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Review of Molvaer, R.K., 'Social Organisation and Social Control in Ethiopia'

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identities and stereotypes in a way that leaves very little room for individuality, individual agency, and common humanity.

Mines's book is not only an important contribution to anthropological theory and ethnography of Indian society. Although the importance of individuality was denied explicitly by several voices in the debate about India, a similar denial is far from absent in the works about other regions of the world. The anthropological predilection for "structure," for something general and fixable, resulted often in a striking blindness for individuality or individual agency. This blindness accounted, for instance, to a large extent for the anthropological fiction that "primitive societies" were unchanging – after all, the "primitive" possessed no agency.

It is not at all only in texts about India that human beings have been totally subsumed under groups and that the identities of individual men and women are equated with group identities. On a very large scale anthropology has denied *selves* to its subjects, as Anthony Cohen has criticized in his book "Self Consciousness" (London 1994). In fact, it seems that this denial of individuality and agency was one of the most important strategies for *othering*, for creating a distance and difference between the anthropologist and his or her subjects (that, by way of this strategy, became *objects*). A greater sensibility and awareness toward individuality and agency could have saved anthropology from a number of debates that seem all but futile and superfluous to nonanthropologists. "Public Faces, Private Voices" is an important stimulus for the correction of a pervasive anthropological stereotype.

Martin Sökefeld

Molvaer, Reidulf K.: Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995. 365 pp. ISBN 3-447-03662-1. (Aethiopistische Forschungen, 44) Preis: DM 198,-

Readers interested in Ethiopian affairs will take up this book with eagerness and anticipation, because it is written by an acknowledged scholar of the country with a long experience and very good command of the language. It is also one of the most voluminous and extensive studies of the social life and cultural and religious values of the Amhara of Ethiopia, that diffuse category of people who put their dominant imprint on much of Ethiopian historical identity and politics. However, the reader will be in for deception, if not outrage, by this text, especially by the first part on "Growing up Amhara." I will indicate some of the reasons below.

First a brief review of the contents of this book. It has three parts, each major studies in themselves. Part 2, a short piece of 53 pages, is a valuable presentation and study of folktales and their place in Ethiopian culture. Here the focus is not specifically on Amhara culture. Folktales are still a living part of Ethiopian life – in contrast, e.g., to cultures in the West – and it is very useful to have new material on this aspect of Ethiopian

society. Part 3, called "Orality, Socialization, and Social Control" (209–322), is theoretically the most ambitious and interesting part, well connected to the general literature on education and socialization (although referring too little to more recent work). It is a classification (246 f.) and study of the use and meaning of verbal insults and terms of abuse as elements of socialization and social control. The empirical basis is a list of 357 idiomatic terms and expressions of derogation, most of them heard or observed in Addis Ababa Amharic. The author gives various examples of the social situations in which insults are used. It should be noted that although useful for people learning Amharic, many of the terms (given here with a translation and with comments) are simply descriptive and are found in any other language (many of them may not always be insulting). While part 3 has an interesting comparative perspective, the chapter on "Orality and Ecology" is rather inconclusive, containing vague conjectures on the relation between people in ecological zones and the nature of their oral insults.

The most controversial and probably for many readers irritating part is part 1, "Growing up Amhara." Here the author pretends to give a social-scientific analysis of Amhara education and socialization, largely based on his own appreciation of Amhara culture, unconnected to any other sociological or historical literature. There is indeed much interesting information on religious and cultural values, ideology, education, play and work of children, and sexual life (on which there is a separate *excursus*). But this first part of the book (13–152) is also exceedingly biased. It presents a long list of presumed "Amhara" peculiarities, habits, and customs with an overall negative evaluation of their educational culture. While many Ethiopians and Ethiopianist scholars may recognize much of what is described here, the presentation and interpretation of the material – accumulated in a rather anecdotal fashion – is so dubious and slanted that we learn more about the author than about the Amhara. Molvaer's bias completely undermines his objectivity. Throughout the text, the author feels the need to interperse his value judgements on what he presents as "the customs or the norms" of the Amhara, with no attempt to relate them to historical and sociological developments in Ethiopian society of the past century. This goes for his remarks on the general backwardness of Amhara and Ethiopian society, but even for those simpler subjects as music and food. E.g., he feels compelled to make nonsensical remarks such as: "Their music betrays eastern (...) influences, but it has developed into a typically 'Ethiopian' kind of music, whining and hard to appreciate by anyone who has not imbibed it with the mother's milk" (26 ff.). Apart from the question of taste, the reader wonders what music he listened to and whether he paid real attention to the lyrics. Fasting food, according to Molvaer (41), "... is prepared rather unattractively during these times" (the fasting season). Probably he ate in the wrong places. Also he is urged to depreciate things like the domestic atmosphere of "the Amhara home": despite recent changes, he says,

"... only rarely (...) do Amhara homes have the 'cosy' atmosphere or home feeling of Western homes" (26). What is meant by this remark? Is it meant to reproach Ethiopian families for not having the financial means to furnish their houses as Westerners can? Is it based on utter ignorance of the difficult but warm family life that Ethiopians often have and which people like the author do not know?

