

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE VERSUS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: BRIDE SECLUSION AMONG THE MAALE AS A PERIOD OF PREPARATION AND CONSOLIDATION

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ABSTRACT Among the Maale people of southern Ethiopia, as well as among many other groups all over the world, women remain in seclusion during the first weeks or months of their marriages. The manifold functions of this period of seclusion, which prepares women for their lives as wives and mothers, are often underestimated in present-day Ethiopia and are sometimes only partially practiced. The following article explains bride seclusion among the Maale and the local knowledge that is transferred through this cultural practice. In addition to strengthening certain gender-specific handicrafts, bride seclusion is an opportunity for young women to consolidate traditional musical skills. I will conclude the article with a discussion of the relationship between local knowledge and national development using the example of bride seclusion, which is currently becoming less common as women pursue formal education.

Key Words: Seclusion; Local knowledge; Knowledge transfer; Development.

THE MAALE OF SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

This paper draws on research among the Maale people of southern Ethiopia between 2006 and 2011.⁽¹⁾ With a rapidly increasing population of about 85,000 people,⁽²⁾ the Maale (also Male, Malle) are the second largest ethnic group of the South Omo Zone in the very southwest of Ethiopia. The South Omo Zone is well known for its ethnic diversity and is often called a mosaic of cultures.

The Maale are agro-pastoralists. The center of their territory is formed by a mountain chain surrounded by savanna. While agriculture plays a more important role for the inhabitants of the mountainous areas, the economy in the lowlands is defined by pastoralism.

The Maale are organized patrilineary and patrilocally. The population is separated into more than 30 clans and two moieties (Jensen, 1959: 27). Polygamous marriages are still common. However, about 50% of the population has already converted to Protestantism, which only tolerates monogamous marriages. The indigenous beliefs of the Maale focus on ancestor veneration. Missionaries of the fundamentalist Protestant segregation SIM (Sudan Interior Mission) arrived as recently as the 1960s from North America and Australia (Donham, 1999: 47, Thubauville, 2010: 50).

Since 2007, the Maale have had their own government district (*woreda*). Parallel to the governmental administration all offices of the 13 traditional ritual and political leaders (*godda*) are still occupied. The traditional leaders still conduct important ritual functions and are sought by some inhabitants for counseling.

The material culture of the Maale was until recently rather simple and existed mostly of objects that were self-made by materials originating from the direct surroundings (e.g., wood, clay, hide, stone, cotton) with only little decoration (Thubauville, 2005). However, the introduction of local markets in the last four decades (Thubauville, 2010: 39) brought quite a big change by introducing fabricated clothes, plastic containers, metal pots and more. Still self-made objects make the majority as they are not only cheaper, but also more suitable for the local conditions (Thubauville, 2005: 141). Therefore, the skills how to produce such items are continuously transferred and valued.

The focus of the following article is on bride seclusion of the Maale people and gender-specific local knowledge which is strengthened during this period. The knowledge transmitted through bride seclusion currently runs the risk of being replaced by formal knowledge learned in schools. To describe this situation I will first give a very brief outline of the discussion of local knowledge and schooling in the African context. I will then introduce some facts about the marriage system of the Maale and will subsequently go into more detail about the seclusion of brides. These explanations are followed by the gender-specific knowledge women accumulate during their seclusion periods. Next, the development of formal education with a special focus on girl's education is discussed. Formal education has recently influenced the bride seclusion of the Maale in that brides who have formerly attended school are restrained from comprehensive bride seclusion. Finally, this new development will be discussed as a discrepancy between tradition and development, as well as local knowledge and formal schooling.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, SCHOOLING AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

If a person is in his own country, he is knowledgeable. If a person goes to a foreign country, he will be a good-for-nothing.
(Maale proverb)

Before turning toward the marriage practices of the Maale, I would like to give a brief overview regarding discussions about local knowledge (also ethnosystems, indigenous knowledge or people's knowledge) and knowledge learned in schools with a focus on African countries.

Local knowledge can be described as the know-how that people need to cope successfully with their social environment (Antweiler, 1998: 480). It develops from the moment a person is born through daily experiences (Sillitoe, 1998: 204) and is therefore highly specialized and differs from locality to locality. The term "local knowledge," as well as the above-mentioned alternatives, "ethnosystems," "indigenous knowledge," and "people's knowledge," are not satisfactory as they propose a binary contrast to "imported" knowledge. The term "local" also implies a certain populist undertone that is not open for creative change and includes borrowings or assimilations from foreign knowledge (Geschiere, 1996: 170). However, local knowledge not only includes static systems, such as identification of

flora and fauna, but, through its reference to everyday experiences, it also comprises dynamic processes that integrate current information and developments.

Some authors suggest that local knowledge should be understood as pre-scientific knowledge, as its practices are mainly based on popular knowledge (e.g., Lachemann, 2004: 126). However, local knowledge and scientific knowledge have something in common: an empirical basis. Nonetheless, they disagree in their validity, which is the case of scientific knowledge independent from place and situation, while local knowledge is context-bound (Antweiler, 1998: 481). Their differences and commonalities show quite clearly that both are important and essential and their combination valuable.

Discussions of local knowledge should also involve a critical reflection of it. Although local knowledge is dependent on the social environment, this does not mean that it is necessarily comprehensive and sustainable. Furthermore, it should not be taken for granted that solutions gained through local knowledge are necessarily just or that local knowledge is inevitably shared by all members of a group (Antweiler, 1998: 486).

The discourse about local knowledge in anthropology and developmental studies presented so far focuses on the ecological and medical knowledge of people and their usefulness for development projects and sustainability. These two fields of local knowledge have also garnered much attention, as they have been identified as marketable goods. While publications and research concerning local ecological and medical knowledge have thus been manifold, social and ritual, as well as indigenous technical local knowledge (ITK), have been neglected in anthropological research⁽³⁾ as well as in developmental approaches (Antweiler, 1998: 474). Those are the exact understudied categories of local knowledge that are transferred through bride seclusions and other passage rites.

Today, knowledge is perceived as so fundamental that western society is often called a “knowledge society.” However, there is a growth of ignorance in many areas, especially concerning the appreciation of local knowledge. Western values have been and still are blindly accepted and copied through the Western educational system in many African countries. Therefore, a self-confident cultural identity cannot develop when those countries have grown apart from their original values and knowledge (Fuest, 1999: 72).

