

The Sources of Life: Boran Concepts of Wells and Water

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Human activities which have an obvious utilitarian aspect often fall completely outside the interest of anthropologists occupied with systems of meaning. In his now classic work on the ritual life of the Basseri, Fredrik Barth notes (1961) that anthropologists of ten make the “unnecessary and naive assumption” that technical constraints impose particular restrictions on the form of an act and that its symbolic meaning must lie elsewhere. Barth’s observation still holds true to a large extent. He goes on to note that “there is no reason why the very forms of an act which reflect the technical imperatives may not also be vested with central and crucial meaning in a symbolic system of context.” Barth is concerned with the migration of the Basseri nomads as a pragmatic undertaking that nonetheless has great ritual significance for the participants. His argument may be extended to include many other subsistence tasks and activities which involve, despite their superficial plainness and technicality, the handling of substances with great symbolic value and acting out of central social values.

Broch-Due notes (see this volume) that in order to understand the ways the Turkana appropriate nature for their own social and symbolic use, anthropologists must modify the metaphors they themselves live by— notably the idea that everything is “constructed”. It is not altogether evident, even in the context of subsistence activities, that the outside observer can know what people understand unless he/she actually looks at both the material constraints and characteristics of the resources handled and the larger cultural context within which they are interpreted. Within a culture, however, shared experience of daily subsistence activities may be a source of widely recognizable paradigms and metaphors. If a certain item is taken from everyday activity and symbolically used in a different, non-productive context, then it may later project back meaning on to the item or the activity that originally provided the symbol. This is not to say that people everywhere are continually obsessed with the symbolism of their quotidian tasks, but rather that there may be a semi- or sub-conscious stratum of reality wherein potential interpretations remain latent.

In the present article we are concerned with the meaning of water, a substance which appears to have universal meaning because of its physiological importance. Specifically, we attempt to throw light on the cultural significance of wells and well-water among the Borana of Ethiopia and Kenya. The Borana are an Oromo-speaking group involved in cattle pastoralism. In the ethnographic literature, their fame is based on their elaborate generation system, known as the Gaadaa-complex (Baxter 1954; Haberland 1963; Knutsson 1967; Legesse 1973). The Borana heartland lies in Ethiopia, mainly between the towns of Moyale, Arero and Tertelle. This is the area where Boran traditions have been most strongly maintained, and which the Borana regard as their cultural centre. Today, however, many Borana live in Kenya, either in Marsabit or in Waso. The Waso Borana of Kenya are the children and grandchildren of a group of Borana who once lived in the Kenyan-Ethiopian border area, who fled into British territory during the early colonial period, to escape the expansionist campaigns of the Ethiopian empire. Originally adherents of the traditional Borana religion, this group converted to Islam in the 1940s. Yet they still retain many of the beliefs and practices associated with

their “original” culture. At Marsabit many Borana are Christians, and Christian as well as Moslem converts are also numerous in Ethiopia.

The present article, the aim of which is largely ethnographic, is based primarily on material from taped interviews with two elders from the Kenyan-Ethiopian border area, Dadacha and Libaan.¹ Both informants have experience as local specialists in Boran law, custom and ritual. To a lesser extent the article uses data from Gudrun Dahl’s fieldwork with the Waso Borana, as well as information from relevant ethnographic literature. This article is intended to be more a study of concepts and normative ideas as presented by indigenous intellectuals than a first-hand study of well use and local praxis. For a very detailed study of the economics of traditional watering in terms of utensils, labour requirements, energy expenditure and productivity, we refer the reader to Cossins (1983).

For a long time, anthropological studies of Boran culture were dominated by interest in the gaadaa-structure of social categories and the relevant rituals. Very little attention was directed to the Boran form of subsistence, a problem one of us has addressed elsewhere (Dahl 1979). More surprising, perhaps, has been the scarcity of attempts to link the Borana system of beliefs and symbols to the everyday activities associated with pastoralism. Understanding the belief systems of Oromo groups has recently been furthered by Bartels’ study (1983) of the religious ideas of the Macha Oromo, but much more work is needed to learn how basic themes vary from one economic setting to another and from one Oromo group to another. In this article we will try to show how Boran well organization forms a framework for the expression of basic cultural principles of solidarity and respect, how ideas about fertility and descent are linked with the paradigms offered by wells, and how wells are closely attached to the basic concepts of Boran identity. It may seem trivial to say that “water is life” since as physical beings we all need water. For the Boran, however, water is more than a physiological necessity: it is a central ontological concern.

TYPES OF WATER

Borana are semi-nomadic or transhumant pastoralists, raising cattle, sheep and goats in their traditional Ethiopian heartland. In the semi-deserts of northern Kenya, some Borana rear camels, but this is regarded as anomalous to Boranness. Cattle and small stock are brought to pasture in circuits of varying length, but generally require watering at least every third day. “Water” mainly means “water for livestock”. Each animal can drink up to 40 litres at one serving, whereas the quantities needed for direct human consumption are obviously much smaller. As well, irrigated agriculture is a late innovation in Boran lands and was until very recently of limited importance.

