

Wild times, wild cultures? Comparative reflections from field research in Ethiopia

Anni Peller

The young man with the chatoyant colored gray suit was already watching me intently as I entered the restaurant, like a predator seeking prey. Sure, here I was the exotic one - tall, white, female, and apparently traveling alone. I was someone extraordinary in Ethiopia. He quickly came up to me and started an intimate question-and-answer game. When I told him I am an anthropologist on the way from Addis Ababa to Gamo Gofa in the south of the country, his face expressed astonishment and embarrassment. „Gamo Gofa?“ he asked, „What are you doing there? The wild people still live out there!“ Now I was the one amazed. Why was he referring to his compatriots in this way? Was he ashamed of them? And, what does „wild“ mean? To me, the life in Addis seemed to be wild, rather in the negative sense: unruly, disorderly, and chaotic. But, on the other hand, it was also hopeful: a turning point, a beginning of something new, aspiring. The thirty-year civil war with Eritrea had ended two years ago and a few weeks ago the referendum for the separation of the former province Eritrea from Ethiopia as an autonomous state was signed. The wild days were over. The chaos of the war was over and something new could start. This chaos was still perceptible in Addis in 1993. For me, coming from a rich and sheltered country like Germany, occasionally it was hard to bear. At times there were no rules, no standards. No shame, no compassion, no faith. So many people were uprooted. A young woman with a newborn lay totally naked and asleep on a busy street, too weak to beg. Could life in Gamo Gofa, where I wanted to go, be even more uncivilized, more chaotic, even wilder?

“Wild” was and is for me primarily a positive term. When my mother would admonish me not to be so wild, it made me proud. It implied I was strong, indomitable, like a lion. Why should I stop that? To be wild means to be natural, without the corset of standards and behavioral rules. In this sense, to act in accordance with the standards is not natural but artificial. The rule-compliant person behaves dutifully, artificial, unlike nature dictates.

And then this man condescendingly asks me, why I am going there, to visit his „wild“ countrymen. I wondered, why him? He is still wearing a mask, the straitjackets of norms to cover his true self. He carried such visible signs of standardization—his snobbish suit, and the invi-

sible, conventional attitudes like his patronizing interaction with the opposite sex. He broke my sense of cultural norms quite blatantly by a lack of physical distance and a rash of intimate questions.

Who is wild here? What does it mean to be wild? A landscape can be wild—an area uninfluenced by man, shaped only by its natural parameters, unlike a manmade, modified, and scaled landscape. But for me wildness is rather an anthropological term. It is not an Amazon jungle but a jungle within societies. Wildness is a judgmental and comparative term; it's meaning a cultural construction with negative connotations, a sense of randomness or disorder.

Basically, wildness means nothing but untamed, lacking conformity with the synthetic standards of human society. Only humans tame behavior and personal characteristics with rules, norms and laws. And, only humans succeed in conforming, in the greatest possible extent, while other animals and nature itself do not reliably conform to human rules. „You can not tame it,“ entreats Ellen Ripley the hero in the movie „Alien: Resurrection.“ Wild animals cannot be tamed reliably. The white tiger, Montecore, whose attack on the magician Roy almost cost him his life and the Berlin zoo-director, Blaszkiewicz, who lost a finger in a chimpanzee attack are sad, prime examples. But it is just not in the tiger's nature to sit up and beg under vociferous applause; it is not the disposition of a monkey to sit in a cage and tolerate other primates constantly breaking the boundaries of his confined space. Most of the times it works out, but then, suddenly, the supposed taming fails. The wild animal breaks the man-made rule and everyone is shocked and stunned, because „such things have never happened before.“ These rules, however, are man-made, constructed for us and for strangers. We create laws and morals that overlay and limit our wildness to ensure our coexistence. These are the grease in the gears of our society. But we constantly break them ourselves—we lie, steal, cheat, and deceive, again and again to our own benefit. Like savages. Our culture is superimposing and suppressing our nature by norms and rules.

This dichotomy between nature and culture endures. The anthropological term „natural people“ (i.e., primitive people) was used in Germany for a long time. It referred to people that lived closer to nature, who were more dependent on it than industrialized nations with money markets, stockpiling and electricity. Do “natural people” represent the opposite of civilized nations? As if they didn't have any culture! To prove our role as a civilized nation, we Germans came up with the absurd term „culture bag.“ A culture bag is none other than a cosmetic bag for traveling. We pack all our cultural assets, such as

a toothbrush, perfume, soap, and anti-aging cream in a bag, secured with a zipper, and preserve our culture, while traveling, so that nothing is lost. Without our culture bags in a foreign country we would be left without culture; we would be wild.

