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Conflicting Practices
of Environment Construction
in Bale, Ethiopia

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PART I

PART I

1. Introduction

Visitors are impressed by the splendid scenery of the district DODOLA in BALE. However, does a forest in Southeast Ethiopia, which is covered by a patchwork of pastures and trees, represent a 'remnant of a natural forest'? And should, in this case, the preservation of the vegetation represent the priority concern of policy makers? Or, can that forest be utilised as plantation, which has the potential to supply the national market with valuable timber? Or should it – after all – be regarded as subsistence ground for a number of families who in the process of national state formation, lost access to pastures outside the forest?

In the course of my fieldwork in 1997 and 1998/9, I realised that the practices of natural resource management of the local population in DODOLA *woreda* / BALE were in conflict with land use management approaches of the state and the natural resource conservation concept proposed by the GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) Integrated Forest Management Project (IFMP).

Agricultural experts of the state regard DODOLA *woreda* as national grain store. They encourage extensive wheat production and promote high-potential seeds, artificial fertilisers and insecticides. Hence, state policies place an emphasis on human domination over the natural environment.

The agro-pastoral population, on the other hand, continues its livestock production. Since the former grazing areas are used for wheat production in the meantime, the cattle, sheep and goats are driven to the nearby forest for grazing. It seems that pastoral livelihood concerns decide about the ways in which the forest is utilised by the various groups of the local population.

Then again, the bilateral IFMP has the objective to develop a feasible strategy to preserve the forest vegetation. The defoliation of tree seedlings as a result of livestock and fuelwood production are considered the most severe causes for the depletion of the woods. The appreciation for the exceptionality of the vegetation and the concern about its preservation, shape the way in which the forest management concept is designed.

The situation in DODOLA *woreda* highlights that the ways in which natural resources are utilised are shaped by diverging natural environment construction practices: albeit having access to modern technologies, the farmers insist on long-standing practices,

which – in the view of development planners – encourage the destruction of the natural environment.

Natural Environment Construction Practices

The conflictive situation in DODOLA *woreda* raises the issue concerning the ways in which the ecosystem is constructed and how it shapes everyday interaction. Thus, the starting point for my research interest can be best formulated with the question: how do various actors construct the natural environment and the landscape in DODOLA *woreda*? In so doing, the natural environment will not be considered as something existing objectively outside of the human being. Rather, it will be regarded as a cultural construct, which is rooted in a specific historical experience and underlies continuous change (Luig und v. Oppen 1995: 6). In other words: the natural environment is considered as a common sense category, which is largely social in origin.

Eder's (1988) theory in *"Die Vergesellschaftung der Natur"* is helpful in identifying the ways the natural environment is typified and used in common practice. Eder (1988: 16) points to the symbolic forms, which he regards as the 'natural' foundations of the social world. He argues for an approach that is sensitive to these symbolic sources of communication. In his view they represent a silent understanding of the everyday life-world of people, a consensus, which is taken for granted in every communication. He explicates:

> "One can refer to it as the self-evident part of society, the *unquestioned facts of a life-world* that – before the existence of a social order – regulates social relations between people" (Eder 1988: 16, translated by M.P.)[1].

My analysis will focus on the symbolic foundations of communication, which were mentioned above. I will scrutinise religious symbolisations and myth about the genesis of *gada*, the generation-set system of the Oromo. This way, I will highlight how the natural environment represents an unquestioned fact of the life-world. Does the ecosystem – for example – represent a polluted, vicious and dangerous 'outside' sphere? Or, do symbolisations suggest that the control of the environment represents a 'natural' foundation of the social world?

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[1] "Man kann das in einer Gesellschaft Selbstverständliche, das *Nicht-Hinterfragte einer Lebenswelt* nennen, das, was vor aller sozialen Ordnung bereits die sozialen Beziehungen zwischen den Menschen regelt" (Eder 1988: 16).

My analysis will focus on the environment-society relationship in order to gain a better understanding of how social order in an agro-pastoral society is possible. In Eder's view, beginning with Marx and Durkheim, macro-sociological theories always assume a hierarchical human-nature relationship in which social differentiation is considered as a result of the social objective to reach domination over the natural environment. However, in what way do actors see and interpret social reality if all natural things and systems appear valuable in their own right and worthy of moral respect? How does a concept of a polluted 'outside' sphere shape the relations of e.g. parents to their children?

