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Naming a Boraana

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1. The Boraana

The present article is an attempt to tentatively discuss certain aspects relating Boran ideas about names to their conceptions of human ontology, especially of how time influences human life.[1] Their basic idea seems to be that since human personality reflects such influences, the name given to a person should reflect the conditions of his or her birth. As I will try to illustrate, this idea is elaborated to different degrees depending on whether we are talking about everyday naming practice or the naming of children destined to become ritually central personalities. Furthermore, I will indicate the ideological importance of naming, name-giving and linguistic acts as male acts of social creativity within Boran society.

The Boraana are part of the Oromo, who comprise more than a third of the total population of Ethiopia. They are to be found both in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Some Oromo are also found in Somalia and Sudan as farmers, nomads and fugitives. The Boraana heartland lies in Ethiopia, between the three towns of Moyale, Arero and Tertelle. This is the area in which their traditions have been maintained most strongly, and which they regard as their cultural centre. However, many Boraana now live in Kenya, some at Marsabit and others at Waso. In contrast to many of the Ethiopian Oromo who are cultivators, the Boraana are by tradition herdspeople, rearing cattle and small stock. A few decades ago, impoverishment caused many of them to take up irrigated agriculture, cultivating maize, vegetables and fruits. Many ethnic groups in these parts of Africa have over the centuries drifted between an emphasis on cultivation or pastoralism, and it is perhaps reasonable to project back that some such changes have happened before. Boraana have a traditional monotheistic religion, sometimes partly or fully substituted for by Christianity (at Marsabit and in southern Ethiopia) or Islam (at Waso in Kenya). Much of the symbolic code, language and customs are known to all Oromo, although their own creativity, together with interactions with other groups and variations in subsistence and political experience, has allowed room for differences.

[1] The following paper is based on (a) fieldwork undertaken by the author with the Boraana of Waso in 1973–4 and 1978, (b) literature reviews and (c) interviews carried out around 1990 by Gemetchu Megerssa with Boran elders in Nairobi, and transcribed from the Oromo language.

2. In the flow of creation

Boran rituals, myths, songs and poetry put a great emphasis on fertility, growth and continuity. In a pastoral society, these are always precarious values. Life flows from Divinity, *Waqa*, through the rain that impregnates the soil and fills up the wells. It flows through the sprouting grass and the mineral water that nourish the cattle, filling their bellies with calves and their udders with milk. If the chain is broken, even for a short time, the consequences are far-reaching. Human access to food is vulnerable to disturbances in the reproduction of animals. In a longer perspective, the overall survival of Boran society and culture depends on the survival and rebirth of herds, but also on access to herding labour. Having many animals and many children is a concrete insurance policy for continuity and ongoing well-being. In this context, virility can be defined as being able to ensure these processes. Mature virility, expected from a married elder, is, however, also a matter of being able to handle language in a way that creates consensus and peace, the ultimate condition for creativity and prosperity. Oratory skills are highly valued, and language is seen as an important form of creativity. Language upholds the necessary balance between human interests, and maintains a fruitful relation between God and humanity, which promotes natural conditions favourable to pastoralism.

Local specialists in traditional Boraana history and rituals—the ethno-intellectuals as it were—describe the traditional cosmology of the Oromo in terms of underlying abstract principles manifesting themselves in objective reality. Their way of thinking could be described as built around a "quasi-platonic" (my phrasing) division between the real world and the world of ideas or principles. This description should be seen as a second-degree analytical formalization of the intellectual models presented by the society's thinkers when asked to elaborate on the concept of *ayaana*, rather than what just any member of the society would be able to formulate. Examples of such intellectuals are for example a traditional law-giver or a specialist in Boran astronomy: people who specialize in trading ideas. Oratory skill is highly valued, and such elaborations are often well-structured: the very way rhetorical discourse is organized by extending applications from general principles may be one of the sources for the structure of the model itself. Everyday thinking is less elaborate and explicit, yet there are recurrent metaphorical patterns both in rituals and in daily speech which may justify the present attempt to make sense of Oromo concepts generally and their underlying logic.

In the Boran thinker's conceptualization of the world, everything that exists in the material world, as well as in the form of abstract values, has its correspondence in the form of an immaterial principle *ayaana*, which is decisive to the character and fate of that entity. Some examples: A person is born with a

predisposed personality and a particular life destiny, decided by his *ayaana*. A social group, such as a lineage, is thought to have its own *ayaana* which defines its demographic and material success. A day in the calendar has its particular character due to the influence of a particular *ayaana*: things beginning on that day—whether personalities, activities or periods—will be stamped by the influence of that *ayaana*. All these "essences" or "principles" can be seen as fractional parts of Divinity. Divinity is the universal sum of all principles, but at the same time conceived of as a personalized, if distant, Sky-Divinity.

A particular *ayaana*, being an immaterial principle, can be materialized in different real entities. An ancestor's *ayaana* can return in a descendant's personality and fate. In particular, the general fate of the Oromo people is seen to be embodied in their leaders, and returns from generation to generation according to an intricate cyclical way of time reckoning which links up with the *gadaa* system, which was presumably once the pre-eminent ritual and political institution of the Oromo. This system has survived to differing degrees in the various Oromo areas, but perhaps to a particularly great extent among the Boraana with which this paper is mainly concerned.

3. The *gadaa* system: temporal collectivities

Many traditional political systems in East Africa were based on age-sets. All men born during a certain period passed together through fixed life stages defining their rights, duties and tasks within the system. The *gadaa* system of the Oromo is a variety of this system, but it is not exactly based on the timing of birth. All Boraana belong to one of five categories of lineages, *gogessa*, here referred to as generation streams, and within their particular stream to one particular generation class. A generation class is constituted by those who are sons of another particular generation class. Tribal "power" circulates between these streams, returning to the first stream after five periods of 8 years' duration. Ritual and legal power thus comes back to the sons of the members of the first group 40 years after their reign. The simplest way of understanding this is to see it as a system of fictive age, whereby all sons are given the same age from a ritual point of view and pass through a common life cycle at the same pace. Besides being the major time regulator in olden times for Oromo rituals and intertribal warfare, the record of past *gadaa* reigns provided a skeleton chronology for oral history. Oral history is kept relevant by the fact that fate is considered cyclical. The past and the present are continuously re-evaluated in relation to each other.

The mismatch between actual biological age and ritual age leads to a situation in which those men who are the first-born in each ritual category fit the system better: younger sons and their descendants seem to be gradually peripheralized. The first-born sons are seen as embodying the essence of being true

Boraana, close to God, close to the sources of fertility and blessing. Boranness is therefore a value which extends from a core to a periphery, gradually waning away. By adhering to the norms implied by living at tribal centres on the Kenyan-Ethiopian border and by following the proper rules of the *gadaa* system, these Boraana are a source or channel of blessing and fertility which also radiates out to the social, spatial and demographic periphery. We may describe this thought paradigm, which appears to run through the Boran conceptual world, in terms of centre and periphery, "essence and dilution" or a gradated "purity".

