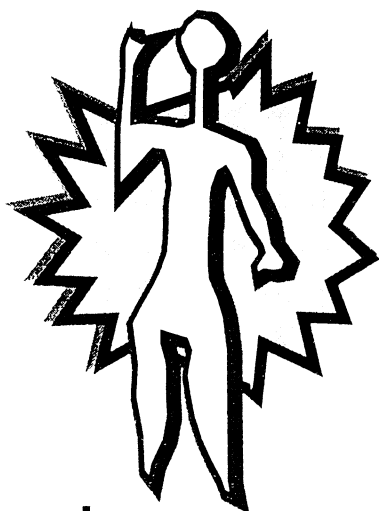# NEW TRENDS IN ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

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Rethinking One's Own Culture (Emic and Etic Considerations)

Hermann Amborn
Universitty of Munich

Hermann Amborn
Universitty of Munich

Dedicated to the memory of Professor Helmut Straube, who died ten years ago in 1984.

Abstract: *African people reflecting on their own situation will frequently find themselves in a dilemma to identify with western and traditional values. A case study of the Burji (Ethiopia and Kenya) examplifies this. First a description is given of the Burji actively dealing with their problems, trying among other things to keep Burjiness alive. Then in presenting a semiotic model it is shown how the phenomenon of their changing group identity (which is not grasped by theories of ethnic group or ethnicity) can be analyzed. The model presented may be useful for analyzing similar cases in the Third World.*

CULTURAL ESTRANGEMENT IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH WORLDS

Among the indigenous populations and the intellectuals of the Third and Fourth Worlds there are a growing number of people who no longer believe in the promise of developing a world-wide prosperous society based on the western model. Even allowing for the good will of the "rich," the limited resources of the earth do not permit the world-wide establishment of western living standards. Nevertheless the concepts of value attached to our consumer-oriented society are penetrating all the cultures of the world irresistibly. Those who criticize, or who consciously resist this development are often accused of tribalism and derided as backward, or even considered politically dangerous.

Modern life, with its rapid and far-reaching changes in the cultural environment, is both a promise and a threat. Traditional value systems have become fragile. Estrangement from one's own culture goes hand in hand with the loosening or dissolving of social structures developed over time. Some will consider the loosening of the old relations a liberation, but many regard the lack of ties with a larger community as a loss. The problems accompanying this have multiplied in the meantime and pose the problem for members of the Third and Fourth Worlds of organizing the world they live in anew and of questioning their own identities.

One common reaction to the changing circumstances is to adapt as well as possible by utilizing new opportunities (preferably by having strategic recourse to traditional structures) to improve one's circumstances or to counteract one's helplessness. Especially in urban surroundings the by now loosened social relations of earlier days, created over time, are often replaced by in-groups (we-groups) formed more or less ad hoc,[1] frequently modeled on clientelship relations.[2]

However, in connection with our theme, another group of people is of interest, who are admittedly not always clearly distinguishable from those mentioned above. These are individuals who consider themselves and their own well-being in a larger context and consequently aspire to a sense of "wholeness" (*Ganzheitlichkeit*). In the following I shall refer only to this group. Here belong individuals wishing to identify themselves in and with a larger community: a need which may be a reaction to the loss of a clear, understandable, and autonomous environment.[3] For a number of people this "wholeness," however, embraces more—both socially and temporally. I should like to think of these people—if somewhat solemnly—as "ethical minded." The term is nevertheless justified since value systems are being discussed. Here should be included people who feel themselves to be responsible for a whole, or who have had responsibility imposed upon them by their society.[4]

TAKING THE SITUATION OF THE BURJI AS AN EXAMPLE

Using the example of the Burji, I would like to consider the problems already described more closely. In doing so I shall first attempt to describe the manner in which the Burji see their own culture, at least as far as I have understood them. Following that I shall propose how the phenomenon of group unity of the Burji may be analyzed. Finally I shall consider what is of general importance in this example.

The original homeland of the Burji is situated on the eastern side of the southern Ethiopian Rift Valley. Traditionally the Burji are excellent agriculturalists, speaking an East Cushitic language, also called Burji. Since the conquest of southern Ethiopia by Menilek at the end of the last century an increasing spatial dispersion of the Burji has been taking place. In contrast to the culturally closely related Konso, Diras·a, and Dullay who, with few exceptions, have stayed in their homelands, many Burji reacted to the conquest and oppression by leaving their home country, which from now on they would respectfully call Bohe Burji. Nowadays one can find many Burji communities at various places along a line reaching from Addis Ababa in the north through southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya to Nairobi and Mombasa in the south.[5] Large Burji communities exist in, among other places, Agere Maryam, Mega, Moyale, and Marsabit. Single Burji families have settled, either temporarily or

permanently, in both Europe and the Americas.

The spatial dispersion was accompanied by an internal social differentiation which was remarkably strong by comparison with that of 60 years earlier. Besides the farming population and the traditional craftsmen there are now considerable numbers of traders, some of whom pursue a very lucrative long distance and wholesale trade. There are also numerous teachers for many different types of schools and academics in various professions. There is even an ambassador of the Kenyan government who is a Burji. The Burji can be found in all the religious communities represented in Ethiopia and Kenya. Muslims are particularly numerous (especially since the 1930s) and in more recent times evangelical Christians of various denominations can be found. In some circumstances though, their own traditional religious ideas are more important than all the newly adopted ones. Special religious dignitaries still receive instruction in the traditional belief system and are considered to be guarantors of the order of the world.