Consequently my analysis will not only focus on symbolic forms but I will also elucidate how the latter shape the ways in which the reality of the social world and its normative structures are constructed by the various groups of the local population. Natural resource management practices, the ways in which kin relations are established and maintained, the modes in which conjugal arrangements are met as well as the practices of labour division illuminate how the natural environment is constructed in everyday practices. Thereby, Berger and Luckmann's (1994) 'Social Construction of Reality' seems to me an adequate theory, which allows taking historical, economic and political conditions into account.

In addition, this thesis is also intended as applied research, which contributes to the solution of a practical problem. The preservation of the forest represents the overall objective of the IFMP. Simultaneously the living conditions of people are deteriorating. For this reason, most inhabitants of the planned villages as well as the majority of forest dwellers in DODOLA *woreda* I talked to during my fieldwork questioned the prior concern for the condition of the natural environment. The incident during a workshop of the IFMP where the forest conservation approach proposed by the IFMP was openly opposed by a number of participants, implying that livelihood concerns of people were considered as less important, inspired me to question the precedence given to the conservation of the natural environment. Which vegetation is worth to be protected? Who decides which natural resources are valued in which way? Hence, the objective of this thesis is to identify contradictions as well as congruencies that exist between state / IFMP approaches and practices of natural environment construction of the various groups of the local population and to give recommendations for a conservation approach, which takes the latter as a starting point.

1.1. Outline

Chapter 2 will give a brief overview over geographical, historical and political conditions in DODOLA *woreda* and thus point to the specific experiences shaping natural environment construction practices.

The analysis of state and international donor approaches in chapter 3 will lead to the question concerning natural environment concepts, underlying the approaches of policy makers and development planners. How does the landscape of DODOLA *woreda* and local farming methods appear to external experts?

Part II focuses on symbolisations connected to *gada* and its inherent assumptions with regard to the social order. Taking a myth about *gada* as point of departure, I will explore how kin and gender relations as well as fertility and a religious order is constructed in everyday practices. Thereby, the question about how the natural environment is constructed stands at the centre of the analysis.

In chapter 5 the analysis of historical accounts and genealogies will lead to the question how clan relations are established and maintained. Simultaneously, the ways in which my interviewees outlined clan histories will also highlight the specific practices of landscape construction. Hence, this chapter will point to two aspects relevant to the ways actors construct their natural environment: firstly, it will hint at social differences that shape the regulation of access to natural resources and it will highlight the ways landscapes are constructed. In chapter 6 I will study how gender identities shape the ways that actors of the various population groups construct their natural environment. Thereby, the analysis will be led by the question of whether women's subsistence concerns turn them into agents for conservation. I will study the practices of gender identity construction and question the assumption that the roles of women and men in sexual reproduction lie at the core of the social construction of gender relations.

The assumption that age and ethnic identity represent further criteria that decide labour responsibilities as well as the ways people gain access to resources will guide the analysis of production systems in Dodola *woreda* and hence, consider differences between women and men as well as divergences between women. In order to comprehend how the ecosystem is constructed, rules of resource access as well as labour division will be scrutinised.

The practices of old age construction will be further studied in chapter 7. The analysis will lead to the question of how the institution of 'elders' shapes natural environment construction practices.

Since the ways in which people construct biological reproduction hints at the ways in which they relate themselves to the natural environment, I will analyse a rain-ceasing ritual in chapter 8. It will focus on the question how does symbolism addresses a concrete relationship with a physical world where the fertility of humans, plants and animals has to be managed in ritual as well as in day-to-day living. Hence, the *unquestioned facts of the living world* – the question of how people link themselves to processes in the natural environment – is tackled in this chapter.

The symbolic foundations of communication will be further scrutinised in chapter 9: the analysis of religious symbolisations will allow a conclusion on how the natural environment is related to society.

In Part III I will finally discuss how an approach to natural resource conservation can take local natural environment construction practices as a starting point.

1.2. Methodical approach

This thesis is based on data collected during a three-month (in 1997) and ten-month (in 1998/99) field research trip to DODOLA woreda, BALE. At the outset of my fieldwork I faced a situation typical for Ethiopia: no anthropological research had been carried out during the time of the socialist military regime and the latest comprehensive ethnography on the Arsi and the Bale-Oromo had been published as early as the 1960s. As a result, I had access to few socio-economic surveys carried out for the IFMP, which studied the living conditions in three 'pilot-villages' of the project. Moreover, there had been no study conducted that reflected the far-reaching process of national state integration which had taken place in the meantime and which had fundamentally altered the living conditions of people. The little empirical data available forbade the formulation of hypotheses in advance and suggested a qualitative approach.

