, they explained, they had the time not only to practise playing the melodies, but also to develop their skills in composing songs, which have a fixed core, while the rest can be improvised. The skill of improvisation needs many idle hours to develop, and the seclusion period provides sufficient time for that.[18]

Formal education among the Maale

In the 1970s the first school was built in Maale by Protestant missionaries. At that time all children who enrolled had to convert to Protestantism. Only under the socialist regime did schools become more widely spread and were controlled by the government instead of Protestant missions.[19] Today Maale District has schools in all of its villages; in 2008 they were seventeen in number, all of which were primary schools. In 2009 the first secondary school opened in the Maale village of Lemo Gento. According to the Maale District education office, in 2008 33.88 per cent of all children of school age were enrolled in schools.[20]

Nowadays, most of the schools in the Maale area are government run. Teachers usually come from other areas, being assigned by the government and not having any knowledge of the local language and culture. The government schools adhere to the official Ethiopian curriculum, use Amharic as a first language of instruction and keep to standard times for tuition.[21] Only a few schools in the Maale area are today non-governmental and run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or the Catholic Church. Those alternative schools employ teachers without a certificate from a teacher training institute (TTI). Teachers are usually Maale themselves and can teach the children in

17 Children usually do not own lyres themselves. But as most families have a lyre which is mostly kept in the main house, they may be able to smuggle them out or practice with age-mates when the house is left unattended by adults.

18 For more details on women's songs, see Thubauville (2010:141–142).

19 See Donham (1997:339), Lydall (2010:323), Tekeste (2011:20–22).

20 I received these figures in March 2008 from Akna Akatta, who was then Chief Administrator of the capacity building office in Maale District.

21 In other areas of Ethiopia local languages have been broadly introduced as languages of instruction since the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991 (Poluha 2004:32).

their local language. Furthermore, many of the alternative schools have shorter instruction times and thus enable students to help their parents in their agricultural or pastoral activities for most of the day (Thubauville 2010:47).

Whether children are sent to school or not depends on various factors. First of all it is easier to send a child to a nearby school, as it then needs no additional time to walk there and can easier be supplied with food and water. Furthermore, children of school-going age are needed on the farms and to tend their parents' cattle.[22] Luckily, in Maale the main harvest in July and August coincides with the school vacations so that labour for that harvest is secured even within families that send most of their children to school. But there are, of course, many tasks such as herding or guarding fields for which children are needed throughout the year.

The situation for girls concerning formal education is a peculiar one. As the Maale are patrilocal, girls will move to their husbands once they marry. Currently the main motive for parents in sending their children to school is the hope that they may find well-paid government jobs afterwards. While boys are expected to stay with their parents or at least support them once they have grown up, girls move away and are thought to be mainly of benefit to their in-laws. Furthermore, as the Maale marry exogamously and make bride-wealth payments, they have an interest in letting their girls appear as attractive as possible for potential husbands. Being skilful in traditional women's tasks is still seen as very useful in this rural community, as most families still live from subsistence farming and herding. Abilities such as reading and writing are not yet considered necessary for women. As a result, until recently far more boys than girls were sent to school. If girls are sent, according to my observations this is not always until the age of six or seven years, and more often when they are already far into their teens. The aim of school enrolment is thus mostly not to complete primary or secondary education, but to attend until one has learnt enough to read and write rudimentary Amharic.

Since 2005 the World Food Program has been trying to increase the enrolment of female students by distributing vegetable oil to families who send their daughters to school on a regular basis in southern Maale.[23] Since vegetable oil is a luxury in the region, the free offer persuaded many families to send their girls to school. As a consequence, since 2007 the enrolment rate for girls has been even higher than that for boys.[24]

Generally, primary education is today free and compulsory in Ethiopia, i.e. people must send their children to school but do not have to pay for it. As universal primary

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22 Compare the contribution by Epple in this collection. Tekeste Negash also mentions the high student-teacher ratio as a demotivating factor for students (2011:28–29). In my conversations with pupils and their parents, however, this problem was never addressed directly.

23 In 2009 the oil was distributed in the villages of Baneta, Koybe, Balla and Boshkoro, as well as in parts of Gongode. See also the contribution by Epple in this collection in which she mentions a similar program among the neighbouring Bashada.