In an initial attempt at defining the Burji, one may regard them as a complex differentiated modern society, such as can be found all over the world today. However, it is impossible to continue to speak of the Burji as an ethnic group in the classical sense.

Perhaps the anthropological term "ethnic group" never did apply to the Burji because of their very complex acephalous structure; although, before the occupation of southern Ethiopia, they had a common territory, a specific economic basis, and a common traditional context with a system of values binding for all of them.[6]

This has changed decisively with the political and economic upheavals of our century. When I speak of the Burji in the following, it is above all to be understood heuristically. However, I shall come to questions of definition later on after having first presented some aspects of this case.

Nowadays those people who call themselves Burji, face a series of essential questions, concerning community (*Gemeinschaft*) and common characteristics (*Gemeinsamkeit*): first and foremost, to which larger community does a person feel to belong? It is quite possible that some people may regard themselves as Kenyan or Ethiopian rather than Burji. Let us assume, however, that a person feels to be above all a Burji. (This may be the rule rather than the exception.) For this person further questions arise: First, what is particular to "Burjiness," to being a Burji? What constitutes the Burji culture? Does this still have some value today and if so what? And finally, who or what are the Burji as a communal association and what holds them together?

In the following I shall try to give some answers both from the point of view of the Burji, in as far as I have understood them, and from the perspective of our discipline.

It was not merely the desire for security and a sense of social belonging (*Eingebundenheit*) which brought some Burji to reflect upon their own cul-

ture. The economic and social changes briefly sketched above brought the Burji by no means only disadvantages. Compared with members of many other groups in the Third World, most of the Burji are well off. According to my information, they have got without difficulty through the "times of need" in Northeast Africa, caused by drought and political upheavals during the last two decades. The cost of relative economic prosperity, however, is a certain disorientation and a sense of "uprootedness" about which not only the elders complain. Especially some of the intellectuals of the younger and intermediate generations are worried about this problem. However, they are concerned less with the glorification of the past than the reflection upon and the active examination of their culture.

The specific situation of the Burji in comparison to their neighbors like the Konso, the Borana, or the Guji, who live in numerous small communities in varying cultural environments, has doubtlessly heightened their awareness of their own culture's values. But the Burji know that it would be illusionary to cling inflexibly to the whole system of traditional culture, already reeling under the impact of modernization. But they try to counter passive acculturation by active involvement.

First, the All-Burji Meetings, to which all the Burji communities send their representatives, need mentioning. Their intention is to demonstrate the cohesion of the Burji. In fact, in the last twenty years there have only been two meetings which could really be described as all-Burji meetings. Despite the fact that, on account of various reasons, a series of planned meetings came to nothing, they nevertheless had an important side effect in that they encouraged communication between the separate Burji communities. In addition, the correspondence concerning the Burji meetings apparently led to the formation of numerous local Burji clubs and Burji associations.[7]

The merits and demerits of older traditions or their transformations are not only discussed in the clubs. "Bride-capture," for example, used to be a socially acceptable and recognized form of speeding up an already initiated marriage. Nowadays the old custom of "bride-capture," divorced from of its social context, is misused as justification for the rape of girls in boarding schools. It is hardly surprising then, that their mothers attack such "traditions" and demand a review of what can still be done and allowed today, and what should be abandoned from the old customs. Attitudes towards pre-modern customs are divided in less clear cases such as the sacrificial killing of animals. Especially Christians of Euro-American churches living in the cities tend to reject them, and eventually even deny their very existence to strangers, whilst most people regard them as necessary for their existence. But what is most important is that this discussion about cultural values is conducted openly and with the goal of solving problems: what is objectionable, what is positive, and what is worth preserving?

Yet, it should not be forgotten that the emigration from Bohe Burji had positive and progressive aspects. Emigration was not just a passive reaction and to overlook its positive aspects would mean to succumb to nostalgic romanticization. Emigration was necessary for the survival of the Burji as a cultural community and secured for many of them a life worthy of a human being, which, in economic and political relations, some would not otherwise have been able to manage. Besides economic advantages (for individuals and for the community), it permitted a broadening of the spiritual horizons. However, the price to be paid was the inevitable dissolution of traditional structures.

LANGUAGE DEFICIT AND REVITALIZATION

One problem, which became especially clear through the all-Burji meetings, was the increasing loss of the vernacular language. With emigrations to other language areas of Ethiopia and Kenya, the Burji adopted the local languages, especially the official language and lingua franca of thepparticular regions. This language shift was speeded up by their peaceful coexistence with the respective residents. In most cases the Burji did not try to compete economically with the local population, seeking instead economic and ecological niches. A good example of this is the symbiosis between the agricultural Burji and the cattle-herding Borana. Beyond the Burji heartland the use of the Burji language was restricted to the domestic sphere, but often even there no Burji was spoken as the many unmarried young men among the early emigrants married women from other ethnic groups.[8]

Meanwhile some Burji, especially intellectuals, have become engaged in a deliberate attempt to stabilize their native language. There are plans for a three-month instruction in Burji culture and language of those young male Burji who are to be initiated. Another attempt at Burji culture and language preservation has already been successful: since the end of the seventies, the Burji have even managed to get a program slot on Radio Kenya with traditional music and news in the Burji language. The program can be heard across the whole of northern Kenya and parts of southern Ethiopia. These broadcasts serve as a symbol of identity and may therefore prove influential to halt the lingering language decline.

