

## PATHS IN SEREE: Beginning and ending in Arbore

Where we came from and where we are going are questions that concern us all. We always look for the right way and hope for confirmation by life itself that we've taken the right branch at a crucial crossroad. To know the answers to these questions gives us confidence, a sense of belonging; it is a crucial component of our identity. This particularly applies to the Arbore in Southwest Ethiopia. Their way of life is very clearly defined, in the metaphysical sense as well as in real life. This is visible from birth until their very last way into their grave.

These are their Paths in Seree.

"Seree" in Arbore denotes the landscape surrounding their village Gandarab. The historical as well as the actual ways of life in Seree are anchored in the minds of the people as a mental map. But the various paths taken by the Arbore are also visible in the landscape, which is inscribed with the past, present and the future. Thus, the morphology of the landscape shows where the Arbore came from, where they go today, and which will be their last way. The landscape is a visible map of paths in Seree. Their way of life ends in the same direction it all began. This sense of directional purpose is manifested in how they mourn and bury their dead.

The past:

The Arbore ancestors traveled to Seree and established their settlement as a multi-ethnic coalition of twelve clans, each with a different lineage. Each of the twelve clans took a different path to arrive here. The clan that adopted me—the Olmoke—consider themselves descendants of the Keyen clan (Shoa Oromo), who came from the east. The Ries clan locates its ancestors in the west at the Gabra (Borana Origin). Despite differences in lineage and language, the Arbore have lived together for generations, without the need for language learning schools or any form of integration measures directed by the state. From a multicultural origin they have grown into a sociocultural unit.

To remember and indicate their origins the hut of each clan is oriented in the direction of their ancestors. This is also where they finally will return. The path goes from Seree through the *kraal*, the livestock enclosure, to the separate huts and back again.

The present:

The way of life of an Arbore individual is relatively fixed by various phases and events: birth, adolescence, marriage, parenting, and death. Only a few, mostly men, deviate from the traditional Arbore biography. And even these typically return, in a roundabout way.

But not only the biographical path is defined. The everyday paths for moving through the landscape are also proscribed. In order to get from one clan to another, fixed paths are used. There are four main paths that divide the village, relating to the directions of the clans, and meet in the central village square or *nab*. These are called *gorti sololl*, the ways of the neighbors. Using these paths ensures that everyone is in the public eye, declaring their intentions. People who have something to hide—enemies, thieves or adulterers—use surreptitious paths outside these routes and thus are outside of public control.



This public attention to the ways of Sere is obvious, especially to strangers. The first questions I understood and could answer in Arbore language were, "Ee ka tacha?" and "En se'ete?", which mean "Where do you come from?" and "Where are you going to?" Usually my answer was "I have come by plane over the mountains from far away" and "I am going now to fetch water."

The future:

Even the last path of an Arbore is predetermined, both the journey and where it leads. In order to finally rest, the deceased must be separated from worldly existence. Clan members perform various rituals over several days to mourn and say goodbye to the deceased. They completely sweep out the hut of his or her life. This complete termination of earthly existence is manifested through many different symbolic actions. Here are just a few examples:

- A sheep is slaughtered and the omentum (mesh surrounding the stomach) is placed on the deceased's face. This is a gift to the spirit of death to drive away death from the clan and may also be a sign that the deceased is now removed from the clan.
- Cattle are slaughtered. In contrast to the usual method of slaughter, during which the animal bleeds out through an incision in the carotid artery, at the funeral slaughtering a knife is rammed from above into the skull of the cattle. Death occurs immediately.
- All clothes are removed from the hut and all jewelry is removed from the body. The deceased no longer needs these things.
- During an hour-long mourning dance the clan members, accompanied by their own voices and a rhythmic beating of a drummer on coiled goat leather, form two separate rows. The dancers touch their front man on the shoulder or waist. This is an image of the unity of the clan: All stand together and say farewell to the deceased. The dancers move slowly in spirals with fixed, simple dance steps. The deceased is symbolically removed from their center through this slowly danced spiral. The dancing ends on the third day.
- The clan members line up in front of the grave in a semi-circle. They lower their heads as a sign of respect, mourning, and farewell. After that a calabash of water is poured out. Water is precious in Arbore—the shedding is a symbol that the deceased no longer needs the precious liquid.
- At the *kraal*, the women remove their *maac*. The *maac* is a belt, adorned with cowries, which only mothers are allowed to wear. It is a visible sign of their fertility. Removing the *maac* symbolizes that the deceased is no longer fertile.





