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JON ABBINK, African Studies Centre, Leiden, and Vrije Universiteit,
Amsterdam

Review of

HERMANN AMBORN, *Flexibel aus Tradition: Burji in Äthiopien und
Kenia. Unter Verwendung der Aufzeichnungen von Helmut
Straube. With Explanation of Some Cultural Items in English*

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Reviews

of people who are neglected and/or mistreated by the state authorities. Many projects, for example villagization and resettlement during the *Därg* regime, went so tremendously wrong that a high amount of sensitivity and care is demanded to avoid disastrous mistakes of this kind in the future. It can be stated that the book does not exclusively serve academic purposes, but it can also be recommended as a basic reader for applied social sciences.

The case studies are primarily descriptive, but most of them try to fit into a theoretical framework offered by scientific authorities in this field such as Michael Cernea. Most of the authors have successfully combined quantitative research and the use of statistical sources of information with qualitative research methods such as structured and biographical interviews. Given the broad range of introductory remarks and case studies, redundancies and repetitions of data cannot be avoided. References to literary sources could sometimes have been more precise by adding the numbers of pages.

To sum up, the topic of this book is so important for present-day Ethiopia that its publication can be said to be overdue. It is desirable that the editors and the authors of the case studies continue their efforts to study the causes, effects and consequences of spatial mobility in the Horn of Africa.

Ulrich Braukämper, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

HERMANN AMBORN, *Flexibel aus Tradition: Burji in Äthiopien und Kenia. Unter Verwendung der Aufzeichnungen von Helmut Straube. With Explanation of Some Cultural Items in English* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 71. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009. xvii + 327 pp. Index, 4 maps, 18 photographs, glossary. € 64,-. ISBN: 978-3-447-06083-7.

With this book the Munich anthropologist Hermann Amborn has presented the impressive result of long-term field research on the Burji people, an ethno-linguistic group of ca. 80,000 people who live in Southern Ethiopia and in northern Kenya (mainly Marsabit), and in fact are currently spread out over a large area. They call themselves D'aashi, and linguistically they are part of the 'East Cushitic' Burji-Konso cluster. They formed a, what Amborn calls, polycephalous society, without a centralized structure and with a pervasive dualism in their social and territorial organization. Their neighbours in Southern Ethiopia are the Gedeo, Konso, Dullay, D'iraasha, Koore, Borana-Oromo and Guji-Oromo.

In part, the work is a more or less conventional ethnography, with sections on the economy, settlement structure, customary land law, social organization, personhood, and worldview. Two more analytical chapters (7

and 8) treat history, and the contemporary situation, and cultural identity of the Burji. This focus on the 'traditional' sedentary Burji society is in a way paradoxical, because more than a third of the Burji live outside their original homeland (I would estimate it even much higher), and they show quite divergent social adaptations and ways of life, calling into question, as Amborn rightly says (p. xvii), the very concept of 'ethnic group' as a label for this people.

The interesting aspect of this unique book is the combination of Amborn's account with the previously unpublished fieldwork notes and manuscript sketches made in 1955 and 1973–74 by the German ethnologist Helmut Straube (d. 1984), who also was based at the University of Munich. Amborn has taken the latter's texts as the core of this monograph and has embedded and 'updated' them (in a different font) with his own data and analyses on the Burji. The book's appearance as a classical, territorially focused ethnography is thus in part dictated by the focus on Straube's earlier account. Straube, says Amborn, aimed at a 'holistic-synoptic' account (p. 6), and remarkably, while Amborn is not convinced of the feasibility of such an enterprise, he still largely follows it in this book. This is not a disadvantage, because as a result we get an extremely informative account of the Burji, although readers at times may have wanted more stories, narrative accounts, biographical tales and citations from Burji individuals themselves. Nevertheless, the book discusses the processes of change in Burji society, and also gives a good view on changing modes and strategies of doing anthropological fieldwork.