Why then is the Western educational system so happily and uncritically accepted? A central motive may be that formal education through schooling is often believed to be the major cause for development. Also the Ethiopian State has after the defeat of the socialist regime in 1991, propagated development as one of its key goals. One reason for these development goals and diverse schooling may be global campaigns such as the UN’s millennium goals,⁽⁴⁾ which include universal formal education as one goal. In addition, these goals may result from the fact that the degree of education or literacy is seen as one of three indicators of development according to the human development index (HDI).⁽⁵⁾ The emphasis on development and schooling also may be a product of the link that the developmental discourse of knowledge draws between knowledge and agency. According to the sociology of knowledge, agency and knowledge go together hand in hand. Knowledge is described as a precondition or constitutive of human agency (Lachemann, 2004:

125). The belief that education is the key to personal and national development and agency is almost mythical, and in many African countries this belief eliminates a critical discussion of the imported educational system from Western countries (Fuest, 1999: 71).

While the importance of knowledge acquisition is stressed by many African states such as Ethiopia (Epple, 2012; Epple & Thubauville, 2012), it is often left unclear what that very knowledge is meant to comprise. The formal acquisition of knowledge through regular school attendance is, in many situations, of higher importance than the knowledge content one has acquired. People who have not been initiated into schooling are viewed as inferior and dependent on people who have attended school (Fuest, 1999: 78). Murphy (1981: 679) goes even further to compare formal schooling in Liberia with the “bush school” of secret societies in the same country. In both cases, the knowledge attained is mystical and secret and the money paid for education lands in the pockets of the teachers and pupils, or novices are used as a source of labor.⁽⁶⁾ School or “bush school” attendance in such a case is much more important for social differentiation and boundary making (Murphy, 1980: 193) which elites utilize more for social classification and hierarchization rather than for knowledge acquisition.

The second question one may ask concerning the content of education is why, in many African countries, Western education has been implemented without major transformations (Rathgeber, 1988; Fuest, 1999). It seems as if the teaching of practical and local knowledge, which might be useful in daily life in those countries, is not preferred to the abstract scientific knowledge conveyed through Western education. In fact, attempts to “ruralize” or “vocalize” school education is often met with refusal, as it is seen as preventing African students from advancing in the “modern” world (Rathgeber, 1988: 270; Fuest, 1999: 73). Nonetheless, already in the 1980s, efforts had been made to introduce practical subjects into education, as Rathgeber (1988: 271) described in Kenya.

MARRIAGE CUSTOMS—BETWEEN MELANCHOLY AND HAPPINESS

It doesn't make a difference if a donkey is dead or alive; it is destined for the hyenas.

(Maale proverb)

This proverb, frequently used among the Maale people, illustrates that as all donkeys end up being eaten by hyenas,⁽⁷⁾ all women end up being married to a man. Although the proverb might give the impression that women among the Maale are ignored or confronted with proven facts, today most women have a voice about who they want to marry.

Time has resulted in changes, such as the decline of marriage by abduction, among other practices. In earlier times, abduction was a common introduction to marriage, while today it has nearly disappeared due to its official ban and a high police presence. There are also few arranged marriages among the Maale today.

They usually occur only in families of ritual and political leaders (*godda*) having political intentions (Thubauville, 2010: 112). Most young couples today meet at markets, festivals, church, or school and mutually decide to marry each other. However, in earlier times, many couples also freely chose each other. The most popular method of dating was *gochitisi* (Thubauville, 2010: 115), which involved a long period of regular meetings at night in the woman's homestead. Of course, even in previous times, as is the case today, most people chose or choose their spouses themselves, but the rules of clan exogamy must be observed.⁽⁸⁾

The bride and groom typically set the date for the marriage feast. In former times and sometimes still today the groom tied or ties knots on a rope, one for every week that remains until the wedding day (Thubauville, 2010: 114). Until that day, numerous preparations need to be made: Wedding clothes for the bride are needed⁽⁹⁾ and the bride and her friends must grind large amounts of grain to prepare the beer and food that will be offered to guests. After all preparations have been completed, the wedding can take place. On the first day of the festivities, the bride and groom usually celebrate together with family and friends in the bride's home, or if the bride did not inform her parents about the marriage in the bush. They drink sorghum beer and sing and dance. Afterwards, the wedding party heads to the groom's home. On the way there, women sing about the bride's relationships. These songs (*gade*) are melancholic and illustrate the coming separation of the bride from her family:

When one leaves the house of his father, *gade* are sung. Into the house of the husband one enters with dances and flutes. At the house of the father they—the relatives and friends—sing about how they had worked together. She [the bride] sings [for example]: “I was the ox who ploughed your field. I have worked a lot for you and now you [her father] become old.” Then the father has to cry. Everyone becomes sad.

(Shaddo, March 2008)

With merrier songs, the wedding party then arrives at the groom's compound. The bride enters the compound through the cattle entrance, demonstrating that she is involved in an exchange of cattle with the groom's family.⁽¹⁰⁾ Inside the compound, several symbolic performances underline the completion of the marriage: After the bride arrives in the compound, one of her sisters-in-law gives her a present of butter.⁽¹¹⁾ After rubbing some of the butter into the bride's hair, she sticks a chicken feather in it. Later, the bride puts this feather in the grass roof of the groom's family home to indicate her new affiliation with them. The bride further shows attachment to her husband by sharing the first coffee sitting on the same cowhide with her husband and drinking from the same coffee bowl.

In the groom's compound, the party continues with special drinks (sorghum beer and often strong liquor), foods—the usual dish *samo*, a sorghum crumble with cabbage and beans, is mixed with honey, and goat meat is served with it—and singing and dancing. When feeding guests, it is important for the bride to show proof of her virginity. If she does not prove to be a virgin on the first night with her husband, her guests are provided with only half a gourd of honey rather than



Fig. 1. Bride (middle) and groom during the celebration in the homestead of the husband's family, Gudo 2007.

a whole one and are given less meat. It is then proclaimed that because the bride is not full (*kumutsi*), no full gourd of honey will be given.

