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Ethnopolitics and Gabra origins¹

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Abstract

Historical anthropology has turned from a specialist and slightly old-fashioned research interest into a hotly contended field of study. Ethnogenesis, i.e. the way in which ethnic groups have evolved out of earlier such configurations, has been incorporated into the discourse of ethnic activists. The present paper deals with reconstructions of the past by Aneesa Kassam, who in turn bases her arguments to a substantial degree on Gemetchu Megerssa's statements. It confirms some of her findings and elaborates on them. Some of her main points, however, which deal with the degree to which the present day Gabra can be derived from the Boran Oromo, are found to be at variance with other evidence. The question is raised whether her perspective is influenced by modern Oromo nationalism or individual Oromo nationalists. On a more general level, the paper touches the question to which extent it is possible to write "factual" history. The ambition is to establish at least a skeleton of fact on which intersubjective agreement can be reached and which can be contrasted against interest-guided versions of history or ideological distortions.

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In the 2006 winter issue of *Ethnohistory*, Aneesa Kassam put forth an argument about the origins of the Gabra that she claimed was at odds with the version I had presented in my 1989 monograph, *Identities on the Move*. The journal gave me the opportunity to respond to her criticism. My word limit was 4,000, and another 2,000 would be allowed to Aneesa Kassam to respond to my response. My comment was printed in the 2008 spring issue of *Ethnohistory* (Schlee 2008). For reasons unknown to me, no reply by Kassam was included. I found my own comment – in its brevity – unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) there was no space to deal with the complexities of interwoven ethnogenetic processes, which are in the shared focus of Kassam’s and my own work, and (2) I was forced to be highly selective in my presentation and decided to concentrate on the points which appeared controversial, leaving out many observations which were in basic agreement with Kassam’s findings, just adding one or the other detail. In its brevity, my criticism of Kassam may in some places have sounded harsher than it was intended. I therefore already announced in said article that I would publish a fuller version as a Working Paper to be put on the web, and that is what the present paper is meant to be. Another unsatisfactory element is that this dialogue threatens to become one-sided. In this paper I keep the conversation going in the hope that one day Kassam will respond.

In what follows, I demonstrate that Kassam’s position is much more in agreement with mine than she wants to acknowledge, which is borne out by the fact that much of the evidence she presents as new was already presented in my monograph (and later publications). I suppose she went to such lengths to emphasise the differences between our positions, because she has been biased by sources with political agendas that are not supported by my interpretation of the historical record.

When I began to do field research among the Gabra in 1978, having completed a monographic study³ on the neighbouring Rendille (Schlee 1979), and moving on to trace interethnic relationships, no one had had any doubts that the Gabra were Oromo, or “Galla” as the older literature read. They speak the Boran dialect of Oromo and have been politically and ritually affiliated with the Boran in many ways, apparently for centuries. They were among those Haberland called “vassals” of the Boran (1963: 141).

Collecting clan and lineage histories, I then found that the vast majority of the Gabra did not claim Oromo origins. Some did, and in the book resulting from this research (Schlee 1989) I also faithfully recorded those. But in far more cases the clan origins pointed either to relatively recent immigration from Rendille-dominated regions, or to an earlier Rendille-like population which bestowed a complex of cultural features also on groups that today speak Somali dialects⁴, and which I therefore called the *Proto-Rendille-Somali* (PRS) complex. At the core of the PRS complex are a calendar and a set of rules regarding camels. The two are interrelated since a main concern of the PRS, and all northern Kenyan lowland pastoralists deriving from them, is what to do with camels on which day, both in terms of ritual and practical matters (a distinction they themselves do not make). Therefore, the vast majority of the Gabra must at one point of their history have

³ In the sense of a monoethnic monograph, a framework I later wanted to break up.

⁴ Rendille itself would have been classified as a Somali dialect if it had been found to be spoken by people inside Somalia and not so far west, in Kenya, separated from their closest linguistic relatives by a belt of Oromo speakers.

undergone a language shift from a Somaloid language to Oromo⁵. Some are also said to have had Samburu (Maa speakers) connections or to have yet other origins (Schlee 1989: 166, 170). But the bulk clearly derived from people who at one point spoke a language of the Somali cluster.

This finding, surprising as it was against the background of assumed purely Oromo origins of the Gabra that had never been questioned by anyone, must have impressed people a lot. The book (which does not just deal with Gabra origins but also with matters of more theoretical interest⁶) was kindly received and widely cited. Now, seventeen years later, Aneesa Kassam (2006) has devoted a long and detailed article to proving that the Gabra are not of exclusively Somali-like derivation, but also have important Oromo connections. The discourse seems to have come full circle. In the 1980s, everyone would have wondered what else the Gabra should be, if not Oromo.

Although it is sweetened with some elements of praise, the basic plot of her argument consists of building me up as an adversary. She starts her paper by explaining what she takes to be my position on Gabra origins and she ends by refuting it. She succeeds in radicalising the difference between that position and her own (described as new) by a highly selective reading of my book and by totally ignoring the rest of my work, although much of it is perfectly accessible in respected book series and journals in the language and country where Aneesa Kassam is at home (English/England). But even if one limited the discussion to a comparison of my book and her article, one would find that the Oromo links of the Gabra and the regional perspective she advocates and presents as new⁷ are all there in my book already. This reduces the difference between her position and mine to a question of degree. Are the Gabra to a higher degree Oromo and to a lesser degree⁸ shaped by their PRS⁹ origins than I have asserted in my 1989 book? Neither

⁵ Somali (and its variants: Rendille, Maymay, standard (northern) Somali, Tunni, etc.) and Oromo both belong to the Lowland branch of Eastern Cushitic and show structural similarities like similar forms of verbal derivations, a fact which greatly facilitated my learning Oromo on the basis of Rendille. However, phonetics and the lexicon are sufficiently different from each other to make mutual comprehension between monolinguals completely impossible. They do not just differ on the dialect level but are clearly different languages.