In his overview of Ethiopian Boranaland, Helland (1980) notes that water is found in three basic forms, each with a particular set of rights. First, during the rainy season there are occasional spots of surface water, or *lola*. Although nobody has exclusive rights to them, the people settled closest have a privileged access to them. Such rain-pools, puddles, and temporary floods, as well as the seasonal streams which appear in the rainy season, provide the main source of water for Ethiopian Borana from March to May. Second, there are more predictable if temporary sources of water that are contained by man-made or natural dams. These sources require some maintenance. Their enclosures must be maintained and silt dug out. Third, there are regular wells. The latter type is of critical importance to the central Borana particularly from January to March when the weather is hot and dry. Helland writes that “practically all the Borana wells are concentrated in some 35 different locations within

¹ The bulk of the material has been collected by Gemetchu Megerssa. Gudrun Dahl alone is responsible for the analysis and interpretation. Gemetchu Megerssa thinks that there are other or additional ways of interpreting the material discussed.

the central part of Boranaland, south and west of the Dawa river. The wells are of two types and both types may be found within the same location, probably draining different aquifers [and are] either sunk deep through the rock. .or [are] shallower, wide shafts dug out in alluvials like sand or gravel”(1980:20). Wells of the latter type, Helland notes, are still being excavated, whereas the former are no longer newly dug but sometimes may be recovered. Construction and recovery are, however, both feats which demand large numbers of cattle. Development reports which deal with Borana wells have different ways of listing and enumerating well locations. The Borana, however, traditionally count nine main well-fields; these are the wells the Borana will first think of when asked to give in formation on the topic.

One of our informants, Dadacha, gave us a wealth of information on the use of wells in the Boran heartland. Since he now lives at a distance from the wells, he tends to emphasize those aspects of well use that are legally and symbolically important. He therefore leaves out certain topics regarding the actual praxis of administrating wells. Helland mentions (1980:22) that the everyday routine is supervised by an officer. Access to water is scheduled on the basis of a three-day cycle. On the first day, it is the well-holder, *konficha*, who takes on the work of supervision. For the two remaining days, officers are appointed according to the consensus of an open council comprised of people who use the well. Typically such officers come from groups having rights to the second and third days respectively.

Northern Kenya is even more and than southern Ethiopia, yet nonetheless it appears that it is easier for the Kenyan Waso to get water for their herds. Many of the wells in Ethiopian Boranaland are very deep and watering from them is a major organizational task. Long chains of men stand at different levels and pass hand-to-hand water buckets made of giraffe-skin, all the while chanting rhythmically to ensure the smooth flow of water and to minimize the time each herd spends at the well. The chanting gives a particular atmosphere to the watering which to a Western observer seems almost sacral.

At Waso in the Isiolo District of Kenya, in contrast, most wells are relatively shallow needing at most four or five men in a chain. Rain-pools, dams, and ponds provide water in the wet seasons from March to May and October to November. In the dry seasons the population living north of the Isiolo-Garba Tula road depends on the Waso Nyiro River, while those living in the scrubland in the southwest parts of the district turn to the wells. In principle, any family can use the rivers, dig a temporary well in a canyon, or dig a permanent well at one of the well-complexes. It is very seldom that watering or well maintenance requires more labour than a family or camp can provide. When people dig for water, it is either found by fairly shallow excavation or not available at all.

LAW AND CUSTOM

The Boran jural system recognizes a distinction between “Law” (*seera*) and “Custom” (*addaa*). The former consists of a set of recognized rules, ideally formulated and revised by the representatives of a certain senior generation set at a collective ritual once every eight years. “Law” is considered to be fixed and holy. To a large extent it concerns issues relating to various culturally-central concepts and values singled out as symbols of Boranness. “Custom”, upheld by local elders when dealing with their clan and community matters, is a more flexible set of agreed-upon practices. Within the realm of wells, there is room both for the enactment of “Law”, and for customary practices.

The Boran view of cosmology, ecology and ontology is one of a flow of emanating from God. For them, the benignancy of divinity is expressed in rain and other conditions necessary for pastoralism. The stream of life flows through the sprouting grass and the mineral waters of the wells, into the fecund wombs and generous udders of the cows. The milk from the latter then promotes human satisfaction and fertility. When people are satisfied by the yield of their

herds, they live happily and peacefully together according to “Law” (seen as both consensually formulated and divinely inspired), thereby creating a balance between people and Divinity, and reproducing favourable conditions.