My research interest – the social construction of the natural environment – focuses on agency and the roots of the social order in everyday life and its production and reproduction in processes of institutionalisation, legitimation and socialisation. Hence, it implies an interpretative approach, which systematically analyses socially meaningful action through the direct and detailed observation of people in natural settings. In this way, an understanding and interpretation of how people create and maintain their social world can be acquired (Neumann 1997: 68). Since the emphasis is placed on exploring the nature of natural environment construction practices rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them, my research question suggests ethnography – as defined by Paul

Atkinson and Martin Hammersley (1994: 248) – as the adequate methodology. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994: 248) count the tendency to work primarily with 'unstructured' – that is data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories – as further characteristic of ethnography. Furthermore, they emphasise that the investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail can be regarded as criteria. Finally, the analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human action – the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations – are considered a typical feature of ethnographies.

1.2.1. Methodological Problems

My dissertation was as well motivated by the wish to contribute to a better political representation of the various groups that make up civil society in Ethiopia. When I studied the ways in which the federalization and decentralization policies were constructed at the local level in Jimma Zone (Southwest Ethiopia) in 1995 (Popp 2001), I again realised that the majority of the rural population was excluded from the political decision-making processes. Since I regard political participation of the predominantly illiterate rural population as a key issue, which opens the perspective for empowerment – in the sense of progressive change for the majority of women and men – I decided to study the impact of agrarian and environmental policies. I consider this the most significant political field of interventions of the Ethiopian state into rural livelihoods.

Both my field site (a setting with diverging interest groups in dispute about the regulation of access to a vital resource) and my objective (to address and to contribute directly to the solution of this practical problem) involved difficulties mentioned by Hastrup and Elsass (1990) as characteristic of applied research. The context was a complex situation, composed not simply of an oppressed and an oppressor group, but of a diversity of individuals and groups motivated by various ideals and interests and pursuing different political strategies. By being associated with the IFMP, which was a powerful party in that game, the way in which I coped with hierarchical relations became the priority of my agenda during the entire fieldwork.

This was particularly apparent during a three-month collection of socio-economic data with a standardised questionnaire, which I conducted together with a French agronomist in 1998. After some time, I realised the limitations of such interview situations: I noticed uneasiness in response to the questions asked on the side of the interviewees.

Although people rarely refused interviews, I recognised the sensitiveness of the subject and that it was not clear to people why a young German woman showed interest in such crucial spheres of their lives.

The asymmetrical relationship between researcher and research subject, which is implicit to standardised interviews in general is particularly sensitive when Western scholars do fieldwork in non-Western societies. People either feared that I was an outsider who reveals the secrets of their life worlds in order to render more effective control, or they thought I was an international development expert, who generously donates goods and money to improve their living conditions. Hence, the answers often were contradictory and left me with the impression that I gained merely a cursory insight of living conditions of people.

The asymmetrical research situation is as well addressed by Chambers, who regards power relationships as a central challenge to modes of learning and information systems:

> "Those who are powerful and dominant – the uppers gain and interpret information in ways which fit their preconceptions and fulfil their needs; while those who are subordinate – the lowers, behave and communicate in ways which generate, select, distort and present information to fit what they believe uppers want, approve and will reward. […] Systems of misinformation are then self-sustaining" (Chambers 1994: 15).

Since I realised the importance of addressing the more tacit (less recognised, implicit, unspoken) aspects of social life, I abandoned structured forms of collecting data in the following months of fieldwork. As Elizabeth Koepping (1982: 3) emphasises, the application of open methods does not liberate from the obligation to reflect power relations:

> "The anthropologist goes to the person not as a person of knowledge and power but as a supplicant, a guest. He is accepted into houses as a courtesy on the part of the other, not as a favour on his. He does not know how to behave properly, lacking the knowledge of et etiquette common to four year old children of the host community, and he has no right totally to evade the control exercised over the four year old by pleading age or alien origin. If a small child can learn, so can an adult. […] Essentially, the researcher in the field has few automatic rights, but many obligations" (sic, Koepping 1982: 3).