24 Thubauville (2010:48). However, according to the countrywide statistic, the enrolment rate for girls in primary schools had increased between 1997/1998 and 2007/2008, while the enrolment rate for girls in secondary schools had decreased (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2008b:6).

education as well as gender parity in both primary and secondary education are believed to be closely linked with social development and poverty reduction (World Bank 2004:xxviii), they have been formalised as aims in the 2000 United Nations Millennium Development Goals.[25] However, even though school enrolment rates have more than tripled under the current government from a countrywide figure in primary schools in 1990/1991 of 2 871 325 to 9 343 428 in 2003/2004 (World Bank 2004:26), the prospects of Ethiopia being able to meet its aims until 2015 are low.

Formal education in Ethiopia currently faces several challenges. Due to budget restrictions in the education sector, the student-teacher ratio has increased immensely and is among the highest worldwide (Tekeste 2011:29). But it is not only teachers, but also textbooks and other teaching materials that are in short supply, while teaching methods are reminiscent of those used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which are based primarily on hierarchy and memorisation.[26] Despite these problems, the Ethiopian state continues to offer as broad a schooling as possible in trying to meet the Millennium Development Goals and because of global pressure, as well as the demands of its growing economy for educated workers.[27]

Current transformations

To achieve gender equality in education, the government is enforcing girls' regular attendance at school. Besides incentives such as the gifts of oil mentioned above, repressive measures have been resorted to. For example, for the past few years the Federal Police have been imprisoning brides who attend school before their marriage and are suddenly staying away from school during their seclusion. I was told of many imprisonments of brides in recent years. Especially Danjite kept me up-to-date when she heard of new incidents. When I arrived back in Maale after many months abroad, she told me of two current cases:

> In Gudo [a village to the north of Maale] they [the police] have recently arrested two brides. One was in Grade 3, one in Grade 2. They had married and dropped out of school. After they had been arrested their husbands and their fathers-in-law came [to the police station] and paid 22 Ethiopian Birr.[28] Then they were released. The police said they [the

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25 World Bank (2004:2). See also the contribution by Epple and myself in this collection.

26 Poluha (2004). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of few pre-colonial Christian churches in Africa. It traces its origin back to the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana in about 330 A.D. Until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974, Orthodox Christianity was Ethiopia's state religion (Zanetti 2003:717–728).

27 For details of the economic changes and future plans of the Ethiopian state, see the contribution by Epple and myself in this collection.

28 In March 2008, 15 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) were approximately equivalent to 1 euro.

> men] should let them attend school. Now both of them go to school again (Danjite, 28 March 2008).

In March 2008, I myself witnessed the imprisonment of a bride in my neighbourhood in Gudo. The in-laws of this bride were quite 'progressive' people, as they lived in a house directly at the village's busy market place, and the father-in-law had been teaching adult literacy classes at the Protestant Church in the village. However, the family found it important to keep their daughter-in-law in seclusion for some time after the wedding and thereby demonstrate their respect for her. One evening, only few days after I had visited the bride in her seclusion room, her father-in-law came and asked my host-father to lend him the bamboo mat that I had brought with me from town.[29] He said that his daughter-in-law had just been arrested by the police after her teacher had reported her as having been absent from school for several days. The bride had to stay at the police station overnight, and her in-laws would have to pay a fine the next day. Then they were allowed to take her home under the condition that she would attend school again (Thubauville 2010:134). The same bride became pregnant shortly afterwards, so that after attending school for a few months, she finally dropped out again when she was close to delivery. During my last stay in Gudo in January 2011, she had become a mother for the second time.

My host-mother Danjite told me, that after I had left the village in 2009, the government had become stricter regarding bride school drop-outs and were even following brides who had married into another village. According to her, two brides who had come from Boshkoro, a neighbouring village three hours' walk from Gudo, were forced to stop their seclusion and return to their home village to sit their exams, and only then were allowed to move to their husbands under the condition that they directly enrolled in school at their new place of residence (Thubauville 2011).