The wedding feast continues for nearly two days. After the feast only a few female guests of the bride stay behind. They leave on the third day, but before leaving, they offer advice to the bride's parents-in-law on how to treat the bride. In return for giving their advice, they receive small gifts of money from the groom's father. With the departure of the bride's last friends and relatives, the party is over, while the bride's next step on her journey to become a complete woman begins: bride seclusion.⁽¹²⁾

BRIDE SECLUSION—LIKE BEING A KING

To marry again is to a woman like being a king.
(Maale proverb)

Periods of seclusions are practiced world-wide. Often seclusions accompany social or ritual initiations (Turner, 1967; 1969; van Gennep 1969; see also K.W. Arthur in this volume), but they are also intended to offer safety in times of danger,

such as after a rape or directly after giving birth.⁽¹³⁾ In Islamic cultures, a more general seclusion of women that extends into everyday life can be observed (Smith, 1954; Robsen, 2000; Pellow, 2003). The latter can be explained as a demonstration of wealth and status.

Seclusion usually accompanies the indisputable inconvenience of being spatially separated and the restraint of observing taboos, such as requirements to consume only certain foods, meet with a limited group of people or use a special vocabulary (Treis, 2005). However, they are always a sign of a positive transformation (Watson-Franke, 1982: 457). A period of seclusion may turn a girl into a woman, a former student into a ritual expert, or cleanse a woman, who has been raped from impurity. The restricted space of a seclusion is often a further sign of economic well-being or even class (Robson, 2000: 195), as the loss of labor, which the secluded person represents, as well as the special foods or other special offerings, must be affordable for the family. Another positive result of the limitation of physical space that accompanies seclusion may be a widening of the consciousness and thereby a crossing over boundaries to a different world, that is via dreams (Watson-Franke, 1982: 457).

Therefore, periods of seclusion should not be seen as negative sanctions but rather as protective actions to assist a person safely through a dangerous period (Watson-Franke, 1982: 449). Regarding the restriction of space in seclusion, one has to keep in mind that unbounded space barely exists. All boundaries, whether they are garden fences or state borders, exist to offer some kind of protection, while their removal denotes the absence of safety (Watson-Franke, 1982: 450).

Returning to bridal seclusion among the Maale, it can be observed that apart from certain distractive elements, which are described below, the seclusion is seen as a positive period. For example, this is expressed through the aforementioned proverb that implicitly relates to bridal seclusion as a period of such express luxury and comfort that experiencing it twice is comparable to being a king.⁽¹⁴⁾

Maale brides, regardless of their religion, are physically separated from their in-laws during their bridal seclusion. They spend their seclusion period behind a partition (*kol'a*) in the residence of their parents-in-law, on a loft (*k'ubo*) inside the same house,⁽¹⁵⁾ or in a separate house inside the compound (Thubauville, 2010: 129). A bride only leaves the secluded place when she needs to relieve herself. She is not allowed to see nor speak to her parents-in-law or other elderly in-laws (Jensen, 1959: 294) but can meet her husband and his siblings. Childhood friends and members of her natal family are allowed to see her and spend time with her in the secluded space. They visit the bride regularly, socialize with her, and bring her water, special food, and small presents like soaps. The food and drinks a bride consumes are kept inside special ornamental gourds.⁽¹⁶⁾

The spatial separation as well as the additional taboos symbolize the brides current position of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969), which is generated through the momentary ambiguity of being neither a girl nor a woman and belonging neither to the parental family nor the in-laws during this time.



Fig. 2. Protestant bride and groom in a seclusion room (*kol'a*) in Gudo 2008.

The seclusion depends on several factors, but usually lasts about three months. Throughout this period, the bride is not allowed to do any household chores or physically demanding work. Instead she immerses herself in learning and deepening handicrafts and musical skills⁽¹⁷⁾ and is fed especially nutritious foods. Therefore, the duration is restricted to the economic resources of the family. However, this is not the only defining reason. Ilpo's example shows yet another cause that influences the duration of seclusion:

As he [my husband] married me as a second wife, I stayed as a bride only for one month. You need someone to cook for you to stay a bride for a longer period. It is because my co-wife didn't like me and she no longer cooked for me; that's why I had a short seclusion.

(Ilpo, January 2007)

Ilpo's case shows that other women need to have spare time to prepare special foods and also need to be favorably inclined toward the bride. Furthermore, the husband's family must be able to dispense with the bride's labor. Therefore, the duration of seclusion depends on the agricultural season, as women are needed to help transport crops during harvest time.⁽¹⁸⁾

During the seclusion also the wealth to be given by the groom is discussed between the two families. Seclusion cannot end before the discussions are finalized and the bride wealth is in the process of being transferred.⁽¹⁹⁾

Contrary to many other societies in Africa, the bride and groom are allowed to engage in sexual intercourse during the seclusion period.⁽²⁰⁾ In wealthy families who can offer special food to the bride for a long time, seclusion may even end with the birth of the bride's first child.

It is our culture for brides to become pregnant. If she becomes pregnant during the bride seclusion, it is good for her. Then the family feels as if she had stayed already for a long time together with them.

(Danjite, May 2007)

Seclusion presents advantages and disadvantages for the bride. Eating and gaining weight are seen as central elements of bride seclusion among the Maale, and most brides enjoy seclusion. In earlier days, if a bride did not eat as much as she was expected to eat, the groom would playfully whip her. A special leather whip (*chalakko*) was used just for that purpose (Thubauville, 2010: 131). Many of my sources stressed the importance placed on the visibly increased weight of the bride:

She [the bride] gains weight. She doesn't work; she doesn't grind grain; the water for washing her body is brought to the house for her. If she lives in a rich household, one slaughters livestock for her and feeds her with the meat. Once she has become beautiful and plump, she gets out. Then people say: "They have treated her as a bride (*utasenne*) very well."

(Zeleketch, May 2007)

Aside from the pleasant aspects of being a bride, many women also recall the boredom of not being able to leave seclusion as well as longing for their family members and childhood friends. One woman told me that during her seclusion, she even missed grinding grain, a task that women usually complain about. She said she would grind secretly when no one else was around to help out her sister-in-law (Thubauville, 2010: 131).

