



Dr. Freud Was Not a Kafa

A Classical Case of Anthropological Overinterpretation from Ethiopia

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Abstract. – A significant ceremonial object in southern Ethiopia is a headdress called *kalačča*. Its association with a phallus by Westerners has become an unquestioned topos. The article shows how prejudiced European ideas – here Freudian ideas – take a foreign object’s external appearance for their interpretation, which is then, due to a lack of self-reflection, “orientalized.” This projection onto the ideas of others blocks access to indigenous conceptions. Makers of *kalačča* and those entitled to wear them emphasize its sacred meaning, identifying it as a socioreligious mediator able to bundle positive and negative cosmic and spiritual energies. Considered within the broader framework, the *kalačča* belongs to those substances which are capable of creating and representing relations with the supernatural. [*Southern Ethiopia, ritual object, prejudice, critique of Freudian misinterpretation, reflexive anthropology*]

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The characteristic feature of topoi is their persistence. A shining example is the *kallačča*, a southern Ethiopian ritual object, worn upright on the forehead, always described in anthropological texts as a phallic headdress. In a general sense, it mirrors how anthropological knowledge has frequently been constructed as an European artefact, and how easily a researcher may be deceived when he thinks something is so obvious that there is no need to look into the possibility of other inter-

pretations. The thing that is apparently obvious is unreflectingly explained and classified in terms of the anthropologist’s own cultural criteria, and all too quickly declared as factual knowledge, until, everyone being in agreement, a tradition grows up – a classic instance of invented tradition.

Ever since human beings have shown an interest in other human beings outside their own territory, there to become witnesses of “strange” customs and phenomena, they have transferred conceptions (including fantasy) sprung from their own worldview onto the Other. Such images are handed down and eventually become stereotypes. Early descriptions of foreign peoples are full of topoi that become increasingly fanciful the greater the distance from the centre of the known world. As an example we need only mention the many monstrous human creatures that populated the periphery of the world (Petermann 2007).

When the anthropological discourse became more scholarly in the course of the Enlightenment, these creatures largely disappeared, together with the topoi associated with them, a development which, however, in no way prevented the new discipline of anthropology from producing new topoi and obsolete conventions and doctrines in its turn. Until recently, for instance, animism and, stubbornly defended, totemism (Baumann 1952: passim) continued to be considered as evolutionary stages of early religiosity, as well as the notion of shamanism as the expression of “Arctic hysteria,” to which we will be returning. Castaneda’s supposedly authentic and true reports of giant birds

and other fantastic phenomena fascinated not a few anthropologists from the end of the 1960s onwards. Plainly ineradicable – at least outside anthropology – is the German term “Naturvolk.”

These misinterpretations and topoi have been recognized for what they are, but it takes a long time for this knowledge to find acceptance in neighbouring disciplines; we only need think of the Australian Aborigines, who, like many another “tribe,” are believed to be still living in the Stone Age – i.e., at an earlier stage in terms of our own knowledge. But there is no doubt that there are many topoi still hidden in anthropological writings. In this article I will present the case of the southern Ethiopian *kallačča*, which should be understood as a general warning against topoi.

Through a critical examination of the sources and of statements by persons who are entitled to wear the *kallačča* or who are involved in its manufacture, we will attempt to establish a more accurate interpretation of the meaning of this emblem and its status within a socioreligious context.

1 Description of the *kallačča*

Kallačča is an Oromo word which in similar forms has entered as a loanword into many southern Ethiopian languages.¹ Usually, a *kallačča* is about 10 centimetres long and consists in its upper part of a cone that is about 2.5 centimetres long, with a base of about 3 centimetres in diameter. Connected to it is a cylinder, about 2 centimetres in diameter, which generally has a slightly conical form. Frequently, four small elevations can be seen around the upper part. In our days, most of the *kallačča* are cast in aluminium, while the older ones are made of nonferrous alloys or silver. The emblem – which has an eyelet on its underside – stands on a round baseplate, either a yellow and white snail-shell (of the genus *Conus*) with a hole bored through the middle, or ivory, and is held upright on the forehead with the aid of a strap (Fig. 1).

Native smiths produce the emblem by means of the lost-wax process, but not many of them know how to manage this complex procedure.² It

starts with searching for clean wax and different sorts of clay for the inner and outer parts of the mould. The wax is cleaned in boiling water and then kneaded. When firm, a rough model is formed by hand, and finished by carving with a small knife. Finally, the surface is smoothed with a heated knife-blade. The wax model is coated with a layer of finely ground, almost liquid clay and then quickly covered with kneadable clay (Fig. 2). In order to avoid cracks, the temperature of the drying process, which takes one to two days, is carefully controlled by repeatedly moving the mould to different places in the compound. The finished mould is taken to the smithy, which is covered by cloths against looking in, where the wax is melted out of the mould. The smith melts small pieces of metal (usually aluminium) on the forge in a small crucible or metal dipper, and pours the molten metal into the hollow space left by the wax. When the whole is cold, he breaks the mould. If the casting is good, some finishing work will be needed only at the vent where the metal was poured in (the foot of the metal object). Smiths also make the baseplate we have mentioned.

The *kallačča* is not a commodity. Anyone who needs this object goes to the smith and arranges a suitable date for the casting. There is no discussion about the price. The client pays whatever the smith asks for the finished *kallačča*.³

Local variations in shape are common. For instance, the objects observed by Bruce and Russell in Gondar have only a short shaft with a long, narrow cone on it. Haberland documents two shapes among the Dizi: a slender brass pyramid that is 7.7 cm in length and crowned by a little ball, and a 7 cm high truncated cone with a round disc on the top. Both sit on a flat round baseplate.⁴ According to Bieber, in Kafa the *kallačča* were bigger than elsewhere and often made out of bronzesheet. He also described a cast-bronze plate with three horns shaped like a *kallačča*. Even golden *kallačča* are said to have existed (Bieber 1920: 300, Figs. 128–130). A special shape is the so-called “Kafa crown” made of silver sheet, which had three cones juxtaposed on a plate sitting on a cylinder that was fixed on a conical

1 Amarro: *kaalača*, Burji: *kallačči*, Konso: *xallašša*, D’iraašša: *hallašša*, Dita: *kaalača*, Dorze: *kaalača*, Dullay: *xallaššo*, Hadiya: *kalačča*, Hamar: *kalaša*, Kafa: *qaallaačo* (for sources cf. note 9)

2 Cf. Amborn 1990: 77. This method is also known as the *cire perdue* process.

3 Information from several smiths from Keera/Konso 1981. According to Haberland (1993: 171), around 1850/1860 King Zula of Gofa gave 40 slaves for a golden *kallačča* from Jimma.