The Boran God is neither a Creator who has finished his work nor a deliverer of sanctions: rather, he is a source of a continuous flow of life, punitive mainly through his withdrawal (Bartels 1983). He has to be close to humans, in creative communion with them, in order for human life to be bountiful. The implication would be that when he is angered, the process of continuous creation slows down.

In Boran views, this flow of life and blessing cannot be seen as different from the process whereby Divinity creates order by structuring the world, first of all into dual categories by creating distinctions between them, and then making his imprint on the world by imposing other typical patterns. The basic core of sets of oppositions contains themes which are well-known from many cultures. Simplifying it in the extreme, there is a linking of up with dominance, with the right (in both senses), with the north, with structure, reason, peace, coolness and maleness; down is linked with the south, with subordination, with the left, with chaos, with women, with male as well as female passion, with dangerous heat. Another way of structuring the world can be summarized by the number 5, and represents basic human conditions: the structure of human bodies as well as the spatial configuration of the world they live in. The patterns which are most relevant to the present theme of name-giving, however, are temporal. They express themselves in sets of seven eight-year periods of fate (*maqabassa*) and in the astrological calendar of 27 recurrent days in a month (*ayaana*). God's creative act is one of continuously imposing a structure of temporally regulated fates. The Boran calendar, like the Javanese calendars that Geertz (1973) writes about, is concerned with marking out "different qualities of time". For any specific period, however, that which comes first in the period is more securely linked to its characteristic qualities. The day which begins a month, a year or a *maqabassa* will be decisive to it. Seniority in terms of time also makes the first-born son the best representative of his father, the first-married wife pre-eminent and so on.

Divinity can be seen as the active force which supersedes these structures. God is black, *guraacha*, an expression that essentially summarizes notions of uninterferedness, originality, lack of distinction and not-yet-realized potentiality. "Everything flows out of this undifferentiated state in the form of ayaana"

(Megerssa 1990, p.19). God is at the same time creating these contrasts, containing them and transcending them, and thereby creating something new out of them.

4. Fractions of Divinity

Let us return to the concept of cosmological principles. As stated above, these are immaterial in themselves, but have material manifestations in this world. They can be thought of as fractions of Divinity: fractions which arise from the continuous Creation by which God expresses himself and imposes structure on the world. One of their most important aspects is that they are temporally structured, and this is seen in the use of the concept to refer to the calendrical days. Furthermore, they represent the basic essences of phenomena as intended by God, being both their cause and expressing themselves through their characteristics and ensuing consequences. It is to this closeness to God's ultimate intention that the Boran concept of truth, *duuga*, refers.

In accordance with what has been said above, a person's personality, his fate and the lasting results of his work are all expressions of the same principle. The concept of *ayaana* is very close to that of *gar*, which relates to the *ayaana* of a particular person or being as he is born. In this way of thinking, personalities are embodiments of abstract ideas, which can also express themselves as the essence of material things. Although a person, man or woman, is the material embodiment of an abstract principle, a person is also his or her physical being. The Boraana are quite explicit in that the physical being only lives once. The conscious, physical life is referred to as *lubbu*. This concept is closely associated with the neck. When you slaughter an animal and cut its eight veins, it is the *lubbu* that is cut. Food, air and water are necessary for *lubbu*, but *ayaana* is a much more abstract concept, independent of mundane necessities. It is a mystery which only the Creator himself is thought to be able to understand. The *ayaana*, as understood by the Boran philosopher, is not tied to a particular person for the limit of his or her physical existence. It precedes him and is his ultimate cause, but is also expressed in him and in the results of his actions. It is there in his children, but also in the results of his deeds, in the wealth and knowledge that he leaves behind him. It is abstract, but it does have a real existence independent of the person, and it can be brought to have an impact on physical realities.

As every individual has its own *ayaana*, so every social category also has its unique *ayaana*, including each of the *gadaa* streams and each generation unit within them. *Abba* means 'father' in Oromo language, but also 'owner' and 'leader'. We may think of the *abba* as a person who embodies a hierarchy of fractions, whether this is a hierarchy of kinship units, of land or livestock property. The same *ayaana* that is linked to the *abba* also characterizes the

social unit or set of property or knowledge that he is responsible for. Therefore, as a son resembles his father, the *ayaana* of a particular generation class resembles the personal *ayaana* of their leader, the *abba gadaa*. The fate of the leader as a person is irrevocably linked to the fate of his group.

In principle, the fate of direct ancestors of generation groups is thought to recur any time the same generation stream comes to power. However, it is obvious that all new periods do not live up to the fears or expectations with which they were linked before they actually came about. Such deviations from expectations are blamed on the failures of the community at large and particularly the ruling *gadaa* class to abide properly by custom. In this context, the *ayaana* of the *gadaa* may be seen as remaining consistent, while the *ayaana* of the leader varies and creates exceptional conditions. The *abba* has a responsibility for the proliferation and fecundity of the unit that he is superordinate to. He is supposed to use his blessings and his curses for this purpose. He can only do this if his own capacity as it were encompasses those of his subordinates, not only in terms of property rights but also in terms of abstract values, and this is in short what the whole structure of hierarchy and sacrality and closeness to God in Boran thought is all about.

5. Recurring fate

The concepts of descent, descent-based categories and inheritable fates do not by themselves explain enough about collective characteristics, however. Interwoven with the system of five streams of eight-year generation classes we find a system of seven different categories of fate (*maqabassa*): *mogisa*, *mahul*, *fullasa*, *mardida*, *darara*, *libasa*, and *sabaka* (Knutsson 1967, p. 162). These are also eight-year periods regulating the fate of the ruling generation class and thereby the whole Boraana people. The idea of a temporal division into named periods characterized by particular fates occurs in early literature on the Ethiopian Oromo and their age or generation classes. As Huntingford (1955, p. 41) notes, some of the names registered by d'Abbadie (1880) in 1846 and de Salviac in 1901 were of quite some time-depth, appearing already in the statements of Bahrey (1593). Huntingford (op. cit., p. 43) mentions that some names were "kept in reserve", that is, they were remembered by the elders if ritual or other reasons demanded that names be changed. D'Abbadie is explicit on the matter of fate being linked to the rule of the group (quoted by Huntingford loc. cit.), stating that each incoming generation class rules according to its inclination, and that the five streams represent "natural governments", i.e. those of

man	running water	sheep	lion	vulture
reason	progress	quietude	force	war

The generation classes were thus named after symbols embodying the principles that were supposed to rule during their era. *Dulo*, as an example, were inclined to war, since their regime was governed by the vulture.

The *maqabassa* fate relating to a particular *gadaa* collective to which the Boraana child belonged was ascribed by a certain way of rotating names between the various *gadaa* streams. However, the name also had to be proclaimed officially. Together with the offering of an individual name to the child and the appointment of particular cattle (who are also carriers of collective identity), this was the important element of the traditional name-giving ceremony.

