Rhetorics of local knowledge

Introduction

The Hamar live in the mountains and steep valleys, on the high plateaus and low-lying plains north of Lake Turkana (formerly Lake Rudolf) and Lake Chew Bahir (formerly Lake Stefanie). This region is part of the East African Rift Valley which is not only geologically very varied but also has different habitats where—until now—natural species survive that have elsewhere been extinguished (leopards, baboons, dick-dick antelope, ostriches and others). Furthermore, the various ecological niches have also provided the opportunity for ancient forms of culture to persist.

Some of the groups of present day southern Ethiopia have a cultural repertoire that includes the lyre, the head rest, the hooked and forked stick (called in Hamar respectively *goala, borkoto* and *woko*), which are at least eight thousand years old and belong to the archaic cultural strata that preceded the civilisations of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia.

The way of life in these "Altvölker" (as A.E. Jensen titled them and thereby antagonised many 'progressive' anthropologist) can help us sense and understand some elements of early human existence. Or, put differently, current ethnographic work in southern Ethiopia—be it with the Hamar or their neighbours the Arbore, Dassanech, Nyangatom, Kara, Mursi, Bodi, Aari, Maale, Tsamai, Konso, Karmit, Borana or others—widens our *interpretative horizon* by helping us to discover what life might have been like before the rise of North-East Africa's "high cultures", and, perhaps more importantly, how with the use of only a minimum of material objects life can still be

satisfying and provide each member of society with a strong sense of pride and self-esteem.

When, together with my wife Jean Lydall and our one-year-old son Theodore, I arrived in Hamar more than thirty years ago, I sometimes had the feeling as if I had 'dropped out of history'. Here is what I wrote in my diary when, for the first time ever, I spent a night at a Hamar cattle camp:

> 18.6.1970: We walk off together and arrive in the camp as night falls. There is a full moon and as the cattle, bathed in its light, arrive, I am struck by the lightness of their colouration: yellow, grey, a grey that is almost blue, light red, white and their movement is so relaxed and careful. We sit or lie on cowhides and the men, all of them young, talk and talk. They use their hands a lot, speak almost with their whole bodies. I wish I could understand what they are saying. Later, when it is almost midnight, we are served milk and blood mixed in huge calabashes. When I taste the smoke with which the calabashes have been cleaned, as I drink the milk and blood mixture and look across the Omo plain which is coloured red by fires burning on the steppes below, I have the feeling that I have dropped out of history (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 15-17).

Local knowledge always has a historic dimension, and as we conduct our ethnographic researches, we do not only encounter knowledge that is characteristic of specific places but also of particular times. We should never forget this, although the central topic of the present essay is quite different, concerning as it does the rhetorics of local knowledge among the Hamar.

To begin with, let me provide an excerpt from a text provided by Baldambe (Father of the Dark Brown Cow) who for many years—until his death in 1995—was our friend, host and mentor in Hamar. He often mentions particular places, months, fruit, animals, sicknesses and so on that can not fully be understood by a reader unacquainted with Hamar, but this does not matter, for here the details are only meant to provide a first impression of the richness of Hamar local knowledge:

"This rainy season what will it be like? Will the rain fall a lot for us?"

Now there are a few big men who looking at the stars in the sky can tell how things will be. For six months of the year the sun moves down to the left. When it has reached its hole it sits there. As it sits there the people check its position against the profile of the mountains.

"*Nanato*!"

"*Yo*!"

"This year the sun has gone towards abundance. The stars this year will give water. The male star and the female star are sitting together. This year the elders won't get up. All the sorghum will ripen. For five months the rain will fall. First in *barre* when the sorghum, whether planted or not, will grow, then *surr* and *duka* and *puta* and *zako*."

This is what the stars say.

"Cut the bush well, in the mountains cut a lot, the homesteads down in the lowlands should cut a lot. This year the months when it will rain are six! The whole land will ripen. A hind leg will be produced."

This is when the stars come together, then the big rains and the small rains will meet, there will be no dry season in between.

"This year the stars will not give water. The male star has gone off to Korre. It has gone off to the left. It has gone off to Borana land. Last year when the star went to Aari she ripened the sorghum. This year store your seed well. This year the star has gone to Borana, gone to Korre. The male and female stars do not sit together. This year the sorghum will not ripen. This year only the red sorghum and tobacco and eleusine will ripen."

When the star goes to Borana and to Korre, there will be war, there will be sickness. The cattle sickness, rinderpest, the goats' sickness, pox, and the goats' sickness called *shokolo*. The country will be exhausted. *Barre* is dry season, *surr* is dry season, *duka* is dry season, only in *puta* will it rain. Should it rain in the month of *puta*, then the sorghum, which people plant in the plains where the sun urinates will