The fact that there is no one single language covering the whole region where Burji are found might be positive as regards the preservation of their language. In fact, the Burji live within reach of three languages of wider communication: Amharic, Oromo, and Kiswahili.

But even as a vestigial language, Burji may be regarded as having a high symbolic value for the people's unity.

BESIDES THE LANGUAGE, WHAT ELSE CONSTITUTES "BURJINESS"?

For those Burji in Marsabit in Kenya who are engaged in revitalizing their language, this takes third place of importance among the elements which constitute "Burjiness." Clearly the most important element is agriculture. The Burji think of themselves as master cultivators, not only in comparison with pastoralists, or former pastoralists now settled with the support of various development projects, but also in comparison with Amhara or Kikuyu farmers.

With their highly developed agriculture, there is no doubt that the Burji, along with the Konso, Dira@a, and the Dullay, belong to the most successful and experienced farming populations of eastern and northeastern Africa. Yet, like the language, agriculture is rated for its symbolic value rather than for its everyday reality.

For a long time now large parts of the population have no longer been active in agriculture and in the meantime a new generation has arisen who, for example, would not be able to plan mixed sowing, suitable for a particular piece of ground, on the basis of special knowledge concerning the land and climate; an art which secured the lives of previous generations. However, despite this inability even these Burji feel themselves to be superior farmers compared with others of pastoral descent who have become sedentary.

Second place of importance takes the relation of the Burji to their common traditional territory with its sacred places. The interrelationship of the clans is also connected with Bohe Burji, as are the relationships between age-mates. In the latter case because the sacred places on where the *gada* ceremonies took place lie in Bohe Burji. Especially amongst the older Burji there are many who want to be buried in this land, where their ancestors rest. On the other hand, some Burji unfamiliar with Bohe Burji refuse to travel there (even though they see it as "their" land) fearing a culture shock because of the "primitive" ways there. Bohe Burji is now populated mainly by olderppeople, including, most importantly, all religious functionaries and dignitaries. It is especially important for the *ganni* to live in Bohe Burji.[9] When a religious dignitary dies, the successor is required to take up residence in Bohe Burji, regardless of his current residence. They are obliged to stay there as keepers of the ceremonial places and the culture which is regarded as the traditional culture of the Burji. Economically, Bohe Burji is dependent on the other Burji communities. On the other hand, this old homeland is symbolically so valuable that without it the Burji people in other parts of Africa or even in other parts of the world—in regions they think of as Diaspora—would feel like orphans. Because of this, tradition-conscious Burji who live outside of Bohe Burji feel duty bound to financially support the elders who have stayed in that area, especially the religious dignitaries. It is therefore the territory itself as much as the custodians of Bohe Burji and their spiritual qualities which constitutes the core of Burjiness.

For the continuing existence of the Burji as a coherent group (in any form) it should be decisive to what extent it will possible for them to keep alive their traditional region—the core of Burji culture.

Among those elements which are seen as essential to Burji culture, a common treasure of myths and oral traditions needs mentioning. Besides agriculture, heartland, and language they constitute one of those factors held in common, which bind all Burji together. Of these, the myths of origin, migrational traditions and historical experiences are of special relevance.

These myths and narratives allow us a good deal of insight into the conceptual world of the Burji. Following the example of Dilthey (1981, pt. 2, chapter II) I see them as the articulated and condensed expression of common experience and learning within a traditional community. The myths or the historicizing traditions are of great importance because they present the cultural assets and heritage in a concentrated form and consequently reflect more than just the opinions in their particular circumstances. This not only makes them of interest to anthropologists, but also of great importance for those Burji who seek their identity as Burji. For them, Burji culture manifests itself nowadays increasingly through its conceptual and symbolic content.

Unfortunately, however, our knowledge of the Burji cosmogonies is only fragmentary.[10] And yet these few references exhibit clearly parallels to the cosmogonies of the culturally closely related Dullay and Konso.[11] The great variety of the mythologems is noticeable in the entire Burji-Konso cluster. Whilst a coherent "traditional theological system" cannot be discerned, there are instead numerous syncretistic conceptions from various different sources. Conceptions, of which the ones are as true as the others. The formation of the world is not necessarily comprehensible through one single truth only, as also the numinous assumes multiple forms. This accommodation of different syncretistic conceptions in mythology and religion of the people of the Burji-Konso cluster can be seen as one reason why belonging to different religions (Catholicism, Islam, etc.) is not regarded as detrimental to the Burji as a communal association. This is because beneath the different beliefs lies the spiritual center, Bohe Burji, with the religious dignitaries residing there, the intermediaries between the ancestors and the people. This "lying beneath" is, however, neither to be taken in a hierarchical sense, nor as a basic concept, but rather as the permanent possibility of being called upon where the interests of the community are concerned. This is the case when, for example, a joint resolution applying to all is to be religiously sanctioned. Since those involved are as a rule members of different religions, this can only be achieved by recourse to their common historical religion.

