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ULRICH BRAUKÄMPER, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Review

IVO STRECKER, *Ethnographic Chiasmus: Essays on Culture, Conflict and
Rhetoric*

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by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

IVO STRECKER, *Ethnographic Chiasmus: Essays on Culture, Conflict and Rhetoric* = The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia V, edited by IVO STRECKER and JEAN LYDALL, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press – Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010, x + 400 pp., Glossary, map, 4 indices, € 29.90/\$ 34.95. ISBN 978–3–8258–7858–0 (LIT Verlag), ISBN 978–0–87013–990–1 (Michigan State University Press).

There is hardly any ethnic group in Africa that has so comprehensively been studied by social anthropologists as the Hamär of southern Ethiopia. A couple of researchers, Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, have continuously worked among them since 1970 and have provided numerous publications, documentary films and ethnographic collections at the universities of Mayence and Göttingen and in the museum of the South Omo Region at Jinka. They have also started a series entitled “The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia” and the book reviewed here is number V of it. It is a collection of articles which Ivo Strecker published between 1976 and 2009 on a topic he labeled “ethnographic chiasmus”.

This is not a subject frequently dealt with in human sciences. The term is derived from the ancient Greek letter *chi* and denotes the parallel elements of expression in particular verbal statements. It is said to be a prime mover in human thought and history and a rhetorical figure that helps to control the world people make for themselves to live in (pp. 4f.). To put this interrelation more pointedly: culture structures rhetoric and rhetoric structures culture. Speech and rhetoric have in fact always been one of the major concerns in Strecker’s ethnographic work. He invested enormous energy to acquire an exemplary mastering of the Hamär language enabling him to comprehend the subtle aspects embedded in rhetoric with regard to value concepts, emotions, symbolic implications and behavioural patterns. A focus is laid on the analysis of the multi-faceted field of organizing the interpersonal relations in a meaningful way and particularly dealing with the settling of conflicts in a social environment, characterized to a noteworthy extent by harsh living conditions and violence. Strecker considers these aspects obviously without falling into the (neo)functionalist trap of advocating a general teleology of human beliefs and actions.

The 16 articles of the book – besides the introduction, the prologue and the epilogue – are structured into three parts, which are entitled “rhetorical creation of culture and self”, “rhetorics of war and peace” and “rhetorical articulation of knowledge and belief”. As the different aspects overlap in manifold ways, this division can only meet the demands of a more or less approximate categorization. The respective core areas are, however, clearly attributed to the three sections.

In their trilogy “The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia” (1979) Strecker and Lydall ventured on a new type of anthropological analysis and interpretation which, at the prelude of the postmodern movement, they labeled “naïve ethnography”. Many of the texts were recorded during that time of early field research, some of them still are unpublished in the notebooks, and are now being used to back the arguments in the debates and discussions on ethnographic chiasmus. Essential features of Hamär culture are hidden behind simple or sophisticated forms of rhetoric and can be elaborated for a descriptive ethnography as well as for a general theory of topics such as ritual actions, magic, honour phenomena, moral issues, consciousness of natural phenomena, landscape, transmission of local knowledge, enculturation, gender relations, discourses on socio-political hierarchy, predicaments of peace and war. The case of the Hamär clearly corresponds to the prevailing patterns of southern Ethiopia insofar as “Theirs is a culture of boasting and not of humility” (p. 63). A man should prove himself before he marries by hunting dangerous animals or by killing male foes. If he fulfils this demand he is ritually anointed and becomes an integrate part of what I have labeled the “meritorious complex”. Another essential point which Strecker emphasizes is the correlation of speech situations and social control. According to his interpretation (e.g., p. 105), it can not effectively be achieved because of the lack of a central authority and the “permanence of anarchy” in Hamär society. In order to attain and secure at least the minimal quantity of social control which is indispensable for the functioning of a society, a strategy of extensive speaking is required. This is a weighty argument to explain the eminent role of speaking activities in egalitarian groups such as the Hamär. The valuation of verbal articulation and eloquence can, however, also be regarded as a common (pan-Ethiopic) cultural trait of many ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia including those possessing sophisticated hierarchic organizations.

Strecker explicitly aims at deriving his conclusions from the contents of the texts in a highly empathic way and not so much in a “positivist-minded” strategy of western scholarship. This type of research is nevertheless a bit strange for scholars (including myself) who advocate a scientific “rigidity” by presenting large quantities of ethnographic and historical facts and comparative materials as well as explanatory hypotheses. One has to admit that his type of scientific approach is in many respects different from that of anthropological practice and theory, which might be called mainstream.

Ivo Strecker likes to start his considerations from eminent ideas of philosophers such as Aristotle, Vico, Schopenhauer, Heidegger and from classics of anthropology as Malinowski, Benedict, Bourdieu, Appadurai, Lévi-Strauss, Geertz. In one case, he even dedicated an article to a colleague, James Woodburn, for his basic theories on the ideas on authority and particularly on gen-

Reviews

erosity and sharing in egalitarian societies (pp. 136ff.). But sometimes he also quarrels on diverging positions with colleagues who worked on neighbours of the Hamär. For example, Strecker would by no means agree on Katsuyoshi Fukui's conviction that the Bodi will go on killing others for ever (p. 171). A prominent concern of the author in the book reviewed here – as in many of his writings before – is to render homage to Aike Berinas, called Baldambe, the key informant and close friend of the author who died in 1995.

“Ethnographic chiasmus”, although it consists of published articles, will be welcomed by the community of anthropologists and éthiopisants as part of an evolving thesaurus which is so far unique for a small ethnic group in southern Ethiopia.

Ulrich Braukämper, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

JOHN MARKAKIS, *Ethiopia. The Last Two Frontiers*, = Eastern Africa Series, Woodbridge et al.: James Currey, 2011, 383 pp. Price: GB-£ 40,-. ISBN: 978-1-84701-033-9.

General history on modern Ethiopia¹ tends to focus on the central Ethiopian highland empire, its institutions, its historical trajectories, its relations to neighbouring people, and finally in post-Adwa Ethiopia, on the relations with the neighbouring colonial powers. Following the *great tradition* in Ethiopian Studies these books treat the periphery of this empire with very little interest to the nation-building project and the relation between centre and periphery rather vaguely in terms of “unification” of the Ethiopian nation state.

Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers is yet another general history of Ethiopia, but John Markakis, author of numerous books and essays on Ethiopia, brings together conclusions of his long research experience (spanning three successive governments) with Ethiopian politics, and makes the periphery of the state his focal point of entry: thus the book offers a timely and comprehensive perspective on the nation state-building process, from ca. 1890 up to today, and approaches the historical changes and continuities of the centre-periphery relations under three successive regimes. The study's focus is on the lowland peripheries “because its part in the story is little known and, even more significantly, because this region poses a critical test for the nation-state building

¹ Cp. BAHRU ZWEDE, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1991* = Eastern African Studies, Oxford: James Currey – Athens, OH: Ohio University Press – Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, ²2001; HAROLD GOLDEN MARCUS, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, ²2002.