4 Bruce 1790, Atlas: pl. 34, 35; Russell 1833: 158. Dizi: Haberland 1993: 169–172, Figs. 29 a and b; photos 1–3. Among the Dizi this headdress is called *t’abal*.

hat.⁵ A triple *kallačča* was described to Bartels from memory by a Mačča-Oromo.⁶ Like other unauthorized persons, Bartels was not allowed to see any of the still existing *kallačča*.

The *kallačča* is found among people living in an area west of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and south of it approximately as far as the equator in Kenya. Among southern Cushitic-speaking societies it is mostly connected with the generation-grade system, but it is also known in societies without this system, such as the Hamar, Amarro, Hadiya, and within some groups of the Gamu highland. In the former sacred kingdoms of Janjero, Wolayta and the Gongga kingdoms of Kafa, Hinnario, and Šeka, the right to wear the *kallačča* was under the control of the central authority.⁷ However, it is unknown among most west Ometic speakers. For the 18th and early 19th centuries we know of examples from northern Ethiopia, too (Bruce 1790, Atlas pl. 34, 35; Russell 1833: 158).

2 Phallsification

Friedrich Bieber, an Austrian who saw the *kallačča* in southern Ethiopia, was the first person to write at length about its possible meaning. He was also the first European to undertake any extensive research in Kafa. This was in the early years of the 20th century, only a few years after this Cushitic kingdom was overthrown by the imperial Abyssinian army. He was really impressed by their *qällāččo*, especially the “Kafa crown” of the former ruler, who was brought as a prisoner to Addis Ababa. Bieber’s reminiscences of Kafa were published in two volumes in 1920 and 1923, at a time when Freudian sexual symbolism was the latest topic of discussion. That an Austrian researcher interpreted the Kafa *qällāččo* in sub-Freudian terms

5 Photos in: Brogini and Lanz 2000: 44; good drawing in Dittmer 1964: 69, Fig. 4. In order to prevent the crown from being returned to the Kafa, Emperor Menilek gave it to his Swiss adviser Alfred Ilg. Only in the 1940s was it returned to Addis Ababa (but not to Kafa!), where it is now located in the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

For a critical assessment of this object as a “crown,” see Lange (1982: 271), who also points to the fact that the most important royal insignia was a golden bracelet.

6 “Gammachu Magarsa: ‘My grandfather . . . had a *kallacha* . . . After they had become Christians, they have done away with them. The *kallacha* consisted of three tubes of iron, each about ten centimeters long, with some simple design on them . . . Between these three tubes of iron were three times three big black beads . . .’” (Bartels 1983: 140).

7 For sources cf. notes 9 and 17.



Fig. 1: Religious dignitary (*ganni*), Burji, Southwest Ethiopia (photo: H. Straube).

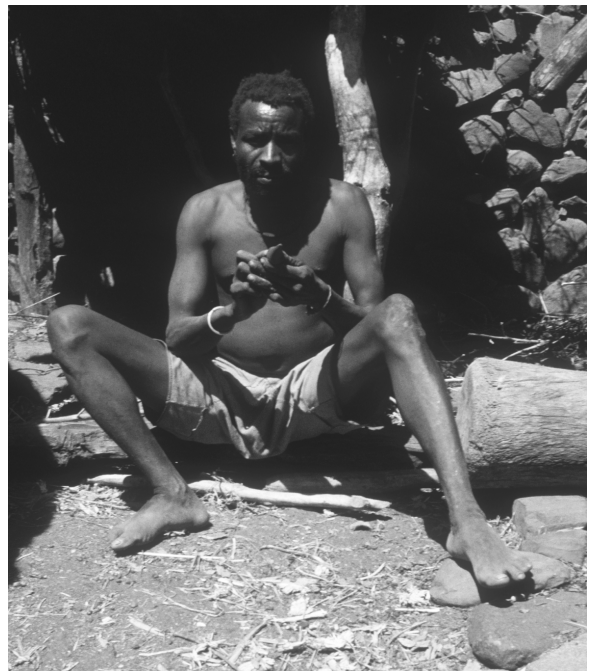


Fig. 2: Forming the wax model, Konso, Southwest Ethiopia (photo: H. Amborn).

is therefore hardly surprising. He explained in several places of his two-volume book that it was “[eine] stilisierte . . . Nachbildung eines erigierten *membrum virile*” (a stylized reproduction of an erect *membrum virile*).⁸ In the ruler’s “crown” he even saw a triple golden phallus, moving force of sexual magic (“dreifachen goldenen Phallus, dem Träger des Geschlechtszaubers”) (1923: 66) and “das Sinnbild der siegenden Mannheit . . . und mächtig machenden *potentia virilis* oder *potentia coeundi*” (the symbol of triumphant manhood . . . the power-giving *potentia virilis* or *potentia coeundi*) (358). By rendering vernacular texts he gave the impression of authenticity. Even if his claims are inconsistent, for elsewhere (362) he wrote that the “Kaffitscho” did not use the *qälláččo* for love magic or anything else, and in another passage he translates *qälláččo* as “Kopfstück” (headpiece), the idea of the *qälláččo* as a powerful erect *membrum virile* is found throughout his writings.

Thus the phallus on the head was born. From then until our days it has become an unquestioned topos among anthropologists that the *kallačča* is a “phallic ornament.”⁹

It was also Bieber who introduced into the discussion a connection between *kallačča*, power of procreation and the killing of male enemies. According to him, successful warriors who had killed enemies received from the king the right to wear this emblem as a badge of merit. In this way the *kallačča* became the phallic killer insignia (1920: 128 ff.; 1923: 361 f.).

Killing enemies or big game is indeed respected as an honourable action in many Ethiopian societies, and such a “hero” enjoys an untarnished

reputation. In the hierarchical societies, the central authority (“king”) could raise the rank of a person who has killed, whereas in the more or less egalitarian societies of the south, a common possibility for men to gain merits and authority was by killing enemies or dangerous big game.¹⁰

It is also true that some ethnic groups stuck to the idea that killing and procreation were linked, which fostered an ethos of virility culminating in the decree that a man must have killed or at least participated in a killing raid before marriage.¹¹ The custom of cutting off the penis of the dead enemy as proof of a successful killing is widespread all over Ethiopia. Now, in some places men known to have killed enemies are among those entitled to wear the *kallačča*, and this gave rise to the argument that the *kallačča* was a symbol of this trophy making, and thus necessarily of a phallic nature.