⁶ The main focus lies on interethnic clan relationships, not just between Rendille and Gabra, but also extending to Sakuye, Garre and Ajuran Somali. Some authors have taken up this idea and addressed the issue of how far this network of interrelationships extends east to other Somali, or whether similar relationships of cross-cutting clans and lineages exist there independently (Luling 2002, Helander 2003). Others have been inspired by it to look for clan relationships between major units elsewhere, both close by, as among Maasai (Spear and Waller 1993) and the Burji (Amborn 1998), and further afield, as among the Ndebele (Lindgren 2004), Hopi (Shetler 1996), and Uzbeks (Finke 2005). On a more abstract level, one can read the book as one on the dynamics of cross-cutting relationships. As such, it has been taken up by Firat (1997) in her description of identity games among Kurds and Turks, where these ethnic classifications cross-cut religious ones (Sunni, Alevi, etc.), in a manner similar to that in which ethnicity and clanship cross-cut in northern Kenya and people can situationally choose whether to identify along ethnic or religious lines. Pelican (2006) applies the model on a similar level to the Cameroon Grassfields.

⁷ The title of a section of her paper, *Toward a Regional Interpretation* (Kassam 1996: 185), suggests that this perspective is new and in contrast to earlier work.

⁸ Questions of degree should not lead us to forget questions of kind. Before the recent massacres, many Gabra may have stressed their linguistic and political closeness to the Boran, but they might have been more afraid of spilling Somali blood than of spilling Boran blood, because they believed their “blood” to be the same as that of the Somali and they believed the misfortune resulting from killing Somali to be disastrous (Schlee 1994b on ethnobiological categories).

⁹ Here I slightly restate the assumed difference, because the way Kassam phrases it makes little sense: “[Schlee’s] theoretical construct of the PRS, which excludes the Boran and portrays them in a hegemonic role, simplifies the complex social, political, economic, and ritual relations which existed between the different groups. It does not correspond to the views of the Boran oral historians of and relationships between the groups” (Kassam 2006: 176–7). As explained above, the PRS cultural complex is defined by features relating to camels on one side and a particular calendar on the other. It can be found among the camel keeping lowlanders whom the Boran call *worr dassé* – “people of the mat [-covered tents]”. The Boran focus

in my own research experience since 1989, nor in anything written by others, including Aneesa Kassam's article, have I found a shred of evidence for this. I could therefore brush her criticism away by saying that it is partly superfluous (to the extent that she just reiterates me), and partly wrong (where she actually appears to differ, namely in her implications about degrees of Oromoness).

Such a summary dismissal would, however, not do Aneesa Kassam justice, who has worked on the Gabra for decades and who should be encouraged to contribute pieces to the complex mosaic of ethnohistory in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, where many questions still need to be answered. To do so in a cooperative way, and to abstain from radicalising dichotomies and from building straw men just for setting them ablaze, would be more conducive to this effort. I will therefore try to be constructive and address the issues she raises on the level of ethnographic detail. Much of the evidence I am going to adduce perfectly supports the relevance of the Oromo links Aneesa Kassam emphasises, but it stems from materials collected and findings published long ago and does not induce me to now tip the balance of the Oromo and Somali influences on the Gabra toward the Oromo side. Ethnohistory in this setting has been a highly politicised matter, at least since the introduction of the "Galla" [Oromo]/Somali line as a territorial boundary in the early British colonial period, and has been even more so since the intense ethnicisation of Kenyan politics in the Moi period (1978 to 2002) and the demise of the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia in 1991. Ethnicity then became the principle underlying the regional order of Ethiopia. Who is an "Oromo" and who a "Somali" is not only a hotly debated question, but one fought out with guns from time to time. Therefore, questions of how to identify the influence of political ideologies on historical reconstructions, and how to present one's findings in such a way that they are not easily oversimplified and appropriated by political activists or even entrepreneurs of violence, also need to be addressed. Unfortunately, Aneesa Kassam seems to have accepted a high-level player in Ethiopian ethnic politics as her key informant rather uncritically¹⁰.

Kassam (p. 176) claims that my analysis, which "simplifies the complex social, political, economic, and ritual relations that existed historically between the different groups (...) does not correspond to the views of Boran oral historians on the origins and relationships between the groups." Having written hundreds of pages of detailed accounts about all these matters, I do not plead guilty to such a multiple simplification. Still it may be legitimate to ask who the Boran oral

on cattle and have a not less elaborate, but quite different, calendar. They certainly would not feel "excluded" by not being subsumed under the PRS. On the contrary, they might feel offended if they were. The groups sharing the PRS complex all speak or once spoke a Somali-like language, i.e. they belong or belonged to the Omo-Tana branch of the Lowland East Cushitic languages. Oromo, the language of the Boran, is also Lowland East Cushitic, but not Omo-Tana. (For the benefit of the specialists, I will come back to details of linguistic classification in footnote 26. All this is well known; in my writings I have mentioned this wider linguistic affiliation shared by the bearers of the PRS complex and the Boran, and I have described centuries of interactions between all these groups. So I have in no way excluded the Boran from my analysis, and to exclude them from the category PRS is the obvious thing to do and cannot be a point of accusation. I will address other elements of this argument ("hegemony", "simplification", "Boran oral historians") below.