In this conception of essential linkages between elements, one can select almost any item and see it as symbolizing the whole chain of fertility the fat cattle, the dung, the grass, the milk and so on. All these items can be seen as “key” symbols in the sense that each of them provides a due to the essential values and concerns of the Borana. Though we are here concentrating on the meanings associated with water, we recognize that it may be useful to see water as only one of the “vital fluids” which in fact shares many meaning components with milk and semen. This can be seen, for example, in formal rituals where pure water is not used for signifying the fluid of life. Instead, a mixture of water and milk is used for ritual spraying and libations.

When investigating how Borana think about their water, it is necessary to start with the concepts of *horraa* and *tullaa*. *Horraa* literally refers to “mineral waters”, including water from all the categories of springs, wells and dams mentioned above. However, it is also tied to a whole cluster of concepts associated with fertility (*hormaata*). It is possible that some of these terms are etymologically linked. More interestingly, though, Borana consciously play with the similarities between words like these, creating and recreating associative links both in oratory and ritual life. The most important word coupled with *horraa* is *horrii*, meaning “animal wealth”. These two words further connect with *horaachaa*, reproduction of capital and wealth, *horata*, prosperity and reproduction of family wealth, *horomo*, a variant of Oromo which means “he who is fertile”, *horomsu*, a ritual to give alien people Oromo-identity, and *horroro*, the elder’s marriage stick. Horn can be an exhortation, meaning “be fertile”

These terms, revolving around the morpheme *hor*, are not the only symbolic elaboration on the link between wetness and fertility on the one hand, and dryness and death on the other. Bartels (1983:62) allocates a section of his book on the Macha Oromo of Ethiopia to the theme of “water as a source of life”. He notes how dead persons and barren women are talked about as “dry”, and mentions specific ritual contexts where fertility is represented by sticks which are still “wet”, in that they contain the original moisture of living wood or “wet” marsh grass. In an important form of blessing, elders, parents or special ritual “spitters” convey fertility through the medium of saliva representing the water of life. Among the Waso Borana of Kenya a moist twig is always placed at the gate of the cattle enclosure, to symbolize the minimal breeding herd from which a sufficient family herd can be bred.

Macha, like many other Oromo, talk about themselves as being linked to the “Lake of Freedom”. To them water is not only a prerequisite for life but the very source of life. According to a myth of the Sayyoo Oromo of Wallaga, the original water was not a lake but a spring. People were forbidden to drink from this spring, but on one occasion a girl broke this taboo, and as a result she became pregnant. The children she bore became the ancestors of Sayyoo and Macha, and were known as “the nine Boorana” (Gidada 1984). Several authors have discussed the Wollaabi myth, mainly with the aim of locating the water in question in some geographical reality (ibid.). Haberland (1963), for example, associates it with a particular swamp known as Haro Wallaabu, in the Gujji-area near Darasa country (see also Hultin 1975:276). A symbolic interpretation is rarely suggested, although it would appear to be close at hand.

Borana, too, sometimes refer to Lake Wollaabu as their point of origin but more typically they trace their generations back to *horroo*. *Horroo* seems to be known to our informants as a person, but Baxter defines “*horro*” as an expression generally denoting “ancestors” (1954:76). To person used to European metaphors, it is not difficult to think of “the origin” of something

as its “source”, but the Borana are doing much more with such a metaphor. Both Libaan and Dadacha make an explicit link between the mythical ancestor and the wells, Libaan expresses it thus “Boran originated from *horroo*. Boran originated from the well, the spring with mineral waters from which the cattle drink.... The Muslim people tell you that all mankind originated from Adam and Eve, but to us this is no true. We do not trace ourselves to them. We trace ourselves to *horroo*.”

If we are to understand the way Boran speak about ancient mythical figures such as *horroo*, we must keep in mind that Boran sages regard individuals as embodiments of cosmic principles. These principles can also express themselves in material things or in abstract ideas. Therefore *horroo* can simultaneously be seen as a person, well, or the general principle of wells, i.e., the well “as idea”. Similarly the essence of a cultural invention is sometimes personified. For example, traditional Boran “Law” is divided into five fundamental bodies. Each body is considered to be given by a particular founding father and to be the embodiment of his spiritual heritage, his *ayaana*. In this context, matters relating to livestock and to mineral waters, *horraa*, belong to the same category. The laws were given by the founding father, *Yaayaa Galee Anno*, and are considered basic. The expression *Yaayaa Galee Anno* refers both to this body of law and the founder himself.

According to Dadacha, any consideration of mineral waters has to begin with *tullaa*, the organizing concept in the Boran Law of Mineral Waters. *Tullaa* refers to well-complexes or permanent waters. All mineral waters are legally categorized under rock wells and then in turn subsumed under the Laws of the well-complexes:

The sources of mineral water are one thousand [blessed number]. Their father is the well-complex. You do not call the son while the father is still alive. That is why we address ourselves to the well-complex though we are not claiming to know it in full. The well-complex has lapsed wells. The well-complex has secret cavities. The well-complex has corridors for the cattle. The well-complex has watering troughs. The well-complex has holy people. The well-complex has openings. We are not saying that we have the full knowledge of the well-complex. We are not saying that we can explain its laws. But we are saying that *tullaa* is the father of mineral waters, therefore, today we greet him.