6. Name-giving rituals

When Boraana are interviewed about the traditional customs of Boran name-giving, they are likely to describe how a name-giving feast (*jilla*) is held for those who are born to fit the idealized *gadaa* life cycle from a temporal point of view: that is, the first children who are born into a category, so that their ritual age fits their biological age. In practice, however, there seems to have existed a scale of different varieties of name-giving, gradated in ritual prestige according to the centrality or peripherality of the participants to the *gadaa* system. Ideologically, this can also be seen as a decreasing scale of communal interest on the scale of the "tribe" as a whole:

a) The *gubbisa* of the first-born *daballe* and their *daballe* brothers within the *gadaa* ritual cycle.
b) The *gubbisa* of other first-born sons, not born appropriate to the *gadaa* cycle.
c) The *moggasa* of junior sons and daughters.
d) The *waqalal* ('God's attention') of peripheral, Muslim boys.

At the centre, closest to the divine sources of blessing and fertility, we find the name-giving ceremony of the *daballe*. The ceremonies of the young *daballe*, the slightly older set called *gamme* and those holy elders who are to retire from the ritual cycle all come at the same time in the Boran ritual cycle and are performed on the same day. The *daballe* are boys born to members of the ruling *gadaa* class. They are the first children that class were allowed to keep. Children born earlier used to be "thrown out", i.e. left in the forest, at least nominally to die or to be picked up by the Wata, the hunting-gathering caste. Children found by the Wata in this way were given particular names, such as, for a girl, *Harganne* ('picked up from below') or, for a boy, *Alio* ('coming from the outside'). The *daballe* were also brought up by hunters, but later taken back into the Boran community. They made up a holy category, able to convey fertility and blessing, but dressed drably in order not to attract human envy or

the attention of evil forces. They are referred to as "girls", and had a feminine hairstyle. Their name-giving took place when these girlish boys were to pass into the Gamme grade. Legesse (1973, p. 55) describes an event when 80 families took part: other members of the *gadaa* class were supposed to be symbolically represented by twigs deposited at a shrine.

Name-giving has been described for northern Kenya by a couple of British colonial sources. In good time before the expected birth, the father prepared his *dannisa* stick and bought tobacco, coffee beans and salt to have handy for the celebration (Brown 1944). When the birth had been announced, he took his ceremonial whip and the anointed stick and carried it with him until the umbilical cord had been cut off with a knife against the upper side of the sole of his sandal, on the fourth day after the birth. According to Reece (1963, p. 193), the father of a son wears an "embroidered bandoleer of shells and beads and little gourd bells. He wanders off into all the byways round his village, wreathed in smiles, looking for people to come and share his joy." The conventional response to the announcement of a girl would be: "That too is a child." Neighbours arrived and sang, danced and ululated for a number of days if it was a boy, or for an evening if a girl, and shared the sacrificial sheep. The Sakuye and Gabbra, who are camel-rearing neighbours, defined as junior clients by the Boraana if not necessarily by themselves, did not have a big name-giving feast (*jilla*), and for them the procedure just described was the main celebration.

The Boran child, however, could traditionally look forward to a big name-giving feast, either a *gubbisa* or a *moggasa*. The *gubbisa* ceremony was for a first-born child and would usually take place in the month of *Chamssaa*, on the day of *Addullaa* which was auspicious for such things. A specialist was consulted about the auspiciousness of the day of birth and the day of name-giving for the particular child, to confirm that no changes had to be made in order to avoid any undesirable cyclical fate. The ceremony was planned a year ahead of time. The father was expected to travel widely, preferably on horseback, to invite relatives and friends. Celebrations immediately following the birth, by contrast, would naturally only recruit from close neighbours. As the days of the name-giving ceremony approached, people would begin to arrive from all directions. Every family that came would bring sour milk, the amount depending on the distance of their relationship as well as the distance of their journey. These arrivals would, together with neighbours, take part in building a ceremonial hut, akin to the ceremonial hut of the Boran priest king and big enough to accommodate enough people. The father had selected an officiant called the *qadadu* from the retiring generation class. This person had to make sure that there was a hole in the roof through which the people and the sky could remain in contact during the ceremony (Baxter 1954). A member of the hunting caste had to light the first fire of the ceremonial, a celebration of his caste's relationship to the first Boran priest king. According to Brown (op. cit.), the incoming guests were required to pass the corral belonging to the father, and were offered tobacco and coffee beans on their arrival in the ceremonial hut. Oxen were slaughtered. Men went around serving the guests milk. In contrast to a secular hut, which is ultimately under female control, a ceremonial hut is male territory. A woman cannot go there alone, but must be led by a male person, however young. She cannot enter it unless a male enters before her. Women therefore sang on the outside, and during a large part of the ceremony they were in the corral. The Boran corral is on the whole, under normal circumstances, a male province—and an embodiment of male property—although it is appropriate for women to spend time there, particularly during milking. In older times weddings were not occasions for singing and dancing (as they are nowadays). Name-giving was the most important ceremony for that kind of rejoicing. Women, old men, warriors etc. took part.

The building of the ceremonial hut would take three to four days. On the last day, the central pillar of the hut would be removed. A certain type of stick (*qottii*) was cut and brought inside. Other sticks of the same kind would be placed on both sides of the door. In the evening, a ritual milking known as *hargugaa* was performed. Eight coffee beans were fried by the mother. To the Boraana, coffee beans are a sacrament of peace and fecundity. As the coffee beans were frying, a particular container was filled to the brim with the ritual milk in which the beans would be placed. First the father took a sip, then the mother. The container would go around until everybody had taken the ritual sip.

The father would shave off the child's tuft of hair, wetting it with a mixture of water and milk (*arreera*), an important substance frequently used in Boran ritual. A contemporary Boran elder gives the following description of the event:

> Late that evening after the cows are milked and everybody is free to give the ceremony full attention the fathers will be asked about what name each wants to give to his son. Let us say that a man called *Dabassa* stands there to announce the name of his son. Everybody is waiting. All the women are longing to hear the name to start their songs and dance in the name. Then the father announces the name—for example *Libaan*—and another elder repeats this very loudly. In the *gubbisa* ceremony of the *daballe* children who embody the ideal character of the *gadaa* group by being the first and most original members of the group, this official proclamation has to be done by the *abba gadaa* himself. For other first-born sons, who similarly represent their father and his lineage best by being first and most original, this function is taken over by lesser elders. All the men will say, "Say and say it again Libaan Dabassa—may God make you grow and your father live through you." They would pronounce this together, each of the seven ritual leaders repeating it three times followed by the people. After this was over the women began singing the *maqabassa* songs relating to the cyclical fates. They come out with their ceremonial sticks (*siiqqe*) and ornamental tails (*saqaa*) and form a circle. One of the elders asks the mothers which *maqabassa* the children belong to and the mothers of the children proclaim the name of that *maqabassa*.