The end of the seclusion period is marked by a festivity called "bride's falling" (*uta kedenne*). The in-laws decide when it should take place, and the bride is symbolically returned to the community. During the festivity, the bride kisses the chests of all the elderly in-laws who are present, and they bless her in return. The feast is organized in the parents-in-law's compound:

We have brewed beer. Two long feathers were stuck right and left into my hair. Then I went together with my sister-in-law and kissed the people of the village. All people came, also the ones who were sent as go-betweens to my father. Coffee was put on, and the father-in-law handed it to us. Then we kissed the chests of people. The elders blessed us, and everyone went off. Then my sister-in-law took the feathers out of my hair. This was the end of the bride time. I didn't have to hide myself from people anymore.

(Amino, March 2008)

If the bride's parents' homestead is not too far away, or if she has other family members in the surrounding area, she can visit them on that day accompanied by a small group of young people. The group moves around singing and dancing and, in this way, informs people in the neighborhood about the end of the bride's seclusion (Thubauville, 2010: 132). After the festivity has ended, the woman no



Fig. 3. Bride and groom during the *uta kedenne* in Gudo, 2008.

longer must stay in seclusion. She then performs all of the usual household and field chores at her in-laws homestead.

Bridal seclusion is the only major rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960) for Maale females, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, or more specifically, from girlhood to womanhood. Until their wedding day, women are considered girls (*wuduro*) and are addressed as such. When the day of marriage arrives, they become brides (*uta*), and finally, at the end of their seclusion, they become women (*lali*).⁽²¹⁾ This transition from girl to woman is the central implication of the seclusion. Neither considered a girl nor a woman, brides are in an in-between state and are therefore seen as endangered.⁽²²⁾ Another meaning of seclusion among the Maale is that it is a display of respect towards the bride and her natal family. By offering special food to their new family member and sparing her drudgery, the in-laws welcome the bride as a special and honored guest. While bride wealth is paid foremost in return for a bride's labor,⁽²³⁾ a bride is welcomed by not doing what she actually came to do: hard physical work.⁽²⁴⁾ The seclusion is therefore a period of inverted proportions:

After marriage, you will always grind. But in a house that respects you, you will not be allowed to grind for four months. They put you inside a house and give you the prepared food, and you eat it together with your husband only.

(Danjite, August 2006)

As is common for rites of passage, bride seclusion in Maale not only symbolizes a new social status for the bride, but it also seeks to create new relationships

and interdependencies among people (Holm & Bowker, 1994: 8). The bride is expected to return the respect she enjoyed during bride seclusion to her in-laws in future. Furthermore, she must pay back the hard work of others she enjoyed during her time in seclusion. I was told by one woman that her seclusion ended with her mother-in-law declaring “Bride! Get out! Now you will eat after having ground for yourself! Now you will eat after having cooked for yourself!” (Thubauville, 2010: 132). During bride seclusion, the bride is cared for and her food is prepared for her as if she were a child; after seclusion, she is considered a complete woman who is able to take care of herself as well as her other family members.⁽²⁵⁾ Treis eloquently expresses the reciprocity between a daughter- and mother-in-law through her example from the Kambaata:

Respect and support are by no means one sided. After she has been cared for in her *quonqonú* [seclusion] time, the daughter-in-law helps her mother-in-law to rest; in return, the mother-in-law looks after her daughter-in-law when she is in labor and in childbed. (Treis, 2005: 314)

Additionally, bride seclusion can be seen as a time of preparation for a woman to become acquainted with her husband and in-laws and to overcome home-sickness. On their wedding day, brides move away from their own families and move in with their in-laws, with whom they will live and work in the future. Their seclusion, therefore, gradually gets them acquainted with their new social environment. In the beginning, they have only enough time to become accustomed to their closest allies and peers—their husbands and siblings-in-law. If they do not live very far from their paternal family, childhood friends and family will frequently visit them to help them overcome homesickness. Another advantage of seclusion involves physiological nature. Brides, who are often very young, receive especially nutritious foods during seclusion. The combination of eating nutritious foods and refraining from physical work allows them to gain weight. These resources might help them to get through the delivery of their first child in good health. One final advantage of bride seclusion is that brides have enough time to increase their knowledge of traditional manual and musical skills, which are explained in detail below.

DELVING INTO HANDICRAFTS—A DISTRACTION DURING LONELY HOURS

- Danjite: *When her mother-in-law buys cotton for her [the bride], she spins cotton. Otherwise, she plays lyre.*
- Bako: *When she knows how to burn ornaments, she burns ornaments. You cut a gourd into two halves and give them to her.*
- Amino: *I have been idle the whole day. I have played lyre. When all people had left the house, I have ground with the grinding stone. When they returned, I played lyre. When they went, I ground again.* (conversation, 11.05.07)

Bride seclusion among the Maale is, as among many other cultures, a period of apprenticeship (van Gennep 1960: 136; see also Kaneko this volume concerning the *uuta* period among the Aari). While, in other cultures, this time is designated to instruction and teaching (Lydall, n.d.: 4), the brides in Maale are free to do as they wish as long as the work is not physically demanding and they can do it in their secluded space. Knowledge acquired during bride seclusion among the Maale is not presented by experts but is taught in a more unstructured manner by female friends and family members. Even though it is unstructured, seclusion is an important time for strengthening and transferring gender-specific knowledge.

Indigenous technical knowledge, which is learned and transferred by women among the Maale, offers an immense diversity: Women are involved in building and maintaining houses, especially plastering walls and floors with mud; apart from that they produce many household items, particularly those made out of gourds. Furthermore, they make most of the traditional clothing themselves by spinning cotton for blankets and shawls, preparing leather skirts for women, or making skirts of cotton strings for girls. It is also the women's job to produce local jewelry made of glass beads, such as headbands, necklaces, and belts. Finally, their own beautification in the form of braided hairstyles and non-permanent tattoos can also be seen as female-specific technical knowledge. All of those tasks can be expanded upon by women during their bride seclusion.

Most brides spend their days in seclusion—their solitary hours as well as times when they are visited by friends or relatives—learning and consolidating local skills. Often one will find a bride spinning cotton together with one or more female friends or relatives, preparing a gourd with the help and advice of a friend, or sitting together chatting with a group of young people and, at the same time, passing around a lyre for everyone to play for a while. Following, I will explain only three skills in detail: decorating gourds, spinning cotton and playing the lyre, which were practiced most by brides in the village of Gudo, where I conducted most of my research.