Consequently, anthropologists and scholars of comparative religion have established a link between these phenomena. This in turn has inspired some anthropologists to develop fantastic ideas. It was Hallpike who was not only convinced of the erect penis symbolized by the Konso *xallašša*, but even saw in it a (penetrating) weapon. “In the symbolism of the *hallasha* we see another aspect of the erect penis, in which it is regarded not only as an instrument of impregnation, but as a weapon” (Hallpike 1972: 149).¹²

Although, as Haberland himself writes, the Borana insistently told him that the *kallačča* does not represent a penis, emphasizing that it has nothing to do with such trivial things but has been created by God, he would not accept their views on

8 Bieber 1920: 300, cf. among others: 1923: 358.

9 Sources that saw a connection between *kallačča* and phallus:

Oromo and societies with a generation-grading system:

Oromo: Baxter 1978: 167; Haberland 1963: see Index, s.v. “Phallischer Schmuck”; Hinnant 1978: 237 (Gujji); Knutsson 1967: 88 ff. (Mačča Oromo); Leus 1995: s.v. *kalaca* (Borana).

Konso: Hallpike 1972: 149; Jensen 1936: 198, 347, 389 (Fig. 119); Plowman 1918–19: 115; Tadesse 1992: 20, note 26; Watson 1998: 201.

Others: Straube 1963: see Index s.v. “Phallischer Kopfschmuck” (Amarro), 224 (Dita), 190 (Dorze); Haberland 1993: 169–172 (Dizi); Jensen 1936: 327 (Gid’eo [Darasa]); Braukämper 1980: 242, 295 (Hadiya); Lydall and Strecker 1979: 59, 74 (Hamar); Jensen 1959: 370 (Tsamakko).

Former “sacred kingdoms”: Bieber 1920: ch. 37; 1923: chs. 15, 23; Lange 1982: 271 (Kafa); Lange 1982: 39 (Hinnario), 129 (Šeka); Haberland 1965: 278 (Wolayta); Straube 1963: 337 (Janjero).

Southern Ethiopia (in comparison): Braukämper 2001: 230, 232.

10 For a critical view of the “meritorious complex” as a former focus of research in German anthropology, cf. Braukämper 2001 passim.

11 Killing is locally also seen as a prerequisite for fathering children. The “classical” source for it is found in Enrico Cerulli (1933: 125): “Chi non ancora uccise uccida! Chi non ancora partori partorisca!”

12 Hallpike continues: “In the ritual the *hallasha* is used in conjunction with the rhinoceros horn . . . The penis is therefore associated with the penetrating horn of the rhinoceros, which explains why the *hallasha* is bound on the priest’s forehead . . . As we know rhinoceros horn is widely supposed to be an aphrodisiac, in the case of the *hallasha* an apposite symbolic process takes place, whereby the ‘penis’ becomes ‘horn.’” – The speculative association with the horn of the rhinoceros which is among the insignia of lineage-priests is not convincing. While there is indeed a widespread understanding of the rhino’s horn as a means of ferocity and in some places of procuring general (not so much individual) fertility, there is no evidence for southern Ethiopia that it is an aphrodisiac (as in South and East Asia).

the matter: “Allerdings wollen die Borana eben-
sowenig wie die anderen Stämme etwas davon
wissen, daß der kalača einen Penis darstelle, son-
dern betonen, daß er mit derartig trivialen Dingen
nichts zu tun habe, sondern ‘von Gott geschaffen
sei’” (Haberland 1963: 51). He takes it as given
that the “kalača” was originally the killer’s in-
signia, representing the phallus of the slain enemy
(209).¹³

As regards entitlement to wear the *kallačča*, the
sources known to us agree that within a society it
can only be worn by a select circle of persons, as
a rule men who already have an eminent status in
the society, for instance a specific *gada* rank, and
this only on special occasions, which are always
related to some religious or spiritual purpose.¹⁴ As
a rule, these are persons that are expected to
employ their power of blessing on others. When
Haberland (1963: 51) aptly describes the *kallačča*
of the Borana as “vornehmstes Stück aller Ritual-
Gegenstände,” this can without doubt be extended
to the whole of the region concerned.¹⁵

The honouring of killers is mentioned in the
sources, but this was the great exception, *not* the
rule.¹⁶ Moreover, even in these cases it remains
unclear whether the person concerned did not al-
ready possess a rank before the act of killing. Us-
ually killers of men and beasts permanently wear a
bracelet as a sign to be recognized by. Killers I
questioned thought that the idea of wearing the
genital trophy (if only as a model) on the forehead
was repulsive. Indeed, tying it (always including
the scrotum and a flap of skin) to one’s wrist as
is usual at sacrificial animal killings is a more
frequently found custom.

13 Maybe recent supporters of the phallus theory saw a
confirmation of their interpretation in Bruce and Russell,
who wrote that this decoration (referring to the present-
day object that resembles the *kallačča*) is put on after a
successful military campaign (Bruce 1790, Atlas pl. 34, 35;
Russell 1833: 158).

14 *Gada* is a cyclical generation-set system with ascend-
ing ranks, in which social and ritual responsibilities are
transmitted.

15 Knutsson (1967: 88) is of the same opinion: “The *kallu*
also possesses a *kalača*, the most respected of all ritual
objects not only among the Macha but among all Galla.”
“Galla” has been replaced today by “Oromo,” because over
the course of time it has become a discriminatory term.

16 Dittmer (1964: 74) was the first to point out that according
to written evidence killers were decorated with the *kallačča*
only in exceptional cases and then always together with the
killing insignia. For the most widely spread killing insignia
in southern Ethiopia, see Braukämper (2001: 224). Inciden-
tally, the *kallačča* does not appear among his examples,
even though he speaks in another context of the “phallic
symbol” (230, 232). For the insignia of killers in Konso, cf.
Nicole Poissonnier (2007).

The following may speak for itself: among
the Gawwada and Gollango, neighbours of the
Konso to the west, and also the Mačča Oromo, for
instance (Bartels 1983: 239), it is the *xallašša* to
which an important role is attributed in peace talks.

3 Ethnographic Sources

In what follows, we will first give a survey of the
meanings attributed to the *kallačča*, as far as they
can be determined from the sources, and this will
help us to define the area in which it is found. For
this purpose, we will make use of the ethnographic
present tense, even if the authors are only able
to describe a limited chronological period. In a
subsequent section (section 7), I will describe more
recent developments, especially those changes that
are due to the influence of the book religions (cf.
Amborn 2007).