This proclamation is known as "to open the mouth". A group of seven married men out of the audience will then go around in a circle and sing a song called "Ilme Hoyo". For Libaan, the son of Dabassa, and belonging to the *maqabassa* of *Saabaqoo*, the song would for example run:

The sons of *Hoyo*,
the sons of *Hoyo*,
the sons of *Sabaaqa Dullaa*,
oh you sons of *Hoyo*,
the *Sabaqqoo* is connected to the drinking cup (*dulo*),
oh you sons of *Hoyo*.
The son is connected to the father,
oh you sons of *Hoyo*.
He is named *Liiban*,
oh you sons of *Hoyo*.
Liiban is connected to *Dabassa*,
oh you sons of *Hoyo*.
Dabassa is connected to *Guyo*,
oh you sons of *Hoyo*.
Guyo is connected to *Saffara*,

etc., each time connecting the mentioned name to a paternal ancestor one step further back.

Another song is "I will anoint you" (*si muuda*), which invokes names of ancient Boran forefathers in order to get their blessing and, by implication, to confirm the Boran identity of the child. This song again is sung by men. The song refers to *Alio*, 'the one of the bush, of the outside, of the wilderness', one of the names associated with the idea of the first Boran ancestor:

1) O, *Alio*,	'O, *Alio*,
Ali Gur'aacha,	*Ali* the Black,
Gur'aacha Yaa'yaa,	the Black Fundament,
Yaa'yaa Munyo,	the Fundament of Munyo,
diida munyuqt'e.	you crawled outside.
2) Karra churrute	Crawling through the gate
daraara marraa	the flowering of our grass
Waaqi sifesse.	was blessed by Divinity.
Daraara ilman Waaqi,	God blessed our offspring,
guddise.	may they grow.
Diida munyu,	They crawl in the open field,
si muuda!	hail to thee!
Moona churruqte,	They crawl in the corral,
si muuda!	hail to thee!
Darraara d'edde,	Grazing in the sprouting,
si muuda!	hail to thee!
Darraara marraa,	The sprouting grass,
si muuda!	hail to thee!

Waaqui sifesse,	God made it suitable,
si muuda!	hail to thee!
Darraara ilmaa,	The sprouting sons,
si muuda!	hail to thee!'

People will continue singing throughout the night, men in the house and women in the corral.

Different sources all refer to sets of "seven elders" in the ceremony and it is not entirely clear whether there are normally two or three such sets or whether there are local variations. One is referred to as "the seven people of *jilla*", one consists of the seven dancing men and one group is mentioned as seven men who coordinate the ceremony. The most important group is the first one, who during the whole of the continuous ceremony sit in the back room (*boorroo*) of the ceremonial hut. Baxter (op. cit., p. 216) states that these people are chosen by the father from both the Boran moieties. The seven ceremonial elders are not allowed to sleep in the night or move from the back room, where through the hole in the roof they are connected with the stars, of which they seem to be conceptually linked to the constellation *torban*, that is, Ursa Major, permanently seen, and in that sense always watchful. They have a complete set of ritual equipment. All seven bear the checked turban, a sign of sacred authority. They carry a ceremonial stick and whip in their hands and each one has his own ceremonial milk container filled with milk, apart from the normal container they have like any other participant in the celebration.

The task of the seven is to set out together to "scout for grazing" (*abbuuru*) in the early morning. Equipped with their whips, they enter the cattle corral and take a look at the ox. (Brown notes here that the men point at their ox with their sticks, and that they repeatedly call out "Dambari!", meaning that the animal should be quiet even though it was fiery before.) Then they return to the ceremonial hut, repeatedly stating on their way back that "The grazing scouts have seen green pasture". After this ceremony they stay indoors until all the other people are awake and the ox can be killed. It is important that the ox falls to its right. Then the ox is ceremonially anointed and butchered. Brown states that the chest, rump and foreleg are thrown on to the roof of the ceremonial hut, and that one complete leg is hung on its central pole. The leg is not eaten but cut up to be shared out and hung on the milk containers that the guests brought milk in. A certain amount of meat is placed in every container: the containers should not go back empty. The pieces thrown on to the roof are intended for the hunters who may pick them up in the night (Reece 1963, p. 193). The neck and the stomach are covered up by the skin in the corral and left there until the afternoon.

The next step, still according to Brown, involves the father with his ceremonial stick and whip and the mother with her child going into the corral, at precisely the time the cattle are due to leave. It is now time to point out the

"navel string animal" (*handuura*). This custom has been described from other Oromo peoples as well. Hultin (1990, p. 156) writes about the Macha:

> at the birth or name-giving of her child, when he cuts the biological tie of the baby to its mother and replaces it with a corresponding ritual tie of patrifiliation—he gives the child an animal which is called ... "umbilical cord". People say: "The cattle pen is like your mother's womb"... Yet, this "womb" is an attribute of your father and you are tied to it by your *hand'uuraa*, your "umbilical cord".

In traditional Boran custom, not just one, but five cattle should be given to the child. One, however, preferably a young cow that has already proved fertile by producing one calf, is appointed as "navel string". The navel string, when it falls off the child after birth, is attached to this cow, but she is not formally presented to the child until the name-giving ceremony. In addition, the child may receive 30 to 50 head of cattle as a gift from close relatives at this ceremony. The "navel string" stock, however, must come from the herd of the proper pater (never the genitor), even if he is dead and some male agnate is standing in for him (Baxter 1954, p. 216). For a grown man, the herd represents a kind of "biography on hoofs" (Dahl 1979, pp. 88–111), the composition of which reflects his achievements and life events. The cattle that he was given with his name correspondingly represent the core of his future social identity. At the Muslim name-giving ceremony, *waqalal*, the child is similarly given livestock: two cows, one with a heifer calf and one with a bull calf (ibid., p. 93).

The hair that has been shaved from the child and the navel string which Brown says has been kept in the mother's clothing are thrown into the corral when the *handuura* animal is pointed out. According to Baxter (1954), these items are thrown to the back of the selected animal. Reece (op. cit., p. 194) claims them to be mixed with water for anointing the animals. The father touches the cow with his ceremonial stick as a symbolic gesture of his blessing and offer of the cow to his son. The three then follow the herd for about half a mile according to Brown, and look for green grass to bring back to the appointed animals. Four sticks of Grewia wood are stuck in the roof of the ceremonial hut. While the male guests return to the ceremonial hut to eat and sing, women go on dancing in the corral. The seven ceremonial elders return and turn over the skin of the ox with their sticks, and empty out the intestines for "all the old spinsters" (Brown 1944) or "the Wata women" (Brayne Nichols 1944) to eat: both these categories are unfortunate people who do not enjoy very high status within the system. The seven elders and/or the *qadadu* officiant split the hide into long milking straps and share them with other important guests. A leather armlet is cut from the skin and put on each camel that has arrived with milk. The child receives a bracelet cut from the skin around the animal's navel (Baxter 1954). The rump of the cow is given to the blacksmith

or the medical expert, the left foreleg to a Wata and the rest of the animal consumed by the seven ceremonial elders. Baxter (op. cit., p. 240) further specifies that "A set of ribs is given to the father of the village (the leader of the settlement) and another to the father of the child. The head is given to the *qadadu*. The clod is shared by the *torbani*." In Baxter's accounts, the ceremony is ended by the *qadadu* officiant covering up the hole in the roof of the ceremonial hut. While the guests disperse, the seven elders stay in the ceremonial hut for two days, living off the chest of the bull. The ceremonial hut is left to dilapidate and the material is not to be reused.