As previously mentioned, the Maale people usually leave their gourds undecorated. However, the plain gourds nevertheless look beautiful as they have different colors caused by age, which blackens them (Thubauville, 2005: 53). The only gourds that the Maale decorate are those used by brides and bond friends as eating or drinking vessels (NOTE 13). The women decorate the gourds by burning ornaments on them. They make the decorations with small, wooden, permanently glowing sticks. In this manner, they burn circles, half-circles, and lines into the gourds and later anoint them with butter. Creating the decorations requires many hours and much patience. It is difficult to produce uninterrupted lines while keeping the stick glowing at the same time. In contrast to spinning cotton, burning ornaments on gourds is a skill that not every woman has learned and practiced. This means that not all women spend their seclusion period learning or mastering this skill.

Cotton is grown everywhere in the Maale area, and different sized cotton blankets and shawls are used daily. Preparing cotton for spinning, as well as the spinning itself, is performed only by women. The production of cotton thread consists of several steps, which women have developed to perfection. A woman first collects the cotton from the field and then spreads it out in the sun to dry.



Fig. 4. Woman burning ornaments into a gourd, Bunka 2007.

She then removes the seeds from the cotton, usually with the aid of an iron stick and a large stone. The woman places the cotton on the stone, and by rolling the iron stick over it, she presses out the seeds.⁽²⁶⁾ Cotton is then ready to be spun. The spindles (*billabitch*) used for this process are made by the women themselves. They carve a bamboo stick to proper length and width and place a clay disc on one end. A small hook, typically made from sorghum stalks, is applied on top of the clay disc to hold the cotton threads in place. The woman attaches the cotton to this hook and then spins the spindle. While spinning, the woman sits on the floor with her legs outstretched and crossed. She holds the spindle in her right hand, close to the ground, and holds the cotton that will become a thread with her left hand raised. Girls often begin learning to spin in their teens by imitating women, but at that time, they do not take the task seriously and are not expected to spin large amounts of cotton. While it does not take a long time to learn the basics of spinning, it takes a great deal of practice to spin uniform threads and to spin with the heavy spindle without breaking the thread. During bride seclusion, women have the opportunity to expand their knowledge and to spend a lot of time practicing their skills to perfection. In earlier days, they had to spin at least one large blanket (*bulukko*) and one shawl (*natzalla*) before completing their seclusion. Women also attend their first spinning groups as brides, when sisters-in-law or other female friends come to provide them with companionship and spend all day together spinning. Women often spin in groups of two or more (*mol'a*), with the objective being to complete enough spindles to make a certain product in one or two days.⁽²⁷⁾ While the cotton is spun by women, the weaving is performed by men in Maale. Women hand over the produced cotton threads to the weaver they most trust, who then produces the

desired cotton product with his foot-operated weaving loom (Itagaki in this volume).

Both Maale men and women play the five-string lyre, usually within the homestead to entertain guests and family members who gather to drink coffee leaf tea or sorghum beer and smoke water pipes made out of gourds. Men pluck the strings of the lyre with a small wooden disc, while women pick the strings with their fingers. The melodies that men play with their discs are usually more exuberant, loud and entertaining, while women's tunes are more quiet and composed.⁽²⁸⁾ A song typically consists of a sequence of no more than 10 tones that are repeated several times with little variety. Based on their interest, children may begin playing a simple melody in their teens, but adults usually do not have the patience to teach children and listen to their efforts; thus children are expected to listen to older people who make music and are only allowed to practice themselves when they stay among their peers. One such period that especially allows a good deal of time for training is bride seclusion. When I asked women when they had first learned to play the lyre, most of them stated that they would have learned to play during their seclusion. At that time, they explained, they not only had the time to practice playing traditional Maale melodies, but they had also developed their skills by composing lyrics. As the tone sequence of a certain song can vary, the lyrics have a fixed core while the rest can be improvised. Many lyrics deal with the roles and lives of women, so they teach brides about the expectations and problems that accompany their upcoming gender role.⁽²⁹⁾ A good example of lyrics that express the problems of the role of a Maale wife is the following:

Gachen galatta base. *There is no gratitude for grinding.*
Madda maragge base. *If I work or not, it does not change anything.*
Ade gelea mashalla. *When a man enters, it is like sand [the man, who
enters the life of a woman, does not fit with her.
They fall apart from each other like sand.]*
Katsen maragge base. *If I cook or not, it does not change anything.*
Shoen maragge base. *If I give birth or not, it does not change anything.*

In addition to songs, the lyre can also be used for games. Such games are especially popular to play during idle hours, such as during the seclusion period. In one game, a very small item is hidden somewhere in a room, and one person has to find it with the help of the lyre, which is being played by a second person. A particular melody is played for this game, and the speed in which the melody is played reveals if the person searching for the item is close to or far away from it. This game is a favorite of brides and visitors for socializing and passing the hours during seclusion. Furthermore, the simple melody of the game is ideal for those who are learning to play the lyre.

While this paragraph focused on the transfer of local knowledge, in the following section I will proceed to its replacement by formal education, which not only differs by its contents, but also by its location, as it is transferred in schools.

CURRENT TRANSFORMATIONS—FORMAL EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The end of learning is death.

(Maale proverb)

For the most part, the Maale people are responsive to change. Across all generations, people have positive opinions about formal education and—as the above mentioned proverb expresses—are aware of the necessity of life-long learning. Compared to their neighbors in Ethiopia’s Southern Nations Nationalities and People’s Region, the Maale have begun quite early to send their children to school. Many school graduates work today as representatives at all administrative levels of the Ethiopian state. Currently, the Maale provide the second chief administrator of the South Omo Zone in succession. The following statement of Danjite, who herself was not able to attend school as a child, can be seen as characteristic:

When I was small, there was a school in Boshkoro. This was the only school in Maale. After some years, many schools opened in Maale, like the ones in Asheker, Koybe, and Baneta. It is good to learn. People who have been in school in former times are in high positions now. It is they who today advise other people and act as intermediaries in disputes.