For the sake of clarity, the references for inter-
pretations which according to the anthropologists
are attributed to the *kallačča* by southern Ethiopi-
ans, are indicated by capital letters and listed in
the footnote below.¹⁷

- 17 A: Borana: Haberland 1963: 51; Mačča: Bartels 1983: 146.
Among the Guji the *kallačča* got its power from God
(Hinnant 1978: 235).
B: Haberland 1963: 540.
C: Bartels 1983: 141, 145; Knutsson 1967: 89. He also
refers to a myth which has similarities to the story
of Abraham and Isaac: The *kallačča* came down from
heaven on the back of a lamb (89).
D: Amborn 1990: 310; Jensen 1936: 206.
E: Haberland 1963: 479.
F: Haberland 1963: 359.
G: Southern Gonga: Bieber: 1920: 304; 1923: 67, 305;
Lange 1982: 39, 129, 271; Wolayta: Haberland 1965:
278; Janjero: Straube 1963: 337; Amarro: Straube 1963:
110.
H: Dita: Straube 1963: 224; Dizi: Haberland 1993: 169;
Dorze: Straube 1963: 190 (for the *halaka*, two digni-
taries who are elected for a limited period); Gid’eo:
Jensen 1936: 327; Hadiya: Braukämper 1980: 242;
Mačča: Bartels 1983: 140; Knutsson 1967: 88; Oromo:
Haberland 1963: 51 (Borana); 285, 359; (Guji); 540
 (“Schoa-Galla”); Leus 1995: s.v. *kalaca*; Burji-Konso-
Cluster: Amborn 1990: 310, 330; Jensen 1936: 36, 402,
495; 1959: 370; Tadesse 1992: 20; Watson 1998: 201.
I: Baxter 1978: 167; Haberland 1963: 51 (Borana); 285
(Guji); 456; Kassam 1999: 494.
J: Bartels 1983: 140 f. (Mačča); Jensen 1936: 395 (Guji),
402 (D’iraašša and Kusuma); Knutsson 1967: 89 (Mač-
ča).
K: Kept in the roof of a special ceremonial house (Dullay);
Bartels 1983: 140 (Mačča); Haberland 1963: 306, re-
cently worn by *k’allu* of the Guji under a wide-brimmed
hat when travelling.
L: Hallpike 1972: 188 (Konso); Hinnant 1978: 236 (Guji).

All the sources are in agreement that the *kallačča* is a ritual object which, as we have said, is worn or used only on special occasions and only by certain persons. The first *kallačča* is of a supernatural origin: it was given to the Borana and the Mačča by God [A], among the “Shoa Galla” (Tulama and neighbours) it came from heaven [B], among some Mačča groups it came with the lightning [C], while among the Dullay, D’iraašša and Konso it was created with the clan or lineage founders [D] and among the Arsi with the first *gadas* [E]; the Guji found it in a pool [F].

This mythical origin makes it clear that the *kallačča* belongs to the sacred sphere. Thus it is due in the first place to persons with a high socioreligious function. Among peoples with divine rulers, it belongs to the insignia of the ruler. This applies in particular to the southern Gongga (Kafa, Hinnario, Seka), Wolayta, Janjero and Amarro. In some cases they were able to transfer the right to wear the *kallačča* to other persons [G]. Among peoples with egalitarian structures, such as the Dita, Dizi, Dorze, Gid’eo, Hadiya, Mačča-Oromo and other Oromo, and the different ethnic groups of the Burji-Konso cluster, there are high socioreligious dignitaries (“high-priests,” lineage priests, etc.) and these are the persons who possess and use the *kallačča* [H]. All these people wear it at their installation and at certain sacrificial ceremonies, especially animal sacrifices, at sowing and rain ceremonies, and frequently at funeral rites.

The *kallačča* became widespread among large parts of the population in groups with generation group systems (*gada*). This includes in particular those Oromo who have not gone over to centralized institutions. In these cases the *kallačča* is worn at rites de passage and other religious ceremonies by the members of the highest *gada* grades, who fulfil important functions within the ritual life [I]. “[It] is . . . worn at the *gada* culmination ceremonies . . . a primary purpose of *gada* is to enable properly qualified elders to ‘put up’ their *kalaacha* . . .” (Baxter 1978: 167).

In general, the *kallačča* is regarded as a carrier of spiritual power. This can be both a blessing and a threat. Looking at it can be dangerous and can even lead to blindness [J]. This is one reason why it is often kept in a hidden place [K]. Malefactors,

especially those who act against the interests of the community, can be cursed with its help [L]. It is frequently used to make oaths binding, for it can kill liars [M]. It plays an ambivalent role in the settlement of disputes and peace agreements: it sanctions the agreement and poses a threat to anyone who breaks it [N]. Its positive effects are seen especially at sacrificial ceremonies and rites de passage (see above), where it wards off harmful magic. It is remarkable that these explanations of the role of the *kallačča* were also recorded by those researchers who refer to it as phallic. A phallus seems to be capable of an astonishing number of things.

4 Critique

This is an appropriate place to make some basic criticisms of the customary interpretation. The sensual perception of our environment provides material for our thinking, understanding and imagination. If we perceive something that is unfamiliar, we classify it by referring it to what is well-known and familiar. Within our own lifeworld, such processes usually cause no greater problems, especially because we have the familiar linguistic apparatus at our disposal.

However, if an anthropologist is confronted with another lifeworld, the search for and creation of reference points is not quite so smooth. Even if modern anthropology provides many variant interpretations for comparison, the areas to be associated are frequently very far apart. As shown for instance by Quine (1975), this can begin with real, material objects (such as a knife), which according to all appearances have the nature of a universal fact. There is no reliable intercultural reference point, even for what is apparently obvious.¹⁸ Nevertheless, everyone more or less consciously uses their own experience as the basis for comparison, and the perception of the researchers is determined by their own criteria and categories, which also influence their subsequent observations. At least this is true of the initial phase in a foreign environment. “Thus, every perception is preceded by an existing classification scheme containing a certain number of interpretation templates. Laid over the foreign reality, they reproduce nearly always identical details of the same sociocultural stereotypes” (Petermann 2007: 17; my translation). For our context we could add: as long as they remain unreflected.

¹⁸ Quine (1975) discussed by Hornbacher (2005: 70).

M: Amborn 1990: 330 (Konso); Hallpike 1972: 188 (Konso), Amborn and Kellner 1999: s.v. *guwa* (Burji), i.e., a special *kallačča* which is used at oath ceremonies. It can kill liars. Bartels 1983: 141, 144. (Mačča).

N: Bartels 1983: 142, 239 (Mačča).

Here, I may mention an insight that is largely accepted in anthropology, that due to the socio-historical dependence of our own *and* the foreign lifeworlds, what is foreign cannot be measured, but can be interpreted only with *our* standards; for this reason indisputable “objectivity” (as demanded in some scientific disciplines) is excluded in a discipline that deals with living human beings. However, this does not mean that we must give up any attempt at understanding. Neither does this require a metalanguage.¹⁹ It does not harm our understanding if we first make reference to our own conceptions. For no one can lay aside their dependence on their own lifeworld; but this is something the researcher must be aware of.

