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In memoriam Hermann Amborn (1933–2024)

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In memoriam Hermann Amborn (1933–2024)

MAGNUS TREIBER, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

‘Theft is seen not as a conflict between victim and perpetrator but rather as an unsolidaristic act posing a danger to the community. There are serious provisions for its punishment. The degree to which theft may destroy a community is made clear in the Burji myth, which is also familiar to the Konso and Borana: theft of a sacrificial lamb and the conflicts arising from it produced irrevocable divisions among the Burji, Konso, and Borana, who had lived together in peace until then’.¹

¹ H. Amborn, *Law as Refuge of Anarchy: Societies without Hegemony or State* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 122.

At the height of colonial rule, Meyer Fortes and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's seminal book *African Political Systems* (1940) manifested British social anthropology's interest in political rule without state. Pierre Clastres in France (*Société contre l'État*, 1974) as well as Fritz Kramer and Christian Sigrist in Germany (*Gesellschaften ohne Staat*, 1978) carried the debate into the post-1968 period, when anthropology got inspired by more radical theoretical thought.² In his last book *Law as Refuge of Anarchy*—published in German in 2016 and in English in 2019—Hermann Amborn went beyond the analysis of social institutions in societies without central rule. He made law the central theme and developed an idea of law as defence against domination and hegemony. This new perspective on anarchic societies derived from his decade-long study among the Burji-Konso group in Southern Ethiopia and his intense exchange with local intellectuals, key figures, and craftsmen. Amborn was ethnographer enough to see that non-hegemonic—polycephalic—societies of today are based within states that claim a monopoly on violence. Still, they exist. Amborn sketches the ambivalent character of law, capable of both stabilising and restricting power relations. Law is not set but must be constantly discussed and altered, when needed and, after all, agreed upon in large and inclusive social gatherings. In non-hegemonic societies religious and political functions are distributed to various, different dignitaries. Power monopolies are prevented through jointly set rules, multiple responsibilities, and the inevitable need to communicate, which brought up an elaborated tradition of speech and rhetorics in non-hegemonic societies. Crimes—such as theft—are considered less an individual offense but an attack on coexistence and the shared polity. Amborn held no illusions; such models were neither all perfect, nor could they easily be transferred to Western contexts. However, he did not sketch utopian dreams but describe lived realities. Furthermore, his ethnographic approach allowed him to question philosophy's ideal of a universal communicative rationality as proposed by Jürgen Habermas and others.

Remarkably, Amborn started his professional career as *Schweißfachingenieur* ('welding engineer').³ How did he—the son of a resistive protestant pastor in Hesse, born in the fateful year 1933—become a renowned ethnographer in Southern Ethiopia and a late voice in revived intellectual anarchism? Amborn found his way to anthropology, when he travelled through the Middle East via Syria,

² M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems* (London–New York, NY–Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1940); P. Clastres, *La Société contre l'État: Recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Collection Critique (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974; repr. 2011). F. Kramer and C. Sigrist, *Gesellschaften ohne Staat*, I: *Gleichheit und Gegenseitigkeit*, II: *Genealogie und Solidarität* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1978).

³ R. Husmann, ed., *Studienführer Ethnologie 1985: Directory of German Cultural Anthropologists and Anthropological Institutions* (Göttingen: Edition Herodot, 1985), 61.

Iraq, and Pakistan to India in the mid-1950s and encountered worlds that seemed strange and opaque to him.⁴ Back in Germany, he completed school and studied engineering at the Technical University of Munich, though this did not satisfy his interest and curiosity in the diversity of culture and people. Subsequently, he switched to Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität and continued studies in anthropology. In 1965, Amborn became part of Hermann Baumann's DFG project 'Fairy Tales and Myths in Africa', but he soon started to question the role and past of his professor, who had been a member of the Nazi party. Baumann—as Amborn recalled in a biographical interview—stood for a distant and disengaged ethnography,⁵ while he himself wanted to get engaged and involved. While Germany's contaminated post-war anthropology tried to widely avoid and ignore theoretical debate, he was interested in contemporary French intellectual thought, particularly in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism (later on also in the writings of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu). Unsurprisingly, Amborn won the reputation of a troublemaker. Luckily, Helmut Straube, a former student of Adolf Ellegard Jensen with a regional interest in Southern Ethiopia, was appointed chair of the Munich institute in 1968 and agreed to supervise Amborn's dissertation on iron smelting in the Nile Valley and its significance for sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ Being both engineer and anthropologist, Amborn's detailed and thorough work broke with German anthropology's speculative diffusionist approaches. In the 1970s and early 1980s—from Haile Selassie's last years through 1974's revolution to the establishment of the *Därg's* military dictatorship—Amborn linked up to and continued Straube's research on and with South Ethiopia's Dullay, Burği, and Konso at Munich University. He did extensive research on the social organisation of craftworkers in predominantly agrarian societies, which he perceived as both differentiating and integrative;⁷ on ecological