(Danjite, February 2007)

The first school in the Maale area was built in the 1970s by Protestant missionaries. At that time, it was obligatory for students to convert to Protestantism. Then, under the socialist regime, the number of schools increased immensely (Donham, 1997: 339; Lydall, 2010: 323; Tekeste, 2011: 20–22) and all were directed by the government instead of Protestant missions.

Under the ruling party EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front) today, most schools are governmental. The current government promotes development, and one step toward that goal is education. In its cultural policy, in which the right to express one’s own culture is stated, the Ethiopian government subdues culture and tradition to promote development (Epple & Thubauville, 2012; Thubauville, 2012). According to its cultural policy:⁽³⁰⁾ “The culture of the different nations, nationalities, and peoples should be developed in harmony with modern education, science, and technology.” While promoting development and education, the number of schools in the Maale area under the EPRDF had risen to 17⁽³¹⁾ in 2008, covering all villages in the district. According to the education office of the Maale district, in 2008, 33.88% of all school-age children were enrolled in those schools. Public school teachers are assigned by the government and usually come from other areas of Ethiopia; thus they do not have knowledge of the local language and culture. The governmental schools adhere to the official Ethiopian curriculum and current tuition fees and dates. The overall quality of formal edu-

cation in the entire country is currently critical. Due to budget constraints in the education sector, the student-teacher ratio has increased immensely and is among the highest in the world (Tekeste, 2011: 29). Not only teachers, but also textbooks and other teaching materials are in short supply. The teaching methods are still reminiscent of those used in the Ethiopian Orthodox church, which are based primarily on hierarchy and memorization (Poluha, 2004). Local knowledge is rarely part of the curriculum. However, I observed that school children produced decorated gourds in their manual labor classes. Compared to brides who produce those gourds during their time in seclusion, school children create this kind of handicraft: for a very limited time during one or two school lessons and therefore cannot develop a high proficiency; most of the teachers are from other areas and therefore have little expertise in producing such gourds; the production is performed out of context; and the teaching method in school merely involves verbal instruction instead of observation as in traditional circumstances.⁽³²⁾ Instead of spinning cotton, students learn to crochet with imported wool and mainly crochet doilies, which have not previously been used in the Maale area.

Only a few schools today are non-governmental and are run by NGOs (non-government organizations) or the Catholic Church. These alternative schools employ teachers who have no degree or long-term training as a teacher. Teachers are usually Maale people themselves and to some extent teach the children in their local language.⁽³³⁾ Many of the alternative schools have shorter instruction times, enabling students to join their parents in their agricultural or pastoral activities for most of the day (Thubauville, 2010: 47).

Whether children are sent to school or not depends on various factors. First, it is easier to send a child to a school located in the immediate vicinity, as the child then requires no additional time to walk to and from school. Because school-age children are needed on the farms and for attending their parents' cattle, it is difficult for parents to decide whether the work of a child can be spared to attend school. In Maale, the main harvest in July and August coincides with school vacation; thus labor for that harvest is secured even within families that send most of their children to school, although there are many tasks, such as herding or guarding fields for which children are needed throughout the year.

The situation concerning formal education for girls is especially delicate. As the Maale are patrilineal, girls will move in with their husbands once they marry. Currently, the main motive for parents to send their children to school is the hope that their children may find high-paying government jobs when they graduate.⁽³⁴⁾ In determining whether to send their daughters to school, parents consider that while boys will continue living with their parents, or at least will support them economically once they are mature, girls will move away and will mainly benefit their in-laws. Furthermore, as the Maale marry exogamously and make bridewealth payments, they have an interest in making their girls appear as attractive as possible for potential husbands. Being skilled at traditional women's tasks is still seen as very useful in this rural community, as most families live from subsistence farming and herding. Abilities such as reading and writing are not yet considered necessary for a woman. This may be one of the reasons supporting the fact that until recently, far more boys than girls attended school. Since 2005, the World

Food Program has been trying to change this situation by distributing vegetable oil to families in southern areas of Maale who send their daughters to school on a regular basis.⁽³⁵⁾ Since vegetable oil is a luxury item in the region, the free offer convinced many families to send their girls to school. As a consequence, since 2007, the school enrollment rate for girls has been even higher than that for boys (Thubauville, 2010: 48).

To enforce the goal of achieving gender equality in education, the government tries to ensure that girls are sent to school and that they attend as regularly as boys. Instead of incentives such as the gift of oil given by NGOs, the government takes repressive measures to achieve its objective. For example, for the past few years, the Federal Police have imprisoned brides who had attended school before their marriage but have abruptly stopped attending school because of their seclusion:

In Gudo [a village in the north of Maale] they [the police] have recently arrested two brides. One was in grade three, one in grade two.⁽³⁶⁾ They had married and dropped out of school. After they had been arrested, their husbands and their fathers-in-law came [to the police station] and paid 22 Ethiopian Birr. Then they were released. The police said they [the men] should let them attend school. Now both of them go to school again.

(Danjite, March 2008)

I was told about many such cases during the past few years but experienced one case myself in March 2008 when a young bride from my neighborhood in Gudo was imprisoned. Her in-laws are quite “progressive” people, as they live in a house located directly in the village’s busy marketplace, and her father-in-law has been teaching adult literacy classes at the Protestant church in the village. However, the family believed it was important to accept their daughter-in-law with respect and to keep her in seclusion for a period of time after the wedding. A few days after I had visited the bride in her seclusion room, her father-in-law arrived in the evening and asked my host-father if he could borrow a bamboo mat. He said he would need the mat for his daughter-in-law, who had just been arrested by the police and therefore had to spend the night at the police station. Her teacher had reported that she had been absent from school for several days. The bride had to stay at the police station overnight. The next day, her in-laws had to pay a penalty at the police station. They were then allowed to take the bride home under the condition that she would attend school again (Thubauville, 2010: 134). After being forced to attend school for few months, she finally dropped out when she was close to giving birth. My host-mother Danjite told me that after I left the village in 2009, the government became even stricter regarding the matter of bride school drop-outs and followed brides who married into another village. Two brides who had married to the village of Gudo and originally came from the neighboring village of Boshkoro (about three hours walking distance to the west), were forced to end their seclusion and return to their home village to take their school exams. Only then were they allowed to move in with their husband under the condition that they immediately enroll in school in their new village.