In this connection, Hans-Georg Gadamer has demanded that the term *Vor-Urteil* (prejudice) be rehabilitated. He argues that since the Enlightenment it has erroneously been used only in its negative sense, as something that is opposed to “reason.” A prejudice is not bad or reprehensible in itself, but only when it has not been sufficiently considered. In order to reach a judgement, I have to start by making a prejudice. Gadamer (1990: ch. II.1) speaks deliberately of *prejudice* and not of *pre-knowledge*, since due to our dependence on history and our position in history, the contents of our consciousness are handed down in the form of opinions (judgements) and not as firmly established knowledge. Thus, it is not a matter of conforming with the traditional scientific requirement of objective knowledge free of any value judgement, but of defining the criteria of one’s own dependence, of consideration, of reflection on one’s own judgements, and of the value status of academic research (Amborn 1993: 138). And this applies incidentally to all academic areas and not only to the humanities. For anthropology in particular it is necessary to separate the attempt to understand from a positivist representation model, and to reflect critically on the above-mentioned influences which affect the thinking of the interpreter and the act of interpretation. A simple example of positivist representation (and, as we will show, uncritical transfer) in the anthropological literature is the *kallačča*: for the (post-Freudian) Western outsider of our times, this object looks like a phallus, *ergo* it is a representation of the phallus

and its symbolic content is, therefore, connected with virility, procreation, and fertility. It seemed like the familiar being mirrored in the strange and unfamiliar. Thus, the foreign reality appears to be compatible with Western rationality and Western ideas.

Conforming to recognized, methodologically sound academic standards does not, of course, make anthropologists immune to misinterpretations. They can never make the whole of the foreign lifeworld their own. The knowledge gained in the course of ethnographic “field” work necessarily remains fragmentary, complex, and in many ways ambiguous. Choices and evaluations are always made and priority given to particular aspects. In our days this is usually done quite deliberately, since it is now accepted that even attempts at a holistic approach only result in a very fragmentary picture, owed to current circumstances, that is then presented in a publication. We are, therefore, faced with the question: who and what determines the choice?

If we accept that personal and social judgements and different cultural tendencies enter into every research project that follows a particular goal, this requires reflection on the particular conditions for its constitution and the related knowledge-guiding interest (*erkenntnisleitendes Interesse*) (Habermas) of the researchers and of the institutions of which they are, as a rule, a part.²⁰ The experiences, syntheses and analyses that are

19 Strang (2006 *passim*), however, opposes the idea that Euro-American paradigms should dominate in anthropology. She believes that the categories used in anthropological theories are cross-cultural and therefore make it possible to create a metalanguage, a cultural Esperanto, the discipline’s *lingua franca*.

20 “Habermas führt die Bedingungen der Wissenschaft (und zwar der Natur- und Humanwissenschaften) auf den ‘Lebenszusammenhang’ zurück, mit dem sie unlösbar verbunden sind. In diesem Kontext nennt er ‘Interessen ... die Grundorientierungen, die an bestimmten fundamentalen Bedingungen der möglichen Reproduktion und Selbstkonstituierung der Menschengattung, nämlich *Arbeit und Interaktion*, haften. Die Grundorientierungen zielen nicht auf die Befriedigung unmittelbarer empirischer Bedürfnisse, sondern auf die Lösung von Systemproblemen überhaupt’ (Habermas 1991: 242). Durch die Interessen und deren Bedingungen werden die Aspekte ausgewählt und festgelegt, unter denen wir Realität erfassen können, was sich nicht linear, sondern im dialektischen Prozeß vollzieht. Erkenntnis und Interesse wachsen in einem gegenseitig vermittelten Verhältnis zusammen, womit zugleich eine Richtung – ein ‘*erkenntnisleitendes Interesse*’ – bezeichnet wird.: ‘Die erkenntnisleitenden Interessen (haften) an den Funktionen eines Ich, das sich in Lernprozessen an seine externen Lebensbedingungen anpaßt; das sich ... in den Kommunikationszusammenhang einer sozialen Lebenswelt einübt; und das im Konflikt zwischen Triebansprüchen und gesellschaftlichen Zwängen eine Identität aufbaut. Diese Leistungen gehen wiederum ein in die produktiven Kräfte die eine Gesellschaft akkumuliert, aus der sich eine Gesellschaft interpretiert; und in (deren) Legitimationen ...’ (Habermas 1968: 162 f.)” (Amborn 1993: 139 f.).

guided by different interests necessarily influence the way in which foreign phenomena are conceived and presented. It must not be overlooked that the existing power relations have a decisive influence on the conditions for the constitution of a research project. In this connection, we may refer to Foucault, who has discussed in detail the relationship between knowledge and power (inter alia: Foucault 1994: passim).

The need to adopt a critical attitude towards their own research was accepted by many scholars and reached a provisional climax in the anthropological *literary turn* (cf. "Writing Culture" as paradigmatic text collection, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Since in extreme cases this led to excessive introspection while the foreign cultures were relegated to the shadows, some people were of the opinion that its advocates had paralyzed their own research (e.g., Eriksen 2006: 31; Strang 2006: 981) and that it was now time to return to "proper" empiricism. However, to stop reflecting critically on one's own claim to hegemony of interpretation, and to again monopolize foreign traditions of knowledge as objects of one's own knowledge would be fatal. Hornbacher (2005) emphasizes the opportunities for modern anthropology that have arisen as a result of the postmodern debate:

"Die Aufgabe selbstkritischer Ethnologie nach *Writing Culture* läßt sich also im Anschluß an Foucaults Kritik ... neu formulieren: Sofern sie das kulturell Fremde nicht nur als Gegenstand eigenen Wissens voraussetzt, sondern als dessen Gegenüber in einem Feld globaler Machtbeziehungen, modifiziert sich nicht nur das Verfahren, sondern auch die Zielvorstellung ethnographischer Forschung ... Die Grunderfahrung der postmodernen Ethnographie, das Verschwinden oder der Verlust des klar definierten ethnographischen 'Objekts,' erscheint ... nicht mehr als Mangel, sondern als Chance zu einer differenzierteren Beschreibung kultureller Differenz ..." (Hornbacher 2005: 150).

