The mythical reflexivity of the Burji.
Presentation of an ethnological-linguistic methodology for interpreting oral literature

Alexander Kellner¹

The Burji, an east-cushitic-speaking group living in Southwest Ethiopia and Northern Kenya, use their myths as a reflexive medium for thinking about problems and phenomena of today. In order to analyse the Burjis’ ‘mythical reflexivity’, I developed an approach which combines hermeneutic and performative approaches with Bourdieu’s theory of social practice and which is demonstrated here with the example of the myth of a clan founder in Burji.

Introductory Remarks

In this paper, I wish to present an interpretative approach for analysing oral literature the aim of which is to gain a deeper understanding of a given culture. I developed this approach – which is presented in full detail elsewhere – when I was dealing with the historical traditions and myths of the Burji which I had recorded in the original language.²

The original homeland of the Burji is the southern part of the Amarro mountains situated on the eastern side of the southern Ethiopian Rift Valley. Traditionally, the Burji are excellent agriculturalists, speaking an East Cushitic language. The number of people considering themselves as Burji is around 90,000. Before they were integrated into the Ethiopian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, the Burji had a polycephalous social order. This is still true today where internal issues are concerned. Since the conquest of what we today call southern Ethiopia by Emperor Menilek II at the end of the 19th century, the majority of the Burji has left their homelands and built up communities in other parts of Ethiopia and in Kenya. The spatial dispersion of the Burji was accompanied by an internal social differentiation into groups with different linguistic and religious affiliations, economic situations and life-styles. Despite all these differences, the Burji nevertheless regard themselves as belonging together. Apart from the self-image of being master cultivators, the relation to their common traditional territory and the vernacular language, Burji regard their common treasure of myths and oral traditions, especially historical experiences, as an essential element of ‘Burjiness’. In discussions about their identity these traditions serve as a significant discursive and reflexive medium.

The late Helmut Straube was the first to do systematic research on the Burji in 1955 and in 1973/4. Communication with the Burji has not been broken off since then. Since

¹ Universität München (University of Munich) Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikanistik Oettingenstr. 67, D-80538 München, Germany. E-mail: kellnera@web.de
the 1970s Hermann Amborn is doing research on the Burji-Konso cluster, and from 1998 until 2000 I carried out a 14-month fieldwork on the oral literature of the Burji.\(^3\)

An important result of my work is that the myths of the Burji neither contain uncompromising or unchanging views about the world, nor set up orthodox rules which people must obey. On the contrary, they offer people thought patterns which inspire ideas on how to cope with problems and inconsistencies of human life. Oral traditions provide the Burji images and cognitive schemes out of which they develop discursive lines in order to evaluate their present situation and to anticipate future possibilities.

In order to analyse how the Burji reflect upon certain phenomena and problems with the help of their myths, I tried to combine hermeneutic and performative approaches with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice. In this paper I try to demonstrate my approach with the example of the myth of Yaayya, the (re-)founder of the clan of Baambala. This tradition is still deeply rooted in the minds of the Burji and can be seen as “key cultural text” (Silverstein & Urban 1996: 12) of the Burji because it occupies “a special position” within their culture and has become the “focus of multiple realizations.”

**Theory and methodology**

**Hermeneutics and performative approaches**

During my fieldwork I recorded oral traditions from various genres in the original language which I transcribed and analysed linguistically. I put my focus on narratives which can be assigned to the genre “historical traditions” or “myths” and which the Burji would call *mammaahoo*. The contents of the narratives as well as the ethnographic information and linguistic modes of expressions contained therein were discussed with Burji from several villages.

As already mentioned, the interpretative analysis of the Burji texts was carried out with a threefold approach which combined hermeneutic and performative approaches with Bourdieu’s theory of practice. Each of these approaches has its achievements but is insufficient if used as the sole basis.

By “hermeneutic approaches” I understand – with regard to interpretative analyses of oral literature – those kind of approaches which start from the assumption that taking the cultural context into consideration is indispensable for understanding the meaning(s) of a narrative (or any other piece of oral literature). In other words, the meanings of motives, linguistic expressions and cultural topics addressed in a narrative can only be grasped by the researcher when relationships between text elements and cultural, socio-political as well as historical contexts are established. On the other hand, culture-specific phenomena or the modes in which people reflect upon them become discernible and can be revealed through the contents of a tale, narrative, etc. (cf. Geider 1990: 16).