In connection with the syncretistic conceptions and various attempts to explain the formation of the world, a more modern version is revealing. It is taken from the thinking of Ato Salle Chota, a Burji by birth, who was previously a teacher in Awassa, and is now working on a Bible translation for the

Ethiopian Synod. Out of interest in his own culture he made tape recordings of numerous interviews with people still firmly rooted in pre-modern Burji culture. Ato Salle Chota may be regarded as an experienced and successful autodidactic anthropologist. He is currently evaluating his field notes.[12]

In our context I would like to mention only the opening chapter of his intended book, which is quite compatible with the series of cosmogonies already mentioned. The chapter begins with the origins of the universe. The account follows the astrophysical cosmological theory of the big bang. There follows a description of the beginning of our solar system, of the Earth, and finally of the emergence of life, beginning with the primary substance, protoplasm. This passage is followed by the evolutionary history of plants, animals, and humans. Here Salle Chota suggests a connection between Old Testament notions—such as they are taught by fundamentalist American Protestant missionaries—and an evolutionary model based on that of Darwin. The dating of particular epochs follows the Old Testament interpretational model. After the emergence of the world and its life forms has been explained, the description moves on to early Ethiopia, finally connecting with the historicizing myth of Liban, firmly anchored in Burji culture. Liban is considered the common point of origin of numerous Cushitic speaking peoples such as the Oromo, Dira@a, Konso, and the Burji themselves. From Liban came the migration to Bohe, which is regarded as the real genesis of the Burji culture (see below).

Through the analysis of this material we can establish that the author follows the pattern of numerous African (and other) myths of origin, dividing his material into cosmogony, anthropogeny, and the beginning of history.

This reordering of the idea of the origins in a modern world is of special interest here. The beginning of the world is explained by a scientific thesis and history gains spatial extension, with the Burji as members of the world community. Previously, the myth of the creation of the world could be linked to the Liban myth of origin via a few intermediary points, for the end of the social world was in the north, beyond the rivers of Yirgalem. It seems to me that the diachronic and synchronic relations in which the Burji stand, and the demarcation of the Burji whilst simultaneously seeing them as part of **the whole of humanity,** is of importance in this presentation. I shall return to this idea after analyzing the Liban tradition.

Salle Chota's approach mirrors deliberately, as far as I can judge, the conceptual world of the Burji—which, in this context, means essentially that of the "traditionalists." (In his explanation he is guided by the traditional context of the cosmogonies, in the structure at least.) Thus his approach can be taken as concentrated collective experience. This work, by a Burji intellectual, gives us an idea of how the Burji see their spiritual and physical position in time and space—above all those Burji who, unlike Salle Chota, have not been trained in European linear logical thought, but have been educated in analogical, complex logical thought.[13]

Generally in the minds of the Burji, there is a tradition that they came from Liban.[14] Before the time of Mohammed Grañ (Ahmed b. Ibrahim Grañ) the Burji, Konso, Dira@a, and the Oromo (including the Borana) lived in the Liban region together (in the area around present day Negelli). Some of the nine clan founders of the Burji were created in other parts of Ethiopia, obviously before coming to Liban. (All other clan founders emerged through similar, always supernatural means.) Some emerged in Liban, such as the tribal father of the *kadado* clan, who was born out of a calabash. Two of the clan founders, ancestors of the two most important religious present day dignitaries of the Konso and the Burji respectively, were also created in Liban and are descendants from the same father, who originated from there himself.[15] However, most Burji, Konso, Borana, and Dira@a clans are not blood-relations, but 'companions in fate.' (They are associated with each other a bit like age-mates are. The Burji and Borana clans are especially closely associated, and their clan names are compatible.)

A dispute developed between the different groups following a communal animal sacrifice in Liban, during which they had tricked each other. The Burji, Konso, and Dira@a then left Liban and after migrating, at first together, the individual groups then moved off into their separate residential areas [according to some narrative variations the separation happened while they were still in Liban], where they have lived since roughly the time of the Grañ wars (the migration route can be shown exactly).[16] Tradition has it that partly in Liban and then on the way, a process of differentiation into various activities took place, especially the division into farmers and craftsmen. The Burji potters and leather workers got their professions by breaking a taboo. Not all the clan founders came from Liban. Even later it was possible that some clan or lineage founders emerged in supernatural ways. Today the places which the clan founders reached first upon arriving in Bohe Burji are important sacrificial sites. Ceremonial implements, important insignia of the sacrificial priests, and the origins and procedures of important religious ceremonies all originate in Liban. When an animal sacrifice occurs today, the skull of the animal must face eastward toward Liban, the land of origin. From Liban the Burji brought horses and various cultivated plants with them (these are the old plants which used to be the nucleus of cultivation). They brought a certain sorghum species, along with barley, wheat, and lentils from Liban and the cabbage tree (*Moringa stenopetala*), the typical plant of the Burji-Konso region. Coffee and tobacco are also supposed to come from Liban.

The Liban tradition is not only a myth of origin or a historicizing narrative (though it is these too), but a tradition which, in the crisis which began with the occupation of the south and, especially after 1950, with the increasing exodus from Bohe, serves to determine what distinguishes the Burji and Burji culture of our days. In enumerating those cultural elements which were brought from Liban, a process of selection occurs which is meant to explain to the listener

what has developed within the Burji community and what has come from outside. The appeal to the ancestors sanctions those elements which distinguish Burjiness and guarantee its genuineness. This is as true of material goods as it is of the world of ideas, but especially of the social order. By mentioning the clan founders together on their joint migration, the equality and cohesion of the segments (clans) is assured in this acephalous society, without the need of a central authority. In addition, their relations to their immediate neighbors are established, especially to those who have social structures regarded as being equal to their own (Borana clan correspondences; the demonstrative mentioning of the common ancestor of both a Burji and a Konso clan). Through all this, the Liban tradition marks the center, as it were, of Burjiness as a common history which binds together all the Burji for many more than seven generations.[17]

With regard to what "being Burji" can mean, the myth (in the sense of a complex of all myths and mythical traditions) yields the following important aspects:

1. The context of tradition determines the content of Burji culture and identifies its representatives.

2. Like all genuine myths of creation, the Burji myth raises the question of origin. What are the origins of the cosmos, the world, animate and inanimate nature, humanity, of one's own community, and how did all the manifold elements of cultural heritage originate? What defines the Burji; as Burji on Earth and as Burji in the cosmos?[18]

    Without doubt, the Burji see themselves as part of a whole. This can be seen in the Liban tradition, which tells of their originally living together with other peoples of southern Ethiopia. (The tradition also speaks of the social relations with other societies).