To sum up, the *gubbisa* naming ceremony for first-born sons not only links them to a personal name and the core of their future property, but also to a temporally structured collective fate, the *maqabassa*, to a line of close paternal ancestors, to the ultimate ancestor of all Boraana and to God, the black source of potentiality. Because the boys involved also stand as original representatives of their younger brothers, the ceremony introduces the whole group of brothers into the temporal structure of fates.

For those who are not born *daballe*, there is a difference in importance between the first-born son, whose ceremony is also called *gubbisa* and the younger brothers and daughters who are given a *moggasa*. If the child born is a girl, a goat may be slaughtered on the fourth day after her birth. At this time her navel string is cut and she is shaved for the first time, which is generally the end of the celebrations for her, unless she is given a small name-giving ceremony half a year or so later. The boy was usually given his name only after a year. The astrologer who was consulted about the date of birth also gave advice on this. Until name-giving, babies who were not *daballe* had their hair shaved except for a small tuft above the forehead—a *tuse*. A child with either a *tuse* or a *daballe* hairstyle has not yet been given proper social recognition. In this context it may be interesting to note that in certain Oromo groups *moggasa*, the word for name-giving, also denotes the ceremony of adoption (Blackhurst 1996), integrating somebody into society by giving him a social identity. It is only at the name-giving ceremony of the first-born boy that the parents can put on the proper signs of parenthood. If the baby dies at birth, or within only a few months, it is not taken out of the house, but buried inside the house. No stone is placed on the grave, only soil—the placing of stones being associated with remembering the name. Then the family cover the soil of the grave with branches so that they do not have to look at it. A baby girl will be buried to the left side of the door, and a boy to the right. Once the child has been given a name, though, for however short a time it may live, it still has the right to a burial and its parents would be addressed as the "father or mother of X" (Baxter 1994, p. 212). The Muslim Boran of Waso, at least in the 1970s, claimed that a name-giving should also be arranged for children who are stillborn, if they have recognizable human features.

7. Inheritance of names

Boran names are usually carriers of specific meanings. There is a certain set of names, which it is said tend to recur in the lines of first-born sons, names such as *Dooyo* ('watch out'), *Arreero* ('water-milk'), *Jaldessa* ('monkey'), *Liiban* ('blessing') and others. This category of men are frequently given names after their grandfathers. No special category of explicit meaning appears to characterize such names, but since they recur in the recollections of oral history and have been borne by people who to a particular extent are seen to embody Boran-ness, the names themselves are of course connoted as typical, good old Boran names. The descendant namesakes are thought to some extent to re-embody the characteristics and personal fates of their ancestors. (Living namesakes are also supposed to stand in a close relationship to each other.) A person who carries the name of an ancestor reflects the same *ayaana* as the former, and if he is socially a direct first-born descendant he may be the main carrier of a cyclical fate running in the family. Although the person with his bodily identity will never come back, important aspects of his personality may be reborn or re-embodied.

Boraana are divided into clans, which consist of patrilineally recruited segments. There is an assumption of shared patrilineal descent between these segments, too, but normally it cannot be traced. Some of these clans are presumably of rather ancient origin, because they occur all over Oromo country. The clans and clan segments have names, and are referred to by way of introduction as soon as two strangers meet, even though they are not part of the personal name. These names are often linked to some element in a myth, some ritual function or some other assumedly collective characteristic. For example, the *Karayu* are understood as conceptually linked to the cattle gate, the *Tissele* to herd-boys and a type of grass. Names of clans and large societal units are not often explicitly linked to an eponymic ancestor among the Boraana; more often they refer to trees, although the distinction between personal names and plant designations is not always clear (see below). Clan and sub-clan names are not used as part of the personal name in the way Swedes, for example, use family names. Instead, personal names consist of an individual name, after which is added the name of the father, or in the case of a married woman, the name of the husband. My translator in the 1970s, for example, is officially called *Adhan*, his Muslim name, and affectionately by his family *Gurre*, 'the black one', presumably the name he would have had if his grandfather had not converted. The full name normally used would be *Adhan Fugicha Jillo*, *Fugicha* being his father who had been 'born feet first' and was named after that. With some effort Adhan could trace his full name to be *Adhan Fugicha Jillo Diido Dooyo Galgallo Kute Bonde*, but generally Boraana do not recall more than five or six generations. A man's patrilineal ancestry, repeated at the name-giving ceremony, is of course always seen as an important part of his identity, and without being explicitly given his father's name he is not a full member of society.

8. Living on by your name

Having many descendants, a man's name may live on as part of theirs. His *ayaana* is always expected to be represented in his descendants, but particularly so if they are the first-born ones and if they carry his individual name. The person with his bodily identity will never come back, which is expressed by the saying *lama nuti hindebitu*, meaning 'it will not repeat itself'. Yet a personality may be re-embodied: an effect of present events being reinterpreted in terms of cyclical antecedents. "Keeping somebody's name alive" is a major concern to Boraana when talking about death. It is a recurrent expression, even though our material does not justify any far-reaching conclusions about how this relates to Boran philosophical notions, if at all. Although rebirth in an immediate sense is explicitly denied, some myths contain ideas that are reminiscent of reincarnation theories. It is for example said about the Boran priest king (*qallu*) Balanbal and the Muslim saint Sof Omar that "they are really the same person". Such ideas, however, are not elaborated on very much, they appear to rest as a kind of potential for interpretation. Within the framework of the *gadaa* system, the idea of embodying the fate of an ancestor was mainly relevant to the leaders within the generation class system, whose individual names were extended to the whole generation set they led, and thus a community matter. Such leaders would always be chosen among those who were among the first-born of that generation set, first-born sons of first-born sons: their individual biological life courses would fit the idealized, ritual life course of the set. In the periphery of this system, as has been described by Legesse (1973), men would continue to be born to the class with the name of such a leader, even a century after his death, and completely out of time, since the real-life age difference between fathers and sons is of course only rarely 40 years, and the larger differences add up. Among the Boraana of Waso, when I studied them in the 1970s, such "untimely" born men and their descendants formed the majority. The relevance of ideas about recurrent fates to everyday name-giving was limited to a notion that there is indeed some kind of inherent relationship between a person's essence and his or her individual name, and that to some extent, the temporal conditions under which you are born shape who you are going to be.

