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Review

ANDREA NICHOLAS, *From Process to Procedure: Elders' Mediation and Formality in Central Ethiopia*

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ANDREA NICHOLAS, *From Process to Procedure: Elders' Mediation and Formality in Central Ethiopia* = AethFor 75, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011. IX + 396 pp. Price: € 76.00. ISBN: 978-3-447-06611-2.

The book gives insight into customary conflict resolution in an area that has been inhabited mainly by two ethnic groups: the Oromo who constitute the majority, and the rather large minority of the Amhara. Both groups have been living in close neighbourhoods or settlements for decades. Though people are conscious of their ethnic identity and transmit it to their children through their patrilineages, everyday life is very similar and intermarriage is common. Most people are bilingual and are involved in the same social institutions, except for the *gadaa* – the Oromo age- and generation-system in which only Oromo males include active participants. The category of “elders” (referring to elderly male household heads) is central to both groups, and the “things that elders do” are the mediation between conflicting parties, and hereby the insurance of peace and stability of the whole society.

Focusing on the role of elders in mediation, Nicholas presents the results of 23 months of fieldwork in the Ada'a Liban district of Eastern Šawa, Central Ethiopia, some 50 km south of the capital Addis Abäba. In her descriptions of elders' involvement in marriage negotiations and conciliation processes, she outlines how they try to fulfil two major challenges: to meet the interest of the general public to restore peace and social order in the area, and at the same time to meet the interest of the two conflicting parties.

Nicholas does not include the analysis of individual conflicts. Referring to linguistic pragmatic theory, she focuses on the “power of formality” (p. 301), which can influence and confine the opinions of those involved. The formality underlying mediation procedures is the result of “accumulated knowledge and experience [...] of many generations” (p. 3) and the variety of possible procedures constitutes “a set of effective tools” which according to Nicholas “ascertain or at least strongly promote a positive outcome of the process and at the same time contain safe guarding mechanisms to prevent a possible breakdown of the mediation” (ibid.).

For cases of mediation and conflict resolution this means that the words that are chosen, the procedures and ritualized actions that are prescribed predetermine people's reactions and feelings in a way that makes peaceful conflict resolution more probable. Individual elders are appointed to act as mediators on the basis of their experience, reputation and wisdom. In their role as mediators the elders will make the appropriate choices within the cultural limits and actively use the most effective – standardized – procedure.

With an emphasis on mediation instead of individual mediators the aim of this book is to show how standardized communication and procedural stead-

iness not only provide orientation, but also create a feeling of safety through the commitment of all involved actors and obligation for future behaviour.

The book is divided into four parts. After an introduction which lays out the methodology and theoretical framework, in part I (“The Institution of Eldership”) the status of elders and the connected cultural expectations are defined over ten pages. Part II and III constitute the core of the book. On more than 100 pages the author outlines the “Procedure in Mediation”. First, the local definition of conflict is explained and as well as how elders choose their ‘cases’. She then introduces the involved actors: the culprit and the victim, their respective social networks that take sides in a case, and then the third party consisting of selected elders who act as mediators or judges. Very central in my opinion – though not very long – is the next part where local concepts of peace and reconciliation are explained. “Inner peace can be said to be the central concept of Oromo society” (p. 80), the author states, and this idea obviously underlies all the mediation efforts of the elders involved.

Next, the author goes into explaining different phases of mediation procedures by describing in detail the ideal sequence of actions in four typical contexts that need mediators: marriage, bride abduction, beating and injury, and homicide.

In Part III (“Ritual and Communication”) with also about 100 pages the symbolic meaning and communicative power of objects, ritualized behaviour and ritualized speech as used in mediation is explained. While Part II is rather descriptive of possible cases of conflict and how they can be resolved, in Part III the reader gets more in-depth information on the meaning of the various procedural steps and elements mentioned in the different cases.

The final part on “The Question of Power” shows the limitations of elders’ involvement in legal cases. It also puts the issue into a wider context by explaining the meaning of other institutions such as lineage and *gadaa* assemblies, the role of the church and of spirit mediums, the village tribunal and the state court.

The book is very well written and the reader is clearly guided through the book. The descriptions of the mediation procedures in Part II are very detailed and clear, so that such practices could even be reinstated if eventually forgotten. In Part III a lot of space is given to the explanation of symbolic meanings of objects, institutions, actions and places, both in the context of mediation but also in other contexts, so that the reader gets a deep understanding of how certain terms have to be understood while reading the more analytical parts of the text.