    Through its diachronic dimension the myth mediates between past and present, making it of central importance in societies where worshipping of the ancestors and their inclusion within social order plays a crucial role. The myth of creation, with its cosmogonical perspective relates to the beginning, but is also anchored in the experienced reality. It offers people an oral discourse on the reality surrounding them, and is true in as far as it constitutes cultural reality. Hence, it possesses a paradigmatic quality for their society, which extends far beyond what we in our society consider as the realm of the religious.

3. The myth is at the same time exclusion (the Burji as opposed to other ethnic groups) **and** inclusion (in the whole of humanity and the cosmos). The explanation offered by the myths relates not just to differences, but refers to the whole. This point is of central importance because there is a tendency in anthropological discussion of ethnos and

ethnicity to emphasize only the exclusion of the "other," whereas inclusion of one's own culture has come to be neglected.

4. When the myth reflects the situation of the people in time and space, it contains, through the reference to a whole, an anticipation of the possibilities of the future. In referring to the whole it allows the existence of other identities, whilst letting a person still remain, first and foremost, a Burji.

5. There seems to be a process going on now which will probably lead to the importance once attached to Liban being transferred to Bohe, at least in some respects; that is to say that Bohe is acquiring the role of a new conceptual center, comparable with Liban.

6. From the point of view of structural analysis it is interesting to note that the myth unfolds according to a principle which is very similar to that of the hermeneutic method. The myth begins with the whole, moves on to the specific and, through the existence of the *ganni,* brings the specific back into a relationship with the whole in a manner understandable to people.

<div style="text-align:center">

Cosmos the Whole
Burji the Specific
ganni (Bohe and Cosmos) the Specific in the Whole

</div>

7. One should not, however, overvalue the myth. Certainly, not all Burji are constantly conscious of the myth. It is remarkable though, that without actually considering the myths, the Burji nevertheless gave exactly those points mentioned in the myths as being essential to "Burjiness": agriculture, Bohe Burji as a center, and a common history.

Today it is especially their spiritual unity that constitutes Burjiness. It is this unity that is conveyed to the outsider through tradition rather than through the (doubtlessly existent) symbolic value of the other criteria, which should be regarded as crucial to Burjiness. For example, it is hard for us to grasp what symbolic value agriculture has for a government employee in the capital. Through the oral tradition we get an impression of what constitutes Burjiness and, furthermore, how an acephalous society sees its own unity.

Even though we have certainly not grasped the symbolic universe of the Burji in its entirety and only understand its meaning to a limited extent, we can, however, follow Voegelin's statement regarding the meaning of the symbols for community formation: "Die Selbstherstellung der Gesellschaft durch Symbole ist ein integraler

Bestandteil der sozialen Realitaet, man kann sogar sagen, ihr wesentlicher Bestandteil, denn durch eine solche Symbolisierung erfahren die Menschen die Gesellschaft, deren Glieder sie sind, als mehr denn eine bloße Zufaelligkeit oder Annehmlichkeit; sie erfahren sie als Teil ihres menschlichen Wesens." (Voegelin 1991, p. 53)[19]

A VIEW FROM THE METALEVEL AND THE PARADIGMATIC CHARACTER OF THE CASE STUDY

Turning to the analysis of what constitutes the definition of Burji and Burjiness, we find ourselves in a seemingly paradoxical situation. The Burji regard themselves without doubt as belonging together, but they do not live together as a group. By reason of their cultural tradition they fall within the sphere of our scientific discipline. However, according to the current criteria and theoretical approach of social anthropology, the Burji are actually nonexistent, since nowadays they form neither a tribe nor an ethnic group.

But, looked at more closely the acephalously structured Burji society never did fit into the scheme of the ethnic group.[20] It becomes apparent when one considers, for example, longer historical periods of time, that the process of group formation never comes to a standstill. Besides which the term ethnos (or similar), as demonstrated above, is no longer valid for our times. The Burji society was and is an open society. Open to new suggestions (which previously entered through involvement in long-distance trade) and to neighboring ethnoi, but not open to each and everything. Foreign elements are accepted to the extent to which they can be reconciled with their own structures, which means that a selection of elements took and takes place in communicative action. Their relations with their neighbors are determined in a comparable way. They draw boundaries between themselves and certain groups (for example the Guji), and form occasional alliances with certain others.

Attempts to grasp the phenomenon of Burji unity through definitions of "ethnos" or "ethnic group" are bound to fail, since the Burji are not an "ethnos" according to the accepted formal criteria, because, as mentioned above, they do not fulfill a sufficient number of these criteria (common territory, common language, etc.). The deficits of essential theories or of formal definitions of "ethnic group" become apparent here. The ethnicity debate, besides being chiefly geared towards small urban groups, does not take us much further. The actual existence of the Burji as a unity eludes explanations of this kind.[21] Besides being foolish from a scientific point of view, it would help little to try and create a sub-definition of "ethnic group," yet another typification based on and only valid for the individual case.[22] Even when one intends to work with the broader and more flexible concept of "in-groups," one faces a dilemma. Whilst allowing the analysis of Burji unity, it nevertheless provides no theoretical tools with which to explain this phenomenon.