burn. It will ripen only in the mountain gullies where the flood runs. Fast sorghum will ripen. Slow growing sorghum will not ripen. The fast sorghum with only two joints in the stem will ripen. You should not plant in riverbeds of the lowlands. Up in the mountains you should plant eleusine and red sorghum and tobacco. You should plant in between the stones where the *katsa* grass has been dug out, where the *sati* bush has been dug out and the *shaunbula* bush has been cut down, where the *golal* tree has been cut down and the *baraza* has been cut down. When rain falls in the month of *puta* then what is planted in *zako* will ripen so long as it rains a little in the month of *karna-agai*. That's the rainy season which becomes a drought. It happens when the female star goes towards Labur and the sun does not reach its home in the months of *barre* and *kile kila*. When the male star goes to Korre and faces Saber, then all the rivers in Hamar die. Shaukara dies, Wungabaino dies, Mishano dies, Angudebaino dies, Kadjabaino and Kalobaino die, Barto dies, Atino dies, Gulaba and Bakolte die, Kaeske alone does not die. Down there Omalle dies, Kizo dies, Saunabaino dies. Irbangude does not die, Letano does not die, that is up at Dimeka at the Kaeske where everyone moves to and gathers. The Kaeske is like a flowing river. At the rivers the people gather. Then it is said that the land has spilt its people.

When both the female and the male stars look towards Aari land, when they look up to Bala, when they rise from the hole where *wancho* rises and sit there together, then this year there will be water, the *mate* ritual will be performed, a hind leg will be pro-duced, the sorghum will ripen even at Galapha, Turmi, Saunabain, Galama, and over at Leata. Up at Dimeka the bush will be cut. The bush that has been cut and left to dry will not burn. The big rains and the small rains will meet each other. This year the grasses at Dimeka will be too wet to burn. This year will be abundant. That's how it is. (Lydall and Strecker 1979b: 159-161)

Mental alertness and intelligence

Although the theme of this essay is local knowledge, I like to begin with a (slightly abbreviated) conversation where, not

knowledge as such, but intelligence as expression of a general competence to live, is emphasized and applauded. As I have often heard, to be intelligent (*paxala*, literally 'bright') is the prerequisite for all knowledge and the ability to cope with the vicissitudes of life in Hamar.

In the morning of the 20th of January 1974 I sat with my friends Baldambe and Choke in one of the houses of Dambaiti (see Lydall and Strecker 1979a), and while Ginonda (Bargi) was serving coffee, a conversation developed about Ginonda's young son Lomoluk and his intelligent actions:

Baldambe: Isn't Hamar something good? Look at this goat, which once got lost… Our herding boys said, just so:

"The fox has eaten it."

At that time the sorghum was ripe.

"Gino, look for the goat."

"I have searched for it aaall over the country."

Recently an age-mate of Lomoluk said:

"Lomoluk."

"*Woi*."

"Look at this goat, it has the ear-cut of your goats, the goats of Berinas' homestead. Take it, it has already been a long while with us."

Now the goat has grown up. When it got lost it was small and thin, now it has become big and fat. See, this is Africa, Hamar.

Bargi: "One of your goats which went astray is among ours."

"Please let me see it."

Bal: Said Lomoluk?

Bar: Lomoluk. "Where is it?"

"When did it get lost?"

"It got lost a long time ago."

"It came to us a long time ago after it had been licking salt."

"Our goat which got lost was white with grey spots on the neck."

Choke: Said Lomoluk?

Bar: Gino lost it after the goats had been licking salt.

Cho: Yes, so it was.

Bar: "Please let me see it!" When Lomoluk arrived over there:

"*Uh*! Ours, it's him! Mother, mother, ours, it's him!"

Cho: He took it then.

Bar: Then Laesho's son was over there. Lomoluk said to him: "I am going with my cattle. That one is ours. Please let it go with your goats today." Then when Lomoluk returned in the evening with the lost goat I said to myself: "Look here, my small son has grown up, he as returned from the bush with the goat that was lost." *Hahahaha* (laughs happily, proudly) He gave the goat to Laesho's son to herd during the day while he was looking after the cattle.

Bal: Look here, my friend, see the intelligence of our Hamar children, of Africa's children.

Bar: Those who are stupid would not have recognised the goat and would have said "I don't know", would arrive and say "I don't know." (Strecker 1979a: 37-38).

Little Lomoluk was praised here for his mental alertness and intelligent decisions, which are demanded of a herding boy. This competence develops gradually as the child grows up. "Look here, my little son has grown up", says Ginonda after Lomoluk has proved himself so well, finding and returning the goat, which was said to be lost.

Enculturation and transmission of knowledge

In anthropological jargon we would say: The competence of Lomoluk is a result of his enculturation. His competence shows that he has become a Hamar. This competence concerns not only specific kinds and contents of knowledge but also intelligence and an ability to perceive and comprehend that develop and are enhanced in culturally specific ways. During the first days of fieldwork, when they have not yet been 'enculturated' and therefore are still like children,

ethnographers are very impressed by this local knowledge that is so hard for them to grasp. Here are two passages from my diary, which illustrate something of this:

> 30.5.1970: Today I join two young boys, Aike and Kolle, to learn the art of herding goats and sheep. I get a taste of the slowness and casualness of herding. The boys are following rather than leading the herds and when they rest, the boys sleep or do some quiet work like braiding each others' hair. After five hours of "concrete poetry", I am exhausted and return.
>
> 8.6.1970: Early in the morning inside the kraals we do some exercise in the colour classification of goats and sheep. Then Jean goes into the fields while I follow a herd of cattle. At a waterhole in the company of some young men I try to name the different colour patterns of the animals but my old dilemma persists: I know the names, but cannot distinguish between the patterns and colours. What I call white, a Hamar may call grey, and what I call grey, a Hamar may call brown or yellow, and what I see as stripes, the Hamar see as blots. We obviously "see" differently. A young man chases the herds into the bush and I follow them for an hour and watch them graze. They walk in one direction only and obviously know where they are going, but I don't (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 12-13).