The nine well-complexes are very closely associated with the history of the Borana and their concepts of identity. There is little reason to think of these well fields as originally constructed by Borana; on the contrary, it is quite possible that their prior existence was important in the formation of the Borana as a ritual and political group. Haberland links the Boran wells to an unknown ancient megalithic culture (1963:75). Helland (1980) quotes the Borana as ascribing the original wells to the Warday people (see also Legesse 1973:86). However, the two elders who provided us with data for this article both assert that the original wells were created by a succession of eight peoples who were not Borana, though presumably still speakers of the Oromo language. These tribes preceded the Warday, and it was from the latter that the legendary Abayye Babbo captured the wells. Dadacha says that “those who were forging iron and who dug the *tullaa* wells were the Sufftu and the Abrobji. Those who did most of the digging were the Tayyaa. . . . Those who made the underground caves and tunnels through mountains were Sufftu. The people named Warday and those who came after them got most things from those that preceded them.”

According to Dadacha, the Borana were originally living at “the hill of ancient men”, then later settled in the Warraabu area of Somalia. A prophet belonging to the Warday came to the Borana and told a certain leader, Abayye Babbo, about his own land which was blessed with rainfall, salt, and wells, unlike the dry area where the Borana were then residing. Babbo travelled to the *tullaa* area and everywhere placed substances with which he could symbolically manipulate the fate of the inhabitants. Following this he returned to the Borana

and told them they could be certain of victory if they invaded the land of the Warday. This was against the advice of the Borana's own prophet, who warned that by going there—an area where nine successive people had failed to remain— Abbaye Babbo would draw a bad fate to the Borana. However, the prophet continued, this would not happen until the ninth turn of the full gaadaa-cycle. The coming of the white people to Boranaland during the reign of Libaan Jaldessa (1891-1899) is said to have fulfilled this prophecy. In Libaan's version of this story, Abbaye Babbo could only find 30 people who agreed to go with him. With them, he fought the Warday and drove them out of the well-complexes.

WELLS AND CLANSHIP

The system of well-complexes is identified with clanship and the Boran people. Boran clans are named, patrilineally recruited groups which are scattered all over Boranaland. In many cases they can also be found among other Oromo groups in Ethiopia and Kenya. Each of the well complexes is seen as representing the Borana people as a whole and its multiplicity of clans. The ownership of wells is fundamentally linked to clanship. Within the well-complexes specific wells are associated with particular clans, but no clan is barred from using the well-complex. Every Boran has "ownership".

The number of wells actually used in each well-complex varies, as each field contains many wells that are not in use, because they are not recovered. Whether or not they are in use, wells are owned. In Dadacha's opinion the total number of claims to wells is about 4,000. One would assume that if the number of unused claims is large, then there might be room for manipulation and even fabrication of claims. When people wish to open a lapsed well which has been unused even from the time of the Warday, they need to find out which clan is the owner. To do that, they have to consult special experts on the Law of Mineral Waters. The guardians of this restricted knowledge are supposed to pass the knowledge to younger men, as they themselves grow older. A law regulates who should and should not be taught. According to Dadacha, "this is done to protect the knowledge from becoming public. Today wells become sources of bribery, but they did not have anything of that sort in the beginning." He notes dryly that "whether these people cheat or remain honest to the original knowledge is up to themselves, but they fear God and hence do not cheat."

Any man can request water from any well belonging to his clan-mates as he moves with his cattle over Boranaland. But agnation and wells are connected in more symbolic ways. We have already noted the association of mineral waters with fertility. The fertility with which we are here concerned is masculine rather than feminine. It is the active life-giving principle, the potency of impregnation and creation rather than the nourishing fertility associated with women and the soil. The stream of life flows through rain, well water, milk, male virility and its moral counter part the commitment to herd reproduction and care, closely associated with commitment to clan solidarity. As the clan shares title to wells, so do they share in the reproductive capacity of stock. This aspect of solidarity and corporativeness is expressed when someone loses his stock: he has the right to turn to his clan-mates to get a breeding nucleus from which he can then recover his herd (Dahl 1979:173 ff).

Commitment to herd growth cannot be regarded as separate from commitment to the clan: the wasteful and careless man loses his moral right to assistance. Similarly, work in and with the wells is expressive of commitment to the herds and clan; undertaking such work is in essence "being a real man", and recreates the basic physical conditions of Boran existence.

It is possible to find several examples of how this idea is symbolically elaborated. One striking example of a direct metaphoric link between the realm of descent and the realm of water organization lies in the expression "*Gogessa*" which has double significance. It denotes the five lines of generation-classes in the *Gadaa*-system: hence, ideologically, the flow of

descent.² But it also refers to the chain of men in the well-shaft, passing buckets of water one to another.