The risk of "the name not being kept above earth", however, is often talked about. Boraana do not like to talk about death as such and they disdain and fear the remnants of physical life, finding for example visual images of the dead disturbing. Photographs of dead people are disliked and their old clothes have

to be distributed far away so that one does not see them worn by somebody at a distance and momentarily mistake the person's identity. The fear of forgetting the name is dealt with by the custom of placing stones representing the children of a man and sometimes trophies (cf. Hultin 1990, p. 156, for the Macha Oromo) or a tree of remembrance at the grave, and by the custom of letting a close agnatic kinsman father a son "in the name of" somebody who has died without issue. The *ayaana* is carried over to a man's children, not only the biological ones, but the ones who are legally born to him, i.e. born within his marriage. This would include all children born to a man's legally married wife, even if the genitor is her lover or if the husband is dead and a levir has taken responsibility for the wife. The children born to the dead man will add his, rather than the genitor's name, to their individual name.[2]

Among the Boraana of Waso, there were many who had been given Muslim names officially by a *sheikh*, a Muslim teacher, in the *waqalal* ceremony. This is a minor ceremony in which the *sheikh* himself selects the name—sometimes according to the day of the seven-day Muslim week when the child was born. There were also many elderly or immigrant Boraana who had been named in the traditional way. Since I was there, there has been a movement of cultural revival, and naming may have been affected. In the non-Muslim system, many Boraana, especially those who are not first-born sons, are named after some significant characteristic of the time during which they were born.

9. The meaning of individual names

The first clue to a person's character is given by the date when he is born, in relation to the Oromo astrological calendar. In fact, the date of birth is seen as decisive to conditions throughout the ensuing life of a male person. A woman's fate is governed more by her date of marriage, which constitutes her social identity. In order to know what the date is, which is a matter of observing the constellations and/or making certain astronomical extrapolations, a specialist in Boran astrology has to be summoned. He is able to consider the implications of dates of birth and death. He can advise on ritual precautions to avoid the inauspicious consequences of certain bad days, and to plan the timing of events within human control. For example, death on certain bad days is assumed to give rise to series of deaths, and may call for a protective ritual of purification to avoid the further incidence of death. Such precautions relate to ideas of "the cyclical fate of family" (*d'aachi*). Unless the necessary purification is performed, the cyclical fate will go on, and even if the dead man had a son his son or grandson will also risk dying on the same *ayaana* as its first unhappy victim. But there are also positive fates linked to the calendric days,

[2] Islam and Christianity have introduced changes to the conceptualization of marriage, see e.g. Dahl 1979.

referred to as "lucky coincidence" (*milkki*), and they are also inheritable, and can be observed from success in the tasks you undertake on that particular day, whether it be hunting, cultivation or whatever. With regard to birth, some days are considered particularly good, but they may still require that the person follows certain ritual rules. For example, a person born on the day of *Arreeri*, which represents the idea of cattle and that of the holy mixture of water and milk used in ritual, must not cut down a tree for building before drinking milk or ever drink water without mixing it with milk. A person born on the day of the sheep, *Ruuda*, will appropriately become very peaceful, but must not slaughter or eat sheep, as one is not supposed to consume what one represents.

> Then is the day of *Rubruuma*, the hyena. This *ayaana* is a very good one. It is good for marriage, for birth and death. But anybody married or born on this day has a taboo to keep. People born on that day should never look for an animal that has disappeared during the night. They should remain indoors and pray and nothing will happen to the animal, while the animals will be taken by predators if they go out. Such people should also not bite bones with their teeth. They should use knife. There is taboo between such people's teeth and bones. Yet such people prosper and have a long life.

Many of the statements about these kinds of precautions and influences are made particularly in terms of sons who are born on that day. For women, it is the date of marriage that is most decisive to their fate and characteristics during later life, and little is said in our material about the effects of birth dates on girls.

Some of the 27 days of the ritual calendar have particular personal names attached to them, such as that of the first of the two days called *Biitta* ('day of the left side'). This day is inauspicious for most activities except raiding and fighting, and seems to be linked to male passion and unyieldingness. According to a Boran specialist, Guyo Jillo from Dirre in Ethiopia, who had migrated to Waso in Kenya, girls should never be given away in marriage on this day (as they would then have these characteristics). A boy born on the first *Biitta* day will be disliked. "He is always the last to die of his brothers and he is like a sorcerer. This is naturally given." Van de Loo (1991, p. 155) reports from another Oromo group, the Guji, that "children born on these days may turn to violence and homicide and end up in misfortune. A woman about to give birth on one of these inauspicious days will by all means attempt to turn away the evil or wash away the sinister destiny from the new-born. When a man dies on the first *Biitta*, the inheritance must be dispensed with on the second." The unfortunate person who is born on the first *Biitta* will always be named *Aaga*, which according to Gragg's dictionary means 'fortune, good news', presumably in an attempt to change fate, rather than as irony.

In most cases, however, it is plainly the circumstances relating to the birth that are used, for example a place-name, the season, a reference to the vegetation. Very many men are plainly called *Guyyo* ('day'), *Waario* ('midnight'), *Galgallo* ('dusk'), *Halkano* ('night'), and so on, and women are for example

named *Diramu* ('dawn') or *Waare* ('midday'). A large number of people are also named with reference to the season in which they were born, especially if it was a season with favourable conditions, i.e. rain (*Roba*), which one would like to mention, and not famine or drought, which one should avoid invoking. Others bear the name of the place where the family camped when they were born, with references to types of water (*Haroo* 'pool', *Malka* 'ford', *Galana* 'river'), topography (*Tullu* 'hill' etc.) or vegetation. Since the traditional grounds of the Boraana used to have few permanent structures, trees and plants provide important landmarks. The ones that attract attention also have specific good qualities that make them suitable for preparing tools, weapons, rods, sticks and other utilities, like strength, hardness, a nice fragrance or shine, which may be useful metaphors for desirable human traits as well. Many of them have ritual uses and symbolic significance. Examples of such names are *Ooda* ('Ficus sycomorus'), *Dadacha* ('acacia'), *Roka* ('tamarind'), *Harroresa* ('Grewia mollis') and *Fullele* ('Acacia seyal'). Another class of names appears to relate to other special circumstances around the baby, such as *Mijuu* ('sacrifice') or *Gammale* ('happy'), together with a large number of animal designations such as *Racho* ('frog'), *Nyencho* ('lion') or *Chukulisa* (a bright-coloured little bird). Names merely reflecting physical characteristics, however, are also extremely common: *D'eera* ('tall'), *Happi* ('thin'), *Diima* ('red-brown'). In keeping with what would appear to be a pan-human tendency, names suggesting physical abnormality often stick to people later in life as nicknames, as in the case of two of my friends, Abdi, who was called *Kurkucho* by others since he was 'limping', and his companion, who from the beginning had been named *Alio* because he was born 'outside', with the hunting caste, but when I met him was only known as *Huka* ('slim').