Typically, knowledge is cultivated during morning or evening conversations around the coffee pot. I have already described this situation in several other publications because it is constitutive for Hamar every-day life. Here is one example where the focus lies on the transmission of knowledge:

> A Hamar elder comes to my mind as he sits opposite a number of younger men drinking coffee in one of the houses of Dambaiti. A coffee bowl stands on the ground in front of him and he leans across the steaming bowl towards the other men; stretching one arm out in a gesture that seems to take hold of each one of them, he emphatically calls out, "*Kansé, kate kansé*!" (Listen, listen well!). Then he speaks and the audience listens. The elder may speak for half an hour, for an hour, or even longer, and as he speaks and tells

> his good story he frequently comes back to the same points, uses similar images and generally covers the same ground, going over it again and again from many different angles as his speech unfolds. In this way he not only informs his listeners but actually influences and moulds their views. Or, to put it differently, the repetitiveness and other redundancies act as a tool of persuasion and instil in the listeners not only details and singular occurrences but also, and more importantly, underlying cultural generalities and structures. Furthermore, the repetitiveness leads, so to speak, to addiction, in that the listeners begin to feel that they have still heard too little, that the speaker has in fact missed certain implications of what he has said, implications, which are also true and follow immediately from the premises that made him speak so long in the first place. When the coffee is finished, the youths go down to the dry riverbed and as they wait for the cattle to come to the water-holes, they sit in the shade of a tree and begin to talk again about what was said at the coffee pot (Strecker 1988a: 194-195).

Similar conversations occur in the shade of trees near the waterholes, where during the heat of the day, the herdsmen rest and, in the presence of the ever curious ethnographer, repeat and comment on what the elders have said and then follow their own interests and trains of thought.

A very important place for acquisition and transmission of special knowledge is the cattle or goat enclosure where—surrounded by goats, sheep and cattle—people can converse at length without risk of getting disturbed. Here is an example where, yet again, the knowledge of Hamar herding boys transpires:

> When the sun has gone down I sit in the cattle kraal and watch Tsasi milking the cows and Lomoluk and Wollekibu driving the goats into their enclosure. Gino sits down next to me and so do Tsasi and Djobire. We talk about herding and I realise how knowledgeable the boys are. Moreover they talk clearly and freely to me, they don't talk in the muffled manner in which they usually answer questions of older people and in which they tend to express

their rejection of authority. This is what Gino has to say about goats: When a young kid loses its mother, it is made to drink from another goat. The herding boy calls the motherless kid by a specific call and soon the kid learns that the call means that it will be led to its foster mother. Sometimes a boy finds several foster mothers for a motherless kid. Just now we have three such kids in our kraal. I ask about male goats and Gino says sadly that the strongest and biggest is dead, slain by a "killer", a male goat whose horns easily wound and kill an opponent in a fight. One day the strong goat and the "killer" goat started fighting with one another. Gino spent all day drawing them apart but in the end, the dangerous one wounded the strong one; one horn went straight through his neck. Gino treated the wound with the leaves of a tree and for several days it looked as if the goat was getting better, but then one day, in the evening, the goat did not return from the bush and was eaten by the hyenas. Did it not return because it was too sick or because it was too proud (*poramo*)? Male goats will turn against you when they are angry, but this is always a bluff, they never really attack. Cattle, however, do attack and may even kill you. Shalombe was attacked by a bull which hurled him into the air and opened an immense gash in his thigh. Bali who was present when Shalombe was attacked took a spear and killed the bull instantly. The ferocity of cattle is also a great asset, for they can defend themselves and their calves against the hyenas. Oxen are especially good as guards, for when the hyenas approach they roar and storm towards them and drive them away. One night, a hyena entered the cattle kraal of Dambaiti and was dragging away a calf when a young ox saw the hyena off even before the men arrived. When the ox had successfully rescued the calf, both the men and the ox inspected the prey of the hyena; the men with their eyes, the ox with his eyes and his nose (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 119-121).

Drama and the loss of firm ground

Clearly, this conversation reveals a strong sense of drama and delight in entertainment. The ethnographer asks a single question, and immediately the stories begin, one after another, and all explanations are enriched with exciting examples, like Gino's beloved he-goat who was too proud to continue to waste away in the homestead, and the ox, which saved the calf from the teeth of the hyena.

At the same time, however, the ethnographer begins to detect elements that run against the grain of his, or her, studied 'reason'. He-goats are and remain he-goats, and if someone says they are proud (*poramo*), this can only be meant in a figurative, not in a literal sense of the word. But can we really be sure? Could Gino not be more right than we? Could it be, for example, that rather than the animal being given human attributions here, human behaviour is likened to animal behaviour? The he-goat would then be the paragon of *poramo*, of pride that won't be bent. Gino, the Hamar, is expected to walk through life with his head high like his favourite goat, and without fear he should turn against anyone who challenges him.