However, there are some problems with hermeneutics. Hermeneutics and its methodology were developed in western society, for interpreting first and foremost written testimonies. Therefore it is a questionable undertaking to apply hermeneutic

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\(^3\) As far as the linguistic analysis of the Burji language is concerned, there are, apart from some short word lists, grammatical notes and specialised linguistic publications, two larger works, the etymological dictionary by Hans-Jürgen Sasse which appeared in 1982, and the grammatical sketch by Klaus Wedekind (1990). In Kellner (2007:part II) one finds some grammatical annotations and seven Burji narratives in the original language which are partly interlinearly translated. For the region which has come to be called South Ethiopia, interpretative analyses directly based on the original language are generally very rare. For Burji culture and history see Sasse & Straube 1977, Amborn 1994, 1995, Amborn and Kellner 1999 and Kellner 2007 with further references.
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methods directly to oral traditions (or to culture in general, as it was suggested by Clifford Geertz'). Oral ‘texts’ are not invariable written documents detached from situational contexts. Hence it is problematic to consider the contents of oral traditions or the statements contained therein as timeless, trans-situational representations of culture-specific ‘facts.’ The decontextualization is driven further when, in a second step of hermeneutic analysis, these reified ‘facts’ are related to ethnographic information which is also decontextualised because it was collected in other contexts. To conclude: in oral cultures, statements which speakers or the audience may consider as correct and true in a specific situation might be rejected by them in other situational contexts. In societies were writing as a medium is of minor importance, oral speech is always brought into line with the respective discursive situation and is not to be thought of as disseminating a timeless, leave alone universal truth. This does not mean at all that one has to turn one’s back on hermeneutic approaches. I applied them when the narrators themselves made connections to or hinted at culture-specific phenomena, or when Burji themselves with whom I discussed the recorded stories established a corresponding discursive context. The images, clichés and modes of speech used in a particular version of a story can only be understood when they are, as already said, linked to intersubjective, historically evolved horizons of meaning and practices from which they have emerged. Since images, motives and modes of expression, on the other hand, are not semantic units with invariable meanings but used by members of a specific culture as operators which can be handled and interpreted differently, the hermeneutic-interpretative analysis needs to return to the specific narrative performance or event.

Performativ approaches which focus on the situational dynamics of oral performances gave me stimulus to regard the specific situation in which a narrative was recounted. Since the meaning of oral speech, other than that of a written text or testimony, is transmitted not only by lexemes but by prosodic features like intonation, speech speed, phonetic accentuations and non-verbal means like facial expressions or gestures too, Burji narrative performances were treated as individual speech events and transcribed according to the method of “speech-oriented transcription”, as developed by Thomas Geider (cf. 1988, 1990), which takes prosodic and non-verbal features into account. Second, the interaction between narrator and audience, the presence and expectations of the anthropologist, as well as the overall discursive framing were also considered when analysing the meaning of Burji narratives. The situational selection, arrangement, and stylistic variation of narrative elements are not just ornamental additions. The content and meaning of a narrative (or of any other piece of oral literature) cannot be separated from its formal features and situational embedding.

Pierre Bourdieu’s “Theory of Practice” was the third building block in my efforts to comprehend Burji narratives. To date, the potential of Bourdieu’s theory for analysing oral literature has been scarcely recognised. By employing Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “social field”, a perennial problem can be tackled which, in my view, has been not comprehensively and systematically solved: the micro-macro problem of how to relate the situated narrative events to larger social structures and other modes of

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4 See, e.g., Geertz 1973.
6 For the contextual nature of the concept of truth and lie among the Burji see Kellner 2006.
7 The number of Bourdieu’s publications is legion. One of his basic theoretical works is “The Logic of Practice” (1990).
practices. In addition, Bourdieu’s theory provides a vocabulary to mediate the seeming contradictions between collectivity of oral traditions and their individual variations.

The potential of Bourdieu’s theory of practice for analysing oral literature

Bourdieu’s theory of practice is the attempt to overcome the antinomy between objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivist theories, like structuralism, hold that social relations and forces impose themselves upon agents, irrespective of their consciousness and will. Such approaches see human practice, says Bourdieu, as the automatic or unintended outcome of objective structures. Subjectivist theories, on the other hand, such as ethnomethodology, stress the ‘constructivist’ capabilities of individual agents. The failure of these theories is, however, according to Bourdieu, that they neglect the fact that orientations of action are not freely chosen but shaped by objective social structures. Bourdieu’s theory of practice is the attempt to synthesize objectivism and subjectivism and to mediate between them. The key terms of his theory are: “habitus”, “social field”, and “capital”.