¹⁰ She cites Gemetchu Megeressa six times, three times with his unpublished London doctoral dissertation, twice with a personal communication, and once with a publication written jointly with her. Gemetchu Megeressa, an Oromo from Wollega, has at various stages of his life been a researcher for the priest/anthropologist Lambert Bartels (Bartels 1983), the chairman of an Oromo association (the Macha Tulama Association), vice chancellor of the University of Addis Abeba, and a political agent in the present government crisis after the contested 2005 elections. My assessment of his scholarly qualifications has been a matter of public record for a long time (Schlee 1997: 134f, 2003: 352).

historians are, who provide a less simplistic view. On this issue, Jan Hultin (personal communication) offers the following observations:

“A. K. mentions (notes, p. 190) interviews with two Boran oral historians. One of them (or both of them?) lives in Nairobi. (...) I have heard of one of them, Dabassa Guyo. When I was in Nairobi the other year, two Oromo from Wollega told me about a ‘Hayyu Debessu Guyoo’ who, according to them and what I jotted down in my notebook, is ‘teaching Oromo history, culture, religion, everything. Dr. Gemetchu was here for many years learning from him. He lives at the last stop of busses number 1 and 2. He was Gemetchu’s main source. Many foreigners are learning from him. He is teaching every day throughout the week. You pay 500 shillings per month for his teaching. He is teaching in small groups, foreigners in one group etc. He is not a rich man.’

Now, this may be gossip and rumours. But that is not the point. The point is that if anthropologists use the same sources (elders, experts, oral historians etc.) this creates problems that deserve to be discussed. These are the problems [reminiscent] of the ones dealt with by Lyn Schumaker in her book *Africanizing Anthropology* (2001). And if the ‘local experts’, ‘elders’, *hayyu*, or whatever increase their reputation because anthropologists and other foreigners regard them (or thereby make them) experts, this may create some epistemological problems (how are these sources influenced by such contact; how are they – the oral historians etc. – ‘inherited’ by anthropologists; not to speak of how they are influenced by teaching as gurus to new age romantics and what not).

I suppose there may be other Boran ‘oral historians’ further to the north, in northern Kenya and Ethiopia. As it is now, the section on *A Perspective from Boran Oral Tradition* (pp. 182–185 et pas.) seems to be based mainly on the two persons mentioned in notes on p. 190 – and on Gemetchu.” (personal communication with Jan Hultin)

To base one’s conclusions on the views of authorities may be a questionable procedure anyhow, and to base them on questionable authorities, which do not even seem to be sources independent of each other, is an even more questionable method. I prefer to compare many sources of different kinds, check their internal consistency and that with each other, and then to come to my own conclusions.

I shall now address some ethnographic questions in the order of her presentation. This implies that some of my comments are related to her central thesis, others not.

Kassam (2006: 173) calls the Gabra phratries (“the five drums”) semi-exogamous. I would call them largely endogamous. Without having figures, I would claim that most marriages are entered into within a phratry. This has to do with the spatial separation Kassam mentions. Marriage is often entered into with the other moiety (Jiblo/Yiblo versus Lossa) within a phratry. These moieties might therefore be called semi-exogamous. Tendencies towards exogamy at the moiety level, could, by the way, have been linked to wider (early, only partly persisting) Oromo patterns, in support of her emphasis on Oromo links.

The religious chants of the Gabra contain non-Oromo words. Kassam (2006: 174) is right on this and also on pointing to Sufi influences. In fact, the name of the chants, *dikira*, is derived from

dhikr, the Arabic word for “commemoration,” which is the word Sufis use to refer to their chants. In her footnote, referring to these chants, she explains that “[t]he Borana state that the idiom of the Gabra religious elders is the same as that spoken at their own ritual centres” (fn. 4, p.190). The *dabela* (religious elders) of the Gabra may indeed have a special vocabulary shared by the *gadamoji* of the Boran. The context, however, seems to suggest that some or all of this sameness extends to the language of the *dikira* chants. If this was the case, it would pose an interesting riddle: While this ritual language, called Af Daiyo by the Gabra, is full of Arabic elements, the examples I present (1989: 70f) also contain Cushitic roots¹¹ shared by Oromo, Somaloid, and other languages, which more clearly point to the Somali side. One word of ultimately Arabic derivation (*sher* from *shari’a*, the law, the path) is used there in the Rendille sense of *seer* – “day of the week”¹² – rather than in the Boran sense (*seera*- “law”). If the Boran Oromo used that type of language, it would point to a greater importance of non-Oromo elements in the culture of the Boran themselves than is usually assumed.

In some places, Kassam has not fully exploited the Boran links of the cultural domains she describes. Her description of the sites, to which the Gabra phratries undertake their ritual journeys on the occasion of age set promotions, agrees with mine (Schlee 1989: 135, 1992a: 111ff), and also her description of the sequence of these pilgrimages, with Gaar, the senior phratry, being the first, is correct. What she fails to mention is that to trigger the whole chain of events a heifer must be given by the Boran to the Gaar. The Boran thereby are given the ritual privilege of setting the time for these events (which in fact is largely determined by the calendar¹³) and are accorded the senior-most position of all (Schlee 1998: 130). This makes perfect sense in view of the role they played as the centre of the Worr Libin alliance, comprising the Gabra, Sakuye, and other basically PRS-derived camel nomads prior to the arrival of the British (Schlee 1989: 37–41).

Such interconnections of cultural systems, however, cannot be interpreted in terms of origins. Mutual interdependence between the many different *gada* (generation set) systems of the area seems to have been a means towards political integration of a wider region. The Boran themselves, who today are seen as prototypical Oromo traditionalists and who also in their history have often been in opposition to groups who professed Islam, need a banner (*baqala faaji*), given to them by Garre Somali (Schlee and Shongolo 1995: 15, Schlee 1998: 140), and the material for the turbans (*duubo*) of the Galbo ritual elders (*dabela*) is brought by a Sheqaal Somali who receives a fixed payment, i.e. a ritual gift, of a young camel bull (*gurbo*) in return (Schlee 1998: 139). Still, in view of the emphasis Kassam puts on Boran links, it came as a surprise to me how many such links she failed to notice, even though they could easily have been extracted from my published works.