All domains of Hamar life are characterized by such transitions where people's thoughts seem at first well founded but then, gradually, loose their firm ground, and where, as Paul Grice (1975) would say, conversational maxims are flouted, and the listener is left to complete the hard work of interpretation on his own. I will illustrate this at length in what follows below.

Reading tracks

As we can well imagine, the reading of tracks is part of Hamar every-day life. Anyone who does not know how to read tracks will not find the stock that are lost in the bush, will not find game when hunting, will not detect the scouts before the enemy launches his attack. In other words, without discovering the track you will have no success. So what would be more natural—in anticipation of what is to come—than take to physical possession of a track and claim that its maker is now

yours? Like my friend Baldambe who wanted to acquire a second wife: He went to a diviner who advised him to pick up the girl's footprint and bring the dust to his homestead. Soon afterwards the girl arrived at his homestead, "like a calf that had lost its way." I was surprised and confused when I heard this—while Baldambe laughed when he told it.

Listening and interpreting sounds

Without a careful, open ear no one can live competently in Hamar. People always need to listen, especially at night. They listen and hope not to hear the provocative, triumphant howling of hyenas hunting some animal of his herd that went astray in the bush. This seems very reasonable to us. But a Hamar also listens because he wishes not to hear the barking of a jackal at the gateway of his homestead, for this would tell of misfortune bound to arrive at the homestead.

One listens to the sounds of the animals in the enclosures. When they are quiet one feels comforted, but when they are restless and noisy, this means that they are still hungry and want to be lead to new pastures. The animals 'tell' that they are suffering, and that things can't go on like this. This sounds plausible, and we nod in agreement when our Hamar friends explain this to us.

But we shake our heads about the following: Goats, it is said, also listen to our conversations and comment on what we say. So it may happen that while we sit at night by the side of a goat enclosure and engage in conversation, one of us makes an assertion like for example, "Tomorrow we won't have rain." If at the same moment a goat produces one of its characteristic loud sneezes, one of the group will unfailingly be quick to retort, "No, my friend, haven't you heard the goat. There will be rain tomorrow after all."

We also find it at least a bit surprising when people say that livestock and children know in advance when sickness will enter the homestead. This observation may in fact be true and

can be put empirically to the test, but statements like the following seem rather strange and hard to agree to:

> 18.9.1971: Baldambe tells me that he was bothered one night when Theo was crying badly. Why was he crying? He was not ill. He sensed that there was illness coming in his family. "You see, now Jean has fallen sick." Theo was like the cattle and goats who also sense sickness: "When the cattle walk straight home, the bells ringing strongly and regularly, that's a good sign, but if the herds don't want to enter the gateway, when they have to be driven in by repeated hitting, that's a bad sign, then there will be illness." (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 52-53).

It is even more irritating when someone asserts that he not only knows the hidden meanings of certain sounds, but can hear what will happen in the future. Here is one passage from my notebooks that has already served as a key example in other texts concerned with knowledge, power and the puzzles of meaning:

> *Gemarro's fist of knowledge*: I sit with Gemarro in front of his house and we are talking. I think I hear far away a truck making its way through the bush and ask Gemarro whether he too hears it. He does not answer but blows the warm air from his mouth into his hand, then turns the palm into a closed fist and moves it to his right ear where he then slightly opens it again. Through the cylindrical hole he listens intensely and after a while turns around to me with his typical fox-like smile: "Brother-in-law, my ear is bad, it hears only the truth, it hears whether someone is going to live or die." No further explanation follows, and also no further comment on what he is hearing just now. As so often before, I feel let down. Knowledge is so personal and hazardous, so political and antithetical that no systematic line opens itself for inquiry.
>
> There are some basic axioms concerning the prophetical properties of the planets, the clouds, etc., but the evaluation of the cosmos is a matter of individual psychology and is motivated, as I have said above, by political antithesis: if a political opponent uses the stars to support his point you yourself use them to support your point.

When Gemarro shows me his fist, which increases the power of his ear, this acts like a test by which he finds out how far he has influence over me, how far I would accept his bid for greater power. Baldambe, rather like Gemarro, is also constantly operating with such individually usurped super-knowledge. Whenever it seems possible in an argument, he forces his specific points on what he thinks is significant in the sky on to the listeners. He does this, of course, not modestly but by means of outright assertions. And yet there is no end to plausible interpretations of the sky, not only because the combinations of the known stars and other phenomena are innumerable but also because all objective phenomena are thought to have a subjective motivation. So Baldambe can say: "There will be rain in this month because the sun will only go to rest in her hole (which she reaches on 21st December) if rain has cooled and softened it. The sun will only reach her hole when rain has fallen." So the sun is not an objective measure of climate and season if the personal knowledge of a Hamar wants it not to be so. At another moment, however, it is, and Baldambe will say that no one should plant before the sun has reached its "hole". You can be sure that when he says this he has some political reason for it, the motive to establish a social hierarchy in which he ranks at the top and is accepted as a decision-maker. All this works because everybody agrees that there is knowledge to be gained in the sky (and elsewhere) for him who is capable of catching it. The general discussions of the seasons, the weather, disease, hunger, war, etc., in terms of what the sky says, which I have witnessed so often, are like psycho-social experiments in the assessment and also in the exercise of personal power within the group, and it is interesting to note that some of those who keep quiet (offer no affirmation or rival interpretations) in one composition of the group are leading interpreters in other situations when the group is composed differently. Part of all is the constant abuse of knowledge of others. Either it is useful to you, and you steal it from the others, pretending the interpretation derives from yourself, or you dismiss it as false. Leaders especially like to slander one another in this way. Thus Gemarro, shortly after he has told me about the power