Habitus designates the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world. The habitus does not determine our actions but rather disposes us to think, act and feel in certain ways or styles. These dispositions are acquired through lasting exposure to particular social conditions and conditionings in social contexts, in distinct social spaces which Bourdieu calls “social fields.” In western societies we find a multitude of such social spaces: arts, the economy, the law, politics, etc. Each of these social fields has a profile of its own and is endowed with a particular set of rules, principles and forms of authority which are incorporated by the participants. Social fields function as ‘social arenas’ where agents struggle over resources, referred to as capital, which are at stake in the field. For Bourdieu, a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the field-specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it. Capital comes in four principal species: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Since the habitus is acquired in social fields, i.e. in structured social contexts, it is a structured structure (*opus operatum*). But the habitus is at the same time the basis for reproducing (or modifying) these social contexts or fields, i.e. the habitus is a “structuring structure” (*modus operandi*) as well.

In my attempt to make Bourdieu’s theory productive for the anthropological analysis of oral literature, I conceptualized oral traditions and their use as follows: oral traditions can be conceived as objectified expressions of the habitus, i.e. the habitus expresses itself in the oral traditions. Furthermore, habitus and oral traditions are dialectically related to each other: the habitus forces its way in the oral traditions which, on the other hand, contribute as structured objectivations of the habitus to its generation and strengthening. In other words, the habitus finds itself in the traditions and is spontaneously stimulated by them.

The next step is to clarify which fields of practice are of special relevance for the interpretative analysis of Burjji narratives. These must be those fields in which oral traditions are deployed as one of the main sorts of capital. In this respect I defined a socio-political and a symbolical (sub-)field (which of course are analytical constructs).

There is no traditional Burjji assembly in which speakers would not refer to historical narratives, myths, proverbs, parables or allegories. Those who show ambitions to take a position and play a role in the socio-political field are only persuasive when they have knowledge of Burjji history and Burjji customs and traditions. Not without reason Burjji
The mythical reflexivity of the Burji say “mammaahoo k afey shiidi masheeninaa” (“A speech which does not refer to orally transmitted traditions is barren”). An agent who could convert his cultural capital to social and symbolical capital is respectfully referred to as someone who “knows how to speak” and how to convince others (afey beehaa lammi).

The symbolical field is another field of practice where oral traditions as cultural capital are relevant. It is highly significant for Burji who seek their identity as Burji. For them, the socio-cultural elements which constitute ‘Burjiness’ manifest themselves nowadays increasingly through their conceptual and symbolical content. This explains why a Burji from Marsabit who, when trying to pick a mango fruit, almost fell down from the tree nevertheless stated: “You know the Burji are master agriculturalists, and this makes them distinct from other people.”

In polyphonic Burji society, the access to cultural capital is, in principle, not restricted. Anyone who has a keen interest in orally transmitted traditions can learn them (by participating in assemblies, personal inquiry, etc.). It must be added, however, that the wish to know and learn about oral traditions is stronger and fostered more when a person grows up or lives in a surrounding where this sort of capital is highly valued.

Example: The myth of Yaayya

In this section I wish to demonstrate my interpretative approach with the example of the Burjis’ myth of Yaayya. For the sake of brevity I cannot present my approach in full detail but only give highlights on it.

First, the content of the myth shall be briefly summarized. The myth tells us about the wondrous birth and deeds of Yaayya, the (re-)founder of the clan of Baambala. An unmarried girl tended cattle at a pond near Leemmoo, a village in the Ethiopian homelands of the Burji. After she had fallen asleep, a python wriggled out of the pond and spat onto her stomach. The girl became pregnant and gave birth to Yaayya. In most variants which I collected the Burji are afraid of the boy and his supernatural powers. Therefore, Yaayya has to leave Leemmoo and then starts roaming through Burjiland. During his migration he works miracles which are a blessing to the whole Burji community. The python stands here for the community of the ancestors. Yaayya not only (re-)founded his clan but also became the first ganni of the Baambala clan. Many Burji are captivated by the creational events which are reported in the Yaayya myth because they took place in their homeland and thus sanctify it.