Having got to this point it would seem to me inappropriate to pursue either of the concepts mentioned above any further. Instead I consider it to be more helpful to include aspects of Peirce's semiotic approach. The concept of the triadic relations of signs which he developed offers a heuristically applicable model that, in my opinion, is more effective than the current methods already mentioned. Peirce develops a methodology which is capable of opening up, in terms of formal logic, a reality arising from the practice of life. Through critical consideration of Kant he developed a transcendental philosophy of signs, according to which each thought possesses sign character.[23]

The Peirce model allows the extreme positions of our case study to be linked together in a complementary fashion: on the one hand, the "**objective**" facts and circumstances (such as the contents of myths and other reference points for collective identity), which come from the Burji themselves or which could be reconstructed from the research on Burji; and, on the other hand, the **subjective** element, the feeling of group unity. Furthermore, it makes possible the dissolving of the apparently paradoxical situation of finding, simultaneously and equally, the opposite extreme positions of an open society and the concept of a confinable group within one society. The contrary scientific aspects of in-group research and the concept of ethnic group can also be dealt with in this way.

It will suffice here to briefly recapitulate some aspects of Peirce's semiotic theory, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of his model in our context. Peirce outlined a triadic base structure of the sign with three categories, **sign, object, and interpretant.**[24] To avoid confusion I shall use the term **representamen** for **sign**, as the triad is itself a sign. (Peirce uses the terms "sign" and "representamen" equally.)

According to Peirce representamen is to be understood as a materializable, factual given (such as sound waves, a gesture or, of course, a word). Transferred to the social interaction process, it stands for an empirically perceivable symbol. (For example, the word ethnos, which has, however, no content without the other categories of the triad.) Every representamen stands for something different; it refers to something given and designates an object (in the broadest sense). This object can be a thing, but could also be the content of a declarative statement. The "interpretant" establishes the relation between the representamen and the object. Meaning arises only through this mediation. The interpretant is that which guarantees the validity of the sign (e.g. as convention). It is then to be understood as intersubjective and at the same time makes the sign intersubjectively understandable. According to Peirce, the interpretant in the triad must, under no circumstances, be confused with a (single) interpreter.

The relation between the three elements—representamen, object and interpretant—is a necessary structural relationship and cannot be broken up. This means that the three-way relationship does not allow itself to be reduced

to a two-way relationship without loss of meaning. According to Peirce, signs make our environment intellectually comprehensible and make it possible to create and represent reality. Through their interdependency, the various material things allow themselves to be grasped and interpreted as well as ideas. Thereby the meaning of a sign is in no way fixed for all time or for all cultures: that which puts an interpretant in relation to something (whether in the form of a term or as consciousness) is socially and culturally conditioned.

For a specific society this would mean that it finds expression in certain common symbols and terms (representamen) of an existing group of people

Figure 1
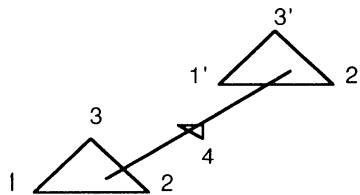
Figure 1 Group Identificator
1 = Representamen, 2 = Object, 3 = Interpretant

(object) whose validity and representation is realized in a certain conceptual representation (e.g. social relations) and a specific action (interpretant). It is this that the individual interpreters, namely the individual members of this society, are guided by.

With reference to the present case study, and at the same time generalizing it, I should like to take Peirce's semiotic field of the triad as "group identificator" and then to add a vector to the model as a fourth component, to symbolize the transformative influences (Figure 1). While these influences are contained in the interpretant and therefore in the triadic sign which refers to the mediation (*Vermitteltheit*) of all experience, they are not explicitly emphasized.

Peirce's theory aims more at a formal logic and not so much at the examination of these moments and elements that initiate transformative processes.

Vector 4 (fig. 1) should be taken as an indication that changes do not occur solely on the conceptual level, but rather in and through human activity: impulses of experience are dealt with in the process of communicative action (Habermas). The vector is meant to accentuate the transformatory powers which act upon the semiotic field: those socially and historically effective mechanisms which change the content and value of the elements of the whole field from inside and outside, giving a new sense to the content of the sign. On the level of logical reasoning alone, it cannot be explained why the content of the sign has changed over the last one hundred years (why 1 became 1', etc.).

The modified Peirce model presented here has the additional advantage

Table 1

1.) Representamen:	d'aa_/Burji a) and b) similar, but changed (base) corpus (fluid transitions)
2.) Object:	A quantity of people bound together through different relations.
	a) (about 1890) Within a defined territory with distinct common activities (in a subsistence economy based on cooperation) and generally binding concepts.
	b) (about 1990) not bound to territory (mobile); relatively loose communial-association.
3.)Interpretant:	Determination as a specific human community (Gemeinschaft) (Indigenous) joint identification as a group
	a) (about 1890) Determination of persons in time, space, and social order (inclusion and exclusion).
	b) (about 1990) in the relation of meaning "representamen/object" ideas outweigh matter (From outside) scientifically established explanations (definitions etc.)
	a) (about 1890) tribe, acephalous ethnic group.
	b) (about 1990) Internally socially differentiated and spatially dispersed communial-associations with acephalous basic structure, within modern states.
4.) Transformative Powers	(social/historical) changes in content and value (from inside and outside) because of: occupation of the south, frontier situation, gabbar system, emigration, use of economic niches (etc.), impact of colonialism, neocolonialism, and the global market.

that different group identities can be explained and interpreted with its help, without having to force them into a defining strait jacket. Thus, a term brought in from outside, such as "ethnic group," is unnecessary, even though the model would allow it. With the help of this model it would also be possible to analyze millenarian movements, which often pursue the same interests as "ethnic" revitalization movements.