(Deceased, childless Arbore, regardless of age and status, are buried without ceremony at night in the *kraal*. Since the deceased has not continued the lineage he or she remains inside the village. Those without children do not return to the ancestors).

- The fire is removed from the house of the deceased and carried to the grave. In the house the fire goes out, just as a life is extinguished. The deceased no longer requires a fire.

- On the last day of the funeral ritual, a white kid is slaughtered. The color white is associated in Arbore with death and powerful emotions. The kid is shoved over the *kraal* fence along with the drum, which has accompanied the dancers the last three days. One man and one woman then carry both things to the grave. Death and the emotions of grief and mourning leave the clan.

- Some men go to slaughter three goats. The blood is distributed in Seree towards the grave, in the direction from which the ancestors of the clan once came, the same direction the dead member will now return.

- The women bring water and tobacco to the grave. The water is tipped out in front of the grave. The tobacco is distributed to all clan members and thrown forward for good luck. People put stones on the grave and say goodbye. At the very end a man breaks the water vessel, the *karam*. The deceased needs neither the water nor the container.

- A life is extinguished. If the deceased was the last person to live in the hut, the whole life of the hut extinguishes. Clan members will salvage the still usable supports and the hut will be orphaned. Nothing will remain of those who once lived here.

In short, in a specified period of mourning, the deceased is released from the clan. All basic things needed for life in Arbore - water, clothes, vessels, jewelry - are symbolically or de facto detached from the deceased. These things are no longer needed. Clan blood is wiped out, ending a fruitful lineage. Through the intercession of the clan, the deceased begins the way to the ancestors. By the end of the funeral ritual the deceased will be deleted from memory. Remembrance and further mourning are not common.

What does the resting place of the dead look like in Arbore? In contrast to many other cultures, it is not an especially identifiable or fixed place. There is no cemetery in the Western sense of the word, no necropolis or mortuary temple. There are no built structures that make it identifiable as a place of mourning or remembrance. The graves are very simple and are located between two and four kilometers from the village. They begin as small mounds of sand on which the relatives place stones as a sign of farewell. After the funeral, no one visits the graves. Rain and wind slowly level out the sand mounds until they become so flat that the gravesites are recognizable only by the



unusually large number of stones in this location. The shepherds traverse them together with their flocks, which is not a disrespectful gesture: The deceased have been deleted from the minds of those still alive. Humans, and the memories of them, are transient, and so is their final resting place. It is neither holy nor eternal; it is a migratory place in the landscape and, as such, in harmony with their entire lifestyle.



The Arbore's path to their ancestors extends beyond the graves in Sere. The deceased will find their way back more easily if they are buried in the same direction from which their ancestors arrived. The entire village is surrounded by the burying places of the clans in the form of a ring, which I imagine as a zone of protection around Gandarab.



No other grave form would fit the Arbore. Their life is rough and simple, without any pomp. They have adapted to their environment, they are a part of it and as ephemeral as everything else in it. Their leaders are elected from their midst—there is no need to glorify them in the afterlife. Permanent graves would contradict their entire life style; they would be a foreign body here. Only strangers like me, with their own ideas of death, mourning rituals, and burial places find this difficult to grasp. For me it is a pity that I will not have a place where I can go to and grieve over my dead friends. But I do have my memories and my numerous photographs.



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