Regarding the central purpose of the seclusion of brides, the imprisonment of a bride is a complete reversal: instead of being transformed from childhood to adulthood in a gentle and respectful manner, the interruption of the ritual means that the bride is marched off by the police and squeezed into a shabby cell together with several other women, whom she does not know and who may have been imprisoned because of violent felonies. Her husband and his siblings as well as her childhood friends, who would usually keep her company, are not allowed in the police station. Once she has been brought back to her new home, she has to attend school regularly.[30] The few hours a day that she is able to spend in seclusion afterwards trivialise the important transition

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29 As such mats are not produced locally, it is hard to find a house that has a spare mat.

30 The handling of brides after they have been released from prison differs from village to village: in some villages (like Baneta) they are not forced to attend school again so that the transfer money paid at the prison simultaneously frees them from further duties (Zeleketch, 29 March 2008). In other villages (like Gudo) they have to go to school after they leave prison.

from girlhood to womanhood and do not leave sufficient time for the other aims of the seclusion period, such as learning specific skills.

Apart from the law of compulsory education there seems to be no other reason to bring brides forcibly back to school. Bride seclusion is not on the list of so-called harmful traditional practices (HTP) of the Maale District, although it is on the list of other districts.[31] In Maale District, this list only denounces not sending girls to school in general. The penalisation of brides who drop out of school can therefore only be interpreted as the protection of schoolchildren by the government. Once a girl and her parents have decided that she should attend school, the government seems to want to make sure that she is able to finish primary education. This control may be in the interests of some girls, who would like to continue their education despite their parents' reluctance, but it is above all in the interests of the government, which does not have the means to enforce compulsory education fully and in this way at least makes sure that the seclusion of brides is no longer a cause of additional dropping out. Unlike brides, young mothers who quit school as well as girls who never enrol in school at all are not penalised. The exclusive punishment of brides thus does not represent a consistent implementation of compulsory education.[32]

Prospects

As I explained above, the seclusion of brides is a very important ritual of transition that has several aims ranging from the respectful incorporation of the bride into the new family and the creation of relationships and mutual obligations between new relatives to the training of traditional handicrafts and music. Furthermore, this period prepares brides emotionally and mentally for their coming role as a wife and mother. This important traditional form of education, which does not harm the bride but acts mainly to her benefit, is increasingly being disrupted by the imprisonment of brides and their subsequent return to formal education. Therefore, I argue that a unique and traditional way

31 Regarding policies towards so-called harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia, see also the contributions by Shauna LaTosky and Kate Nialla Fayers-Kerr in this collection. In 2009, the Women's Affairs Office of the South Omo Zone listed the following customs as harmful traditional practices in Maale District: polygyny, abduction, early marriage, rape, abortion by massage, exclusion of women from inheritance, exaggerated mourning celebrations, ban on women fetching water after childbirth, post-partum seclusion of women, homicide, banning people who have died with swollen stomachs from the usual burial sites, outcasting of blacksmiths, outcasting of potters, drunkenness, infanticide (*duuni*), burials three days after a death has occurred, tabooing of the fields of those who have died childless, not sending girls to school, and exclusion of women from sawing (Women's Affairs Office of the South Omo Zone 2009).

32 Still today, the birth of a child is often only registered by local health professionals. Furthermore most citizens of Ethiopia's south are not officially registered, nor do they have identity cards. Therefore, complete implementation of the law of compulsory education is just not possible, as is apparent from the data on school enrolment rates mentioned above.

of instruction is being endangered for the sake of a uniform and modern formal education. As more and more girls attend school, it is foreseeable that the seclusion of brides in Maale will either disappear or have to be adjusted to the school curriculum. This growing disruption of an important rite of passage and a period involving the transfer of traditions is only one example of the ambiguous ways the Ethiopian government deals with cultural practices.[33] In my view, the Ethiopian government gives no consideration to the loss of traditional practices or to the possibility of reconciling tradition and development, but clearly privileges modernisation, in this case formal education. The loss of the seclusion of brides will imply for the Maale the loss of certain local and social skills, and of ethical values, which lie at the core of Maale culture and should rather be protected in accordance with Ethiopian cultural policy.

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33 For further examples, see the contribution by Epple and myself in this collection.

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