> of his fist, says that Wuancho, who like himself is a traditional spokesman of our area, is a goat and does not know anything." (Strecker 1988a: 197-198)

The weather and the stars have already played a role in "Gemarro's Fist of Knowledge", but I will deal with the discourse about these topics at length below because they play a central role in Hamar rhetorics of knowledge.

Observing and predicting the weather

All of us know the weather as a topic of conversation where the mind quickly moves from the evident and assured to what is more uncertain and hidden. One begins by saying, "what a beautiful morning", or "what ugly weather", and then continues, "but I don't think it will last," or "just wait, and you will see the sky clear up." Then one may offer further views and arguments that are grounded in traditional knowledge that is not easy to substantiate and often is expressed in proverbs such as "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight", "Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning", and the like.

Rain falls very unevenly in Hamar. It 'stands' on, as the saying goes, only one of a cow's horns, because there won't be enough for the other. Rain builds up (*woissa*) in grey columns under the gigantic white, and often also black, cumulus clouds, but it does not 'stand' on two or more legs, but simply on one.

In order to observe the course of the rains, the Hamar like to live on mountain ridges from where they can see far and wide, and can follow the drama of approaching rains that all too often veer off at the very last moment, bypassing them and leaving their homestead and surrounding pastures as dry and parched as before. From here they also follow the 'tracks of the rain' and deduce where in the future their herds will find grass and water. This, I am sure, everyone will find reasonable. We also can tune in with the hopes and fears that the Hamar show on such occasions, yet here we enter spheres were we gradually loose the firm ground provided by what we call 'knowledge'.

But hopes and fears are part of our lives. They are 'objectively' necessary for us to master our lives. But what measure of hope and fear is appropriate in any given situation? As there is no easy answer, it quickly happens that one fear follows on another. A floodgate of fear opens, as it were, like I recorded in my diary:

> 8.7.1973: During the evening as we sit in front of Ginonda's house drinking coffee and talking, grey clouds collect all over Hamar and it begins to rain, heavy rain everywhere. This is good for the fields, there will be a harvest after all … But Baldambe and old Zinu, who are sitting with us, are quick to point out the negative aspect of the rains: While it rains, the people hide in their houses and the crops become easy prey for the monkeys. Moreover, if it rains continuously for a long period, the heads of the sorghum plants will turn bad and will only be usable for beer. The rains are most dangerous for the cattle and the goats. If a day starts bright and without a sign of rain, the herds are driven far away, so that should heavy rains suddenly begin to fall, they will not be able to return home because of the roaring floods which quickly fill the dry river beds. Blocked by the floods, they will have to stay over night in the bush and thus become an easy prey for the hyenas. Their owner is not able to reach them to protect them, because he himself is cut off from them by the floods. Furthermore, he is unable to hear their bells because of the roaring of the floods and the drumming of the rain. In this connection, Baldambe complains about the contemporary settlement pattern. In the olden days, the homesteads stayed put on the same ridge for many years. In this way, the cattle would always find their way home. Today, people live dispersed in the bush and are continually changing their place of residence. So the cattle never really get used to a place and consequently don't find their way home under difficult circumstances. Yet another danger of the rains is that they soften the thorn fences of the cattle camps, making it easy for the hyenas to enter. After each prolonged rain down at Kizo, they lose a couple of goats or sheep. This is why the Hamar don't like long-lasting, slow rains, although they acknowledge their value for the fields.

> What they really like are the thunderstorms in which heavy clouds burst over a limited area for a limited period of time (Lydall/ Strecker 1979a: 151-152).

As can be expected, it is the aged who are prone to voice worries, for they know from many years of experience how some things that first seem beneficial later turn out to be detrimental. Zinu's and Baldambe's commentaries were also partly directed at the Ethnographer who had suggested that a grey sky with soft, continuous Atlantic rains would be exactly what the Hamar needed. But fertile as it may be, continuous rain hold many dangers: the baboons devastate the fields; the ripening crops begin to mould; the herds and herding boys do not find their way home; hyenas find it easy to pass through the thorn fences that have turned soft and soggy, and so on.