The data presented in the book stems from an abundance of literature (including unpublished material from Ethiopia) and from own research: according to the information given in footnotes and in the appendix the author refers to 382 interviews made with 145 informants. Besides, participant observation

has played a major role in this research so that ‘cultural ideal’ as usually described by informants as well as ‘actual behaviour’ both have entered the descriptions of the author. The numerous cases (37 based on observation and interview, 57 cases based on interview only) discussed contribute to this impression. It should also be mentioned that the author is rather transparent about how data was raised: in the introduction (especially pp. 36–42) the research context is depicted and exact information is given about date, context and origin of any given information in the footnotes and in the appendix.

Though it may have been a conscious decision of the author who wanted to focus on ideal patterns and sequences of mediation processes and not on concrete events or individual actors, one weakness of the text is the fact that the local people do not directly appear in the text. Their voices are only heard as cleaned and generalized voices when typical sayings or formulae are quoted with very few exceptions in footnotes. Especially in Part III on “Ritual and Communication” one can find examples of typical blessings, curses, oaths and parables, but no indigenous explanations are found in the text as real quotes. Therefore, in many places it is not clear whether the presented ‘ideal’ or ‘typical’ statements are derived from the researcher’s accumulated knowledge or represent a kind of summary of statements of several key informants (as implied in footnotes). The presented case studies are summaries of the author based on own observations and interviews, but original accounts of the people involved in the conflict cannot be found. The reader is excluded from the process of analysis and also has no access to the original feelings and expressions of the people involved.

Secondly I would like to address some stylistic and formal aspects. The structure and layout of the book still very much resemble a thesis: the table of contents is very detailed and could have been simplified, and the appendix is also too long and could have been structured better. Instead of listing the names of 147 informants alphabetically, it would have been better to order them for example by sex, ethnic background or relevance for the research, as surely not all 147 informants have given equally detailed accounts and explanations. To give every interview source in a footnote and to list up all situations of (really participant?) observation and informal interviews in the appendix may be required for a Ph.D. thesis, but are not needed in the publication of this book. Instead, an index would have greatly contributed to the readability of this voluminous publication.

All in all the book is very readable and may, aside from the academic audience, be very welcomed by the local people themselves as a detailed document of a highly valuable social institution that has been contributing to the peaceful coexistence of the people in Ada’a Liban and can eventually lose significance in the future.

The topic presented in this book is also of relevance to the present. In Ethiopia today, efforts can be observed that acknowledge and give space to local ways of solving conflicts and establishing peace at least in certain areas of justice. As stated in a recent study by the Ethiopian Arbitration and Conciliation Center in Addis Abāba, customary dispute resolution mechanisms have remained operative in many parts of Ethiopia, not only in rural but also in urban areas. In some regional states, they run alongside the official state law, and are actually more influential and effective than the formal legal system.¹ Such studies may contribute to a greater recognition and preservation of traditional ways of resolving disputes.

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PINO SCHIRRIPIA (ed.), *Health System, Sickness and Social Suffering in Mekelle (Tigray – Ethiopia)*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010. 147 pp. Price: € 29.90. ISBN: 978–3–643–10952–1.

Since 2007 Pino Schirripa (Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Sapienza University of Rome) has been leading an ethnographic project on health, sickness and social suffering in Təgray (Ethiopia). His research team, originally made up of only three students working on their master theses, has continuously risen every year, reaching a number of 15 members. Within the general research objectives, each student selected peculiar areas of interest, including risk perception, delivery, agency and prostitution.

Seminars and lectures were organised in Mäqälä in 2008 and 2009 to disseminate the first results of this survey. More recently, at a conference titled “Politiche, salute, migrazioni: studi sul Corno d’Africa” (“Policies, health, migrations: studies on the Horn of Africa”), which took place in Rome in June 2012, a large part of the young anthropologists who joined Prof. Schirripa in Ethiopia had the opportunity to present and discuss their work.

Nevertheless, it is only with the publication of *Health System, Sickness and Social Suffering in Mekelle (Tigray – Ethiopia)* in 2010, that some of these studies could finally reach a wider audience and readership.

The volume – which develops the contents of the seminar held in Mäqälä in 2008 – opens with a general introduction, compiled by the editor, and includes three essays written by Alessia Villanucci, Emanuele Bruni and Aurora Massa, the very first collaborators of the research team.

¹ ገብሬ ይንቲሶ – ፈቃደ አዘዘ – አሰፋ ፍሰሃ (አዳኞች), GEBRE YNTISO – FEKADE AZEZE – ASSEFA FISEHA (eds.), ባህላዊ የግጭት መፍቻ በኢትዮጵያ – *Customary Dispute Resolution in Ethiopia*, አዲስ አበባ ፤ የኢትዮጵያ የግልግል ዳኝነት የማስማማትና ዕርቅ ማዕከል – Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Arbitration and Conciliation Center, 2012, p. 18.