

Dahl, Gudrun 1990b 'Mats and Milkpots: The Domain of Borana Women' in A. Jacobsson and W. van Beek The Creative Communion: African Folk Models of Fertility and the Regeneration of Life. Uppsala: Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 15, p 129-136

hasa.
Nzuji has kindly
smogony. She has
among the Luba
to the fish-like ori-

ture, Medicine and

ettes and their ac-
i Bayaka and their
265-90.

-1930. *A drum of
New World*. New

*sociologiques des
dans la société et
(Angola)*. Luanda:
ntifica de Angola.
affliction. A study
ng the Ndembu of
n Press.

imus und Hexerei.
-57.

f illness and medi-
ire. *Social science*

GUDRUN DAHL

Mats and Milk Pots: The Domain of Borana Women

The Waso Borana of Kenya are an offshoot of the Borana of Ethiopia, an Oromo-speaking group mainly oriented towards cattle pastoralism. The Waso Borana are the children and grandchildren of a contingent of Borana from the areas around the Kenyan-Ethiopian border who fled into British territory in the early colonial period, to escape from the expansive campaigns of the Ethiopian empire. Originally adherents of the traditional Borana religion, they converted to Islam in the 1940s but retain many of the beliefs and practices associated with the original culture.

The present paper is an attempt to contextualize some of the symbolism of household utensils as they relate to the Borana concepts of gender, with particular attention being paid to the house and the milk pots as expressions of femininity. This symbolism partly arises from parallels in their form and appearance but also from their practical relation to the functions of motherhood. This relation is vitalized in their similar ritual treatment, as this is embedded in everyday domestic life.

The traditional male role in Borana society is distinguished by a preoccupation with livestock, both as a set of practical tasks and as the focus of male ambitions and strategies. Being a real man, in Borana perception, is to be committed to making the livestock thrive and multiply. Lineage identity is formulated around the shared interests that members have in livestock. A man who loses his livestock due to misfortune has the right to be assisted with a small herd of breeding cattle so that he can reestablish himself. The man who is careful with his livestock capital expresses a concern for lineage continuity, while the careless squanderer is basically seen as antisocial and in a sense weak in his masculinity. It is not surprising if the man who sells his still reproductive cows is deserted by his wife—he risks being the laughing stock of his neighbours, who may hint at this impotency.

The female role, on the other hand, is an elaboration of motherhood, of sheltering and nourishing. Fertility—whether relating to cattle, humans or nature in general—is a dominant cultural theme of the Borana. Children are valued assets and wished for in large numbers both for social and cultural reasons and as a consequence of the logic of pastoral labour organization. By Borana cultural standards, women's role is the physical reproduction of humanity, whereas men serve to secure the regeneration of the herds and

thereby of society. The present author has in another context (Dahl 1987:253) argued that pastoralism is very much a compound process, where labour spent on capital care cannot objectively be separated from labour directed towards the production of food. Despite the fact that the "folk model" of the division of tasks would lead us to think of women as food producers and men as cattle producers, if one scrutinizes the work of Borana women, they do indeed carry out important tasks that relate to the regeneration of herds. In particular, they care for the young, weak or pregnant animals which cannot move far away from the camp and the permanent waters. However, what is important at present, is that this contribution is culturally more or less done away with, so that herd growth and continuity are seen largely as a male contribution. It can be added that we are dealing with ideas common to many East African societies, where the man is seen as socially begetting his children through his cattle. Women are conceptually linked not to the herd but to the house.

The mobile hut (*min gela*) of the Waso Borana is made out of a structure of curved roof supports, made from the branches and stems of the *madera* tree, dyed red with acacia bark and tied together with strings (*garki*) of wild agave (*oroge*). This structure is manufactured from leaves (*marassa*) of the dompalm (*kone*, *Hyphaene Crinita*). The house is essentially similar to the *min dasse* house of the Gabbra, described by Prussin (1987). The reader is referred to Prussin's text for details of the hut as a physical structure and for information on the parallel processes of house construction and weddings, which in Prussin's formulation make "meanings attached to marriage synonymous with meanings attached to houses" (:40).

The mats are prepared in such a fashion that the house from the outside appears "hairy" or "haystacklike", for to one side of the mat are tied very thick fringes of grasslike straws of palm-leaf, while the inside is smooth: there you can see the narrow strips of palm-leaf neatly tied together, sometimes decorated with old strips of coloured rag or metallic cigarette wrapping. It takes a week to make one mat, and as about 40 mats are needed for one hut, the amount of work a hut represents is quite substantial. The *gela* mat is somewhat different from the *dasse* mat of the Gabbra, which is woven from fibres rather than from leaves. The *dasse* last longer, but the wild sisal needed for these mats is not easily available at Waso, and although they were used in earlier times, they are now rare. Another reason is that they take too long to prepare.