Kassam presents a “regional” perspective as an alternative to my interpretation of history and in contrast to my description of the Worr Libin alliance. I think, however, that my description does fit the characterisation as ‘regional’. This alliance had the main *qallus*¹⁴, hereditary ‘priests’, of the

¹¹ The term ‘roots’ here is used in the linguistic sense of basic shapes, which can be traced back to earlier forms in neighbouring or ancestral languages.

¹² Another sense of *seer* in Rendille would be “boundary.”

¹³ These rituals can only take place in certain months, each part of them on a given day, after an interval of at least two seven-year cycles.

¹⁴ Kassam writes *qaalluu*. One also finds *qallu* and *qaalu*. In my view this is a case of compensatory lengthening. Speakers who simplify the *ll* to *l* compensate this by lengthening the *a* to *aa*. This means that the word should be written either with a double *aa* or with a double *ll*, not with both letters duplicated. The lengthening of final vowels often has to do with flexion or emphasis, i.e. with the function a word has in a sentence. In these cases the lengthening should be omitted when the word is cited in isolation.

Boran as its two ritual centres, the *gada* system of the Boran as a time giver for periodic pilgrimages to the Boran and as the core of a joint politico-military alliance that comprised many groups of PRS origin, some of whom had adopted the Oromo language, others of whom had remained bilingual or continued to prefer Somaloid dialects¹⁵. My account comprises all these different peoples rather than focusing on one of them, precisely because it is ‘regional’ in character.

These remarks do not exhaust the importance of *gada* institutions for interethnic relations. To enrich Kassam’s “regional” perspective it should also be mentioned that, apart from modern type Muslim Somali, all former member groups of the Worr Libin alliance have *gada* systems, with the five Gabra Malbe phratries alone having three markedly different ones. But the fact that they all have *gada* systems is a true regional phenomenon. This observation, however, says nothing about whether the Gabra are more Oromo or more Somaloid. My analysis (Schlee 1989: 73–90) shows that generation set systems of the *gada* type are common heritage to all speakers of Lowland East Cushitic (or even East Cushitic) languages, and have not recently been borrowed by one branch from the other¹⁶. As remnants show, the Somali also may have had a *gada* system, and dropped it in the course of Islamisation¹⁷.

Kassam makes a great deal of those Gabra lineages, which are of Boran origin, although these are a numerical minority. One of her prime examples is the Berre lineage of the Alganna phratry (Kassam 2006: 178). I render a Gabra account of the Boran origin of this lineage as well, slightly longer, but basically agreeing with Kassam’s version (Schlee 1989: 200). Kassam (ibid.) then goes

The emergent Oromo orthography in Ethiopia, still rich in variation, is full of such debatable duplications of letters. The Boran dialect in Kenya has been reduced to writing on a very high level of scholarship and consistency, as can be seen from Houghton’s translation of the Bible. Unfortunately no models have been derived from this for the Ethiopian attempts to write Oromo in Latin characters. In our collection of Boran proverbs (2007), Abdullahi Shongolo and I had to follow the Kenyan conventions because the Ethiopian ones (also adopted by Kassam) are disliked by many Boran speakers, also because of inconsistencies with other languages used for writing. The use of *dh* rather than *d* for the postalveolar retroflex contrasts with the use of that combination of letters in Swahili, in which it stands for a dental fricative. Also in English transcriptions of non-English words *dh* is used for the same sound as in Swahili, *dhikr* (above) being one example.

¹⁵ For the different combinations of “Language and Ethnicity,” refer to the entry under that title in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2001) where I use the Garre, a group of the Worr Libin cluster, as an example.

¹⁶ A comparison of *gada* systems reveals similarities in certain principles in combination with a high level of difference. The shared principles include being based on rigid numerical calculations and complex calendars, in contrast to Nilotic generation set systems. The differences extend to such fundamental features of organisation as the number of sets per generation. To explain the high level of difference, one may point to the apparent antiquity of these systems, which has allowed them plenty of time to evolve apart. Another explanation has to do with their distribution in a contiguous area and how this may have come about. In addition to ritual and the regulation of marriage, to which many *gada* systems were reduced during the colonial period, *gada* was also a mode of military recruitment. The menace of neighbours who had a well-functioning *gada* system might therefore induce people to set up one such system as well in defence. In spite of the often observed tendency that enemies become like each other, one might then not choose an identical *gada* system but rather mark the enmity to one’s neighbours by some conspicuous differences. The emergence of *gada* systems might therefore be seen in a context of warlike interaction. In periods of peace, people then interact through their *gada* systems as well and even establish forms of ritual interdependence. For these we have cited some examples above.