This study is amazingly detailed and rich in its survey of Burji agriculture, social relations and religious culture. In Chapter 3 the authors show how the economic and the social domains are integrated in an intricate agrarian system that stressed durability and sustainability over the long run, thus guaranteeing food security and surplus. There was no plough agriculture (virtually impossible and potentially destructive), but labour-intensive hoe and digging stick cultivation, with work teams and collective maintenance labour on terracing, waterways, roads, etc. and a cohesive social organization that helped in maintaining the intensive productive economy. It was organized via a complex annual calendar of activities (pp. 99–102). Amborn and Straube see the Burji as part of an 'agrarian intensification complex' in the Southern Ethiopian region. The number and variety of crops among the Burji was remarkable and integrated in a mixed cultivation system geared to avert risk. Boohee-Burji, their main town, was a node in profitable trans-regional trade, which in the old days even attracted coastal Somalis. Although the Burji cannot be called a herding people, livestock was an integrated part of their economy, tuned to the agrarian activities. But the Burji continuously suffered from the raiding by their pastoralist neighbours in the lowlands, the Guji, which even made them

give up cultivation sites in the eastern part of their country. Burji society also had craft workers (pp. 56–57) – blacksmiths, potters, tanners, and weavers, of which only the latter craft could economically maintain itself.

The violent inclusion of Burji society into the Ethiopian state since 1897 struck a very severe blow at this elaborate system, as well as at population figures, which plummeted with at least 70 % in the first decades after the conquest (diseases, slavery, killing, forced labour). But the core elements of the Burji production system are still (or perhaps again, after the recovery) in place, and are now augmented by successful trading activities of the Burji, and by massive out-migration. The theme of the book, as referred to in the title, is that of the pragmatic and versatile adaptive skills of the Burji. As an intermediate society dependent on agriculture, trade and exchange flows with neighbours they historically developed the ability to adapt to the challenging political and economic changes of the past century, and maintained this to date. Trade activities notably increased during the 20th century, perhaps so as to make up for lost wealth and due to the destruction of their agrarian economy.

As the authors make clear in Chapter 4, the social organization the Burji had, apart from the nine core clans (the ideal number, although it increased) a complex dualist generation grading system with two parallel generation set cycles (*hági* and *gáda*) and described in great detail, a dualist territorial organization between north and south (still largely respected in their self-identity references), and a dualism in agrarian cultivation zones between east (*mírğa*) and west (*bitáa*), with correlates of soil type and cultivation practices. This chapter also describes the life cycle rituals and the customs around birth, circumcision, marriage, etc. The clan system is treated in detail as well, and Amborn rightly notes (p. 132) that the conceptualization of ‘clan’ (= *gósa*, a common term also elsewhere in Southern Ethiopia) among the Burji poses problems because of its different levels of inclusiveness. Commonly it refers to a patrilineal descent group within which a person is not allowed to marry, but this is used flexibly by Burji, as new ‘clans’ have emerged (first as maximal lineages) from the old ones. Clans also have other specific mutual relations and rankings with regard to marriage rules and ritual or behavioural obligations.

The fifth chapter treats Burji customary law regarding access to land, which informally still plays a role in today’s Ethiopia, despite the superimposed national law (under which all land is state property). The evidence shows that various forms of access to, use of, and rights to dispose of land, apply, although ‘real’ private ownership, now or in the past, did not exist, probably due to the strongly collective emphasis in the Burji economic system.

In the chapter on worldview and views on the cosmic order (Chapter 6) the authors give an overview of Burji traditional religion, myths, and ritual, and their connections to the clan and *gáda* system. But they hardly mention the current religious affiliations: a large majority of Burji are converted to Ethiopian Christianity, Protestant-Evangelical Christianity and Islam (especially in northern Kenya). In the chapter, the role of sacrificial rites (e.g., to the ancestors) and of the *gánni*, the ritual clan officiators, and clan elders (*gosánga ana*) is highlighted and claimed to be still very important. In addition, the authors treat the role of other, more political, leaders (the *woma* and *dayna*). The chapter closes with a section on the importance of holy and ritual sites, which form a prominent topography of the sacred, notably in Southern Burjiland.