A woman is given all that is needed for building a house by her parents at the wedding, i.e. they provide poles, strings, mats etc. Most of the things have been collected from various female relatives on both the paternal and maternal side of the bride, and sometimes from the groom's family as well if they are old friends. As time goes by the mats wear out and the hutowner has the responsibility of replacing them herself by her own efforts. At the same time she is of course expected to contribute to the huts of younger women who are about to marry for the first time. My own impression is that the Borana ideal is that all bridal equipment should be newly made, but Prussin (1987:39) notes

that the wedding huts of the Gabbra are made out of a mixture of new mats and older things from the bride's mother so that the "mother's house becomes progressively smaller with the marriage of each daughter . . .".

A woman gets prestige from having a cool and dark hut. Moisture collects in the thick palm-leaf "hair" on the outside and a well-laid cover of mats in good condition lets in almost no light. However, in poverty and prolonged droughts, huts deteriorate visibly. The reason is twofold. One is that during such conditions the woman is forced to involve herself in lots of other subsistence activities relating to cooking, camp relocation and animal care. She gets less time to spend on the maintenance of household equipment or the furnishing of new items, whether mats or milk pots. As milk pots get scarce and the diet changes towards one based on wheat or maize-meal, cooking takes more time. As the drought goes on the woman must go successively longer distances to collect grass and water for calves and small stock and weak adult cattle kept at the camp. Simultaneously the number of animals requiring individual care increases. In normal dry seasons as well as in prolonged droughts, the camps are more frequently shifted, involving a great deal of work for women with packing, loading, transport and re-erection of camps. To erect even one house is a full day's job and requires cooperation. The other reason for dilapidation of the huts is that frequent moves wear down the mats quicker than usual. The state of the hut is thus a sign both of the relative prosperity of the period and of the diligence of the woman.

The plan of the hut is circular. In the middle of the hut, two dividing walls, usually made out of cowskin, differentiate the fore-room, which is open to guests, from the back-room, *dinka*, which is ultimately the woman's own domain to which she can deny even her husband access. As a married woman she may also occasionally allow lovers into this area—in accordance with old Oromo traditions, but contrary to Islam. The hut is ultimately her own property, but its innermost part has even stronger connotations of privacy and intimacy than the rest of the hut. Prussin (op.cit.:41) as well as Bartels (1984:296) note for the Gabbra and the Macha Oromo respectively that this area is "the backdrop for marriage negotiations and the first sexual encounters of the newly-wed". The back wall of the hut is called *borru*. It can be seen through the opening in the middle partitioning wall. This term refers to several central Oromo concepts relating to the east, to mornings, beginnings and origins, and possibly to the *Borana* concept itself. Associations by similarity in sound are very important to Oromo symbolism and verbal aesthetics. The most striking characteristic of the back wall is that it is used to exhibit milk pots, and occasionally ritual paraphernalia such as sticks, the *saka* or decorative tail given to the mother of a son, etc. The milk pots are tied to the roof support by leather straps and are of various kinds, the most important types being called *chicho* and *kodda*. Under the exhibition of *koddas* there is universally a wooden box with a padlock, containing clothes, valuables, tea, sugar etc. This is its owner's most private space.

In old times, all family members are said to have had their own milk pot,

the collection being started off by the two containers of the husband and the wife which figure in the wedding ceremony. During my fieldwork in the late 1970s, however, such situations of affluence appeared to be rare, as there had been a long time of war and drought impoverishing the Waso Borana (Dahl 1979). Nevertheless, those who had several were very proud of them. The function of the *borru* as a place where wifely success is showed off was emphasized to me by contrast when women in the small town centres demonstrated their parade buffets. In a modern, iron-roofed Borana mud house, the back wall is substituted by a glass cupboard or a table draped in cloth, on top of which there is exhibited china and enamel-ware from Taiwan and Hongkong.

Borana have a variety of different milk vessels, some made of leather, some woven, and some cut in wood. The most common variety at Waso was the type called *kodda*, used to keep fresh milk and curds in various stages. The *kodda* are woven from fibres of aloe or asparagus roots (*ergemsa*), which are used to sew down strings of twisted palm-leaves. An awl-like tool (*muta*) is used to push the fibres through the tightly woven vessel. This tool is also used in making the mats and the fanciful anthropologist may seek further symbolism in this, but I have not checked if there is any. The preparation of one big *kodda* can take a month, so this handicraft-like mat-making is dependent on living conditions and access to time. *Kodda* is a generic name for all kinds of woven vessels, while there are other names for vessels of particular sizes and shapes. When decorated with cowry shells (*elelan*) the vessel is called *gorfa*. Borana are no exception to the widespread use of cowry shells as symbols of fertility and femininity. The term *gorfa* is also closely associated with *ghorfo*, the traditional female skin dress, although this is never seen at Waso.