One will not find a culture bag in Arbore, Ethiopia. The toothbrushes grow on bushes. Women perfume themselves with the smoke from a root whose odor is reminiscent of incense. And, just like in our culture, this extraordinary fragrance is used to increase women's attractiveness.

Of course, the Arbore are not savages, their social structures and norms are just different. Some are very logical, such as their rules about marriages, but others are not as transparent and logically traceable. The ritual of female genital cutting is simply explained by saying, „this is just our tradition, the way it has always been.” For



tooth brushing

me, here begins the exciting work of the anthropologist—to describe the cultural characteristics of other societies without judgment, to compare in order to discover correlations and reasons.

Although the Arbore depend on nature more than the businessman from Addis, they are, of course, not primitive people without culture.



wedding ceremony

Daily life in Arbore is structured by nature, by the rhythms of day and night and the rainy and dry seasons, which determines the time for sowing and harvesting, as well as the change of pasture due to the seasonal location of the water spots. Peak periods of work are shortly before and during the harvest and at the end of the dry season, when the herdsmen have to travel long distances to reach the water spots and live together with their flocks in temporary cattle camps for several weeks. The daily life is interrupted by

ritualized celebrations, such as long-planned weddings and the more-unexpected funerals.



burial ritual

Everyday life and rituals follow established rules and procedures. There are rarely any (approved) breaks. Once, immediately after the harvest I observed that the unmarried girls, called „harat“, gathered during the day, dressed up and then dis-

appeared in the bushes for many hours for dancing. These seemed to be their wild times, they were irrepressible and nothing or no one seemed to affect them. The harat formed a closed group for which rules seemed to be suspended.

The Arbore have a sophisticated network of norms, sanctions, and hierarchies, which guarantee their coexistence and social survival. For example, I could immediately tell if a young woman was married or not by her hairstyle and clothing. Accordingly, a man knows straightaway which attitude he should have towards her.

Other codes are a result of the complex, regulatory framework and norms of marriage, which are initially imperceptible to outsiders. To understand this you have to be an insider. The marriage rules are



unmarried girl - *haraté*



bride - *utanté*



wife - *sallé*

based on a complex network of dictates and prohibitions based on the age-class system of the Arbore. In our society your parents (genetics), where you grew up (country), and the position of your family (social status) are all crucial to your identity. These are crucial in

Arbore too. However, there are numerous additional classifications. Some of them refer to social status, but most refer to age and family lineage. From these classifications are derived numerous marriage prohibitions; especially relations between second-degree relatives are excluded. From an evolutionary biological point of view this is an advantage because the probability of genetic diseases, which usually have a recessive mode of inheritance, is greatly reduced. An interesting question would be why such a tightly knit set of rules was developed. Could it be related to the fact that the Arbore have a population size of only about 4,500 and that they mostly marry within their ethnic group? Definitely, this regulatory system is not an intellectual achievement of wild, primitives ones.



ingó means „sister of my mother“

It is unnecessary to say that the businessman from Addis was misguided. But its worth noting that I never heard such judgmental comments as his, using the label “wild,” from the people with whom I worked in Arbore. Of course, in Arbore, I was conspicuously different: I dressed, worked, and felt differently. I also broke rules, usually unintentionally due to ignorance, at times because I didn't know any better. Usually, great forbearance was shown to me because I was, culturally, an outsider. I had much more freedom. Responding to my concerns, Ingo („sister of my mother“) once answered me very simply when I asked if she thought I was a naughty person. She said, „No, it's just not your culture.“ There is no better way to express tolerance, inclusion, and cultural relativism.

When I returned to Addis after three months of field research, the culture shock was immediate, just as my professor in Berlin had predicted. From the well-regulated life in Arbore, with its fixed daily rhythms and the knowledge of each individual, where he/she belongs to, I was just overwhelmed with the capital's post-war contractions and the usual social and emotional jungle, as in every big city. For me, the city was too wild. This feeling creeps over me each time I return from a fieldwork session, although it is now possible to find in many streets in Addis a small piece of German civilization.



Addis 2008