Another example emphasizes the ideal quality of kinship as opposed to the stream of fertility. In a prophetic myth related to us by Dadacha, two brothers hunting for truth come across three wells in a line where water flows out of the first and runs into the third, leaving the middle one dry. This story is said to have metaphorically predicted the modern state, in which people feel more solidarity towards socially-distant people than to agnatic kinsmen. Water in this case is used to symbolize solidarity.

Not only does the flow of water through the wells signify the common patrilinearity of the owning clans. The fact that some of the wells are linked by an underground stream is sometimes used to emphasize “underground” kinship links between two clans. This is the case, for example, with the relation between the Hawatu and Karayyu clans, whose wells are sometimes linked to common underground sources. Although these clans belong to opposite moieties and thus presumably have no agnatic connection, some adoptions between the clans have been deliberately used to neutralize political opposition. In this way, certain of the Karayyu office-holders can be considered as Hawatu when matters are closely scrutinized. When talking about water flows, one can also be talking metaphorically about kinship.

Dadacha explains:

When the Boran wells were originally distributed, people first had to make the rules of sharing. They were fairly shared according to clanship. After dividing access to every well according to clan, they also considered another factor. Let us, for example, say there are five wells near one another. Experts know from which side the water is coming to a particular well. The flow of the underground source is considered. If the experts say that a new well could be dug without affecting the wells already there, then one may be allowed to make a new well. But if one clan just went ahead and dug a well without consulting the experts, the other clans owning wells in the region could stop the digging. Alternatively, they could claim it after it had been dug. But at times the water in the area may be so abundant that it is sufficient for all.

What, then, does “ownership” of a well mean? In contrast to the picture that we are given in various consultancy reports which emphasize the strict control applied by owners, Dadacha emphasizes the ideological aspect of well use, where the practice of sharing is a way of emphasizing and asserting values of cooperation and solidarity. In Boran discourse, such values primarily characterize the relation between affinals, something which at the societal level is expressed through the close association between the two Boran exogamous moieties, Sabbo and Goona. Hence Dadacha tells us that the law that regulates well ownership also “allows Sabbo to use the well of Goona. This is to emphasize collective ownership. It is not ownership that is most important, it is rather the equality that the law had established.”

The basic issue in deciding turns at watering is the appointment of the holder of the *konffi*. This term applies not only to the wooden shovel used in digging, but also (and more importantly) to the rights of the person who—as representative of the owning clan—slaughters the first ox when the well is dug or reclaimed. In principle, this man, referred to as the *konficha*, represents the original pre-Boran Sufftu who discovered or constructed the well long ago and who first placed the *konffi* in the shaft. Thus, people who wish to establish a well must learn the identity of the proper *konficha* by approaching legal specialists. The latter will tell them a name of a man whose descendants and precise clan subsection are then traced.

² As Baxter (1970) has pointed out, the “lines of generation sets do not correspond to descent units. Men from one sub-clan may be found in various “lines” and one “line” contains members from various clans. Nevertheless, they are often spoken of by the Borana as if they were descent units.

The ox to be slaughtered should come from the most senior of the families belonging to the clan that holds the right to the well. The head of that family is the *konficha*. The elected *konficha* gives the sign for starting work by symbolically handing over a *konffi*-shovel. Then the actual job begins by clearing the bushes and shrubs which have grown over the well. Killing the ox and clearing the place are acts referred to as “putting in the konffi”. The people who slaughter oxen to feed the workers after the *konficha* are said to provide “dewlap animals”. Dadacha sees the dewlap animals as a way of checking over-stocking (cf. Legesse 1973:87):

If the number of cattle increases so that the land cannot support them, our “Law” provides a way out. Excess cattle are used for making new rain-ponds or new rock-wells in the well-fields. Recovering an old rock-well can take up to 100 oxen. There are many wells of this kind in the well-complex area, and they all need live stock to be recovered. You engage in such activities to keep the number of animals in limit. That’s why we say that the multiplying of cattle is not a serious problem. We can use the excess for the discovery of new sources of water and land. The number of cattle can never be greater than what the land can take.

Those who provide dewlap animals have rights to water which are, in principle, second only to those of the well holder. But, as we shall see, they will in practice have to leave room in the watering schedule for certain other categories. They are ranked according to the order in which they slaughter:

The man whose ox is slaughtered next after the ox of the *konficha* is the one who will have the right over the use of the well after the *konficha*. The man who provides the third ox for slaughter is third in rights. Then come the fourth and the fifth. It stops on the fifth. Even the turns for watering cattle in one day do not exceed five. If the number is bigger, the exceeding ones should be distributed among the five. This is governed by the law of five³.