¹⁷ Dereje Feyissa (personal communication) has directed my attention to the fact that no pan-*gada* culture has ever been ideologically promoted to connect the Oromo to their neighbours in the modern political context. Given the fact that almost everything from language to religion and former political affiliation is used for identity construction, this failure to base wider alliances on having or having had *gada* systems is indeed remarkable in view of the fact that the Oromo are proud of *gada* as a “democratic” system in contrast to the hierarchical model of Abyssinian kinship and the fact that *gada* is a truly regional phenomenon, as already the title of Jensen’s (1936) book suggests. Maybe the circumstance that some of the groups perceived as enemies of the Oromo also have or have had *gada* systems makes these unsuitable for wider identity constructions by Oromo nationalists.

on to explain that it was through the intermediary of Boruga, the descendants of Berre, that the Boran conferred drums on the five phratries. My informants offer a much richer and more differentiated picture. According to them the *gada* systems of the Gabra with the regular pilgrimages to holy places was installed after a period of withdrawal from Boran incursions and in opposition to the Boran. In this context also the holy objects, the horns and the drums, were fashioned. Alganna is explicitly exempted from this history; their history is different. At the time of the flight “[o]nly Alganna was not among the Gabbra; the others of the five drums [phratries]¹⁸ were together” (Galbo elder cited in Schlee 1989: 127). “All these peoples [phratries]¹⁹ now also each were given a drum and a horn. All these Gabbra. Of all [phratries]²⁰ Odoola was given [them]²¹ first. Then they were given to Gaar, then to Galbo. At that time Alganna had not entered [= joined the other Gabbra]²². At last they were given to Sharbana. But today of all the Gabbra, of the Five Drums, the first-born is Sharbana” (Odoola elder cited in Schlee 1989: 136).

Still, in talking about drums in the Alganna context Kassam has come across something important, only that the story emerging from a critical synopsis of my informants and the existing literature is rather different from hers. While Kassam subsumes all five drums under the same tale of origin, my informants attribute something special to the one of Alganna. “[U]nlike the wooden drums of other phratries it is made of metal. It is said to have been cut from the drum of Karrayyu [the senior clan of the Sabbo moiety of the Boran, the clan from which Berre stems] which was originally longer”²³ (Schlee 1989: 200f). One informant claims, however, that Boruga got the drum from the “*qallu*” of the Arbore. “When I pointed out that other people recall this differently, he explained that at that time the Arbore and Boran were just one people with one *qallu* and that therefore there is no contradiction between the two versions. Anyhow, the *qallu* in question was of the clan Karrayyu and even today, he says, the *qallu* of the Arbore is of Karrayyu” (Schlee 1989: 201). It is the inclusion of the Arbore into the description of the interethnic relations which would make the emerging picture ‘regional’ rather than giving a dichotomising account of ‘Oromo’ and ‘Somali’ influences on Gabra ethnogenesis.

This ties in with traditions of the Rendille subclan Gaalorra, who, just like *qallu* or *eebiftu* (“praying”) lineages among the Boran and Gabra, hold very special ritual powers. These Gaalorra claim to derive from the “Marle” (Arbore)²⁴ on the one hand, and to be related to the *qallu* of Karrayyu on the other (Schlee 1989: 181–190). It also ties in with Haberland’s finding that the Sabbo moiety of the Boran seems to be composed of more recent arrivals than the Gona moiety²⁵. Clan histories, which point to “Marle” and Boran at the same time, therefore do not need to be seen as contradicting each other. They can be reconciled by assuming that they refer to a time, in which there was much exchange between Oromo-speaking ancestors of the Boran and Western Omo-

¹⁸ Square brackets in the original.

¹⁹ Square brackets in the original.

²⁰ Square brackets in the original.

²¹ Square brackets in the original.

²² Square brackets in the original.

²³ Jan Hultin, who has seen the Karrayyu drum, in his comments on a draft of this paper says that it may be literally true that the Alganna drum has been cut from the Karrayyu one since the latter is rather short.

²⁴ They are also nicknamed “Marle” by other Rendille.

²⁵ On the pattern of differentiation of Oromo groups who tend to split along the moiety line and then re-build the missing moiety by accepting immigrants, see Schlee 1989: 36, Schlee 1992b, or the forthcoming article on “Tana Orma” in the Encyclopaedia Aethiopia.

Tana²⁶ speaking ancestors of the Arbore, and boundaries between Boran and Arbore branches of the same clans had not yet crystallised.

More support for the importance of the Arbore for a truly regional picture that goes beyond rival accounts of Oromo and Somali influences can be derived from Ayalew (1995)²⁷. He brings the Karrayyu of Shoa into play (Ayalew 1995: 55), whose connections to the Karrayyu clan of the Boran would also need to be explored. He states that the Olmok of Gandareb village and the Hiruf of Kulaama both trace their origins to the “Oromo Kereyu” (Ayalew 1995: 60). Olmok is the clan of the junior *qawot* of the Arbore. *Qawot* is the Arbore equivalent of *qallu*. According to Gabbert (personal communication) and Tadesse (1999: 108), the *qawot* of Olmok is seen as the equivalent of the Boran *qallu* of Karrayyu. Ayalew (1995: 20) reports that the succession ceremony for a new *qawot* is always attended by Boran representatives from the equivalent clan.

Kassam attributes the origins of most Gabra lineages to “Rendille” and “Somali,” which is in perfect agreement with my findings that most of the ancestors of the Gabra at one point were speakers of a Somaloid language²⁸. For the origins more remote in time, I prefer to speak of Proto-Rendille-Somali to make clear that in these cases the Gabra, of course, do not stem from modern Rendille or Somali but from earlier layers of Somali-like culture. Apparently Kassam does not see the need for such a differentiation.

The point that it is unlikely that the ethnic boundaries of the 16th century coincide with the modern ones, that we do not know whether all or any of the ancestors of the modern Rendille (Gabra, Sakuye, etc.) who lived then were called Rendille (or Gabra, Sakuye respectively), may be too obvious to dwell on for long. Insisting on the difference between “Rendille” and “Somali” on the one hand, and “Proto-Rendille-Somali” on the other, might even be called pedantic. Still, to neglect this kind of difference leads to anachronisms. And such anachronisms do not just result in misrepresentations of history but also in political calamities. Under the pressure of the

²⁶ According to Hayward (1984: 37) the Arbore and the closely related Elmolo together with Dasenech form the western branch of the Omo-Tana. These languages differ in a number of features from the collateral eastern branch which comprises Rendille, Boni, and Somali. As Hayward is concerned with the classification of Arbore, he does not elaborate on the precise relationships within this eastern branch. As the internal differentiation between variants of “Somali” is as wide as that between “Somali” and Rendille, this tripartite division, is, of course, a simplification. The eastern branch of Omo-Tana, however, clearly comprises all those I have termed speakers of Somali-like or Somaloid languages including the early bearers of the PRS complex of cultural features. All these are thus set apart from the Arbore, whose language is located on a different branch of Omo-Tana. The level of difference to Oromo is yet higher. Both the Omo-Tana language and Oromo are Eastern Lowland Cushitic on a higher level of classification. But even in this wider sub-family, structural similarities are so considerable that any one language can easily be learned on the basis of any other.