Koepping admonishes to observe ongoing social processes without upsetting, disrupting or imposing an outside point of view. This expresses that some of the criticisms that have long been applied to quantitative research are now directed at traditional ethnography itself. Koepping hints at the danger of reifying social phenomena, to claim illegitimate expertise over the people studied and to establish relationships of hierarchy and control.

The fear that an approach which acknowledges the hierarchical character of the situation might be likely to reproduce structures of inequality, confirms Atkinson's and Hammersley's (1994: 252) theory, which maintains that development towards the increasing questioning of the very possibility of social scientific knowledge is taking place:

> "It is pointed out that the accounts produced by the researchers are constructions, and as such they reflect the presuppositions and socio-historical circumstances of their production. This is held to contradict the aspiration of social science (including much ethnography) to produce knowledge that is universally valid, in other words, that captures the *nature* of the social world" (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994: 252).

During my fieldwork I frequently changed the research site, the assistants and my techniques of collecting data. In this way I gained insights from different perspectives and avoided a biased viewpoint. Moreover, I made use of a variety of techniques and social skills in a flexible manner, as the situation demanded it. Hence, the image of the *bricoleur* – a "jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (Levi-Strauss 1966: 17, see Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 2) – who produces a *bricolage*, a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation, best illustrates my research procedure. My ethnographic research was structured by the requirement to observe and reconstruct the reality of my research field. It was based on the methodical assumption that the field "is not a jungle, but a constantly methodically self-generating and structuring phenomenon" (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 19, translated by M.P.[2]). In contrast to other research methods, the field shaped the process of collecting data: who I talked to, which places I visited and at which occasion I was present was guided by the requirement to observe and reconstruct the practices through which people construct their natural environment. As Amann and

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[2] „[[...]] kein Dschungel, sondern ein sich ständig selbst methodisch generierendes und strukturierendes Phänomen" (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 19).

Hirschauer (1997: 19) put it, in contrast to other methodical approaches, the adequacy of the (ethnographic) method is rather suggested by the object under study then by social theories. The "choice of research practices depends upon the questions asked, and the questions depend on their context" (Nelson et al. 1992: 2, see Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 2). And remembering the image of the *bricoleur*: "The solution (bricolage) which is the result of the *bricoleur's* method is an [emergent] construction" (Weinstein & Weinstein 1991: 161, see Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 2).

1.2.2. Choice of the method

Initially I expected that the above-mentioned three-month collection of data with a standardised questionnaire would elucidate the way men and women of different age groups and economic statuses have access to natural resources and how they use them. The interviews therefore focused on labour divisions within the 'household-unit' and within society in general, as well as on distribution of formal and informal use, or ownership rights of natural resources.

The brief experience with a standardised questionnaire revealed a difficulty, which is inherent to quantitative methods in general, but represents a more significant limitation in a research context in which the researcher has an extremely restricted knowledge of the living world of people. It limits the scope of the analysis and as a result often simplifies social reality. Chambers (1994: 15) specifies the critique for the context of development studies:

> "… in rural development, outsider professionals have learnt in two modes: rural development tourism, the brief and biased rural visit, in which the visitor is presented with a rehearsed reality to give a good impression; and through large-scale questionnaire surveys which crudely collect and box the reality of the respondents according to the categories and interests of the researcher" (Chambers 1994: 15).

The interviews were helpful in gathering primary information about economic strategies and the ways in which natural resources were utilised. Group discussions represented a further technique employed to explore the character of women-groups, which are important institutions of social security and thus influence the way natural resources are used. Narrative biographical and historical interviews as well as RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) tools and semi-structured interviews with scholars, development experts, represented further important techniques. The data generated with these methods

allowed more general conclusions with regard to economic, political and historical processes.

However, my fieldwork aimed at bringing the subjective sense and the objective meanings to light, expressed in action. I hoped to better understand commonly shared views and underlying interpretations of reality and also things, which are taken as a matter of fact. Since an insider's perspective is vital for forming an accurate appraisal of the practices through which the natural environment is constructed, participant observation, which implicates the immediate involvement into praxis, represented the most significant method of collecting data. I planned to observe ordinary events and everyday activities as they happen in their natural settings and become directly involved with the people being studied in order to personally experience the process of daily social life in the field setting.

