

Political discourse in an egalitarian society: The Hamar of Ethiopia

Ivo Strecker

The Hamar belong to those “tribes without rulers”¹ which have non-centralised political systems and live without formal laws or punishments, without great distinctions of wealth, without social class, without nobility, chiefs or kings. This paper is aimed at contributing to our understanding of the way in which such egalitarian systems work.

The Hamar have hereditary ritual leaders (*bitta*). They also select political spokesmen (*ayo*), leaders for war (*djilo*), guardians for grazing land (*kogo*) and for cultivated land (*gudili*), but the basic agents of politics are the married men (*donza*). Conceptually they are likened to a grass, which has roots that spread like a web on the ground (*zarsi*).

Hamar politics is thus grass-root politics similar to the way people in contemporary democratic societies like to speak of and engage in grass-root politics. An important difference is, however, the fact that in Hamar the women are completely missing from public politics. They nevertheless exercise an important influence, which is hidden and difficult to fathom.

As some of the literature on the ethnography of speaking has shown, oratory plays an important role in traditional societies and its study leads us straight to the heart of politics.² The peoples of East Africa are known for their great competence in oratory. Among those who practice a significant amount of pastoralism, occasions of public oratory are often associated with the consumption of an animal or animals. In Hamar this institution, called *osh*, may be held at different levels of social inclusiveness. It may involve only a small neighbourhood, *i.e.*, several adjacent settlement areas (*gurda*); it may involve a larger part or the whole of a territorial segment (*tsinti*); it may involve several territorial segments or parts of them; or it may even involve the whole of Hamar country (*Hamar pe*). But even though there will be differences in size, duration, general tenor, seriousness of matters *etc.*, the general pattern of the *osh* remains largely the same, and it is this pattern which I explore in what follows below.

Hamar political discourse may be seen as a process that moves repeatedly through four related stages each of which has its own mode of communication.

¹ John Middleton and D. Tait, Eds., *Tribes without rulers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

² Richard Bauman and J. Sherzer, *Explorations in the ethnography of speaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Maurice Bloch, Ed., *Political language and oratory in traditional society* (London: Academic Press, 1975); Donald L. Brenneis and F. R. Myers, *Words: Language and politics in the Pacific* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

The political process rotates in a never-ending spiral from informal conversation to divination to oratory to blessing and cursing.

When the usual routine of Hamar herding, farming, hunting, gathering *etc.*, is threatened by sickness, drought, internal or external conflict *etc.*, the political process sets into motion. First responses happen on an individual level. People ponder quietly over the seriousness of the affair and individually look for signs in nature, clouds, stars, sounds of animals and children *etc.*, which help them to interpret what is happening. Also, during the early morning hours and in the evenings at the homesteads and the cattle camps, and during the day in the fields and at the water holes, people begin to exchange views about the problems at hand.

Once a problem has reached such proportions that the elders decide that public decisions are necessary, they call the married men (*donza*) of the locality to a public meeting (*osh*). Such a call is always preceded by the search for an animal, which will have to be slaughtered in order to feed the men who attend the meeting. Without such an animal (ox, sheep or goat) no public meeting can be held.

Once a man has been found who agrees to provide the animal, the elders will be informed about the appointed day and the place where the meeting will take place. When the men arrive, they first settle down in the shade of a tree, relax and then enter into informal conversations. This is how the proper political discourse begins. Such informal conversations are always part and parcel of a public meeting and are clearly a customarily proscribed form of action. The most manifest element of the informal conversations is the exchange of news, which allow for a better evaluation of the problem for which the men have been called to the *osh*. First the more junior men who are present will speak, especially when they have been witnesses to events and are well informed about details of the current problems. Later, when the facts have been told and discussed in detail, the more senior men, especially the spokesmen who have come, enter the conversation. Typically they will relate historical events, which have been in some way like the present situation and can act as precedents and models for how to cope with the current issues.

In a more hidden way the informal conversations provide a forum for social and cultural criticism, the articulation of social values and, most importantly, the formation of social consensus. Here at the informal conversations people speak their minds and argue with one another. Also they can speak at length for there is usually lots of time at hand and people are willing to listen to one another. A striking theme of the conversations is lamentation. Everyone complains about the fact that others will not listen to him, that things are going wrong because he has so little influence over others and the matter at hand, and that therefore he cannot be held responsible for all the disasters that surely will happen.