If we continue to pursue these ideas, we will find indications that dialogue (rather than mere description) should take up a more privileged position again, particularly in retrospect of postmodernity and its weaknesses. But anyone who wants to conduct a dialogue that is more than simply a conversation must be prepared to acknowledge the Other as an equal and to accept his foreignness. This involves making a revision of one's own conceptions, surrendering one's own knowledge and exchanging it for the foreign knowledge.²¹ But

21 Kurt Wolff (1964: 237) has expressed this aptly as "surrender and catch."

is this virtual participation in a foreign lifeworld enough, when there is no common *Sinnhorizont* (horizon of meaning)? To attain a deeper understanding it is necessary to find, as Habermeyer puts it, "possibilities for action ... which are *common* to the anthropologist and the people from other cultures, ... [in order to] ... transform his virtual participation into a real participation" (Habermeyer 2006: 95; my translation). Anthropologists should try to create fields of action together with their counterpart which serve the interests of both parties (cf. Amborn 1993).²² In the collection of articles, "Reinventing Anthropology," Bob Scholte proposed an epistemological insight to traditional anthropological research, arguing that the necessary conditions for understanding the Other, i.e., for *anthropological understanding*, could be created only in the process of being involved, identification, exchange, and communication (Scholte 1974: esp. p. 436).²³

It is hard to accuse the self-taught Bieber of not having anticipated the critical reflections of later generations. But it should worry us when we find ideas such as those formulated by Bieber being corroborated by later anthropologists and still being passed on today.

It is therefore advisable to examine the preconceptions which led to the association of *kallačča* – phallus – killing – procreation, including the ideological implications involved. If it is correct that research is sociopolitically and historically dependent, I believe that we can include in the further discussion three interconnected thought patterns which I will call projection (*Hineinlegen*), monopolization (*Vereinnahmen*) and disconcertment (*Befremden*).

22 When the Ethiopian Revolution broke out (1974), I saw that there was *necessarily* a common need for discussion and action. Both the indigenous southwestern Ethiopian group (Dullay) and the anthropologist were directly affected, and needed to assess the situation in order to develop action strategies. Questions such as the following had to be clarified: Is the Revolution more than a quarrel restricted to the army and the elite in the capital? But above all: What behaviour is appropriate towards the local police or the big landowners from northern Ethiopia (i.e., from outside)? (At that time, many of them wanted to squeeze as much as possible out of their land, if necessary with violence, before leaving.) To what extent is the existence of one's own group and its value system threatened? The anthropologist was required to contribute to the discussion his knowledge of national and global processes and conditions, and himself learned a great deal about fears, identifications, value systems and the worldview of his counterparts.

23 "I would even go so far to insist that the possibility of communicative interaction is the irreducible epistemological precondition to any anthropological knowledge whatsoever" (Scholte 1974: 440).

I assume that the association of the *kallačča* with the phallus is based on the researchers' first impression, in other words on a spontaneous judgement (or prejudice, see above), as is not unusual for an enlightened European in the 20th century. I refer deliberately to this time period, for it is revealing that around 1800 the Englishman Russell, an observer rooted in the Christian tradition, made a very different association. The *kallačča* he saw in Gondar, the capital of the empire at that time, reminded him of the "horn of the righteous" that is mentioned several times in the Old Testament, and which was also placed on sacrificial altars by the Israelites: "The horn displayed at the forehead will illustrate the allusion made in the Sacred Scripture to the horn of the righteous" (Russell 1833: 158).

Instead of virility and killing, we find here the idea of a symbolic connection with God (to which we will be returning). In the case of later observers and interpreters, however, other components were predominant. Which one of them was not familiar at least discursively with Freud's ideas? We will therefore look at this aspect in more detail.

The revolutionary thing about Freud's theory was that, with the aid of the psychoanalytical methods developed by him, it helped to achieve a breakthrough in accepting the importance of the sexual life of human beings, which for him was the main factor determining their behaviour, experience, and thinking. However, the way in which sexual needs are met is channelled by culturally dependent moral ideas. According to the prevailing sexual morality of his day, there was only a very narrow legitimate area for the sexual activity of respectable citizens: monogamous marriage for the purpose of procreation. Anything going beyond this was subject to sublimation or suppression, which did not prevent these processes and fantasies from finding expression in the "subconscious."²⁴

"It appears likely that the imposition of a cultural sexual morality can pose a threat to the individual's health and ability to cope with life" (vol. IX: 13; my translation).²⁵ Such harmful influences may lead to neuroses, for instance, the cause of which can be revealed by analysis. This works by a me-

thodical decoding of suppressed information, that is information that cannot be expressed freely and consciously, but which is manifested in symbolic ways.

It is this conception of symbols and their meanings, as represented by Freud and the "Freudians" in the first third of the 20th century, which is of interest in our context, for it was obviously this conception on which interpretations of the meaning of the *kallačča* were based.²⁶

According to Freud, the encoded symbolic language refers mainly to the sexual sphere. The symbols of the waking state continue in dreams as symbols of genitality. Yet, because they do not directly correspond to the thing symbolized, such symbols have the effect of disguising the sexual content. This has to be uncovered. Freud and other psychologists at the time found in particular many symbols of the penis. These range from things that have a similar long and upright shape, to sharp penetrating objects such as knives, or things which are capable of becoming longer, or from which water gushes, or which defy gravity, to long animals such as reptiles and fishes and especially snakes.²⁷

Since Freud believed that dreams work with the same symbols that already exist in the subconscious (vol. II: 344), this was for him sufficient justification to accept dream analysis. In his writings on this subject, he developed an interpretation of symbols to which he constantly made additions, removals and corrections (vol. I and vol. II),²⁸ a reason for this was doubtless his insight that the meaning of these symbols can usually only be revealed in the course of a dialogue between the narrator of the dream and the analyst (vol. I: 160). One problem that remains is how the symbols, whose

26 There is, therefore, no need to discuss other theories of symbols here.

27 "Der auffälliger und beiden Geschlechtern interessantere Bestandteil des Genitales, das männliche Glied, findet symbolischen Ersatz erstens durch Dinge, die ihm in der Form ähnlich, also lang und hochragend sind, wie: *Stöcke, Schirme, Stangen, Bäume* und dgl. Ferner durch Gegenstände . . . des In-den-Körper-Eindringens . . . also spitzzige *Waffen* jeder Art, *Messer, Dolche, Lanzen, Säbel*, aber ebenso Schießwaffen: . . . und den durch seine Form so sehr dazu tauglichen *Revolver* . . . Gegenstände, aus denen Wasser fließt . . . Objekte, die einer Verlängerung fähig sind . . . Die merkwürdige Eigenschaft des Gliedes, sich gegen die Schwerkraft aufrichten zu können . . . führt zur Symboldarstellung durch *Luftballone* . . . [Ferner] gewisse *Reptilien* . . . vor allem das berühmte Symbol der *Schlange*" (vol. I: 164 f.). More examples in vol. II: esp. p. 348. See also Index, s.v.: Penis.