All such remarks are unproductive and out of place in a scientific work. Another one about affection for children or spouses (24): "As mothers must give up their children when they leave a husband (...), they develop few strong emotional bonds to their children." On the subject of marital love and affection he then continues: "I have, however, been assured that 'real love' does occur among Amhara couples" (24), and then goes on to describe his (allegedly representative?) informant's escapade with the best female friend of his wife. Part 1 is full of such insinuating remarks, written down with a thinly veiled disdain of Amhara and "Amhara culture." On p. 84 we are informed that "... practically all Amhara" feel an "... almost atavistic pull of what they have received from their forefathers, their customs, so that even Amhara spending years abroad may learn surprisingly little from such an experience, except for superficial accommodation and what is 'memorized' from books and external observation."

The author's remarks on sexual life are also noteworthy. At the time of marriage, he says (23), men have had "... wide sexual experience beforehand - with prostitutes and maids. Lots of other girls and women - students, secretaries, dissatisfied wives, etc. - are also quite readily available to men of all ages. Casual sexual intercourse is as common ... as a cup of tea ...". One can certainly question the tone and the veracity of these remarks, but even if the information were true, what would be the difference with large sections of contemporary Western society? Such remarks - and the first part of the book has a lot of them, too much to quote - appear to fit the author's intention to give a compromising picture of "Amhara society." Insulting statements going beyond the evidence of the individual cases are numerous (26, 28, 84, 99, 152). Even if there are objectionable characteristics in Ethiopian or Amhara behaviour, they should be seen in relation to other aspects of behaviour, and to the wider context of their expression. About this we hear little. Neither is there any word about the moving feats of hospitality, of humaneness and politeness in daily relations which are also common among Ethiopians, Amhara and any other group included. Virtually nothing about the resilient sense of humour and the verbal virtuosity (except in the list of insults and terms of derogation abuse in part 3, but these tend all to be interpreted by the author as serious and heavy abuse). No word about the constant political and economic adversities and their deleterious effects on the lives and survival techniques of people. Nothing on the daily burdens that people have to carry in life, unimaginable perhaps for affluent Westerners. Nothing about the deeds of sacrifice and friendship which one

encounters when one lives closely with Ethiopians in the countryside or elsewhere. All this is also part of daily life and not an exception.

The book does have (but few) positive remarks about Amhara society. These refer to the cultural wealth (29), historical heritage, and what he calls, with Redfield's term, their "high culture" (30). Also to the attractive features of "traditional Amhara society" (57), like friendliness, considerateness, hospitality, ability to enjoy the few things their society had to offer. These remarks, though nostalgic, have a basis in fact: much of the old and valuable Ethiopian culture is eroding without anything positive taking its place. Consistently wrong-headed government policies over the last 25 years (sustained by foreign donor-countries with their limited knowledge, interest, or capacity to deal with Ethiopian society at the grassroots) have a large share of the blame. In some places the author sees the cultural heritage of the past as a resource (128), but in others he denigrates it (e.g., 15, 311). He also makes remarks on the positive behaviour of Amhara, but he tends to interpret good acts as insincere, superficial, or as parts of a stratagem to gain or retain power over others (152).

On the format and style of this text, it can be said that the book is characterized by an obsessive use of footnotes: in about 310 pages of text there are 729 - often lengthy - footnotes: some very informative, but many of them distracting and rather superfluous deviations. At a certain point the reader will just give up reading them. In addition, the author also makes excessive use of quote marks around words. The reader is not certain what these quote marks refer to: is it irony, are they quotes of informants' statements, are they metaphoric descriptions, are they words not to be taken literally? The effect is highly obfuscating and irritating. This is only one example: "Although a child is early taught to recognize and 'interpret' insults, it is not 'taught' to initiate a 'quarrel' by insulting first." This sentence would retain its meaning if all the quote marks were simply omitted.

There are also several strange factual mistakes in the text. I mention a few. On p. 18 it is stated that in Gojjam, Amhara "... mix[ed] with Oromo, Kembata, and Wellamo peoples." The latter two peoples (Wellamo = Wolayta) do not live in Gojjam, neither in northern Shewa which is later also mentioned as a location of the Kāmbatta. What is meant by calling the Kāmbatta and other groups "... previous 'slave' peoples" (18) is not entirely clear. On p. 85 it is incorrectly said that small boys are called "Mammo" and girls "Mammite" until they begin to walk. (With respect to language use and some other cultural details, the author may have underestimated Amhara regional diversity.)

