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ANDREA NICOLAS

Dissertation abstract

*From Process to Procedure. Elders' Mediation and Formality in Eastern  
Shewa (Ethiopia)*

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## Dissertation abstracts

ANDREA NICOLAS: *From Process to Procedure. Elders' Mediation and Formality in Eastern Shewa (Ethiopia)*. Dissertation am Institut für Ethnologie der Freien Universität Berlin, verteidigt im September 2007

The dissertation describes a cultural-specific form of mediation, as it is practiced in the Eastern Shewa region of Central Ethiopia by members of the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. It introduces elders as male household-heads in their advanced ages which do not only settle conflicts but also arrange marriages for the members of the junior generations. The different types of mediating tasks that they are concerned with, all belong to a common corpus of activities that are comprised under the local heading of the 'things that the elders do'. With regard to conflict-related aspects, there are not only 'easy' cases dealt with, which one might assume to be too 'unimportant' for state courts or other juridical institutions but also aggravated cases that carry a high potential of conflict and that may affect the wider group. The dissertation uses specific case studies of marriage, bride abduction, physical injury and homicide for illustration. It provides several examples, both in the original Oromo and Amharic languages and in their English translations, of speech-behaviour that is typical for the elders' conversational exchanges in such mediation settings.

Within the methodological framework, reference is made to speech-act-theory and the 'new ethnographic' approach related to it; the study owes part of its insights to inspirations derived from the field of linguistic pragmatics. In the ethnographic part, both verbal statements or rhetoric strategies and non-verbal means of communication are discussed, such as postures, gestures, special arrangements, numerical symbolisms, or the deliberate use of certain kinds of dress and of material objects.

The ethnographic material brings to light significant regularities that are inherent to the different types of elders' proceedings. Peculiar phases can be distinguished that re-occur in all types of processes analysed in the study, while opening and closing markers allow for distinguishing a formal case in its 'legal' frame from an informal instance of neighbourly problem-solving. This cannot exclusively be explained by reference to 'process', as a general idea of coming into being, or of people negotiating law and influencing its making. It moreover hints to the existence of a formal 'procedure', which follows its own rules that are known to the majority of people who participate in the process. Accordingly, a change of perspective 'from process to procedure' is suggested in the book's programmatic title.