The milk pot exhibition embodies the woman's role as milk manager. A Borana woman expects to have a certain number of cows (*amesa*) to which she has exclusive milking rights. For these cattle she will decide upon the exchange of drying-up milk stock from the camp herd for pregnant cattle from the fallow herd (*fora*). She will judge how much milk has to be left for the unweaned calves. She will distribute milk to children, friends and relatives at her own pleasure, and decide upon the amount that can be set aside for butter-making or made into curds. Thus milk, in contrast to other pastoral products, constitutes a relatively autonomous female domain of decision-making.

The role of "milk-manager" is closely connected to that of mother: firstly because the woman's main objective during this time is supposed to be the nourishment of her children; secondly because it is mainly through her children that a woman gets milking rights. It is as provider for children that she is given rights to milk animals from her husband's unallocated herd (= animals not yet named for any child). And when her children are given stock as a contribution to their future head, these are also entrusted to her for milking purposes.

Milk products are however not "just food" with a utilitarian value. They are also strongly symbolically loaded in themselves. Borana rituals of fertility

frequently make use of lavish amounts of milk and butter. The association of milk with semen is underlined by an idea of the milk pot as a womb. Butter, in the culturally not distant context of the Dorze, has also been interpreted by Sperber (1975:37f) as symbolically associated with semen. Its very close association with the female sphere among the Oromo generally would rather suggest that, if anything, it can be used to symbolize vaginal fluids. It is linked with wetness, which in relation to marshy grassfields, fresh green branches, female vaginas etc. has many connotations of fertility and continuity of life in the Borana thought world. In the prominent *buna qala* ceremony, in which coffee-fruits are fried, butter is the medium in which the coffee-fruits, after having been cut, swell up "like pregnant girls". (These coffee-fruits are, as Bartels (1984:287 ff) hints, "vegetable cowry shells".) In any case, butter is in almost all pastoral societies a scarce item which can only be produced in seasons of surplus and which by its texture and nutritional qualities is naturally associated with connotations of physical richness and nurturing. Butter is also widely used as a preservative, fat being seen as something which maintains and keeps in good shape. With the Borana, and many other pastoral societies such as the Fulani, Hima and Beja, butter-making is a completely exclusive female task, shameful for men to carry out and fully under the authority of the women. They can sell the produce as they like, even when their economic freedom in other respects is totally curtailed. Women can decide themselves how much to churn, and how to use the produce for barter, gift exchange or cosmetic use. The latter use is widespread in Oromo contexts, and "fatness" as well as "shininess" appear to be appreciated female traits (cf. Prussin 1987:45).

Both the hut and the milk pots represent sets of material symbols which are closely related to the capacity of a woman to provide adequate shelter and food for a child. Motherhood ambitions are on two levels. One relates to the actual process of biological reproduction and the other to the feeding and upbringing of children. Children must both be born and properly brought up. While there are physical constraints on childbearing, the allocation of children to care for is a social fact, so that "motherhood" in the extended sense is open to women who cannot bear children. Motherhood in this extended sense is extremely important to the Borana woman, once her childbearing period is over. When a woman has no child to look after, nor to help her in domestic chores, her status in the household and homestead is anomalous and insecure. Her situation is awkward and she can have little confidence in the prospects of her future as an old woman. To secure access to subsistence and respect, a woman who is either totally barren or whose children are now grown up or dead may ask for a loan or a gift of a child from some relatives. It is difficult to refuse such a demand, for people fear the evil eye of childless women. If she does not adopt children, the domain of a married woman's householding may wither away, as her sons grow up and marry, but she will tend to maintain the status quo by ensuring that she is continuously "given" children to take care of. Old widows or divorcees may also use this strategy to tie themselves

to some herd-owning male—not as his wife but as a caretaker of his dependent children, whether they are his own or his orphaned or impoverished relatives. Access to a hut, the extended womb, is necessary for this arrangement, however.

A particularly visible example of this was provided by the squatter settlement at Merti, where old and destitute women could use their houses to be “boarding mothers” for school children and in 1978 there were actually many poor women in the Isiolo area who did not have any hut. All married women had once had one, but many lost theirs through lack of time for maintenance or through fire—some by accident, some through the retaliation acts that the Kenyan Government troops carried out against the “Shifta” guerilla during the 1960s. After the Shifta war, in which the Isiolo Borana suffered from their buffer position between the contestants, the total supply of mats in the area never recovered.