As Patricia and Peter Adler (1994: 378) point out, observational techniques enjoy the advantage of drawing the observer into the phenomenological complexity of the world, where connections, correlations, and causes can be witnessed as and how they unfold:

> "Qualitative observers are not bound, thus, by predetermined categories of measurement or response, but are free to search for concepts or categories that appear meaningful to the subject" (Adler and Adler 1994: 378).

Nevertheless, the role of the researcher in the setting may vary in involvement and is connected to the challenge of balancing familiarity with strangeness and closeness with distance. In the case of my village studies, my permanent presence at the field sites allowed me to observe and interact closely enough in order to understand an insider's viewpoint. Yet, I remained foreign and my motivations were difficult to understand for people though they acknowledged my interest in their cultural and historical background. Due to the remaining distance individuals who were in conflict situations and expected me to understand their dilemma approached me. These encounters vividly illustrated the ways in which the social order is produced in everyday practices and which rules have to be respected in order to remain an accepted community member. A further advantage of the distance of an outsider, who nevertheless is well informed about internal affairs, can also be seen in the fact that I was able to maintain an analytic perspective.

In contrast, my role in the IFMP where I participated in staff meetings, workshops and finally presented a report in which I gave recommendations for the forest management approach, was that of an active member and more conflictive. As an involved researcher

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I participated in the central activities and assumed responsibilities that advanced the project's objective. Yet, I did not fully commit myself to the project's values and goals and everybody knew that the fieldwork for my PhD thesis was the primary purpose of my study. The disadvantage of this approach undoubtedly lies in the high emotional involvement, which sometimes found expression in lack of the appropriate analytic distance. Returning to the field sites outside the town, spending a prolonged weekend in Addis Abeba and discussing my experiences with friends represented helpful strategies, which enabled me to obtain the necessary detachment from project politics.

1.2.3. "Get out and do it!"[3] – Procedure of research work

Since I consider the reflection of the researcher's role in the 'field' as another possibility to take the unequal relations into account and to prevent the researcher from reproducing the chain of misinformation, I will reveal my position in DODOLA *woreda* in the following.

My first introduction to the field was in May 1997 as a gender consultant for the IFMP where I focused on labour responsibilities and access to resources of the various groups of women and men in the agricultural zone of the district.

The alliance with a project of bilateral development cooperation made the practical organisation of the fieldwork easier. For one, I did not have to go through the costly and bureaucratic application process for a research permit. Also, I could easily reach remote sites with project vehicles and the contacts that had been established by the project served as starting point for my fieldwork.

With time most of these advantages grew to be a constraint for an action-oriented approach, which considers "… its research subjects as active constructors of their reality" (Lachenmann 1995: 3) and therefore aims at highlighting the view from inside and relies on a communicative access.

1.2.3.1. PRA and its consequences

The project had gathered data according to the method of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in a few 'pilot villages'. Chambers (1994: 953) defines PRA as an "…

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3 Punch (1994: 84) addresses how politics and ethics impinge on the individual researcher approaching fieldwork as a relative newcomer. Nevertheless, he argues for a "go out and do it"-approach and warns against leaning too far toward a highly restrictive model for research that serves to prevent academics from complex social realities that are not always amenable to more formal methods.

approach and methods for learning about rural life and conditions from, with and by rural people". He then lists the assumptions underlying the method:

"- that poor people are creative and capable, and can and should do much of their own investigation, analysis and planning;

- that outsiders have roles as convenors, catalysts and facilitators;

- that the weak and marginalised can and should be empowered" (Chambers 1994: 954).

The methods applied during a PRA collection of data partly originate from agroecosystem analysis (transect walk, informal mapping, diagramming, and innovation assessment). Then again, field residence, unhurried participant observation and conversation are methods, which come from anthropology. Chambers (1994: 955) mentions the recognition of "… the importance of attitudes, behavior and rapport", the emic-etic distinction and the validity of indigenous technical knowledge as important methodological assumptions of PRA.

Furthermore, field research on farming systems is mentioned as important sources for PRA, which revealed the complexity, diversity and rationality of the apparently untidy and unsystematic farming practices (Chambers 1994: 955).

While at the time of Chambers' (1994: 962) publication it was still too early to evaluate the impact of PRA methods on development policies and practices, in 1997 the results of the PRA workshops in DODOLA *woreda* were clearly observable. A number of community development measures (e.g. the construction of a sawmill, a clinic and a road) had been implemented and in this way contacts to a number of 'communities' had been established.