The ganni are the most important dignitaries of the Burji and usually also clan leaders. They have special abilities which they inherit from their clan forebears. Their duty is to take care of the growth and thriving of all crops and domestic animals, and they are responsible for the prevention of all evil influences and for the well-being of

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8 Personal communication Hermann Amborn.
9 For an in-depth interpretative analysis of the myth see Kellner 2007: chap. D II.
10 Pythons are thought to be messengers of the ganni and impersonate his close relationship with the ancestors. Among the Oromo and in the Burji-Konso group, the snake is regarded as an emblem and an embodiment of the primeval ancestors as well as of their fertility-giving powers (cf. Kellner 2007: 178 p. with further references). The story that a girl or woman became pregnant by a snake and that the child born became a clan founder is also found among the Konso (Jensen 1936: 386, Hallpike 1966, Watson 1998: Appendix, text 2) and the Boran (Haberland 1963: 157, Knutsson 1967: 144f., Hultin & Shongolo 2006).
11 I speak of Yaayya as “(re-)founder” of the clan, because, on the one hand, he was begotten by a python and is thus a scion of the ancestral community; on the other hand, he has all the attributes and traits which are characteristic for primeval ancestors. Which quality of Yaayya is stressed depends on the narrative episode or the general context. Either Yaayya is portrayed as primeval ancestor or as chosen child of the ancestors.
the Burji people. The clan of Baambala has four ganni who all trace their genealogy back to Yaayya. The highest-ranked among them protects the Burji from evil influences and external foes, is able to give fertility but also to withdraw it when people misbehave, and to ban as well as unleash lethal diseases. Together with the rainmaker, he is regarded as the most powerful ganni. (In the following, the term “Baambala ganni” refers to the highest-ranked one of the four Baambala ganni.)

In all variants which I collected the narrators occupy themselves more or less directly with the problem in which way the mythical events are of significance for the present and relevant for shaping and structuring the socio-political and symbolical field.

The variant which shall be discussed here was given by a Burji man who is in his seventies and whom I may call Karre. Karre is member of the Baambala clan and a close relative of the family of the Baambala ganni. The story he recounted is about a competition between young Yaayya and a powerful possession spirit. Karre told me this story two times, but in each of his performances he wanted to communicate another message. The first variant was recounted in a big round in Ralley-Biila, a village in Northern Burji. I had summoned up 20 old men to ask them questions about Burji history and culture. After I had asked the participants about the emergence of the bokkola and garaa disease, one man gave a short version of the Yaayya myth. (Bokkola and garaa are the names for beings or forces which bring feverish and lethal diseases; they can be banned as well as unleashed by the Baambala ganni.) The man said that Yaayya grew up for some time in the village of Leemmoo, but did not speak a single word. Then, one day, Yaayya called out the words “bokkola haa, garaa haa!” (“bokkola hey! garaa hey!”) by which he unleashed these deadly diseases. This induced Karre to give a long version of the Yaayya myth. It contained the following episode:

One day, the boy climbed a hill in Leemmoo. A possession spirit which claimed the hill challenged Yaayya to a trial of strength. A solid rock was to be broken to pieces. The spirit let off a storm, but the rock remained as it was. Then Yaayya called out “bokkola haa, garaa haa!” – and the rock broke into pieces. At the same time, he brought with these words the bokkola and garaa disease into existence. The spirit said, “Okay, you are the stronger of us two. The earth shall be yours, the skies will be mine” – and, by saying this, vanished up into the skies.

About six weeks later I met with Karre again in order to interview him about certain cultural topics. One of my assistants, who interpreted for me and whom I may call Baate, was also present. Baate is a man in his 40s and works as evangelist for the Kale Hiwot Church. He is a friend of Karre and also member of the Baambala clan.

I asked Karre to recount the episode about Yaayya’s competition with the possession spirit once again, which he did. By only slightly varying the episode he turned it in a new direction. Whereas in his first variant he put the story into the discursive context of the bokkola and garaa disease, he now used it as a reflexive medium to think about the relationship between the ganni of the Baambala clan and the possession spirits. This shows clearly the mutual relationship between form, content and situation of telling.

The possession spirits are called waac’i by the Burji. The waac’i cult came to Burji at the end of the 19th century via adjacent Amarro and is to be seen as offspring of the

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12 There are parallels to priestly institutions of many other Oromo groups, especially however to the remaining groups of the Burji-Konso cluster (Konso: Hallpike, 1972: 180-186; Dullay and D’iraša: see Amborn 1983 passim with further references).
13 For an in-depth analysis of this variant see Kellner 2007: chap. D II 3 (for the text in the original language see ibid.: 405 pp.).
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North-Ethiopian zar cult.¹⁴ The cult is rejected by devout Christians and Muslims, who refer to these beings as “satan”, but it is nevertheless still practiced in Burji society. Waac’i mediums and ganni represent two antagonistic elements in traditional Burji religion. Whereas the ganni inherit their powers from the ancestors, the authority of the mediums is based on a personal vocation; the ganni undertake rituals for the public good, but the mediums are concerned with the private individual and his trouble caused by spiritual beings or forces; the ganni are the most important link to the ancestors and guarantee the social order, whereas the mediums are possessed by spirits which smugly and arbitrarily violate or disregard it.