⁴ D. Haller, *Die Suche nach dem Fremden: Geschichte der Ethnologie in der Bundesrepublik 1945–1990* (Frankfurt am Main–New York, NY: Campus Verlag, 2012), 62.

⁵ 'Short Portrait: Hermann Amborn' in D. Haller, *Interviews with German Anthropologists: Video Portal for the History of German Anthropology post 1945*, <http://www.germananthropology.com/short-portrait/hermann-amborn/131> and Interview with Hermann Amborn, 4 July 2008, http://www.germananthropology.com/cms/media/uploads/4e312b5c8618c/interview_4e3827ed47164.pdf, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁶ H. Amborn, *Die Bedeutung der Kulturen des Niltals für die Eisenproduktion im subsaharischen Afrika*, Studien zur Kulturkunde, 39 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976).

⁷ H. Amborn, *Differenzierung und Integration: Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu Spezialisten und Handwerkern in südäthiopischen Agrargesellschaften*, Ethnologische Studien, 1 (München: Trickster, 1990).

knowledge;⁸ on cultural flexibility and innovation (on the base of Straube's unpublished ethnographic notes);⁹ on collective remembrance in social organisation and oral tradition;¹⁰ as well as on social conceptions of soul and personhood.¹¹ Furthermore, he studied South Ethiopia's Dullay language together with Gunter Minker and Hans-Jürgen Sasse, worked on myths and narratives, and supervised his student Alexander Kellner's doctorate on Burġi mythology.¹² His research was not only ethnographically rich and his interests intellectually broad and wide-ranging; his work and writings also aimed at reevaluating the Ethiopian South, marginalized by both Ethiopia's feudal North and international Ethiopian Studies, which were for a long time preoccupied with the acclaiming study of Ethiopia's feudal history, Christian orthodoxy, and the supposed civilisational role of plough agriculture.¹³ More so, he did not seek to ethnographically define the characteristics of a particular ethnic group, but—in the tradition of Jensen and Straube—he understood the entire region as historically interwoven and intertwined, which in his view did not prevent conflict and violence but certainly allowed mutual understanding and social ties. Subsequently, he himself established long-standing friendships and an intensive exchange with research partners and local intellectuals, such as Woche Guyo or Shako Otto,¹⁴ but also with the editors of the German anthropological journal *Trickster*, Werner Petermann and Reinhard Kapfer in particular, or the Munich law professor Heinrich Scholler, who had taught 1972–

⁸ H. Amborn, 'Ecocultural Control of Natural Energy Resources in Southern Ethiopia', *Aethiopica*, 15 (2012), 118–135.

⁹ H. Amborn, *Flexibel aus Tradition, Burji in Äthiopien und Kenia. Unter Verwendung der Aufzeichnungen von Helmut Straube*, Aethiopistische Forschungen, 71 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009).

¹⁰ H. Amborn, 'The Contemporary Significance of What Has Been. Three Approaches to Remembering the Past: Lineage, Gada, and Oral Tradition', tr. R. Schubert, *History in Africa*, 33 (2006), 53–84.

¹¹ H. Amborn, 'Soul and Personality as a Communal Bond', *Anthropos*, 96/1 (2001), 41–57.

¹² H. Amborn, G. Minker, and H. J. Sasse, *Das Dullay: Materialien zu einer ostkuschitischen Sprachgruppe*, Kölner Beiträge zur Afrikanistik, 6 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1980); H. Amborn, 'Toritte alladi. Erzähl uns eine Geschichte: Überlieferungen aus dem Dullay', *Trickster*, 9–10 (1982), 30–36; A. Kellner, *Mit den Mythen denken: Die Mythen der Burji als Ausdrucksform ihres Habitus*, Ethnologie, 29 (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2007).