The choices of the sites for my fieldwork were made in accordance with the interest of the project. From the three 'pilot-*kebeles*' with which the project was cooperating, BURA ADELE was chosen as the starting point. Together with a colleague from the University of Bielefeld and an interpreter, I put up my tent on the compound of Adee Workitu, a Christian woman of Shoan Oromo origin, who was known to the project since she was the only 'local' woman participating at public meetings. In the view of all GTZ employees she was interested in political issues, which was certainly unusual for women living in DODOLA *woreda*. Adee Workitu had been the PA women's representative during the Derg time and she remained an active participant of home

gardening and poultry production programmes offered by the *woreda* home economy agent.[4]

Long conversations with Adee Workitu in the evenings and a number of interviews conducted with informants introduced by her revealed that the mill, which had been constructed by the project, had merely been used for one day. An executive board member of the PA had disappeared with the earnings for that day and there was no money left, which would have allowed the purchase of fuel needed to operate the engine. Furthermore, I was told that Sheikh Ali, the PA Chairman, did not hold that person responsible since they were related through affinal ties.

Unexpectedly, the group discussions and narrative interviews I had conducted led to the disclosure of a number of further political scandals, which in the end fundamentally put my research into question. When I found myself interrogating a woman, who was accused by a group of women for having run off with the collectively earned money of the Women's Association, I realised that I was being involved in local power plays to a degree I had not intended. Neither was this conduct in accordance with my principles.

In sum, it can be concluded that the outcome of the PRA collection of data represented merely a list of unfulfilled wishes and had little to do with the 'empowerment of weak and marginalised people'. The 'shopping list' (as project members later referred to the PRA outcomes) neither provided creativity nor the capability of local groups to investigate underlying causes and to plan appropriate alternatives. Instead, the results of the workshops had the character of standardised answers given to a superficial analysis of underlying problems. The results of the PRA workshops probably mirrored the perceptions of those, who collected and used them (Davies 1994: 2). Since they reflected inherent biases and prevailing power structures, the community development measures were the cause for new conflicts and apparently aggravated the existing gap between the group of people who dominated formal administration and those who had no political representation.

At this point I entered the scene and thus, was put into an essentially hierarchical position of a Northerner gathering information about Southern 'beneficiaries' (Davies

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[4] These income-generating activities initiated by the Woreda Agricultural Bureau represented in 1997 the only alternatives to the activities of the Women's Association which were initiated by the Derg. The women's association had received the rights of use for a plot of land, which was farmed and managed by its members. The money earned collectively was primarily used for communal investments for the benefit of women. The additional work on the W.A. farm, which did not generate an additional individual income, was regarded as a burden by most interviewees.

1994: 1). My introduction to the field linked me to the most important strategic groups and prevented a closer contact to the parts of the population who had no access to crucial resources.

After the first unfortunate, but enlightening attempt to 'go native' in 1997, it needed a large amount of effort until I at last found an agreeable access to the 'field' in 1998/9. I moved to HANGAFU, a settlement in the Erica bush zone at an altitude of 3 500 meters. HANGAFU seemed to be a typical 'forest settlement' to me: in such geographical conditions people depend on the livestock economy as a primary source of income.

In HANGAFU I stayed in a hut constructed by the GTZ project within the framework of a tourist scheme. Haji, a business-minded and communicative middle-aged farmer, whose endeavour was to expand the income opportunities with tourists, managed this hut. Hence, Haji spent a great deal of time with us, asking us about living conditions in Germany as well as the interests and habits of foreigners. Also Haji's mother, Adee Halima, wanted to understand who we were and how we lived. She often dropped in for a chat and was happy to find interested listeners. The enormous interest in my life world turned the research setting into a more balanced relationship, which sometimes did not allow a clear distinction between researcher and researched persons. I also found it easier to address things that were taken as a 'matter of fact' by Haji and Adee Halima and their loquacity often made an interrogation even unnecessary. Still, Haji's position as main beneficiary of the tourism scheme let me be cautious with the information I received from him. However, after some time I could establish contacts to neighbours who were entirely excluded from incomes generated by tourism. They contacted me in order to let me know their viewpoint. These exchanges became important possibilities to crosscheck perspectives and to better understand the predispositions of my key informants.