Contrary to his first variant, Karre now lets Yaayya call out, “aabbattanoo akkattanoo (buura maaldaccoo)” (“Upon the buura and maaldaccoo of my fathers and grandfathers!”).¹⁵ Whereas in the previous variant Yaayya kindled and banned by his first words the bokkola and gaaraa disease, he addresses them now to the ancestors.

The waac’i’s flight into the skies shows parallels to the old myths about the dissociation of Sky God and the Earth which were widespread in the region that has come to be called South Ethiopia.¹⁶ Karre uses this idea as a structuring structure which leads him to certain insights. In the indigenous religions in the South, God is associated with the sky and thought of as ‘deus otiosus’ who has withdrawn from the world. Similar to God, the waac’i would not directly exert an influence on the destinies of the humans if people would leave these spirits in their celestial exile to which they were sent by Yaayya;¹⁷ instead, they continue to contact them through mediums. The spheres of the waac’i and the ganni are strictly separated; the cleavage between them is as wide as between the skies and the earth.¹⁸

At the end of his story, Karre explicates the message he wants to put forward by giving an example: in case of that someone has damaged or stolen someone’s property, the wrongdoer or his family can ask the Baambala ganni for mediation. The Baambala ganni, then, does not appear in person at the reconciliation meeting but sends one of his messengers, giving him his lissoo, which is an insignia of a ganni.¹⁹ This custom is now (re-)interpreted by Karre in the light of the story: the wrongdoer or his family may be ‘impurified’ by a waac’i; therefore the ganni sends one of his messengers in order to avoid these beings.

Karre addresses his story to the evangelical Protestants among the Burji and all those who question the institution of the Baambala ganni whom some of them purport to be in

¹⁴ Much has been written on possession cults in Ethiopia (cf. Haberland 1960; Lewis 1983; Palmisano 2000 & 2003; Kellner 2007: 223-239 with further references).
¹⁵ The buura necklace and maaldacco ring are insignia of a ganni (cf. Amborn & Kellner 1999: s.v.).
¹⁶ “... Heaven did not stand alone but was regarded as working in co-operation with Earth in the work of Creation. Heaven, the male principle, was thought of as begetting, Earth, the female principle, as conceiving and giving birth” (Haberland 1963: 778). For this dualistic idea in the region which today is Southern Ethiopia cf. Jensen 1936: 499 p., Nr. 10 (Darassa); Haberland 1963: 563 pp. (Oromo); Hallpike 1972: 223 p., 286 (Konso); Amborn et al. 1980: 45 (Dullay).
¹⁷ Of course, Karre does not place God and waac’i on the same level. As already said, he uses the idea of the dissociation of Sky God and Earth as a cognitive scheme.
¹⁸ Waac’i is also on of the names for God, which is still used in ceremonial contexts. The word derives from the East-Cushitic root waak'- which means ‘sky god’. There are good reasons for the assumption that in the South (and in Burji too) elements of the indigenous idea of a dualistic (Sky) God have survived in the possession cults (cf. Kellner 2007: 223-29 with further references).
¹⁹ “A lissoo is a strong leather stick made from hippo hide, which is set completely with brass rings. On one side of the stick, which is approximately 50 cm in length, there is a loop through which a brass ring is drawn. [...] At peace meetings with the Guji ‘parlementairs’ wore a lissoo as a sign of their peaceful purposes.” It serves as a sign of dignity for various dignitaries (Amborn & Kellner 1999: s.v.).
league with ‘satanic’ powers. His point is that it was Yaayya who put the ‘satanic’ possession spirits in their place. By taking the particular conditions of the performative event into account (presence of an evangelical Burji Protestant) and by developing the story against this performative background, Karre opened up a new horizon from where he could reflect upon the relationship between the ganni of the Baambala clan and the possession spirits.

Following Bourdieu (1990: 57), the ability of getting inspirations from a myth or historical tradition presupposes a habitus that so perfectly possesses the mode of mythical speaking that the habitus is possessed by it, so much so that the habitus “asserts its freedom” from it “by realizing the rarest of the possibilities” that this mode of speaking necessarily implies. Habitual dispositions and the developing story stimulate each other, cognitive schemes or models are simultaneously applied to and obtained out of a story, and the narrator “finds in his discourse the triggers for his discourse, which goes along like a train laying its own rails” (Bourdieu 1990: 57).

References


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