The legal regulation to forcefully bring brides back to school seems to be an implementation of the law of compulsory education. Bride seclusion is not on the list of so-called harmful traditional practices (HTP) of the Maale district, although it is on the list for other districts. Regarding the custody of brides the Maale district's list of harmful traditional practices only denounces the lack of girls' education in general. The penalization for brides who drop out of school can therefore only be interpreted as a way for the government to preserve the right to education and protect school attendees—especially female students. Once a girl and her parents have decided that she should attend school, the government seems to make sure that she is able to finish her elementary education. This control may be in the best interest of those girls who would like to continue their education despite their parents' reluctance, but it is also in the best interest of the government, which does not have the means to enforce compulsory education fully and, in this way, at least makes sure that bride seclusion is no longer responsible for high drop-out rates. The fact that some young mothers quit school and some girls never enroll in school at all without being penalized and forced to attend school is in contrast to the aforementioned example of brides;⁽³⁷⁾ the sole punishment of brides in particular is not a consistent implementation of the law of compulsory education.

CONCLUSION

While the Ethiopian government seeks to improve the overall development of the country, and compulsory education as one step towards that goal, school attendance—regardless of the quality or content of the curriculum—becomes more important than fostering traditions and local knowledge. The importance of local knowledge within the development context has been recognized and applied for a long time, especially in the fields of environmental and medical knowledge. However, indigenous technical knowledge (ITK), which has been studied less and therefore its importance is less identified, seems to collide with Ethiopia's thrive for fast development and formal education, which is acknowledged as an important factor to achieve this goal.

Ethiopia's drive for development endangers the meaningful tradition of bride seclusion, which according to Ethiopia's cultural policy, should remain intact. The current imprisonment of brides results in the complete reversal of the purpose of seclusion, which is meant above all to be a spatial separation to guarantee the safe passage of a bride to womanhood. Furthermore, the family of the groom wants to show respect to the bride and her family by offering her a special and intimate place to get used to her new surroundings slowly and comfortably. Instead, the bride is marched off by the police, a very insulting matter in a small Ethiopian village. In the police station, she is squeezed into a shabby room with several other women she does not know and who might be imprisoned for violent felonies. Once she is brought back to her new home, she must attend school regularly.⁽³⁸⁾ Thus, the spatial separation, which is the central feature of seclusion, cannot be implemented.

With bride seclusion endangered, the transfer and strengthening of female indigenous technical knowledge is also at stake. While brides fill the long days of seclusion—during which time they are not burdened with any daily duties—with socializing and practicing handicrafts and musical skills, school attendees lack the time to do this and instead learn the knowledge passed on by school teachers. Local knowledge, as previously mentioned, should not be judged uncritically as merely positive. However, as the explanations of the knowledge attained during bride seclusion have shown, spinning cotton is an important handicraft since the cotton is locally planted, and several cotton products are still in use every day. The decorated gourds, for which gourds from local produce are used, have a deep ritual and social meaning. With a decrease in their production, those meanings might also become lost. Finally, the training in musical skills helps the bride to socialize with her new husband and siblings-in-law, and the songs teach her about her new role as a wife.

In this paper, I focused most on the differences and incongruity between local knowledge and formal education as examples of knowledge attained through bride seclusion and schooling among the Maale. Differences can be observed not only in the contents of the knowledge, but also in the location (home vs. school), where it is transferred, in the persons through who it is transmitted (family, friends or local experts vs. trained teachers), and in the methods used (observation vs. verbal instruction).

A further interesting research question would involve taking a closer look at their convergences. Similar research has already been conducted in West Africa, comparing knowledge acquired through formal schooling and through the “bush schools” of secret societies (Murphy, 1980; 1981; Bledsoe, 1992). In the case of the West African comparison the acquisition of secret knowledge appeared to be the joint outcome of both methods of schooling. Among the Maale, where the knowledge learned and strengthened is not transferred by a local expert and is not secret, the time of separation and seclusion in the seclusion room and the classroom would be a convergence worth studying. Both common elements—secret knowledge and seclusion—symbolize the passage from one life stage to the next, and both are mechanisms for social differentiation and boundary making.

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NOTES

- (1) The main data for this paper was collected between the years 2006 and 2008 when carrying out research for my PhD in the Maale villages Gudo, Baneta and Bunka. My research focused on life histories, the life cycle and agency of women in Maale (Thubauville, 2010). I conducted semi-structured interviews and focused group interviews at the South Omo Research Center in Jinka, about 30 km from my research sites. I had nine main female informants (Thubauville, 2010: 55). The data on bride seclusion derives from their life histories, which I recorded, participant observation at the homes of brides in the villages Gudo and Baneta and unstructured conversations that I had with women in those villages, which entered my field diaries. For the financial and institutional support of my research, I would like to thank the Sonderforschungsbereich 295 at the University of Mainz, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology/Halle, the Frobenius-Institut/Frankfurt am Main and the South Omo Research Center/Jinka.
- (2) This number was published in the last country-wide census in 2008 (Central Statistical Agency, 2008). New estimates already speak of a population of 90,000.
- (3) Indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) has been studied widely in ethno-archaeology, but has there not been termed as such and related to the local knowledge debates in social anthropology and developmental studies.
- (4) These goals seek to achieve the following objectives until 2015: 1) to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2) to achieve universal primary education; 3) to promote gender equality and empower women; 4) to reduce child mortality; 5) to improve maternal health; 6) to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; 7) to ensure environmental sustainability; and 8) to develop a global partnership for development.
- (5) For the Human Development Report 2011 see United Nations Development Program (2011).
- (6) See also Bledsoe's comparison of formal schooling with secret societies in Sierra Leone (Bledsoe, 1992).
- (7) This is a fact as donkey meat is not eaten in Ethiopia, and the animals' dead bodies are left in the wilderness for scavengers.
- (8) It is neither allowed to marry into one's own clan (*took* or *serti*), nor is it allowed to marry someone of a *gete* clan (Thubauville, 2010: 112). Aside from that, marrying into families of craftsmen, like potters or blacksmiths, is prohibited (craftsmen are outcasted groups in southern Ethiopia see the contributions of J.W. Arthur, K.W. Arthur, Itagaki, & Kaneko in this volume). In former times, the Maale additionally adhered to marrying out of their own moiety, but this rule is not followed anymore.
- (9) In former times, a special leather skirt (*chach'o buddo*) had to be prepared for the bride, while today most brides wear white cotton dresses typical for the north of Ethiopia or fabricated clothes, which can be bought from local markets.
- (10) Aside from brides, only bond friends enter a compound through the cattle entrance. Brides may not enter through the cattle entrance on their wedding day when their mothers have not yet completed a certain ritual, the *lali ba'enne* (Thubauville, 2010: 119).
- (11) Butter is used during similar occasions all over south Ethiopia. Among the neighboring Aari people, the brides' heads are also covered with butter, and the same is true for the Dorze (Sperber, 1975: 37). According to Sperber (sic) butter is always used in situations that are associated with a wish for fertility. In the case of the bride, whose hair is covered with butter, he equates the hair with female genitals and the butter with sperm.
- (12) Weddings of Protestant Christians (*amanno*) differ in many aspects from the marriages of people of local belief (*alammo*). Due to space restrictions, I have only described the latter above. For Protestant marriages among the Maale, see Thubauville (2010: 121). However, Protestants also observe bride seclusion immediately after the marriage has taken place.