¹³ H. Amborn, 'Polykephale Gesellschaften Südwest-Äthiopiens zu Zeiten der Sklavenjagden', in S. Brüne and H. Scholler, eds, *Auf dem Weg zum modernen Äthiopien: Festschrift für Bairu Tafla*, Recht und Politik in Afrika, 3 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 1–28.

¹⁴ H. Amborn, *Flexibel aus Tradition: Burji in Äthiopien und Kenia*, unter Verwendung der Aufzeichnungen von Helmut Straube, Aethiopistische Forschungen, 71 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), vii; S. Otto, 'The Nine Clans of the Konso', *Sociology Ethnology Bulletin*, 1/3 (1994), 80–92.

1975 at Addis Ababa University. For many years Amborn was an active participant and esteemed guest at various International Conferences of Ethiopian Studies—in Addis Ababa 1984 and 2000, Moscow 1986, East Lansing, MI 1994, Kyoto 1997, Hamburg 2003, Trondheim 2007, and Warsaw 2015. Students and colleagues appreciated his ethnographic knowledge (the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* valued him as author and field expert), his reflexive and critical stand, his intellectual wittiness, and certainly also his welcoming openness without airs and graces. Many of his former students became close friends and part of his private life, which he shared with the artist and church painter Ebtehad Becheir and the Romance philologist and literary translator Barbara Kleiner.

Probably the first of his texts that I read, still as an anthropology student at Munich university, was his introduction into Lévi-Strauss' structuralist thought.¹⁵ The essay I still refer to most often is probably 'Handlungsfähiger Diskurs', a fundamental reflection on anthropological ethics and a nuanced call for action research.¹⁶ Amborn's most popular book is undoubtedly his last, the above mentioned *Law as Refuge of Anarchy*, though his wittiest article may be 'Dr. Freud Was Not a Kafa',¹⁷ in which Amborn unveils a European gaze in explaining the *kallačča*, a wooden object, worn by certain dignitaries in Southern Ethiopia, and easily mistaken as a 'phallic ornament'. His critique aims far beyond the misunderstanding: how did European theoretical thought shape our anthropological perceptions and condition epistemologies and cultural understanding—and why should anthropological fieldwork be involved, engaged, and humble at the same time?

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¹⁵ H. Amborn, 'Strukturalismus: Theorie und Methode', in H. Fischer, ed., *Ethnologie: Einführung und Überblick*, Ethnologische Paperbacks, 3rd rev. edn (Berlin–Hamburg: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1992), 337–366.

¹⁶ H. Amborn, 'Handlungsfähiger Diskurs: Reflexionen zur Aktionsforschung', in W. Schmied-Kowarzik and J. Stagl, eds, *Grundfragen der Ethnologie: Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen Theorie-Diskussion*, Ethnologische Paperbacks, 2nd rev. and enl. edn (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1993), 129–150.

¹⁷ H. Amborn, 'Dr. Freud Was Not a Kafa: A Classical Case of Anthropological Overinterpretation from Ethiopia', *Anthropos*, 103 (2008), 15–32.

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In memoriam Walter W. Müller (1933–2024)

K. MARTIN HEIDE, Tützing

Walter Müller, Prof. emeritus für Semitistik an der Philipps-Universität Marburg, ist am 22. Oktober 2024 verstorben. Müllers Leben war geprägt durch seine intensive Beschäftigung mit den südsemitischen Sprachen und dem antiken Südarabien, motiviert durch den Forscherdrang, in die zu seiner Zeit noch weniger bekannten Gebiete der Orientalistik vorzudringen und diese der Gelehrtenwelt und der interessierten Öffentlichkeit zu erschließen.

Müller wurde am 26. September 1933 in Weipert-Neugeschrei im böhmischen Erzgebirge geboren. Von dort wurde seine Familie 1946 vertrieben und zog nach Beerfelden im hessischen Odenwald. Nach dem Besuch des Gymnasiums in Michelstadt, das er als Bester seines Jahrgangs verließ, begann Müller 1955 in