I have found that these lamentations follow the structural lines of Hamar society: junior men, for example, will complain about the senior men who will not listen to them, and senior spokesmen from one locality will complain that the spokesmen of

other localities would not listen to them *etc.* That is, everyone complains towards the direction where he finds that his freedom of action and his influence is most severely impeded. It took me some time to understand the logic of such endemic lamentation. Now I think that lamentation goes very well with the egalitarian character of Hamar social organisation and politics: everyone is checked by someone else. No one will ever enjoy complete political success. Complete success would lead to a concentration of power and influence once it was achieved repeatedly. Therefore, frustration must be a perpetual part of egalitarian politics. But the frustration is measured, and the very fact that people indulge in long and colourful lamentation rather than lapse into mute silence is an indication that their political spirit is alive and that their aspirations have only been frustrated but not killed.

If the problem, which is facing a particular locality of Hamar or Hamar country at large, is really threatening, a divination will be held. This happens when the informal conversations are finished. The men move to another shade tree where a diviner has settled down to throw sandals in order to ask questions related to the existing problem and how it may be solved. He asks his questions either directly or in form of propositions, which the sandals may either confirm or reject, depending on the way they fall to the ground. Thus he may say, "we move the herds and the rain will fall", and then the silent answer of the sandals will be "yes" or "no".

On the first and manifest level, Hamar divination acts as a means by which the elders focus on the most difficult aspects of their political decisions. While the diviner throws the sandals, the men sit around him, watch and ask him to pose the questions, which interest them. In this way the diviner does not act all on his own but is to a large extent the medium of others. In the last resort, however, neither he nor the other men matter. Only the sandals "speak" and provide information on which the elders will act. The political implication of this, I think, is obvious: through divination the donza achieve an absolution from their responsibility, because it is not they but a third party, the sandals that is deciding the matter.

The process of divination shares some characteristics with the informal conversations in that it provides an opportunity for the men to air their views and articulate social fears. In fact the latter is more prominent here, because the men may ask the diviner critically to examine the behaviour of others under the pretext that it may be the cause for the existing problem. Thus the divination does not only serve as a shield behind which one escapes responsibilities, it also acts as a way to find scape-goats and allows for accusations which are so indirect that the accusers need not fear any retribution by the accused.

While the conversations and the divination are going on, young men slaughter the animal or animals provided for the meeting and roast the meat over the fire. When the meat is ready, they call the men to come and sit down along a semi-circle of branches with fresh green leaves that will serve as a table from which the men eat. They will slowly pick up the meat from the leaves while they listen to the speeches being

made. Only selected men are allowed to speak at a public meeting. They are called *ayo*. The verb *ai'a* means 'do'. So the *ayo* are those who get things done, they are leaders, and they lead especially by what they say. An *ayo* is selected by his 'elder brothers' and 'fathers' (i.e. men of senior age groups) when, at a particular place and in a particular moment in time, there is need for a new spokesman. They bless him and install him by handing him a spear at a public meeting. But the privilege they offer is provisional and holds only as long as his leadership is good and fruitful. To give more colour to this important fact let me quote from a Hamar text:

One boy is a goatherd, but tomorrow he is a warrior: "When you go that way, if you meet a leopard kill it. Kill the lion! Kill the ostrich with the feathers. Kill the giraffe and when you return in the evening bring the fillet". So the fellow draws forth service. Such a man is an *ayo*. If those who go don't kill the giraffe, the buffalo, the lion, the ostrich, the leopard, but if they meet the enemy and one of them dies, it will be said: "His word is bad, his command is bad. Stop him."³