The limited, erratic, unpredictable rainfall in Hamar entails not only physical but also social dangers as my notes show:

> 29.12.1973: … There have recently been some clouds and a few localised showers of rain have fallen, accompanied by thunder and lightning. The rain, or rather the possibility of rain, was enough to make Alma hurry and set fire to his field even though Ginonda's field, which borders his, has not yet been completely cut. Ginonda pointed this out to him, but Alma went ahead with burning his field. And then the fire did not burn well. Baldambe attributes this to the fact that Alma did not consult the sandal oracle, which would have determined the right day to burn the field. So, the sandal oracle always comes in when there are important decisions to make. Perhaps its function is mainly to obstruct rash decision-making. It seems to me like an institut-ionalized pause for reflection before action. Usually therefore this reflection involves not only the actor but other people as well. This latent conflict relating to the fields makes me reflect on the comparative strength of the office of "priest" (*gudili*), even today when other offices, such as the *parko* for example, have become less significant. The "priest's" function consists mainly of blessing the fields and ensuring the rains and the growth of the crops. But he also blesses the people. Why do they

> need his blessing? Not only because of their individual sufferings and illnesses, but also because of these latent conflicts perhaps. The fields bring together people who otherwise live apart and their mutually conflicting interests give rise to quarrels and anger at times, as for example, in the definition of borders, the timing of the burning of freshly cut bush, the stealing of crops, the timing of letting the herds into the fields to eat the dry sorghum stalks and so on (Lydall and Strecker 1979a: 224-225).

This discourse is conducted in a 'rational' mode that we find compatible with our 'scientific' thinking. Alma should not yet have burnt his field. He should have known that it was still too early. But the argument begins to assume 'irrational' dimensions when Alma's mistake lies not in the wrong timing of his field but in his neglect of the sandal oracle. He should have consulted a diviner. This kind of 'displacement' tends to occur when existential worries increase, feelings of helplessness rise and people search for guides of action that are incompatible with our scientific understanding of knowledge.

What the stars tell

Obviously, the heavenly bodies rule our life, most of all the sun, and as the sun rules over nature it also rules over society. It does this in manifold ways, depending on local and cultural circumstances, and in Hamar, for example, one can often hear calls like, "*nanato, dabaté, aino utidine"*(children get up, the sun has already risen); *"nanato, kulla wushaté, aino oididine*" (children, water the goats, the sun is getting hot), and so on. Not just the day, but the whole year is governed by the sun. Everything is in one way or other influenced by the sun, and our scientific sentiment does not object to this observation.

Our 'rational', 'scientific' thought also agrees that in principal all other heavenly bodies, the moon, the planets, fix stars, and distant constellations may influence life on earth, even though these influences may be hard to measure and detect. Therefore, if the Hamar say that the stars influence the weather and

herewith also human life, this is fully acceptable to us, rational. But then the Hamar go on and attribute the stars with meanings and influences that offend our 'rationality'. Here are a number of examples that relate thematically and bring out the main points before I finally embark on an interpretation. To facilitate orientation, I give each example a title:

(1) Rain and the protective male star:

> It is afternoon. A bank of rain clouds which "stood" over Simbale and emptied itself there, found its way to Dambaiti and scattered a few drops here. The moist ground sparkles, the birds call and there is a beautiful afternoon light. To the south, towards Assile and Galapha, the sky is black and heavy thunder grumbles continuously… Kairambe calls to me in between the thunder, "Tomorrow they will be planting their fields in Assile and Galapha!" He adds that such early rain is particularly good for the southern regions because if the main rains come late, the fields in the south often dry up before the crops have time to ripen. Kairambe does not know whether he should go ahead with the burning of his field or not. There has been rain now in some parts of Hamar, but learned old Sago has said that there won't be much early rain since the male star has moved south of his wife's position "to protect her from the dangers of the south", from drought, hunger and war (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 231-232).

(2) Stars sitting at a public meeting:

> As evening comes I sit outside in front of the house on my cowhide. Soon the goats will come and later the cattle. Already even before it really gets dark, the moon and the male and female stars become visible. They have been "sitting in a semi-circle as in a public meeting" and that means trouble. They would not sit together like this if everything in the country were fine, for then there would be no reason to hold a meeting (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 226).

(3) Conflicting interpretations:

> At night we watch the new moon as we drink coffee. It stands right above the evening star and Baldambe says this means there will be

trouble ahead. But when I ask old Kolmo what it means he insists on the contrary: there will be good luck (*barjo*) in the country (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 142).

(4) Individualized celestial knowledge:

In the morning we have coffee in Aikenda's house. Baldambe is absent, but there are guests like Choke's friend Wualle Lokarimoi and Kula the "black". They say that the position of the stars indicates hard times ahead. While listening to the conversation, it strikes me that Hamar astronomical knowledge is mainly related to the period just before sunrise and just after sunset. It would appear that the position, which the stars occupy, then is decisive. The points at which the sun appears and disappears are also crucial because the "holes" where the sun "rests", predict the plenitude or scarcity of future rains. A second point is how *individualized* all astronomical knowledge is. Everyone has particular observations to make. Each man puts them forward with much force and mystique, yet no one attempts any systematic account of the various astral phenomena. For me, this reflects the social structure. Knowledge is generally individualized and specific (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 227-228).