28 Hamburger (1995: 78) pointed out the complexity of this topic and the many revisions which Freud carried out.

24 References to Freud in this article are to the "Studienausgabe" (textbook edition). We depart from the usual method of quotation in that we give only the volume number of the "Studienausgabe;" the reason for this is that these volumes include many additions made by Freud over several decades. Mentioning just one year would, therefore, be giving a distorted view.

25 I am grateful to Gert Sonntag for drawing my attention to this article by Freud.

meaning is usually not understood by the dreamer, get out of the subconscious and into the dream. Freud offers various, often contradictory, theories to explain this. At first he assumes that there is a stock of symbols with fixed meanings “that are available” (without the dreamer being aware of this). On the basis of the linguistic research of his time, he thought that there must have been a first language that emerged from mating calls, and which we subconsciously faintly remember (vol. I: 175 f.). It was the time when Freud, under the influence of Stekel’s theory of symbols of 1911, saw parallels with genitals and coitus in almost all dream symbols, however far-fetched these associations might be. On another (later?) occasion, however, he pointed out the ambiguity of the symbols (vol. II: 348). As possible sources he mentions myths, tales, jokes, folksongs, etc. (vol. I: 168), in other words sources that are culture-bound. Very cautiously he expresses the view that symbolic languages may go beyond the limits of language, but admits that he cannot prove this (vol. I: 172). We should, therefore, not attribute to Freud the idea that symbols are universally valid. Universality would also contradict his ideas concerning the development history of the sexual drive and his emphasis on the cultural dependence of sexual morality;²⁹ which in turn is responsible for repression processes and the need for symbols to disguise certain truths. For him, the censoring of dreams through the use of symbols is not just an individual process; it is also and equally a culture-specific interpsychical process.

Here, therefore, Freud was much more differentiated than those cultural scientists who essentialized his sexual symbolism and interpreted and used it as universalistic, by transferring it to foreign life forms.

We should not assume that the significance of the penis in the symbolism of the southern Ethiopians is the same as in the Western world. Since in southern Ethiopia men – but not women! – went about naked until recent times (and even today occasionally go about naked in their own compound and when working in their fields in the plains), the ideas associated with the constantly visible penis are certainly different.

With the direct association of the *kallačča* with the phallus, European researchers thought they had understood what this object symbolized. The familiar seemed to be mirrored in the foreign. The

outer appearance of the *kallačča*, and its supposed identification with the genital trophy, seemed to confirm its interpretation as a sign of procreation and killing.

Such an interpretation allowed the researchers to fit a foreign phenomenon into their own thought pattern. Although there was obviously a certain fascination, and the researchers were not without some understanding, nevertheless it is clear that they were rather disconcerted by this different way of thinking, supposedly rooted in the instinctive (see above Haberland; Hallpike). But to assume a directly associative symbolization process is to suggest a primitive equation, which implies unreflected thinking in other people.³⁰ Thus an epistemological and in the final analysis ontological line of distinction is drawn between the enlightened Western scholar and the southern Ethiopian.

The unwillingness of Western observers to see the symbolism of the *kallačča* in the broader context of the social and religious world of the southern Ethiopians led to alienation in the sense of creating otherness.

A judgement is made from the point of view of the observer, but not from the point of view of those who are entitled to wear the *kallačča*. Yet anthropology sees itself as a discipline which tries to understand other people from the point of view of their own cultural reason. Bieber did make some effort to do this, and included many vernacular texts in his report; and Haberland also quoted the Borana. Only, the former translated the indigenous texts in accordance with his own preconceived ideas, and Haberland assumed that the Borana were ignorant. But at least Bieber’s texts can be checked today, which makes criticism possible.

The only critic to have examined the question of interpretation of the *kallačča* in detail is Kunz Dittmer (1964) in the Festschrift for A. E. Jensen. He emphasized contradictions in Bieber’s explanations and translations. Dittmer also tried to refute Bieber’s arguments on the basis of formal criteria (comparing the *kallačča* with headdresses and crowns in the Sudan and West Africa), but he was not always fortunate with his examples. In the meantime, however, that is in the years between 1930 and 1960, the superficially plausible symbolism had been generally accepted, and Dittmer remained unheard – particularly, because he had fallen out of grace with some of his more influential German colleagues. And outside Germany, in

²⁹ Vol. IX: 20. Even when he argues in a correspondingly evolutionist manner in respect of cultural differences in his time.

³⁰ In Hallpike’s opinion the Konso have no capacity for abstraction (2002: 7–11).

the realm of Anglo-Saxon anthropology, German culture historians did not receive much attention in these years anyway.

Bartels is also gently critical of Haberland's and Baxter's statements: "E. Haberland speaks without a shadow of doubt always of a phallic ornament ... Baxter ... assured me personally that the Arsi Oromo gave him only a phallic interpretation. The form of this kallacha is, indeed, evidently phallic. For the rest, a symbol can have many associations" (Bartels 1983: 146 note 27).³¹

The interpretative sciences are in no way free of topoi. Another example may be mentioned here. It is of interest because it shows some structural parallels, too. Psychology also influenced and shaped the scholarly perspective in the following example: the connection that had been assumed between shamanism and the so-called Arctic hysteria. In shamanism in the Arctic and Subarctic regions, ecstasy is one of many characteristics. The shaman has the power to send his soul into the beyond and make contact with helper-spirits. During their seances shamans enter a state of being which exceeds the life functions of other people. He or she may stiffen or speak in an incomprehensible language. Now, psychologists have observed and analyzed a disease virulent in the Arctic regions which leads in the sick person to hysterical attacks with hectic movements or trembling, glossolalia, echololia, etc. (Faust 2007). Indeed, some of the phenomena resemble on the surface shamanistic phenomena. Since shamans are frequently sensitive or psychologically instable, it seemed obvious to see the origin of shamanism in Arctic neurosis. But there is an essential difference: the illness comes on suddenly and unwillingly, while shamans fall into a trance willingly at a predetermined time and can control their ecstasy. In consequence they must learn their techniques. As Vajda (1964: 268) has pointed out, shamanism is a cultural phenomena. "Wesentlich ist für uns, daß die ekstatischen Szenen ... feste Bestandteile der Gesamtkultur von bestimmten Völkern sind ...: wir finden sie eingebaut in den nach ... Regeln ablaufenden Ritus und bezogen auf den jeweils gültigen, das Weltbild prägenden Mythos" (271).

31 In her article on rites de passage among the Borana, Kassam (1999: 494) offers the following version: "... the initiands put on their sacred ornaments, the phallic-shaped head ornament (*kallacca*) ... *Kallacca* designates the broad-rimmed base of certain flowers, like that of the *kalala* vine ... The ornament thus symbolically connects the human and vegetal reproductive cycles."