In the model of the group identificator, using the concrete example of the Burji, I detect the following inseparable and interrelating elements (which, for their part, could be further differentiated).[25]

With the help of this model, both the **objective** contents and the **subjective** elements can be represented, namely the "us feeling," which is contained in the interpretant. The whole can be grasped in the name "Burji" (the representamen) with its relation to that real existing quantity of people in a given spatio-temporal framework (the object) which together (through the interpretant) constitute Burji and Burjiness. Using the model (fig. 1 and table 1) it can be demonstrated that there is a logical way of showing why the Burji still have this sense of belonging together. The model demonstrates the relation of the triad (b) to (a), as the base elements of both triads on both time levels acquire significance only through their reciprocal relations, and thus are of necessity structurally dependent upon each other and are transformed as such (1 becomes 1', etc.). The model helps us to grasp and understand phenomena like Burjiness both diachronically and synchronically. But no historical laws should be deduced from or established upon its formal logic. It does not exempt us from the analysis of historical, social, and economic conditions either.[26]

The diachronic structural context becomes evident, when, despite all the

changes, the past, as commonly performed culture and experienced history, has not been simply removed, but is rather present in a collectively reflected way, and remains effective.[27] In both periods presented in the model, a Burji identity is preserved, the empirically retainable forms of which, just like the two group identificators, are not identical.

While the Burji in the Horn of Africa do represent a specific case, the example is in my opinion of more than regional significance. At the very least, the interpretational theory presented here can be applied to societies which are, in the broadest sense, comparable with the Burji and their situation.

Looking ahead, I should like, however, to add some further considerations drawn from this example. The manner in which the Burji deal with their culture and identity can be instructive and even helpful in our times, influenced to such an extent by national and ethnic conflicts. We see a communal association which is based on an acephalous structure, thus a society far removed from modern industrial nations, a seemingly "pre-modern society" with only a slender historical connection or relation to all that is modern (state, technology, economy). Yet it is precisely these people who (as a group), to all appearances, cope better with the present situation of the Third World than (originally) well-defined ethnic groups with hierarchical structures which, on the grounds of their centralized organization, seemed closer to the modern world and showed a greater inclination toward acculturation.

When these hierarchical societies are confronted with the modern world they have, in the long run, two possibilities: either they can resist as such by becoming the ruling part of the population (directly or through assimilation), or they will be under permanent pressure to lose their cultural identity, and at the worst they might disappear. This constellation produces unavoidable ethnic tensions. In contrast it seems, as our example shows, that a society with an acephalous basic structure can cope with this transition better. Above all, the flexibility in the socio-economic sphere found in traditional acephalous societies offers people a greater range of appropriate reactions to new situations. It makes it possible for them to retain their awareness of unity (for example, being Burji) and thereby also their sense of identity, despite undeniable difficulties and changes in their lifestyle.

Our case study contains another important aspect, which is of significance to the so-called ethnic political problems in Third World countries, namely, the much disparaged tribalism. As a rule it is viewed very one-sidedly and represented as an obstructive, backward looking phenomenon and therefore as danger to progress and as something to be overcome. But given our analyses, tribalism should be treated much more sophisticatedly. Tribalism—in the sense of a deliberate reference to traditional culture—does not automatically mean ethnic competition. If the Burji model, with its relation to the whole and its dynamic elements, is correct, does it not provide, aside from good will or moral postulations, a useful blueprint for a multicultural society?

NOTES

1. Groups determined by circumstances in the broadest sense (but not for that reason necessarily unstable) to which a person feels to belong are meant here.

2. Nepotism in the Third World, so often vilified in Europe, is in most cases simply a social structure well adapted to the given economic circumstances.

3. Among the larger groups of people in contemporary Ethiopia, it is quite possible to find political opportunists, that is, individuals who should rather be placed in the category mentioned above. For the small groups in the south there was until now, at least for the individual who relates to his or her ethnic group, little to gain.

4. Generally, these are people who show consideration for a greater whole and who feel themselves spiritually responsible for maintaining the balance of the cosmic process through their actions or, through all those activities which concern the welfare of coming generations, such as the use of natural resources.

5. At the present time there still exists no anthropological monography about the Burji. The most important sources up to now are a manuscript from Helmut Straube from 1955 and his field journals from the years 1973/4. Extracts from these have been published in Sasse and Straube (1977). Mude (1969) offers a short piece about Burji culture. Regarding the historical grounds leading to the emigration from Bohe Burji cf. Amborn (1988) and Mude (1969). For the agriculture of the Burji-Konso cluster cf. especially Kuls (1958).

6. Some Burji are no longer conscious of their own traditional social structures. Those who are (or have been) at school in Ethiopia or Kenya receive a European image of society. Because of this they seek hierarchies in the old acephalous Burji society. Being "educated" and seeing the absence of centralization as a deficiency, rather than recognizing it as an advantage, they try to reinterpret certain institutional positions in the sense of a hierarchical society. Thereby, they can easily continue the endeavours of the administration during the empire.