- (13) Post-partum seclusion is also practiced among the Maale (Thubauville, 2010: 88).
- (14) Actually the proverb is used when despising a woman, who married twice and stayed in seclusion twice (Interview with Zeleketch, January 30, 2007).
- (15) Among the Hamar and Bashada-ethnic neighbors of the Maale-brides also stay on a loft during their seclusion (Epple, 2010: 183; Epple & Brüderlin, 2007: 51).
- (16) The Maale do not decorate casual gourds with beads or other materials. Only the drinking and eating vessels for brides and bond friends have burnt ornaments, usually lines, circles, and half-circles. The use of those special gourds points out that brides and bond friends are alike in another concern—namely, they are both taking cattle from a homestead (Thubauville, 2005: 106; 2010: 197).
- (17) A very similar description to bride seclusion among the Maale can be found from Treis (2005: 297) concerning the Kambaata of southern Ethiopia. There the brides also stay inside a special hut for several months, take rest, do handicrafts, and socialize with their husbands and sisters-in-law while being restricted from meeting with their parents-in-law.
- (18) Women transport crops in backpacks made of goat leather or in baskets made of bamboo on their backs.
- (19) Compared to their mainly pastoralist neighbors, the Maale pay very low bride prices, often consisting of merely a few hundred Ethiopian Birr and a cotton blanket for the mother (Thubauville, 2010: 123).
- (20) However, women in Maale are supposed to stay virgins until the day of marriage (see above). The term for bride *uta* as well as the concept of bride seclusion is common and very similar among many groups in southern Ethiopia, such as the Aari, Arbore, Bashada, Banna and Hamar (Epple & Brüderlin, 2007; Epple, 2010, see also Kaneko this volume).
- (21) Women are often addressed as “bride” (*uta*) until they give birth.
- (22) For a detailed description of the connection between times of seclusion and ideas of danger and pollution, see Thubauville (2010: 176–209) or Blystad et al. (2007: 331).
- (23) The work performed by a woman is also the main reference point when it comes to an early divorce and the subsequent discussions about a back payment of the bride wealth. In the event of a divorce, the bride price may be returned with the argument that the bride has not stayed and worked long enough for the husband, or it may be kept by her paternal family if the bride had stayed and worked hard for more than a year.
- (24) Among the Maale, the main tasks of women in addition to preparing meals and keeping the compound, are collecting firewood, collecting water—often from distant rivers—and carrying grain, pulses, and pumpkins during harvest time.
- (25) Among neighboring groups e.g., among the Hamar, the care of a bride is even more obviously comparable to that of a small child than in Maale. Mothers-in-law among the Hamar say that at the beginning of the seclusion period, they give birth to a bride anew, and like a new-born baby, they rub the brides with butter and feed them milk and good food throughout the whole period (Lydall, 2005).
- (26) If a woman does this task outside of her home, where she does not have the necessary tools, she can also pick the seeds out with her fingers. This, however, is more time consuming, and the thread of the cotton is more likely to break later.
- (27) A blanket (*bulukko*) can be made from forty spindles of cotton string (*shallo*), a shawl (*natzalla*) from only six spindles.
- (28) For more information about the songs of women and some lyrics compare Thubauville (2010: 141).
- (29) Compare the girl’s initiation of the Okiek (Kratz 1994: 254), during which girls learn women’s songs that teach them about gender roles and respectful relations.
- (30) Online. <http://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/fact%20file/a-z/culture.htm> (Accessed January 6, 2012).

- (31) All 17 of those schools were elementary schools. In 2009, the first secondary school opened in the Maale village of Lemo Gento.
- (32) Compare Rathgeber (1988: 274), who describes a similar situation in which soap stone carving is taught in Kenyan elementary schools.
- (33) In other areas of Ethiopia, local languages have been broadly introduced as languages of instruction since the EPRDF took power in 1991 (Poluha, 2004: 32).
- (34) Compare Fuest (1999: 71), who made similar observations in West Africa.
- (35) The oil is distributed in the villages of Baneta, Koybe, Balla, Boshkoro, and parts of Gongode.
- (36) It should be noted here that children, especially girls, are not always sent to school at age six or seven, but are often enrolled after they are already well into their teens. The objective of school enrollment then is not to complete elementary or secondary education but simply to attend until one has learned enough to read and write rudimentary Amharic.
- (37) As the above-mentioned school enrollment rate of the Maale area suggests, a complete implementation of the law of compulsory education is simply not possible right now. Most citizens of Ethiopia's south are neither officially reported nor do they have identity cards. Today a child's birth is often only registered by local health professionals.
- (38) The handling of brides after they have been released from prison differs from village to village. In some villages (such as Baneta), as of 2008, brides are no longer forced to attend school. The transfer money paid at the prison frees them from further duties. In other villages, (such as Gudo) brides must attend school regularly after they leave the prison.

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