At an *osh* the men sit in order of seniority, the oldest to the right, the youngest to the left, and the principle of seniority applies also to speaking, the older ones speak first, the younger speak later. When a man's turn has come to speak, he gets up from his place at the leaves, takes the spear and walks over to where the animal has been slaughtered and roasted. There he takes some of the chyme, which is the green and only partly digested stomach contents of the animal, and rubs it on to his spear, his forehead, his chest and often also his legs. Then he passes slowly back and forth along the semi-circle of listeners and begins to speak. Old and experienced speakers who know of the respect they command usually begin their speech with a noisy and stylized expression of anger. They reprimand the younger for failing to act properly, for neglecting their duties, for thinking of themselves and not being strong, reliable and courageous. From this intimidation the public meeting has its name, *osh*. *Oshimba* means to be intimidated, shy, in social fear, and the term *osh* implies this intimidation. But let us note that the listeners are not really intimidated, and that it is because of their proud rejection of authority that the spokesmen shout so vehemently and complain that people do not listen and do what they want.

After he has finished with his rhetorical anger, the speaker comes to the particular matter of the day. Typically, he places the current issue in a historical context and looks for parallels and precedents in the past. The older a speaker is, the further back his memories reach. After the first speaker follows a second, a third and so on depending on how important the issue is and how many spokesmen are present. No speaker is listened to in complete awe and silence. On the contrary, one often hears the younger *ayo* who are sitting in the audience call out to the others: "listen, be quiet", which attests to the inattentiveness of the others. Listeners sometimes also interrupt speakers, throw in their comments, tell them what to say, laugh and tease them and

³ Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia. Vol. I: Work journal* (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1979): 109.

generally may begin to chatter with each other when a speech begins to bore them. Of course such a refusal to listen dismays the speakers immensely.

Also, when a meeting concerns matters of war and peace, and when the men are determined to fight even though the speakers urge them to be prudent, the men will begin to chant their war songs (*raega*) with which they indicate their willingness to fight and their rejection of any advice of prudence which might be interpreted as fearfulness by their adversaries. Thus in Hamar a public speaker may be “sung down” rather in the way in which at western political meetings a speaker may be “booed” or “whistled” down.

Usually, there is a limit to which people can continue a meeting. The sun will get hot and the herds will have to be watered *etc.* Therefore, if a matter cannot be finished at one public meeting, another meeting will be called where the debate can be continued. In a sense, no debate is ever really finished and Hamar political history can be viewed (and is told as) a long line of public meetings. At each *osh* preceding ones are remembered and future ones projected and anticipated.

I have called the *osh* a debate, but I must qualify this. We speak of a debate when people try to persuade each other by refuting the arguments of others and by showing the strength and validity of theirs. At a Hamar *osh* such features are surely present, but debate should not spoil the central aim of the *osh* which is to articulate consensus. The *osh* is not the place and time where people should sort out and debate things from scratch. We have seen already how the *osh* is preceded by informal conversations and divination. The debates should have been finished during these earlier stages, and ideally the public speeches should express similar views, and agree on the way, which would lead everyone out of the existing problem.

I now turn to the fourth mode of Hamar political discourse, the curse (*asha*) and the blessing (*barjo aela*). We have already seen how the first three processes have gradually moved from a very open mode (conversations) to a more stylized and closed mode of communication. The curse and the blessing are even more closed and focused than the preceding divination and oratory. In the act of cursing and blessing the will of the group is expressed most emphatically. Here the consensus is complete. There is no divergence, no debate, no doubt.

Cursing and blessing are closely related to speaking. Only the more senior spokesmen may do it, and they often place it at the end of their speeches. There are various ways in which a speaker may combine cursing and blessing with his speech. Sometimes, when for example a speaker is so upset by a problem that he wants to get rid of it as soon as possible, he may begin his speech with a curse and having thus unburdened himself (and his audience) he moves on to speak.

There are also occasions where after the *osh* the men move to another place where the *ayo* then raises his spear and calls the evil to leave and the good to come forth.

Here is an example of a blessing. The speaker is standing in front of the men and lifting the blade of his spear up into the air while he calls, he makes rhythmic gestures of pulling or drawing the desired thing (state of affairs) towards himself, and the men, who are imitating his movements with their hands, answer in refrain:

Leader:

Eh-eh!