(5) Obsession with the sky:

This is truly the last day of the "mad" month. One thin, red sickle of a moon appeared just before sunrise and it vanished in the brightening sky a couple of minutes after it appeared. Yes, I have caught the Hamar obsession with the sky. I refer to the desire to extract something of personal significance from the signs of the sky. The sky speaks of death this morning. I don't look at the sky to understand it "objectively"… The Hamar taught me… that one has to decipher the sky in an individual and creative manner. One has to create categories of meaning as the interpretation develops. He who is most imaginative and sees the most striking correlations between the configurations of the sky and the events of the day will gain in stature and increase his power to control social affairs. Not only Baldambe and Wualle but also Choke and Banko have repeatedly referred to Berimba as someone who became a great

leader because he could read the sky. People would keep their herds close to him because, observing the sky, he could predict what was going to happen (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 270-71).

(6) Falling stars:

When night comes I sit in the goat kraal and watch the usual turmoil of goats, kids and children. Watching Ginonda I realise that she has become slim. Still she likes herding the goats. It feeds her with experiences that go beyond the small homestead and every evening when she returns she has new stories to tell which she picked up whilst herding and watering the goats. Under the clear, starry sky we drink coffee. I do some of the talking for a change and describe how light and sound travel. Then I get on to a theme which interests me very much: I say that customs are like language, arbitrary and beyond good or bad. Wadu likes the sweet part of it, the one that implies that Hamar customs should not be criticised. But the part which implies that no one's metaphysical constructs should be taken seriously, he finds sour and disagreeable. Baldambe insists that there is more than just talk to metaphysics, because the falling stars so obviously predict disaster. He argues that one day I myself will come to read the language of the stars and this will persuade me to acknowledge that there is a mysterious cause to all that is happening in the world around us (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 211-212).

These examples speak, mostly, for themselves, including observations and remarks that, though not central, nevertheless pertain to the topic of local knowledge, like the lines about Ginonda who enjoyed the strenuous task of herding goats because it involved many events and adventures that provided ample material for interesting stories in the evening.

Example (1) combines the topics of weather and stars in a revealing way. We witness how carefully Kairambe observes the rainfall from a distance and intelligently reflects about the effects of an early onset of the rainy season. But should he burn his field already now and begin to plant tomorrow? He does not know and cannot say for certain whether the rains will last

and be sufficient to allow the crops to grow. He has even consulted old Sago, diviner and storehouse of traditional knowledge, and was told that one could not trust the weather because the 'male' star (Jupiter) had moved 'below' (south) of the position of his wife, the 'female' star (Venus) who he is to protect against dangers coming from the South, against drought, hunger, and war.

In (1) we have an example of the modality and breadth of Kairambe's knowledge. One part of the world he sees with his own eyes and therefore knows something about it; another part (ecological developments in the South of the country) he deduces, basing his arguments on earlier first hand knowledge of the South; he is uncertain about some things (he knows that he can't know for certain whether there will be enough rain); and finally there is something he is unsure of (he does not know whether the diviner is right or not). Therefore we can say that Kairambe does not only behave rationally, he also shows considerable calm in a situation that seems in fact to be quite precarious.

Example (2) concerns an early evening when I sat in front of my house and observed the moon, Venus and Jupiter, remarking that the stars and the moon had for quite some time already been "sitting in a semi-circle as if they were holding a public meeting". This meant misfortune, for they would have no reason to hold such long deliberations, if everything was well in the country. The text is written in a plain and distancing style pretending as if stating some simple facts. But at the same time it is ironic, for I pretended that evening to have become a true Hamar *donza* (elder), who uses the constellation of heavenly bodies to interpret the present and forecast the future.

In (3) I note two different interpretations of one and the same phenomenon. The moon stands directly above Venus, and while Baldambe argues that this means misfortune, old Kolmo suggests that this constellation speaks of good luck. Here, as in (2), the simple style of presentation is deceptive and hides the

ethnographer's shortcomings. Instead of asking my friends how both interpretations might in some way be right, I conceitedly tell myself that both must be wrong and accordingly learn nothing more about the matter.

Example (4) shows once more how important the coffee pot is in Hamar. Innumerable conversations develop around it in which local knowledge is transmitted and discussed, and figures of speech are cultivated. Three *anamo* (age-mates) converse with each other on this morning. None of them makes much use of plain style, for this would bore the others. Also, as they are equals they like to indulge in rivalry. Therefore, they make use of all their rhetorical skills and figures such as hyperbole, simile, metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony. This means that an outsider finds it difficult to understand the exchanges, especially when the *anamo* converse about the sky and what it augurs for the future.

Also, here we witness again how no one really aims for consensus. The undeterminable provides the opportunity for discussions that allow a demonstration of mental and emotional alertness, brilliance, superiority, and ultimately a claim for social power.

In example (5) I too have been caught by an obsession with the sky and begin to detect the signs of death in the thin, red sickle of the dying moon and in the configuration of the stars. These were the days when the Hamar departed, thousands of them, to raid the Arbore with whom they had earlier been friends. Baldambe's sons and nephews and many of our friends are also among them. We are worried about them and project our fear into the sky. Already the day before I had observed how Baldambe and his friend Wualle had interpreted the sky:

> Just before sunrise the sky is extremely red over Arbore to the east. The fading red sickle of the "mad moon" also hangs low over Arbore. Baldambe and the two old men who stayed as guests over night move as black figures on the backdrop of the red sky. Baldambe holds Wualle's hands, then points to the clouds and

> interprets them for Wualle. I can't hear what he is saying; only when they turn around to dive into the house for coffee, do I hear Baldambe say, "If that which I have said is not true, I am not the son of Berinas." (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 267-268).