When the order of seniority for slaughtering has been settled, the people concerned set out to recover the well. The first day in the use of a re covered well is known by the term *hagugaa*. This refers to the act of leading the cattle of the *konficha* to the well where they then drink from the new trough prior to any other cattle. Then, as the cattle approach the new well and trough, ritual whipping twigs are spread on the ground. The man with rights to the first watering is present in full ceremonial dress. He wraps his head in a cloth, and holds his elder’s stick and whip in his hands. The latter items symbolize peace, and domestic and social authority, respectively. People from certain clan in the opposite moiety with which the clan has special relations of exchanging water rights are also there. Before the water is drunk, a spitting ritual is performed to make the water healthy for the cattle. Certain “spitters” and people endowed with ritual power come to offer blessings. After all this is performed, a cow is milked directly into the well itself. Finally, a libation of milk is given on the well threshold. Holy resin and ritual salt are also placed at the mouth of the well.

THE WATER SCHEDULE

Given the ecological conditions of Boranaland, the maximum number of days in a water schedule is three. For any one herd-owner who wants to water his animals, his turn to water returns every third day. The first day of his cycle he waters his animals. On the two other days, the animals must do without water. In theory, participation in the shovel ritual and

³ See Megerssa (1989:16) for the special significance of the number five. For another example of number symbolism in pastoral society, see Hurskainen (1990, the same volume where the present paper was originally published).

libation defines both seniority and turns for watering. However in practice, watering is complicated by concern for the opposite moiety and by the prerogatives of certain people with ritual powers, holy people, and some others of special status including members of the hunting caste, smiths, and healers. Normally, these categories will not be found at the same time at the same well, but Boran “Law” still prescribes their potential turn.

Of these “Laws”, the one concerned with the precedence of the opposite moiety is the most general. It is applicable to any Boran situation, irrespective of whether watering takes place in Ethiopia or Kenya. Residential camps are usually formed on the basis of affinal cooperation (Dahl 1979:158 ff), and they will thus draw upon each of the two exogamous moieties. By this rule, the turn of the second day should be given to people who belong to particular Sunsuma clans in the opposite moiety. Such people are likely to be found as camp neighbours since they are preferred, if not prescribed, marriage partners. This rule is of such importance that it is seen to belong to “Law” rather than to “Custom”. Dadacha explains its rationale in the following terms:

The “Law” is about collective ownership, mutual respect. You should respect collective ownership even when you know that the well is yours. If I who am a Goona use the water and you use it next and you are also a Goona, then a Sabbo might feel alienated. We place Sabbo between ourselves to make him not feel an outsider. In this way we show our regard for each other.

Under certain circumstances, however, even the people of clans in the opposite moiety have to yield their place in the schedule Dadacha explains:

The first cattle that should be watered are those of the well-holder. Then come the people of clans in the opposite moiety. If, however, a horse comes to be watered it takes the first place, the place of the well-holder. Say one of the gaadaa-rulers comes. Then the second people to water leave their place to the ruler. In this case the owner of the well becomes the last one. The people who live this life know these difficult rules and generally do not disagree. In case a well does not have water and those owning it run short of water, the case will be considered by the whole group regardless of who belongs where. A solution is found in sharing with others.

It may appear surprising that people of very different status are all given the same access to “second turn” watering—holy men and gaadaa-leaders on the one hand and healers, blacksmiths, and hunters on the other. Dadacha explains this in terms of the critical importance of the tasks carried out by people of the latter categories:

The iron bracelet of the priest-king is forged by the blacksmith. The child boom can’t be separated from his mother without a knife forged by the blacksmith. The spear by which you defend the land against your enemies is forged by the blacksmith. The very axe you use in the recovery of the well itself is forged by the blacksmith. Therefore the “Law” places the blacksmith equal with the highest authorities. Note that the smiths are not many in number. You may find one in a locality. And he is known by all. Hence he does not even take his cattle to water himself. Let me give you an example. The smith tells young boys to take the cattle to the well where I am the well-holder, and I deliberately refuse to water his cattle. What if they go home without drinking? When I come home, he has already got the news, hence he will “cry out” and file a case against me. The court elders ask him questions. One of the questions will be about where he himself was when his cattle were taken to the well. He will answer, “I make the knife for the shaving and for cutting the umbilical cord and the throat of the sacrificial animal. I forge the spears you defend yourself with. I was busy with all these activities but the well-holder sent my cattle home dry.” “Law” will sentence me to “the Retribution of the Living”, which is 30 heads of cattle. The “Law” considers that the smith was carrying out his duties to land and clan when his cattle came home dry.

In Dadacha’s view, people such as healers, hunters, smiths, the *qallus*, and holy people with ritual power are similar because they all play an essential role within Boran traditional organization. When a well has been filled with soil because of ram and soil erosion and needs

to be dug again, oxen are once more slaughtered to feed the diggers. All the users, regardless of moiety, have to contribute.