In effect, the conditions in HANGAFU did not differ substantially from the situation in BURA ADELE P.A. Once more, I was regarded as a project member, who decides who is entitled to share benefits and who is not. However, what might have made a difference is the fact that I was aware of the precariousness of the situation and did not get involved in local power plays. During my first experience in BURA ADELE I had gained the insight that keeping distance would prevent me from being entirely absorbed by one party. My approach which involved the adaptation of the method to the requirements of the field, led to a new technique: rather than directly raising issues by

inquiry, I tried to listen to chats and participated in daily routines of the villagers. This approach of a 'silent guest' helped me understand the relevance of different activities; I got an idea of the functioning of social networks and had the opportunity to participate in religious ceremonies. Hence, I limited my scope to everyday routines and in this way managed to establish contacts to the disagreeing parties.

Moreover, I found that the obviously privileged position of Haji and the conflicts that evolved as a result to the arrangements he made, made it easier for me to recognise the diverging standpoints.

1.2.3.2. The 'professional stranger handler'

The final round in 1999, during which I investigated clan structures and the importance of the generation-set system – *gada* – by interviewing elders within the entire DODOLA *woreda*, lastly developed into the real breakthrough of my fieldwork. With the help of Hussein, a young man with a high school certificate, who grew up in DODOLA *woreda* and had important social competences in handling interviewees, I could question about 30 influential elders who gave valuable information about the historical background of different clans. These interviews often were intense discussions and I could clearly see that my interview partners felt flattered to be questioned and enjoyed to elaborate on clan histories.

The eagerness to talk to me might have resulted from the research theme, which did not focus on precarious livelihood concerns but allowed rich elaborations on an imaginative past. This however also indicates the importance of an historical analysis which considers that the studied society is not prehistoric and timeless or at least that the time before the massive state interventions began cannot be considered as a peaceful and stable period.

> "The past is taken into account for emic theories which *explicate*: cosmogony explains the origins of the world, etiological myths, why things are the way they are, creation myth [give details about] social entities, historical traditions and constructs legitimate contemporary conditions between ethnic groups, social strata, caste groups etc. …" (Schlee 1993: 442 / 443).

The fact that elderly people have ample time to attend an interview might be another reason for the success of my historical interviews.

Hussein, my assistant and interpreter, can be regarded as third factor that contributed to a good atmosphere, which opened doors for me. Since my Oromo knowledge is limited to the ability to follow discussions, I had to work with an interpreter throughout the

entire fieldwork. Hence, a further person became important for the outcome of my fieldwork: the interpreter's interest and personality, her / his approach to people and willingness to translate even minor conversations, which contributed to the way I was treated and ultimately the information I received. Hussein proved to be a 'professional stranger handler' (Agar 1980: 59) who passes valuable information to the stranger and by doing so, integrates her / him in the group and creates an atmosphere of trust (Lachenmann 1995: 5).

Hussein only assisted me during the last phase of the fieldwork, since I had also had the objective to get in touch with women, who often do not feel free to speak in the presence of men, and therefore had insisted, to only work with a woman interpreter. Unfortunately, only few women speak English and Oromo fluently and agree to work in rural areas under simple living conditions.

While Hussein lived in the forest zone, the majority of our interview partners were his close relatives and he consequently acted as a 'professional stranger handler', who gave me insights into his own life world, my interpreter Eleni was a young upper middle class woman from Addis, who was born and grew up in DODOLA town. She took the same position in an entirely different way. Eleni acted as a mediator between the diverging social worlds and prevented me from offending the code of conduct. Though being the daughter of the wealthiest farmer in the district, she was greatly committed to her responsibility to bring the social reality of people in DODOLA *woreda* closer to me. She proved to have an extraordinary sensibility in dealing with ambiguous encounters and surprisingly it was the reputation of her family, which helped her to create trust. I only came to know later, that the privileged position of Eleni's father also obliged him to show extraordinary concern for social issues and thus he acted as an elder in situations of crises.

Unfortunately Eleni only assisted me during my first stay in DODOLA woreda in 1997. However, the different assistants with whom I did fieldwork in 1998 / 99 together with the various methodological constraints I faced, finally enriched the process of collecting data. The combination of different techniques as well as the experiences with interpreters of distinct backgrounds repeatedly put my approach into question and constantly forced me to reconsider my methods of collecting data. Not taking into account the high psychological stress such a procedure involves, I believe that self-reflection is substantial for anthropological research, which endeavours to uncover an unbiased perspective on people's living world.