Much needs to be explored about the cultural relationships between the Arbore and the PRS derivatives to the south of them. I certainly would not subsume them under the label PRS, but if linguistic similarities can be accepted as a basis of informed guesses in the absence of data on other domains of culture, the Arbore can be related to the groups I have described as deriving from the PRS cluster, but not as closely as the latter are to each other. Although in my work I refer to the Arbore repeatedly (Schlee 1989: 32, 158, 177, 185, 188–9, 201), much of the evidence is indirect and did not satisfy me.

Since then, Tadesse Wolde (1999) has thrown some light on the Arbore and now all our expectations are directed towards the on-going research by Christina Gabbert.

²⁷ This MA thesis reflects an early stage of Ayalew’s work and might require some cross-checking. It is to be hoped that Ayalew continues with this highly interesting line of research.

²⁸ In view of her emphasis on a “regional” perspective, it is, however, strange that she bases her argument overwhelmingly on (uncited) Gabra sources. To the best of my knowledge, of the relevant languages she only speaks Boran, the language of the Gabra. Her statements about other groups are limited to Gabra claims to derive from them: Such and such a lineage comes from Rendille, another one from “Somali”. She has not investigated these claims from the Rendille or Somali side, does not discuss contradictions, variants, ideological forces. The truly “regional” chorus of voices cannot be perceived through her writings.

dichotomising regional order in Ethiopia (Oromo versus Somali), people like the Garre, Gabra, and many others now seek out their “Oromo” and “Somali” roots from centuries ago, when neither Oromo nor Somali existed in the modern political sense. To share parts of one’s culture and ancestry with one group and parts with the other without being identical to either (and without being descendants of either because one’s ancestors lived in earlier configurations, not in the modern ones), does not seem to be a permissible option in this logic, a deadly logic, because it is often fought out with guns.²⁹

Of course Kassam cannot be blamed for every misunderstanding which can be caused by not stating what for some might be obvious. Apart from her speaking of “Rendille” and “Somali” in contexts where I would use “Proto-Rendille-Somali”, our disagreement in this matter is small.

A desire to differentiate her account from mine pervades Kassam’s entire article, despite the high level of agreement on facts (which in most cases she does not acknowledge, preferring to present her findings as new). The difference is always accentuated when it comes to the Gabra’s relationship to the Boran. From the earliest periods onwards, Kassam insists on depicting the relationship of the ancestral Gabra to the Boran as more brotherly, more egalitarian, and, to put it simply, as *nicer* than I do. It would be cheap to capitalise on the recent (2005) clashes between Boran and Gabra that left hundreds dead, or on the ethnic rivalries over the then newly emerging regional order in post-Mengistu Ethiopia, when the Gabra/Boran relationship of the past was discussed by the two groups themselves precisely in terms of the extent to which it was oppressive versus the extent to which it was brotherly (Schlee and Shongolo 1995). It is a certain Oromo variant of these recent political discourses, which seems to shape Kassam’s reading of history. But rather than dwelling on that political bias, I shall address her arguments on the “factual” level, i.e., with reference to the periods they refer to and on the level of what can be reconstructed of history as it might actually have occurred: the factual skeleton of history which people, who use the same scholarly methods and standards, should be able to agree upon.

In my book I describe various oral traditions that all corroborate each other in one basic statement: The ancestral Rendille and Gabra (with the exception of Alganna already stated above), and the Garre and others who do not concern us here so much, at one point in time withdrew from the Boran who, as a result of their newly reformed *gada* system, had an efficient way of recruiting a fighting force and made periodic incursions against their neighbours. Ethnogenetic accounts are given in terms of who split from whom at which point of this great trek. In spite of this solid body of oral history described in great detail, Kassam (2006: 189) claims that such a migration of early Gabra and Rendille away from a Boran threat had not taken place. Such traditions, she claims, might instead refer to the withdrawal of the Warrday, an earlier Oromo population of northern Kenya, from the advancing Boran. There is no doubt that the Warrday, remnants of whom we nowadays find far to the southeast among the Tana Orma, in earlier periods must have withdrawn from the Boran on a very large scale. My interlocutors are aware of the Warrday and keep the oral traditions about them separate from those about their own ancestors. But even if traditions about two different migrations here should have been conflated into one, does this mean that one of them did not occur?

The history I have reconstructed is like a mosaic in which pieces collected among different groups fit each other and form a complex picture. Some people originated from Boran Oromo,

²⁹ Cf. Fekadu Adugna, in preparation.

others withdrew from them and later negotiated a mode of living with them, which conceded ritual seniority and a hegemonic role in a politico-military alliance to the Boran. Yet others, namely the Rendille, refused to submit to the Boran and remained exposed to their raids. Despite the rich documentation and the careful and critical comparison of sources on which this reconstruction of history is based, it meets with Kassam's scepticism. On the other hand, she is totally uncritical of the wildest claims of Oromo nationalists. Gemetchu Megerssa's fabulous account of nine tribes of Oromo having succeeded each other in ruling the area, each for 360 years, establishing 3240 years of Oromo presence, is cited by her as fact, not as kabala.