THE WELL AS A PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

When cattle come to the well, they first reach the well-yard, which is enclosed with a thorn bush. The well has only one gate and all cattle should enter through this gate. A man who lets his cattle enter elsewhere may be charged for destroying or abusing the horraa. The man may then claim that he did it out of ignorance. The local court of elders may decide to drop the case, but the man will be stigmatized for admitting ignorance in such matters, since this is regarded as woman-like and undignified.

When they pass the well-yard, the animals enter the cattle corridor, which is a sloping ramp dug into the soil. The end of the corridor towards the well is marked with a threshold, known as the dargullaa. These places are considered within the domain of "Custom" rather than "Law". But once the threshold is crossed the ground becomes holy, and is defined under the "Law". Within this holy zone and to both sides of the threshold, according to Dadacha's description, there is a wide place where cattle rest after being watered. This central part of the well also contains the day trough from which the cattle actually drink.

The physical outline of the well is conceptually divided into five parts. This parallels the division of the Boran house. The legal function of the well-threshold corresponds to that of the domestic threshold which divides the outer part of the hut, ruled by "Custom", from its inner, private part which is ruled by "Law". Consequently, a quarrel which takes place inside the threshold is regarded as a far more serious breach of norms than one which takes place outside. It cannot be dealt with by a local court of ordinary elders, but must be handed over to the tribal legal experts. In Dadacha's description, the interdependence of "Law" and "Custom" is symbolically and materially embodied in the structure of the well. He also emphasizes that the proper place and respect given to the various special categories of dignitaries and ritual power-holders should be reflected and acted out in the wells.

In any Boran grazing territory, the continuity of occupation by particular groups of people is normally of sufficient strength that practical watering schedules are mainly concerned with ordering relations between people well known to each other, or standing in an easily definable relationship to each other. However, there has always been some degree of mobility and hence a provision for newcomers and strangers of different kinds is necessary. Boran people passing through the country could water their animals at any well and be given first service even without having to wait. A Boran newcomer who settled in the area, however, would enter into the watering schedules according to his contribution of dewlap animals. Other considerations are applied to people classified as outside the Boran system. About these groups, referred to as siddi, Dadacha says, "If they have cattle, the animals are given the fourth place. If the outsiders are not many and happen to be just one group, they will be entitled to use the well one day out of the three." To let the strangers wait longer than the three days of the watering cycle would be equal to leaving them to "the day of the hyenas and vultures", which is taboo. When it comes to slaughtering "dewlap" animals the strangers must contribute⁴:

This is because they live among us if they are not our kinsmen. Even if "Custom" calls the outsiders siddi, people with whom you could fight, "Law" allows them in. "Law" is sympathetic to all, but also harsh to anyone who abuses its sympathy. Strangers are given fourth place if they live with you in peace so that they do not experience loneliness and alienation.

⁴ Ayele and Gossaye (1982:12) mistakenly use *dargullaa* for the area beside a pond where the cattle are resting.

So far we have been concerned with the ranking of various categories of humans in terms of access to water. The cultural and ritual ranking of animals is also reflected in the regulation of turns at the wells. The animals considered in traditional Borana law are horses, mules, donkeys, cattle and “small stock”, that is, sheep and goats. The basic animal categories used in the well regulations are “horses” and “cattle” or “hoofed” animals and “cloven”. Horses, which are found in Ethiopia but usually not in Kenya where ecological conditions for them are adverse, are both a central ethnic emblem and an emblem of dignity and rule. They were important to the Borana and other Oromo in their ritual cyclical raids and probably a vital factor in the seventeenth-century expansion of the Oromo over Ethiopia (Hultin 1975). The horse, as we have seen, has privileged access to water. The mule has no independent right of access to water, but is entitled to water through the legal subordination of the category of the “mule” to that of the “horse”. The donkey is regarded as an independent entity but has no formal position in the system. For practical reasons it is watered with cattle when it arrives with cattle, and with horses when it comes with horses. Cattle are ranked after the general category “horse”. Sheep and goats, placed in one category, do not have any legally-independent access to water, but gain access as members of the category of “calf”. Camels are regarded as outside the realm of normal Borana matters, and their rights are not given any legal recognition. Dadacha explains:

Whether or not the camel can go on longer without water is not the issue. The point is that the owners of the water are not people of camels. They are those of cattle and horses. So, when a camel comes they can't find a place for it. Consequently the camel has to wait until every animal has had its turn. The camel not only comes after other animals but also after hyena and vultures.