10. Naming and creative language

In his debated book on "primitive thinking", Hallpike (1979, p. 413) discusses "nominal realism", and whether "primitives" are or are not aware that names (or words) have an arbitrary, conventional relationship to the person (or object) named. He does so in the context of the Konso, another southern Ethiopian people among whom first names are not arbitrary but are bestowed on children on the basis of the circumstances in which they are born. "Nominal realism" implies that words or names have an inherent association with their referents, "so that knowing the name of something or someone is the essential means to power over it or him", an idea closely linked to the idea of "speech is power", as Hallpike (p. 425) also observes. One of the issues raised is whether personal names represent classes of persons (like words may represent classes of objects) or if they have no intensions or connotations. Hallpike appears to think that Western personal names do not convey connotations of joint characteristics, which is probably not entirely correct. Such connotations of a name are surely among the considerations that Swedish parents do take into account when selecting a name. They are not necessarily linked to the formal "meaning" of the name taken as a word, but rather to the images it evokes. They change with fashion, and associations are made to media representations as well as to idiosyncratic memories of relatives and acquaintances. Such inexplicit (in relation to their nominal significance) associations are of course also put into action by the Boraana. The meaning referent when you use an ancestral name for your child is of course much more complex than if you just want to signify that the child was born in the morning. In both cases, the range of names to choose from may anyway be such that even as a parent you have several interpretations as to why the name was given. For example (in a fictitious case), your child may look like a star, *Bakkalcha*, be born in the light of one, and at the same time you dislike the name because your mean uncle bore it, but on the other hand the ancestor so named was very successful. Like European parents, Boraana parents choosing a name probably do not make their choice in a monodimensional way.

Nominal realism and "symbolic realism" (my term), the notion of an inherent relationship between symbol and referent, are different sides of "conceptual realism" in Hallpike's terminology, i.e. assuming that concepts are real. Hallpike saw this as a less developed way of thinking, typical of "primitive" thinking and the thinking of children. In the child, he says (p. 386),

> Words (including names, a concept which the child finds easier to understand than "word") are regarded as a part of the things they denote ... Words themselves therefore have strength or weight or swiftness or any other physical duality possessed by their referents. And no distinction is of course made between a statement and what is affirmed or denied by such a statement. At the first stage, therefore, there are two related confusions—between thinking and the body and between the sign and the thing signified. There is certainly no understanding of the notion of "idea", the idea of something is that thing.

However, when we consider the power of words in the context of social abstractions, phenomena that are largely constructed, nominal realism may not be such an invalid approach. Phenomenologically inspired sociologists have for some time suggested that social structure is largely constructed and evoked through processes of typification and classification. Thus, for example, Duncan (1962, p. 68) tries to show that social order "depends on consecration through communication, or as we have said in more specific sociological terminology, through naming ..." (1968, p. 23). Typifications establish recurrent patterns of interaction (Berger & Luckman 1966, p. 32). Social phenomena exist as units relevant to the individual, part of the environment of his or her action, by virtue of being named (Duncan 1968, p. 103). Labelling power is power: the one who creates names controls the social action of others.

Constructivist suggestions have also been given a place in anthropological analyses of Boran society. Legesse, already in 1973 (p. 200), made some insightful remarks on the Boran concepts of cyclical time which imply a constructivist mode, not only by suggesting a continuity between past and present:

> Although we must recognise the fact that Boraana historians are highly selective in keeping track of some events and ignoring others, and although this type of selectivity may account for the cyclical recurrence reflected in their oral-historical records, the cycles are not spurious. They reflect a very real structuring of events that results from the fact that the Boraana have allowed the historical antecedents to guide their present course of action. History does indeed repeat itself, not only because they believe it to be cyclical and remember the events that tend to confirm their model, but also because they believe that the historical cycle is a basic philosophical given and they act in accordance with those beliefs.

Living within an interpretative framework which suggests that fate is relived may not only constrain one's own action, but also structures how other people's actions are read and how events are experienced, in accordance with the "Thomas theorem", which states that everything that people believe to be true will be true in its consequences (Thomas & Thomas 1928, p. 572). Baxter (1990, pp. 244 f.), following Lyotard (1984), suggests in an instructive article that Boran society is more or less constructed by the words of prayers, blessings and greetings. They "continuously create and recreate connections between the organisational and cosmological structures ... and workaday life. The words give purpose and dignity to daily life but they are also one of the strongest threads from which the fabric of Boran society is woven." Also, Megerssa and the present writer, in an article on Boran wells, argued that water-regulated turns are a way of re-enacting the imagined structure of society at large (Dahl & Megerssa 1990).

Structures of communication and politeness on the micro-scale here reproduce the imaginary community, the ideological unit: but it would be meaningless to read ideology as "misconstruction", because there may be no social reality other than what the ideology constructs. In the Boran conception, the moral unit larger than the family and clan and the family's immediate network of affines is itself also defined by linguistic boundaries, which is most clearly expressed by the norm against killing somebody who uses the Oromo language.

In Boran society, the oratory of direct speech was, apart from ritual life, the main ideological channel. Although their form of pastoralism is less than fully nomadic, it is still a fluid society based on few permanent material artefacts: the history of places, their symbolism and links to past events are stored in myths, poetry and orally reproduced discourse rather than in monuments, buildings or written texts. It is a society of relatively independent units from the subsistence point of view. Cohesion, to the extent it exists, rests upon a

shared ideology and a hierarchy not based on differing authority to issue orders, but rather on a differential capacity to mediate blessing and curses. Blessings are issued in greetings and prayers, and offered as positive sanctions to individual actions directed towards collectivist goals. Bassi (1992) has even shown how collective blessings, rather than negative sanctions, are used by the Boraana to make recalcitrant individuals yield to community pressure. Curses remain as potential threats rather than being put into practice. This "power with words" was seen as inherent in leadership, but oratory was also seen as a very important criterion for selecting a good leader. "To know words (*duubi beeku*), that is to be skilled in debate and presenting a case, is a most admired skill: as is a ready wit. As words can be instrumental, they are best wielded by a skilled user of them." (Baxter, op. cit.) Future councillors for the *gadaa* system were selected among youngsters stemming from earlier leaders remembered for, among other things, their skill with words (Legesse 1973, p. 222). A "black tongue" is seen as an important attribute of holy people, those who mediate blessing and fertility.

In this emphasis on oratory, blessings and cursing there is certainly a notion that words as such are to some extent effective: talking about bad times, for example, may cause them to come, while the more you talk about peace and blessing, the more likely they are to appear. It would seem a natural idea that changing the name of somebody would be a suitable method of changing that person's fate, and I was told by an Amharic intellectual in Addis Ababa that his family had done it several times. However, when I have asked my Boraana informants about this, they have not been able to confirm that this is ever practised among them. Huntingford (1955, p. 41 n. 47) mentions such a name change on the collective scale for a more northern Oromo group where "the Gombichu changed the [G. D.: *maqabassa*] name of a [G. D.: generation] set to *Bifole* after a famine, in order to presage abundance of rain (*bifu*, to rain)". There is also the naming prescription for the poor troublemaker born on "the first day of the left side", mentioned above.

The kind of conceptual manipulation that we are dealing with in blessing, cursing and changing of names may at first glance suggest "nominal realism". To the extent that they are rationalized in other terms than "this is how things are done because they are always done in that way", which is the common way of explaining ritual all over the world, they are rationalized not by the thinking of the Boran layman, but rather by the conceptualizations of "ethno-intellectuals", the ritual specialists. Ritual action is oriented towards the principles themselves rather than their incarnations, realizations or embodiments. In fact, the concept of underlying immaterial principles makes anything found in this world a "representation". A person, his name, or an object that stands as his symbol are equally much a "representation". Within the Boran conceptual scheme, the very act of naming something that exists materially is to some

extent coterminous with linking up with God's abstract order. The simple scheme proposed by Hallpike does not in my opinion do justice to this.