Unfortunately, this book, by focusing on the Amhara as a section of the population neatly isolated from the wider multiethnic fabric of Ethiopian society, has also unwittingly followed an "ethnicist" model of social analysis, which is becoming increasingly popular but which is based on faulty premises: that ethnic groups can be neatly delineated, are united, want always to be identi-

fied as a group or consciously "choose" to be ethnic, and that ethnic groups make up the framework of social and economic life and indeed of social history. These are all ideological assumptions, which have to be tested in every empirical case and not taken *a priori*. Past work in certain anthropological and historical research traditions is perhaps to blame for this model; but since the last few decades, the style of analysis of ethnic groups like "the" Amhara, "the" Oromo, "the" Maasai, "the" Gikuyu, etc., is thoroughly discredited in contemporary anthropology itself. When such ethnonyms are used (and for some purposes they are of course inevitable and necessary), their status and relevance should be problematized, i.e., critically discussed, and their *relational* aspect should be emphasized. In Molvaer's book there are few traces of that. On p. 19 it is indeed admitted that the Amhara are a "mixed people," but the subsequent wave of unwarranted generalisations and insults heaped on the Amhara as a whole does not give evidence of any sensitivity to context and to the dynamics of group relations. The account is a stunning litany of complaints and insinuations not befitting a scholar who has such a wide and deep experience of Ethiopia. The world would be too small if a similar analysis would be applied to the French, the English, the Germans, or the Norwegians. About any people or ethnic group such a catalogue of presumed group characteristics could be compiled. It is also a book which appears to want to fit in with the political correctness of the day, where "the Amhara" must be vilified as the people who brought Ethiopia to disaster and can be insulted at will. Apart from its morally questionable aspects, this is of course a rather unhistorical view of modern Ethiopian history, neglecting a host of social, economic, and political factors. I have showed parts of this book to not only people of Amhara but also of Oromo, Gurage, Kambatta, and other background. Most of them were amazed by this text and said (yes, including the non-Amhara) that this book went much too far. The common reaction was one of amazement and of indignation about such a "cheap approach."

In conclusion: Molvaer's book is a rich vademecum on Amhara culture with indeed a lot of new information and hypotheses, but I regret to say that the way in which he has presented them and thought it necessary to continuously give his folk-psychology and value judgements make it of questionable value as a scholarly work of cultural interpretation or social analysis. His own parochialism drips from every page. The underlying assumption in all his criticism of Amhara society – which in his opinion is largely itself to blame for its own backwardness, (cf. 15, 28, 114, 125 ff., and *passim*) – appears to be that all is best in his own Western society. While the general point of the effects of cultural factors on a nation's socioeconomic (lack of) development is a relevant subject of study – and indeed in Ethiopia itself this is being pursued by reputable scholars – Molvaer's approach is not helpful in this respect. He has no serious suggestions as how to go about in further assisting Ethiopia, except by invoking the following,

utterly inadequate, idea: "Perhaps the country would be best off if nationalities could develop in line with their own 'spirit' or genius, so as to preserve many of the basic elements of each culture" (28). This Hegelian (or Herderian) argument is too antiquated to even spend any ink on. His general conclusion on the value of indigenous Amhara culture in the future process of change (128) is more reasonable.

A comparative perspective is also lacking (less so in part 3): what of all this Amhara behaviour and culture is shared by other peoples, including *färänjis*? Are the Amhara, in their educational, cultural, and socialisation practices, "worse" than other people in Ethiopia or outside?

Another way to approach the subject matter of this book would to carry out a systematic survey-research project on "Amhara society" in a more structured methodological fashion, or – even better – a series of in-depth community studies by trained anthropologists in various parts of the Amhara-speaking regions. Here, the relative value of the various behavioural characteristics presumed to be "Amhara" could be studied *in their context*.

Molvaer's book is brought down by part 1. This is hardly the work of a professional, distanced anthropologist, and it should be read with much caution. The load of negative and condescending value judgements even affects the reader's confidence in the factual information given, despite the fact that much of it may be largely correct. None of what is said here (notably part 1) can be substantiated without further serious research and without a more historically sensitive and measured approach. The author's methodology was weak (as the author admits, it was based on a large number of largely unstructured observations, talks, and informal interviews, mainly in Addis Ababa), and the book's interpretations and substantial conclusions, especially in part 1, are dubious. A lot of work has to be done before this collection of judgmental generalisations and conjectures can be supported in any way, let alone be explained in their full complexity. In this respect, by seemingly reverting to outdated paradigms, this book is – certainly in part 1 – a step back in the historical and sociological understanding of Ethiopian society. It seems that the author felt the need to abreact all his frustrations of 14 years of work in the "development sector" in Ethiopia. Such books may, incidentally, also increase the resentment felt by Ethiopians towards foreigners, and are, therefore, very unfortunate. The final critical verdict on this book should, however, be given by Ethiopian scholars.

J. Abbink

Moore, Henrietta L. (ed.): *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1996. 179 pp. ISBN 0-415-10787-3. Price: £ 13.99

"Anthropology is no longer a singular discipline, if it ever was," writes Henrietta Moore in her "Introduction" to "The Future of Anthropological Knowledge," "but rather a multiplicity of practices engaged in a wide vari-