DISCUSSION

An obvious pragmatic view of the Borana system of allocating access to wells would hold that it smoothly organizes watering. But it also serves to activate, in everyday life, the basic principles of the social order. Each well is an arena for playing out the two fundamental forms of social co-operation on which the dual organization of the Borana tribe is grounded. Water is either a resource that you “share in” as a member of a descent based collectivity, or one that you “share out” to signify respect. In the anthropology of kinship, the way we conceive of “sharing in”—solidarity based on shared identity—may to a large extent be governed by our own preconceptions of shared identity transmitted through sexuality and birth. Pitt-Rivers (1973:92ff) emphasizes that kinship is just one possible form of consubstantiality. For example, food and drink not only maintain people as biological beings but may also confer shared identity. To understand how the Borana link patrilinearity and water, it is probably not enough to see water as a metaphor for semen or semen as a metaphor for water. Water stands in relationship to linearity and descent which parallels that of semen; it can no less be separated from the former than it can from the latter. Water is not only a metaphor for life, but also an expression of life and a medium for life and linearity, and hence mutually links the members of that social unit controlling the source in consubstantiality. The second principle that of “sharing out” through distribution of the water outside the boundaries of the agnatic unit, is as stated above seen as a way of showing respect. The Borana concept of respect implies distinction of identity. Respect also implies a degree of deference to the superior rights of those respected. Respect is the behaviour that is expected of women in relation to men, of juniors in relation to seniors, and, as we have seen in the context of wells, of ordinary citizens in relation to ritual power-holders as well as to in-laws. Although the division of the Borana into two moieties means that, on a collective level, wife-taking groups are identical to wife-giving groups, it is the archetypal “in-law” that one thinks of when verbalizing the norms of respect. At the level of individual relations, “wife-takers” show respect to “wife-givers”. Paradoxically, it is in their capacity as “wife-givers” that the members of a man's opposite

moiety should be afforded respect. One can observe, in relation to the symbolic links of well-water to agnation that the water with which the livestock is watered is usually taken out of the well by men. Although women carry out important tasks in herd reproduction such as caring for sick, pregnant and newborn animals, it is men that are singled out in the male-dominant ideology as doing the essential work of recreating the herds. Since the most laborious task of male work with the herds is watering, and since the idea of water as the basis of life is so pervasive, it is reasonable to expect this task in particular to be regarded as recreating the herds. The offering of water to affines is then structurally parallel to marriage, when seen as an offering of male substance to affines. As “vital fluid”, livestock water only reach the members of the clan after having been milked by women, whose milking activities are symbolic analogues to giving birth (Dahl 1990). More information is, however, needed for a full-fledged analysis along these lines. For example, in contrast to livestock-water, water for direct consumption by members of the human household belongs to the female domain. Such water is not only usually fetched by the women; the limited quantities required also mean that such water can be available without much formality. Such sources, since they do not represent any investment of work, are less clearly tied to clanship. It would be interesting to know if there are any particular customs or regulations referring to the way women gain access to household water from the deep wells, but unfortunately such data are lacking.

No Boran would reject the idea that agnatic sharing and affinal respect are the two cements of society. The moiety system of dividing the tribe into Sabbu and Gona is regarded as one of the constitutive characteristics of the ethnic group. It permeates all aspects of Boran community life, and also life at the wells. But each well-field, by representing all clans, is also a microcosm of the larger ethnic order. A final reflection should therefore be offered about the nature of the Borana as a nation or ethnic group. The Borana “had” the pan-tribal institutions of the *gaadaa*-system, age organization and so-called priest-kings, who were ritual leaders. There is no absolute consensus among various Boranists about the nature of these systems, as to whether or not they are a political hierarchy. Baxter (1978) claims that the *gaadaa*-system was an exclusively ritual apparatus, while Legesse tends to stress the political and juridical aspects, stating that the *gaadaa*-officers had to solve conflicts between clans or households arising from the use of pastures, as well as to settle claims to water resources (Legesse 1973). Because of their close links to the ritual centres and formal “offices” our main informants are more likely to exaggerate than under estimate the actual political efficiency of the *Gaadaa*-system. As a political unit, Boran society is not primarily a hierarchy of economic or legal power, but rather, to paraphrase Ingold, a “specific mode of practical co- operation” resting on “a specific form of social consciousness” (1986:236). Organizationally it has a core, but with no clear boundaries at the periphery. As a bounded unit it exists mainly at the level of a theoretical construct, an “imagined community”. The formal ritual life of the Borana, the rituals of the age and generation classes that have drawn so much ethnographic attention, serves to recreate this image, but the latter is also constantly revived by the meaning of all the quotidian activities that serve as mementos of the tribal unit as a whole.

Participation in watering at the central wells involves the subordination of individual well-routines to a particular order of seniority and precedence at watering. This is interpreted as a reflection of allegiance to the basic principles of respect and solidarity in Borana culture. Let us, in a final note, mention that this has implications for the relation of the Waso Borana to those Borana remaining at the ethnic centre. The former see the freedom from regulation as a comparative advantage that the Waso area has, while the latter doubt the cultural sincerity of the Waso people and their allegiance to Borana’s particular brand of “hydraulic civilization”.

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