Kassam takes offence at my use of the term "hegemony" to describe the senior role of the Boran in the Worr Libin alliance. Modern Oromo nationalists would prefer to see the relationship of the Boran to their neighbours as nice, kind, enlightened, brotherly, and egalitarian. Not feeling the need to please anyone, I have described this relationship as what it was. I reject the term "vassals" of the older literature, because the relationship was not of a feudal type. The Boran were not the lords of vassals; they did not give out fiefs or practice other methods medieval lords in Europe did. Certainly they were not the government of a multicultural society in the modern sense either. There was no bureaucracy, no fixed taxes. They were ritually senior, their *qallus* received regular gifts on which the wellbeing of the givers ritually depended, and their *gada* institutions carried the greatest weight in a political and military alliance in which others also had a say but to a much lesser degree. The best term I could find for this kind of relationship was "hegemony" and I am still waiting for convincing arguments as to why this term is not adequate for the set of regional interethnic relationships in the period immediately preceding colonialism. The way to convince me of the inadequacy of this term would be to adduce historical data which supports a different characterisation. In Kassam's (1996: 186) own description of this relationship ("firstborn (...) dominant (...) hierarchically ranked (...) lastborn") there is nothing that speaks against calling it "hegemonic."

Oromo nationalists, including Kassam's key informant Gemetchu Megerssa, have occasionally criticised my historical reconstruction as one-sided (see the discussion in Baxter, Hultin and Triulzi 1996). It was said to overstress the PRS elements or to have a Rendille bias. This criticism was misguided. In the book I say quite clearly:

I cannot present a complete or even well-balanced picture of all the different cultures studied. Other aspects of these cultures have to be studied elsewhere. One entire dimension of cultural history has had to be left out almost completely: the early and recent Islamic influences (Schlee 1988 [...]). I also have to reserve for the future a fuller treatment of the influences of the African cultures of the interior on the PRS-derived cultures. Some political institutions of the groups in question (*hayyu*, *jallab*, etc.) seem to have been fashioned after Boran models, and linguistic and cultural borrowings from the Boran can even be shown in the case of the Rendille, the group most remote from Boran control. Much would need to be said also about Samburu and possibly other Maa influences on elaborations of Rendille age-set rituals, on Rendille youth culture, and on Rendille kinship terminology. All these cultural strata deserve the same attention as [...] the PRS culture [...]. (Schlee 1989: 90f)

So I have explicitly mentioned these other cultural forces and stressed their importance. Nevertheless, superficial readers have accused me of neglecting them. The original version of the

book was submitted to Bayreuth University in 1985 as a Habilitation thesis. It included substantial descriptions of the non-PRS-derived elements of the Cushitic lowland pastoralists as well, like those of the Nilotic Samburu and the Boran Oromo, but these were not included in the published version because the publisher insisted that the text needed to be shortened and streamlined. I thus concentrated on the PRS cultural complex and the interethnic clan links which are part of it, simply because I had to concentrate on one theme and I decided to take that one.

In the meantime, I have elaborated (making use of texts I had to cut out of the book) on Samburu and Boran influences (Schlee 1987, 1994a). Those who accuse me of a PRS bias have chosen to ignore these publications. The texts left unpublished in 1989 are so substantial that, apart from providing the data for these later publications, they will form a major part of a forthcoming book even now, almost two decades later³⁰. In any event, the 1989 book itself is abundantly clear on the point that there are many different sets of relationships and that it is only for reasons of space that I concentrated on one of them.

To summarise: I can neither share the view that my reconstruction of northern Kenyan ethnic relations overstates the PRS factor nor that it undercommunicates the Oromo factor. I also do not see what is insufficiently “regional” in it. I am open to revisions if there is new data that contradicts my findings. If Kassam has such data, she fails to present it.

Without substantial differences on the level of data, and given the fact that my conclusions about history closely follow this accepted data, Kassam’s criticism cannot be validated. This leads us to ask another question: What is the motivation behind this criticism? To start with the conclusion: The motivation appears to be that some Oromo friends of Kassam’s do not like my findings because they do not fit their political agenda. Should this mislead us into re-writing history until everyone likes it? My position is that intellectual honesty demands that we stick to the facts wherever we can make them out³¹.

Politicised ethnicity has a number of features which tend to distinguish it from ethnicity among ordinary rural people. While Rendille and Gabra herdsmen freely admit that their component parts stem from different peoples who spoke different languages and even high ranking Boran freely admitted to Haberland that one of their ritual heads might “come from” the Arbore, modern ethno-nationalisms stress purity. Purity is logically related to stability over time. People who claim to stem from different groups and to have “become” what they are now imply that their ethnic identity has undergone changes, while the proponents of purity have to assume immutable ethnic identities over long periods of time. While history and social science have often questioned claims to

³⁰ Günther Schlee and Abdullahi Shongolo. forthcoming. *Islam and ethnicity in northern Kenya*.