A view of society as linguistically constituted comes close to formalizing what Boran themselves could have suggested about the links between words and social reality. Human consensus is a precondition for the regeneration of society but also, through Divine intervention, for good physical conditions. No wonder, then, that the creative aspects of language are ideologically emphasized. They closely link creativity and language in several ways. "Oral tradition" is referred to by the concept of *fidnaa*, which also means 'flow of life' (Kassam 1986). Language is located in the stomach, which is considered the centre of human existence, and also the bodily place most readily associated with the personal *ayaana* or *gar*.

Language is always important to identity, but one can gain further insight into its importance for the Boraana by considering its assumed bodily location. In her article on oral traditions, Kassam notes that the Oromo regard language as anchored in the stomach, where the structure of the language and the words and formulations which have not yet been used are thought to lie embedded. Knutsson (1967, p. 58) writes about the Macha Oromo that the stomach is the region of a man's mental faculties and personality, the locus of his will. The stomach is also the centre of fertility, and of the general satisfaction that is the basis for peaceful and truthful behaviour and, in consequence, for harmony between people and Divinity. One can compare the situation with that of the Dinka. Carefully stating that Dinka know how to separate the physical and moral content of the metaphor, Godfrey Lienhardt (1985, p. 148) notes how the Dinka metaphorically locate the moral inside of a person—the subjective truth of his activities as seen by himself—"in the belly", and that "what is inside" seems to be cognate with the Dinka term for "truth" (p. 149). Lienhardt means that Dinka language, unlike modern metropolitan English, compels its speakers to "integrate the moral and physical attributes of persons together within the physical matrix of the human body". In Oromo language, the concept for the womb is *gaara*, for the stomach *garacha*, and personal *ayaana* (representation of the cosmic principle) is called *garaa* or *gar*. The Oromo's concepts for identity and for the flow of life are thus linked in several ways by being located in the same part of the body.

11. Men and the fertility of language

As far as language is creative, the creative womb is thus not a female privilege. In the metaphoric sense, men have creative bellies since oratory and blessing capacity, based in the stomach, forms the basis for social reproduction and since men control the cattle-pens which, as we have noted before, can be likened to wombs. Words and cattle are part of the creative flow that recreates

society. In the name-giving ceremony, both of these forms of male creativity are mobilized to give the child an identity.

The material that we have collected from the Boran elders contains few spontaneous references to birth as a physical event. Boran moral ideology emphasizes maintaining "respect and distance" between opposed social categories representing a God-given duality in the world. As far as the Boran elders who are our main sources represent male ideology, they do not spontaneously talk much about what is considered as the domain of women. Men never take part in birth procedures. The lacuna in the material may thus not reflect a true non-elaboration of this cultural theme, if both genders are considered, but rather a relative muteness of the female world when only men are interviewed (cf. Ardener 1977).

There are probably few societies in which ritual categories completely agree with biology. The observation that socially correct classification is more important than "objective characteristics" may therefore appear trivial at first sight. Once we look closely at many processes and aspects to which Western culture assigns naturalness, such as parenthood, they tend to prove to be culturally construed. Boraana are no exception to this: on the contrary, they may appear extreme in the extent to which they also explicitly "culturalize" many aspects of social life where one would assume "objective, natural" facts to be obvious. In many cases, their classification of socially relevant categories drastically negates biological facts well-known to themselves.

There is the gap between on the one hand a person's "social age", as represented by the stage in the *gadaa* cycle decided by the father's generation, and on the other his or her own physical age. There is the relative indifference to who is the genitor, compared with who the man was who first formally married the child's mother. Not only fatherhood but even biological motherhood is frequently bypassed by the adoption of children between closely related women in the same family. In terms of fatherhood, physical fatherhood is of course recognized already when the child is in the womb, but from a symbolic-ritual point of view, it is only at the name-giving ceremony that the child acquires its social identity by being linked up with its lineage and its *gadaa* class. In all the ceremonies that establish identity—except for the singing of songs naming the cyclical fate—men play the main part.

Bloch (1989, p. 104), referring to Bettelheim (1962) and others, comments on how frequent are ritual statements that the birth of men is the product of acts of men, while outside ritual contexts children are recognized as being borne by women. Bloch notes that ritual ideology often contradicts what is known by common sense, either denying it or balancing it with a contradictory statement. He observes (p. 161) that "if authority is to be legitimized, it must be represented as part of a transcendental order beyond human action and life. That explains why such an image must be created by denigrating biology

which it identifies as both evident and low and to which it attributes change and mutability." Paradoxically, of course, the Boran ideology which subsumes biological reality to a construed reality still understands the latter in terms of metaphors drawn from biological facts.

Boraana, being dependent on animal reproduction, are well aware of the biological processes involved in childbirth and of the physical facts of age or descent. But their dominant ideology evaluates biology and ritual categorization differently. Applying a feminist perspective to this dominant discourse, one can say that it represents male ideology and leaves the female contribution mute. Men do not talk about women's matters. Not verbalizing them is in itself part of maintaining a culturally privileged respect and distance. This does not mean that the importance of female contributions is neglected and not known in terms of practical knowledge, only that it is part of the public culture to put less emphasis on them. By considering shapes and items that appear peripheral to the official exegesis, such as those relating to female household items, in which men are not expected to take much interest, one can perhaps discern a challenging perspective, giving more emphasis to sheltering functions. However, in doing so there is a certain risk of projecting wishful thinking. Even the "mute" symbolism appears to a great extent to emphasize the balance of men's and women's contributions, rather than putting the stress on that of women over men.

While no Boraana would be unaware of the importance of the mother for physical creation, the ritual system tends to enhance the role of the father in the creation of the child as a person. It is he who gives the child a name, and who thereby provides a link with the identities of individual forefathers and at the same time with a collective fate embodied by the clan as such and another one represented by the generation class. It is the father who announces the name to another elder, who will proclaim it loudly to the collective of men, who receive the name with blessings for the child to grow and for the father to live through him. The importance given to individual and collective name-giving relates to the importance given to language as creative of order, and is a central expression of the basis for Boran gender ideology.

12. Conclusion

Among Oromo-speaking people in north-east Africa, e.g. the cattle-rearing Boraana, one can find conceptions that link a person's character to different temporal manifestations of higher cosmic principles. In the everyday practice of name-giving, a person's name often relates to the most striking features of the situation in which he or she was born. When children who are in ritually central categories are named, their names often refer to people of earlier generations whose fate is thought to impinge on that of the newborn person and, if

they are elected to ritual or political office, also on the collectivities that they lead. Boraana put strong emphasis on the linguistic and ritual construction of identities, and on the role that men play in this form of reproduction.

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