My herds are at Mello,
which are in the open grass lands,
may my herds come lowing, come
grazing the grass may they come, come
having eaten may the calves come, come
leading their kids may the goats come ... come...⁴

Chorus:

When a spokesman curses, that is when he “hides away” (*asha*) the undesired, he turns his spear around and jabs with the sharp metal point on the end of his spear in the direction towards which the evil should disappear, usually westward, where it should “get lost with the setting sun”:

Leader:

Eh-eh!

The herds are carrying sickness,
may the sickness go beyond Labor, may it go
may the sickness go beyond Topos. may it go
Cattle owners you have enemies,
down there, the Korre,
if he looks at your cattle, may he die, die
may his eyes fail, fail
may his heart get speared, speared
may they disperse like doves, disperse
and leave... leave...⁵

Chorus:

⁴ Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia. Vol. II: Baldambe explains* (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1979): 14.

As we can see, Hamar political discourse moves from an open form, in which differences, insecurities and alternatives are expressed and discussed, to more and more closed forms in which the differences are narrowed down and are funnelled as it were towards a consensus. Here lies the decisive difference that distinguishes egalitarian from centralised forms of political organisation. In the egalitarian practice of the Hamar, the ordinary problems of everyday-life set the political process into motion. At the beginning, people's individual views differ and collide about the right ways of action, and only when the differences have been negotiated and consensus has been reached will joint action be taken. Egalitarian politics are here the exact opposite of centralised politics. The former begin with a multitude of wills, which come to a consensus while the latter begin with a single will, which imposes itself on a multitude of others. In centralised political systems, like for example ancient Egypt, all politics emanate from an apex, from the divine ruler whose voice commands downwards reaching each and every-one in the social pyramid. In Hamar things are different. There is no single will which imposes itself on others, but rather many different wills which first diverge and then move towards each other, find consensus and act together. Such agreement never lasts because things change, new problems arise and the political process is set into motion again. Egalitarian political discourse converges from difference of view to consensus.

Besides the funnelling of opinion, several shifts towards seeming "irrationality" characterise Hamar political discourse. The two most important shifts occur when the Hamar move from conversation to divination and then again from oratory to blessing/cursing. How are we to interpret these shifts? Returning to a point I have made above, the shift towards divination may be explained as a way of reducing the social danger involved in decision making. The divination reduces the threat inherent in answers, suggestions, commands, advice, *etc.* separating, as it were, speaking from will. The men express their views and offer their advice freely and without disguise during the informal conversations when nothing they say has any claim of authority. However, when they move towards the formulation of binding decisions, they hide behind the shield of divination. Following the terminology of politeness theory, one can say that they employ a strategy by which they soften the face-threatening act (FTA) involved in proposing decisions affecting others.⁶ Not all decisions are equally problematic. It is when decisions are socially threatening and difficult to justify that one should expect divination to be practiced.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena", in *Questions and politeness. Strategies in social interaction*, Esther Goody, Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978); *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Ivo Strecker, *The social practice of symbolization: An anthropological analysis* (London/Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1988).

What about the shift from oratory to blessing/cursing? Here we find the reverse of what happens in divination. All politics moves constantly between acts of commitment and acts of non-commitment, of saying 'yes' and saying 'no'. While divination embodies a strategy of non-commitment, of saying "no, I have nothing to do with it", blessing and cursing constitute acts of strong commitment and affirmation. They say, "Yes, we want things definitely to become like this or that". But they seem irrational in so far as they express wishes that are beyond human control. In this way, Hamar political discourse moves towards a kind of magical action. But it is important to note that this magical element is intrinsic to all expressions of emotional emphasis, rhetoric hyperbole, mimesis *etc.*, and that it can be found in all human communication. That is, whenever people attempt to move others by indirect means of persuasion they enter the realm of magic. The persuasive magic of the Hamar *osh* aims at influencing the future in a kind of prophetic way, and one is reminded of certain Dinka ceremonies led by the "master of the fishing spear" of which Lienhardt writes:

Like prophecies, the ceremony eventually represents as already accomplished what the community, and those who can traditionally speak for them, collectively intend.⁷

Ivo Strecker is Emeritus Professor in Anthropology and African Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Germany, and founder of the International Rhetoric Culture Project.

⁷ Geoffrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and experience; The religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961): 251.