³¹ This may sound like common sense to some, but it is not necessarily in agreement with all other anthropologists. Some doubt that there is a level of “facts” and that a scholarly reconstruction of a course of events based on different kinds of evidence and methodological reflection (eg. source criticism), is in any way more reliable than anyone else’s account. For radical relativists, any account is as good as any other. They just differ in the “positions” from which they were given, their “positionalities”. Other anthropologists privilege “authentic” accounts. They adopt an apologetic attitude about not being natives themselves. From such a perspective even an unfounded opinion of an Oromo about Oromo society or history should count more than any non-Oromo views on the same matters. Yet others adhere to “ethical” codes which attribute more importance to political correctness than to truth. From such a perspective, the main concern is not to offend anyone. Should we therefore write compromise histories on which everyone can agree? There would be two risks involved in such a style of history: One is to violate facts, the other one to bore the reader to death.

immutable identities³², ethno-nationalists maintain that the identities they proclaim are time-honoured and ages old. Claims to separate and well-circumscribed ethnic groups or “cultures” of long standing are rewarded by the international system. UN and NGO driven discourses about “indigenous” and “autochthonous peoples” favour land rights and resource claims by “peoples” who can claim a long presence in an area over recent arrivals and groups of recent formation. To play the “autochthonous” card is therefore tempting, but in the case of the Oromo it leads to absurd consequences. “Oromo” is a success model. Since the 16th century, the Oromo have expanded from one end of what now is Ethiopia to the other and beyond. In the course of this expansion many people joined their fold. One reason of this was that they wanted to avoid the consequences of ritual warfare many Oromo groups waged against non-Oromo neighbours (and each other), but to speak of forceful incorporation only does not appear to describe the incentives for becoming Oromo adequately. There are obvious advantages in belonging to a strong group or alliance³³ and in speaking a language of wider currency. In the South, the Oromo in question were the Boran³⁴, and submitting to them was the submission to a power which was hegemonic, I insist, but not oppressive. The new-comers not only had the lower status but also the privileges of younger brothers³⁵. As a result of these incorporation processes, the majority of the ancestors of those, who now speak Oromo, did not speak Oromo in the 16th century. The majority of the modern Arsi Oromo might have spoken Hadiya, and among the Western Oromo (Wollega) there is a saying that the “Borana” (here in the sense of original Oromo) are one and the *gabarti* (dependents, newcomers) are nine. Instead of deriving pride from this success story of incorporation and from the attraction the Oromo way of life has had for others, modern Oromo nationalists follow the standard patterns of modern ethnic nationalisms in claiming an immutable ethnic identity and autochthony. As this view is hard to combine with historical facts, they have to hammer it down into people’s heads by constant repetition. However, as I have often stressed in my theoretical writings, identities are not freely invented or fabricated and cannot be changed at will. Sometimes claims, which are historically absurd, do get accepted by popular opinion. Generally, however, there is an advantage for identifications which have a degree of plausibility. In the long run, primordialist claims will not be helpful for Oromo nationalism. The real strength of the Oromo identity is in its power to combine with other social forces (like Islam in Jimma, Wollo, Bale, Arsi, Western Wollega, a.o.) and in its potential to assimilate other peoples. And contrary to the primordialist discourses, a positive identification with these elements of history would also stand the test of critical historical scrutiny.

³² My own position is that time stability needs to be treated as a variable, not as a dichotomy (like situational versus primordial), and that it poses an empirical question which needs to be answered case by case. There are older forms of identification and others which have undergone recent change. Identities change with different speeds.

³³ In the case of the Gabra we have to speak of an alliance. They did not join the Boran but became part of an alliance of groups which remained separate from the Boran.

³⁴ ‘Oromo’ here is used as a classification by outsiders. The Boran have not used “Oromo” as an ethnonym for themselves. Only their modern elites were aware of this identification in the 1990s, and its use only spread to wider circles with the establishment of the new regional order in Ethiopia in the 1990s.

³⁵ Cf. Schlee and Shongolo 1995, where we contest the Gabra claim that they were sexually exploited by the Boran. It is true that Boran, at the time of the Worr Libin alliance, had access to Gabra women, but likewise the Boran had no way to tell their own wives not to have Gabra lovers. This form of hospitality or generosity on the side of the Boran harmonises well with the widespread rule (shared by Boran, Gabra, Rendille) that the younger brother has access to the wife of his elder brother (and other claims against the elder brother) while the elder brother, apart from respect and the higher status, can expect little in return.

The Oromo nationalist project is directed against the “Abyssinian” domination. The role of the Oromo in this discourse is that of victims³⁶. The empire, the king of kings, Amhara colonialism, all stand for vertical social relations with rulers towering high above the subdued. It may be in contrast to this image of the enemy that in their self-description, Oromo insist on being republican, democratic, and egalitarian. Describing the (Boran) Oromo position in the relationship with a neighbouring group, the Gabra, as hegemonic, might not fit the anti-hegemonic image of themselves the Oromo want to portray in their rhetoric of another interethnic dyadic relationship, namely that of shaking off the Abyssinian yoke. In trying to understand the twists of Oromo ideology, we should not forget that for them the Amhara are the relevant Other. Oromo discourses counter Amhara ones. If the Salomonic dynasty claims an age of 3000 years, the Oromo need an even more venerable age, even if – being perpetual victims – they have always been denied their legitimate claims. Maybe it is against that background that one can understand Gemetchu’s fantastic claim of 3240 years of Oromo presence in the area³⁷. Understanding and taking into consideration these psychological needs, desires, and fantasies should, however, not make us allow them to guide our pen when writing history.

³⁶ Oromo armies with Oromo generals in alliance with the Ethiopian empire, Oromo princes exchanging spouses with the royal line, Oromo slavers in the southern and western marches of the Empire and many other givens of relatively recent and well-documented periods like the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (not to speak of the Oromo expansion of the 16th century) do not fit this victim image and are therefore either ignored, or the powerful Oromo figuring in them are depicted as traitors of an Oromo cause, which is based on always having been victims. Being wrong is not the only weakness of this reading of history. Also its psychological effectiveness needs to be questioned. Is it a lasting basis of political identification? How long will it take until the Oromo get sick of being described by their intellectual elites in such terms?

³⁷ This corroborates the finding that in situations of competition, people often become similar to their rivals. Rivaling Amhara claims of doubtful credibility (“national myths”) by overdoing them, does, however, not add to one’s credibility.

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