Van De Loo, Joseph (with the collaboration of Bilow Kola). - *Guji Oromo. Culture in Southern Ethiopia. Religious Capabilities in Rituals and Songs*
Monsieur Thomas Zitelmann

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ses fonctions dans l’institution religieuse et dans la société (François Houtart) ; questionnement sur les offres des Églises et les demandes africaines (Michael Singleton). Puis, à nouveau, le sincrétisme religieux qui ne cesse de faire problème, revient avec l’exposé de Gerrie Ter Harr, engagée dans une recherche sur le ministère de guérison d’Emmanuel Milingo, archevêque de Lusaka entre 1969 et 1981. Nous sommes ici dans le contexte de la Zambie post-coloniale où recherche d’identité et libération sont au centre des cures d’Emmanuel Milingo. On sait ce qu’il advint : il fut destitué de son siège africain et transféré à Rome. Enfin, c’est par une discussion du pasteur Christoffer Grundmann, à propos du phénomène même de guérison en cette fin de xx\textsuperscript{e} siècle et de son interprétation théologique, que s’achève l’ouvrage.

Marlène SHAMAY


A good ethnography presents data in a way so that readers may draw their own conclusions. Placing text into context helps the reader to develop a distance from the authors’ intentions and biases. For readers familiar with the last decade of events in Ethiopia, Father Van de Loo’s study on Guji culture in Southern Ethiopia may gain this quality.

During the period of the Ethiopian dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991), very few ethnographic studies among Oromo-speaking groups, based on actual fieldwork in their territories inside Ethiopia, appeared. Surprisingly, all of them were done by Catholic missionaries, starting with Lambert Bartels’ study on the western Matcha Oromo, followed by Bruno Lonferrini’s book on the Jamjam Guji\textsuperscript{16}, and now added to by that of Joseph Van de Loo based upon missionary work (1982-1988) among the Mati Guji. A further consideration might help to explain this singularity. The period of the rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam was also one of rising pan-Oromo Nationalism, in opposition to the regime. Empirical studies which might have promoted the idea of an historical and cultural distinctiveness of the Oromo, with regard to Ethiopia as a cultural area and a state, became discouraged. That excluded many scholars, including a growing number of Oromo scholars, from their proper source, the people. While sections among the Protestant missionaries took side with Oromo nationalism (in particular regarding the persecution of individual leaders of the protestant Mekane-Yesus Church), the Catholic missionaries did not give a political character to cultural distinctiveness, but included it into their missionary approach. Ever since Cardinal Masaija started a missionary endeavour among the Oromo (during the nineteenth

century), the approach to the people was combined with a sensitive accomodation to local customs\textsuperscript{17}. Names like M. de Salviac, A. Mizzi, W. Schmidt and J. P. Michels, stand prominently in the study of “Galla (i.e. Oromo) religion”, even if some of their speculations appear today somewhat outdated. Catholic approaches towards “the religion of the Galla” were once remarkably summarized by Father Wilhelm Schmidt in his proposal to preserve ceremonies and festivals as “popular expressions of the natural—and church-year”\textsuperscript{18}. On the other hand, for some of the Protestant missionaries this preservation of tradition became part of their very concept of “sin” (cubbu), preached among the Oromo. Father Van de Loo’s study is firmly rooted in the Catholic tradition. Regardless of this, the virtue of his study lies, among other things, in the fact that it is an ethnographic account done during a period where hardly anybody else was able to do fieldwork in this part of Ethiopia.

The Guji—counting about one million people—live in central Sidamo and form a subgroup of the Oromo of Ethiopia (about half of the Ethiopian population). The Oromo are generally well-known for the legacy of a generation—and age-grading system (gada), and the cattle-breeding Guji are considered to be one of the groups where this legacy remains a living tradition. Structuring the life-cycle with symbols and rites of transition is part and parcel of highly developed notion of age and time. Father Van de Loo attempts to place the related rites and songs into a description of the routine of everyday life of a pastoralist economy. This description forms the background for a discussion of two central notions of Guji ethic and religion: nagea (“peace”) and ayaana (“sacred life-force”, “destiny”, “feast”, “favourable day”).