7. Unfortunately, at present I possess no information about their activities regarding the newly formed political parties in Southern Ethiopia.

8. E.g., in the early seventies only 20% of the Marsabit Burji could be expected to speak Burji correctly.

9. The living *ganni* are closely bound to their ancient ancestors, the clan and lineage founders, and as such are considered guarantors of the cosmic order.

10. In Straube's field journals there are only two myths to be found which can be taken as cosmogonies. I have only found a few references to Burji cosmogonies myself, although I should add that I did not explicitly look for them, nor did I speak to people competent in this field.

11. For the Konso: Jensen 1936: 490 ff.; for the Dullay: my own unpublished material

12. In January 1992 Mr. Salle Chota was kind enough to allow me a glance at his unpublished manuscript and to discuss the composition and context with me. My statements in this chapter are repeated from memory.

13. For the analysis of different possibilities of a logical grasp of reality cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962.

14. As with most oral traditions of the Burji, there also exist numerous variations of this historicizing mythic migration story. Presented here is a summary selected from Straube's records from Bohe Burji and from my own notes from Marsabit which, I think, include those points essential to our context. The comments of Burji informants are given in round brackets, and my own comments in square ones. Cf. also Jensen 1936, pp.494; and Amborn 1990, p.309. K.A.Mude from Marsabit, a Burji by birth, also mentions the Liban tradition in his article about the Burji (Mude 1969, pp.30). He would like the Burji to be known as "part of the Amharic people" (Mude 1969, p.28). He considers it to be "unlikely that the Konso have come from Liban" since, if this were the case, "there would have been at least some degree of cultural assimilation. Furthermore, the Konso seem to belong to the negroid or nilotic racial grouping which inhabits parts of southern Sudan" (Mude 1969, p.30). The close cultural ties of the Burji-Konso cluster need not be discussed here. In order to evaluate his view one should be aware that those Burji resident in Marsabit found themselves in a precarious situation a few years after Kenya's independence. As a minority they had hoped to gain some protection from Ethiopia, that is from the rulingppeople, the Amhara. In a letter asking for support from the emperor they referred to themselves as "children of the Ethiopian emperor" (Archive: Ote K.Y.Soke). In retrospect, the Burji in Marsabit are not particularly pleased that they should have turned for help to exactly that same oppressor on whose account they had left the country.

15. This connection is still expressed today when one of the dignitaries dies, through the other being obliged to send funeral or mourning gifts to the community in mourning.

16. In most versions the migration route runs fairly directly from Liban to Bohe Burji. According to other versions the Burji, on their migration from Liban, were led by a rolling stone to numerous groups of people between the area around Addis Ababa and the Kenyan border. In all probability the Liban myth was adapted at different times to suit their geographically extended perspective.

17. The span of seven generations plays an important role in historically judging events.

18. Mircea Eliade (inter alia 1991) has shown, that myths of creation proceed from an undifferentiated whole - chaos - which is shaped through the act of creating the world and arranged to form the cosmos. The creation of the world means the break-up of the original unity and the transition to ordered polarities.

19. "The self-enactment of society through symbols is an integral part of social reality, one could even say, its essential part. This is because, through such symbolization people experience the society of which they are the components as more than simply a coincidence or an amenity; they experience it as part of their human nature." (Voegelin 1991, p. 53).

20. In chapter 2 of my book "Differenzierung und Integration" (Differentiation and Integration) (1990) I have analysed the cohesion of the acephalous societies of the Burji-Konso group using a model of interrelated institutions (lineage - gada system - territorial group). In this representation I concentrated especially on the Konso who were, at the time of my field work (1973/1974, 1981, 1984), very tradition-conscious. For numerous groups within the Burji-Konso cluster the model is only applicable, as a fully functioning model, for the time before the Second World War. Among the Burji this pattern of social relations was still to be found until recently, but has been pushed very much into the background. My model - which partly follows Evans-Pritchard - has something to say about the basic structure of acephalous societies, but it is not sufficient for the clarification of diachronic changes.

21. In rather vigorously pushing the ethnos and ethnicity research to one side here, I do not mean to question its importance for numerous areas of anthropology. Moreover, it was especially the work of Max Weber 1976 (1921), Chapt.IV, §§1 und 2; Fredrik Barth 1969; Edmund Leach 1954; Anthony Smith 1992; Georg Elwert 1989; and Immanuel Wallerstein 1960 which drew my attention to the problem I am dealing with. A critical consideration of these works would have to be so broadly laid out that the particular intention of this essay would be lost. Therefore, I refer directly to the conclusions of my criticism.

22. "Categorizing" anthropologists have consequently, and unfortunately, lost a further part of the subject matter of their discipline in the Burji.

23. Peirce gives the following definition of a sign: "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*." Peirce, CP 2.228.

24. These correspond to his basic categories firstness, secondness, and thirdness. (Peirce 1983, chapter III,2.

25. In fig. 1 (a."d'aa_/Burji" indicates the period around 1890, and (b."Burji/d'aa_" the situation in the early 1990's. The paired names "d'aa_/Burji" and "Burji/d'aa_" express the shift of emphasis marked by the autonym. Burji, previously a autonym of only limited application, has been in more general use for several decades now and is more inclusive than the still customary "d'aa_."

26. Some of the objective and subjective circumstances (which could be inserted in table 1 without problems) have been given in the description of the case study.

27. In several works LeGoff pursued similar phenomena in European every-day culture from the Middle Ages up to our times. cf. especially LeGoff 1983, chapter IX.

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