Chapters 7 and 8 respectively discuss the place of the Burji in the wider historical-cultural picture of Northeast Africa (migration history, relations to other peoples, the reasons for Burji village and town formation) and the emergence of new forms of cultural and ethnic identification among the dispersed Burji people. On the latter point, Amborn gives interesting reflections on the impact of dispersal and widely varying socio-economic adaptations on 'Burji identity'. As mentioned, processes of change have significantly transformed Burji society, and both the accounts of Straube and Amborn give plenty of evidence of this. The large out-migration, due to either security pressures or agrarian decline, has produced a 'diaspora' of tens of thousands of people living in Kenya and elsewhere in Ethiopia. Southern Burji villages are largely deserted as a result. Economic activities have de-emphasized agriculture in favour of trading. 'Burji identity' is a tenuous concept, because people of Burji origin differ strongly as to religious adherence, social class, economic activities, geographical location, alliances, and knowledge of the Burji language (many have lost it). Still, a residue of underlying Burji cultural notions, partly derived from routines from traditional religion, remains relevant as a reference point among people of Burji origin (cf. p. 285). Various forms of adaptation thus do not seem to cancel out underlying ideas of commonality or identity, and herein again lies the versatility and flexibility that Amborn sees as a characteristic of the Burji (p. 287). Little, however, is said in this chapter on the most recent politico-economic developments in southern Ethiopia and their impact on Burji life: I mean the prosaic world of peasant associations, *k'ebeles*, elections, development efforts, agricultural extension, etc. And how, for instance, has the formation of the 'special *woreda*' of Burji impacted on their status and group identity? This might be the subject of a future political-anthropological case-study.

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This book is a quite valuable addition to the ethnology of Southern Ethiopia, an encyclopaedic overview of a fascinating society and people. In addition, it teaches us about the prerequisites of a durable, sustainable agrarian way of life, which was not geared at short-term maximization of production and profit but offered security and a good living standard in this pre-industrial society, based on intricate and specialized knowledge of the natural environment and of production conditions. It thus has relevance for 'development studies', which often plead to bring in external models and projects, and are not based on an appreciation of either the intricacies and relevance of local production systems or of local aspirations of well-being.

In a sense it is a pity that this interesting and well-researched book was published in German, because this limits its range of readership in both Ethiopia and abroad. But as Straube's notebook accounts were in German a translation would indeed have been a big job. The book is well produced, but in the list of references at least two books mentioned in the text are missing (Harrison 1901 and San Marzano 1935). What I also missed were contemporary photographs of Burji life and people, as all photos reproduced in the book were taken by Straube.

Jon Abbink, African Studies Centre, Leiden, and
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

ELIZABETH E. WATSON, *Living Terraces in Ethiopia. Konso Landscape and Development* = Eastern African Series. Woodbridge – New York: James Currey 2009. 256 pp. Preis: £ 45,00. ISBN: 9781847010056.

Erfreulicherweise hat in jüngerer Zeit das Interesse an differenzierten landwirtschaftlichen Methoden Afrikas zugenommen. Für Südäthiopien steht beispielhaft Konso mit seinen ausgedehnten Terrassenanlagen, die ganze Hügelketten von der Talsohle bis zum Kamm überziehen. Immer wieder haben Reisende und Ethnologen von ihnen berichtet. Elizabeth Watson hat nun ein Werk vorgelegt, das die Ökonomie und Landschaftsgestaltung der Konso im kulturellen Kontext in umfassender Weise darstellt und analysiert.

Ihr Buch basiert auf langjähriger und sorgfältiger ethnologischer Feldforschung, die sich in mehreren Etappen über einen Zeitraum von 1995 bis 2008 erstreckte. Während ihres Aufenthaltes in Konso lebte sie vorwiegend in Buso, einer der größten autochthonen Ortschaften.

Im Fokus steht die Konstruktion von Landschaft als komplexer Prozess, der weit in die Geschichte zurückgreift und sich bis in unsere Tage fortsetzt. Prägend ist die intensive, überwiegend im Hackbau betriebene Landwirt-