For the Guji, elements of social structure, the gada system and some of its religious components have been earlier described by E. Haberland and J. Hinnant\textsuperscript{19}. Father Van de Loo does not actually describe an observed gada system and its ceremonalization and ritualization, but reconstructs an assumed normative content from songs remembered by his informants (p. 33). The author quotes extensively original texts and translations of songs sung during Guji rituals, during collective working parties or for leisure. This is a most important virtue of the study, because it opens and preserves part of the oral traditions of a particular Oromo sub-group for secondary analysis and for future (and literate) generations among the Oromo themselves. Father Van de Loo’s descriptions of how social, political and economic institutions are linked to values of fertility, abundance and the upkeeping of good (peaceful) communal relationships are convincing. The evidence of oral culture is given in Afaan Oromo and in English. Since there are not yet any established rules to transcribe dialects of Afaan Oromo, philologists may find numerous examples for intervention. Surprisingly the author does not distinguish between two crucial Arabic loans in


\textsuperscript{18} SCHMIDT, Wilhelm, “Die Religion der Galla”, \textit{Annali Lateanensi}, I, 1937: 152.

Afaan Oromo, *ardaa* ("fertile land") and *aadaa* ("tradition", "culture"), since for both concepts *ardaa* is used constantly (see glossary p. 339). Is this just a variance of the colloquial or due to the authors' (under-)estimations about the influence of islam on Guji traditions and identity (p. 288)?

Due to the authors' method of reconstructing Guji traditions by oral evidence, a constant tension appears between the ideal norms embodied in the accounts of oral culture and the practical developments. What we learn is that at a certain stage in the development of the *gada* cycle, the ritual transition of age-sets and power ossified since the early 1960s. The same person whom E. Haberland observed to become the future *gada* leader in the late 1950s, was still in office in the early 1980s! The normative rules of the system to change leadership every five years (not eight years as in other cases among the Oromo) was abolished since then (p. 25). All the same, Father Van de Loo constantly cherishes the allusion of normative continuity. Although his sympathy is clearly with tradition, his descriptions go beyond it. The defense of "traditional" Guji values by some elders went hand in hand with a cooperation with the regime under Mengistu Haile Mariam while those younger ones who attacked such values joined the Protestant Pentecostal movement, with its total disregard for both "traditional" culture and state-power (pp. 291 sq). More accounts like that would considerably help to understand what drives the social dynamics among the Oromo today.

Somewhat disappointing is the discussion of the concept of *ayaana* among the Guji. L. Bartels wrote extensively about that concept among the Macha Oromo of Western Wallagga, meaning the creative life-force attributed to God (waqa) which can be personalized, feared and invoked as a manifestation of the supreme God. Father Van de Loo attempts to prove the existence of similar concepts among the Guji. It poses a riddle why the author constantly quotes his evidence from Bartels' text on the Macha Oromo, although he claims having "found numerous analogous axioms among the Guji" (p. 146).

In his preface to Father Van de Loo's book, Paul Baxter seeks to place this view on a local Oromo culture into a wider frame of collective political, i.e. national, aspirations among the Oromo. By doing that, he creates a paradox. Essentialist claims like "all Oromo share basic and crucial sets of understanding", his speaking about a "shared series of core values, symbols and modes of thought" (p. 9), and his fear that "Oromo oral literature is threatened by external cultural domination and modern life" (p. 10) betray a strain of Herderian-style, romantic cultural nationalism. But P. Baxter also stresses the instrumental character of words in oral poetry, he supposes a constructed culture based on "shared metaphors and images based in shared experiences" (p. 10). What, and that is the case among the numerous Oromo, if experience is not shared any longer? If the oral poets indeed juggle with verbal complexities and develop "a kind of double talk" (p. 11), any essentialism for Oromo culture can only be claimed, if one attributes to it a basic flexibility, and a style, not so different from what D. N. Levine identified as "wax and gold", as the art of double-meaning, in Amharic oral poetry 20. In the final analysis I believe that flexibil-

ity, not inflexible essentialism, gives a better clue as to how local Oromo culture is paradigmatic for modes of behaviour in other spheres of interaction, including national politics.

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