The hut, the milkherd and the milk pots are practical assets that a woman can transform into social motherhood, embodiments of the abstract aspects of the part women play in the division of labour. At the same time their obvious associations by function and appearance with essential female biological functions such as nourishing and sheltering make them the ideal symbols of the womb, just as they are themselves symbolized by the womb. The similarity between the house, the milk pot and the womb is emphasized in ordinary speech, and some aspects of it are so evident that they may appear trivial. We have already referred to the *elolan* decorations that are common on milk pots. Houses are sometimes also decorated internally with leather sheets bordered with *elolan*, and they also occur on female ornaments, although both these uses appear to be considered old-fashioned and are becoming rare. Prussin notes that the Gabbra huts, their containers for liquid and the domeshaped smoke-bath cages, to which we will return shortly, all together “constitute a composite repertoire: the same skills and the same limited natural resources are engaged and exploited in each process . . . all the woven ones are domical and all the coiled ones are egg-shaped” (op.cit.:42). Apparently, she regards these two forms—the egg-shape and the dome—as representing a gender-specific preference of Gabbra women, if not of the female sex universally.

But the similarities are not only implicit: in fact one can say that they are elaborated on in the way Borana women treat them ritually. A very important set of items used in Borana rituals are incense and perfumes. The secular and ritual uses of fragrant substances in the purification processes relating to the three kinds of “vessel” we have been talking about—the womb, the milk pot and the hut—seem to emphasize their parallelism.

The most mundane use of smoke for cleaning is in relation to the milk pots. Before any milk is filled into a *kodda*, it is fumigated and tarred inside with the help of aromatic charcoals referred to as *qalqach*. These have the double function of cleaning and tightening the woven vessel. This is done every day before milking. After cleaning, the remaining charcoal is removed with fibres from a certain acacia. The smoke gives an odd flavour to the milk, which ac-

ording to one prominent anthropologist “tastes as if recently drained through a kipper”—but the taste is not unpleasant, once one gets used to it.

Below the eastern back-wall of the hut, between the two beds that are found in the interior section, there is a small hole in the ground, covered with a *mano*, a structure reminiscent of the hut, and which looks like an upside-down basket of reeds laced together with leather strips. This hole is used as an incense burner and clothes are fumed by being hung over the structure. Expecting intercourse, or having had it, the woman may use the *mano* for a smoke bath to purify her private parts. Particular kinds of aromatic acacia wood and the bulb roots from papyrus reeds (*kundi*) are used for this purpose. Such substances go under the term *kaya*. Similar smoke-baths, although protected in a different way, are common and ritually important among Sudanese Arabs and Beja women, and may represent an old Cushitic custom. It is not known to me to what extent they occur among Oromo traditionalists, or if the ones found among the Waso Borana are a reflection of Somali influence. Functionally, they may act as a way of trying to come to grips with the infections that follow on circumcision and infibulation. The smoke-bath is thought to make the woman more attractive and enhance her fertility. Those who can afford them also make lavish use of perfumes from the modern market.

Besides this, the *mano*, as well as small mobile clay fumigators, are used in order to make the house clean. Smoke with or without incense is recognized as keeping the house in good shape for a longer time, by keeping termites off the *gela* mats. But also, incense of particular kinds are associated with religious practice, both as part of traditional Oromo rituals and integrated into popular Muslim liturgy. By burning incense in the house the woman attracts blessings and “angels” to the home, just as perfumes may work in relation to the body. Nice smells are conceptually associated with good health, seen as contributing to it as well as reflecting it—hence, a popular greeting question to scan the general state of the family is “*ijole urgoftu?*”—do the children smell good?

Compared to the elaborate rituals of the Gada system, which characterize traditional Borana culture, and which relate to the various stages of male life, and to society seen as created through the achievements and social exchanges between men, the female domain of Borana culture is simple in terms of ritual and symbolism. In this article I have tried to draw attention to the meanings attached to household utensils which are not constrained to their utilitarian values. When the Borana are surrounded by these familiar things, they are constantly receiving messages relating to the central values of their culture, and when the Borana woman handles her milk pots or her mats she is also in a way formulating statements about her own identity.

References

- Bartels, L., 1984. *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia—an Attempt to Understand*. Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 8. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Baxter, P., 1982. An Arssi Market. 7th international Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Lund, April.
- Dahl, G., 1979. *Suffering Grass: Subsistence and Society of the Waso Borana*. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology 12, University of Stockholm.
- 1987. Women in Pastoral Production: Some Theoretical Notes on Roles and Resources. In *Ethnos* 1987:1-2, pp. 248-79. (Special Issue on Women in Pastoral Production, ed. Gudrun Dahl.)
- Prussin, L., 1987. Gabra Containers. *African Art* 20:2, February, 36-45.
- Sperber, D., 1974. *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.