Example (6) has at last the dialogical character without which, as I have said above, no good understanding of others and therefore also no good ethnography can develop. Again night has fallen, again we sit under the star lit sky, again we drink coffee, and again we are all interwoven in conversation. After I have tried to explain how, according to my understanding, light and sound travel, I arrive at my favourite topic, cultural relativism. Old Wadu and also Baldambe enjoy when I say that no one should object to Hamar customs, but when I question the ultimate validity of their world-view, for example their idea that stars can 'tell' you something, they don't accept this and say that I have simply not stayed long enough yet in Hamar to be able to know. If I were to remain longer, the stars themselves would convince me that they speak of approaching misfortune.

In other words, at that time I was not yet fully in tune with Hamar traditions, and I lacked what Tedlock and Mannheim have called the 'collusion' between conversational partners who comply with each other and interpret events within a jointly shared frame of reference (1955: 13). Collusion is a prerequisite for tradition and shared local knowledge. In my early years of field-work I did not speak (and in fact never had heard) of collusion, but thought in terms of *recourse to historical authority* instead:

> At night while Bali speaks to us sitting on our cowhides, more and more young men join us and listen with quiet intensity... An audience materializes almost inaudibly, making the speaker feel that he is saying something, which they value highly. And then slowly the members of the audience sitting in darkness start to speak themselves. Their speeches are long and are listened to by the assembled company. They constantly invoke the "old", the

> "fathers", the "older brothers" and refer to the "precedents" of which I have talked above. There is a confidence and trust in the old and the established which has never seemed to me quite so marked before (although I realise now that it has always been there). I suddenly realise that here may lie one of the keys to understanding Hamar "conservatism" and (paradoxically?) its "anarchy". The cattle camps play a big part in the socialization of the young men. Here, to a large extent, they are free from the strict domination of the elders. Here they have to make their own decisions, and these decisions are made on the basis of precedents, by referring to what the great men of the past would have done in such-and-such a situation. By invoking a precedent the speaker almost becomes the historical person himself, so by invoking *historical authority* they reject the *present authority* of others. One might argue that Hamar anarchy is a result of the fact that everybody rejects a living person's decision if it is based on purely individual and contemporary judgment. Outright individual cleverness and power are taboo and no one may openly aspire to them. Instead one must make a precedent of an incident in the historic past which will be acknowledged by others as offering the appropriate answer to a specific problem in the present (Lydall/Strecker 1979a: 249-250).

Conclusion

Tedlock and Mannheim write in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*: "Ethnography, then, is a peculiar kind of dialogue and a peculiar zone of emergence, at once constitutive of and constituted by radical cultural difference" (1995:15). In this essay I have tried to put some of this program of dialogical ethnography into practice by fathoming the possibilities and limits of trans-cultural understanding. It appears that the

greatest obstacles were the differing premises on which the Hamar and I would base our thoughts, words and deeds.

Baldambe and his friends argued that if I stayed long enough in Hamar I would change my premises. But now for more than thirty years I have come and gone without ever being able to change my deeply ingrained cultural premises, and I still feel that one cannot properly answer such basic threats as drought, hunger and war by turning to the stars and divining their meaning.

Here I refuse to follow my Hamar friends. But I also do the same at home in Western culture where I don't accept that someone thinks in one context rationally (scientifically), but prays in another context to "the Lord, our Father" and begs him for help. In fact, I feel much closer to my Hamar friends who detest every sort of social hierarchy and do not try to split their thought into 'science' and 'religion'. They have no god, devil, sin, shame, master or serf, and they don't really care for any of the inventions of 'high culture' and 'civilisation'. Instead they, or rather their forebears, have developed a world-view that unites culture and nature in a continuous process of creation. The whole cosmos, the heavenly bodies, the Earth and all that is on it contain that which gives them their ideal, harmonic form of being. This is *barjo* (good fortune, luck, well-being). Anything that has no *barjo* must die and vanish. The prototype of *barjo* is the star-studded sky, especially the Milky Way (*sabe*), master trope of infinity, plenitude, harmony and permanence. But also each blade of grass, each fly, each river, each mountain has its own *barjo*, and—of course—each human being. Old persons have especially strong *barjo* that is manifest in their old age, and it is the aged who have the task to call forth *barjo* over and over again in order to ensure the harmonic continuance of life.

According to Baldambe, the calling forth of *barjo* also affects the stars, for the *parko* (ritual expert) can call them to return to their proper positions:

> This is the ritual of the *parko*, the one who has a forked staff and looks after the country. The one who, if the stars forebode hard times, sits on the *boaka* with the elders and brings the stars back with his forked staff: "May the stars not go off course, bring them back with the forked staff. May the stars not go to the left, may they not go to Korre, nor to Borana. Bring them back, back towards Aari country, to the mountains." So the elders and the *parko* call together, and with *barjo* the stars come back for them (Lydall and Strecker 1979b: 19).

This, no doubt, is a proud attitude, even hubris. But not a bent, twisted, contradictory hubris, which on the one side practices science and on the other side proclaims that all drought, hunger and war derive from the benevolent hand of God.