5 Whose knowledge?

To put straight some of the unquestioned conceptions, it seems important to me that the persons concerned should be heard and taken seriously. As mentioned, Bieber noted down vernacular texts and Haberland documented the Borana statements relating to the *kallačča*, but the former used his own existing terminology (*membrum virile*) for the translation in a way that is clearly wrong, and the latter refused to accept the Borana views on the matter.

Other anthropologists have also documented various meanings of the *kallačča*, but it seems as though they hear but not do not listen. The topoi they had in their mind was too strong.

I want to order the statements of southern Ethiopians about the *kallačča* into those made by, firstly, wearers, secondly, producers, and thirdly, knowing traditionalists. The group of those entitled to wear it consists of persons of a high socioreligious status. Primarily, these are sacred dignitaries connected with the society's ancestors, such as lineage or clan elders who trace their descent directly to the mythical birth of their primal ancestor; furthermore, this category includes important dignitaries of the generation-grading systems who carry out religious duties.³²

It is worth paying attention to the statements of the *kalla*, one of the two most important religious leaders of the Konso.³³ For the *kalla* the *xallašša* is a sacred object inherited from the ancestors, used only in rituals. The heritage factor primarily refers to the spiritual power connected with the *xallašša*, whereas the material object itself is of minor importance. So much so that it may be reproduced if it gets shabby. In such a case his counsellors select a smith of an impeccable way of life, who *must not* be a killer. The new *xallašša* is consecrated in a sacrificial rite with sheep's blood.

When the *kalla* wears it on his forehead, a direct connection between him and the supernatural world, meaning the ancestors and *waaqa* ("God"), is established. What he then said was, in his own words: "Nothing is above me, nothing [i.e., no living being] is between me and *waaqa*." This is why he can pronounce blessings with the help of the *xallašša*, but also curse those who have done wrong. Losing a *xallašša* charged with power

32 In some societies, killers of enemies or big game, as I have already mentioned, may be entitled to wear the *kallačča*.

33 Interviews carried out in December 2000 and January 2003. Dawit Jiraso, whose name as a *poqalla* was *kalla*, died in 2004.

would mean the loss of all of his spiritual potential and would be tantamount to his death.³⁴

Indeed, back in 1980 I met a ritual leader in Dihina (Dullay region) whose insignia had been destroyed by the *zemacha* shortly after the Revolution.³⁵ He explained his nervous and odd behaviour to me as the result of losing his mind on account of that awful act.³⁶

The *kalla* of Konso vehemently rejected the conception of the *xallašša* as a phallic symbol. Then he laughed about such a foolish idea, stating that “formerly the men went about naked, so what sense would it have made to have another penis and [of all places] wear it on the head. To have two penises might be a dream of the *farenji*.” That somebody would conceive of tying something representing a male genital trophy to his forehead, was for him a mistaken idea. In view of the openness with which male sexuality is discussed, it would be difficult to interpret this statement as an expression of coy prudishness.

Among the D’iraasša, too, it is the connection a ritual leader is able to establish between the human sphere and the other world by means of the *xallašša* that matters. When a *d’aama* dies he is laid in a large open basket-like coffin and “crowned” with a *xallašša*. When he is brought for interment, the sun (which is associated with the supreme being) emits a pencil of rays which are reflected by the *xallašša*.³⁷ These rays turn into (real) bolts of lightning which strike nearby. Thus, only people with extraordinary spiritual power will dare to go near a dead *d’aama* (Amborn 1990: 330).

Of the Amarro, who recognize a sky-god (*wonto*) as *deus otiosus*, Straube reports that in exceptional events *wonto*, via the *kaalača*, can constitute a numinous unit with the *kaati* (“king”) (Straube 1963: 106).³⁸

34 Haberland (1963: 306) reports a similar explanation by the Guji.

35 In the *zemacha* (National Development Campaign) of 1974–75, students were sent to the countryside to “teach” the idea of the Revolution and the uselessness of religion. In the south many indigenous shrines and holy places were destroyed but as far as I know no churches.

36 Since that time he suffered – as he said – from “sleeping sickness” (probably sudden fainting fits). He also goes out of mind totally for several days.

37 It is possible that this has its origin in a natural phenomenon which I observed several times: on the hillside between the compound of the *d’aama* and his place of burial, St. Elmo’s Fire is occasionally seen during the rainy season, as well as bolts of lightning stretching from the ground to the clouds.

38 In respect of the connection between *kallačča* and the supreme being, see also the note below on the initiands among the Daasaneč.

I also visited the “impeccable” smiths. After some time I wanted to hear from them what they, as artisans who produced the insignia, associated the *kallačča* with. I waited in vain for the “answer” a phallus. When I suggested it, all I got was laughter. The smiths of Keera opined: “Only stupid people believe that, Amhara or Farenji, who have no idea of anything.” Then, turning serious, they explained that the *kallačča* was a strong and dangerous thing, and those who deliberately told a lie (like equating it with the phallus) when looking at its tip would die shortly afterwards.

The very production process is conceived of as a ritual, ensuring the transmission of an ancestral *kallačča*’s power to a newly made one, with the artisans acting as mediators. During this time, the smiths cover their workshop with large cotton blankets so that no unauthorized person may observe or disturb what is going on inside (Amborn 1990: 324). Something comparable applies to all smiths of the Burji-Konso cluster who, by the way, also provide the Borana and other ethnic groups with *kallačča*.³⁹ From the production of wax for the casting mould to the finishing touches, they live in a kind of seclusion, refraining strictly from eating and drinking with others.

Now, these statements on the sacred character of the *kallačča* and the rejection of a phallus interpretation agree fully with those made by the third group, that is, persons who know about ritual life.

These are many, especially in those ethnic groups which practise the *gada* system. They have the biggest number, since every man is entitled to it when he reaches a certain *gada* grade. Here, even the younger ones know about its meaning, which they learn from their fathers or grandfathers.

They all see it as a powerful, sacred instrument which ultimately originates from and has its source of power in the supernatural. We should mention that, according to Bartels (1983: 146), for the Mačča Oromo the *kallačča* is a gift of God and “a help to maintain social order.”

6 *Contra phallum*

I do not deny that the meaning of the *kallačča* may have varied in time and place and that other

39 When Hallpike (1972: 149) writes that the Konso get their *xallačča* from the Borana, this shows that he only made a very superficial study of the matter. The pastoralist Borana do not have any smiths of their own. I was told by Borana that they had a symbiotic relationship with the Konso in respect of ritual objects.

meanings are possible. But, since we do not know much about the dynamics involved in the transformation of symbols along with their socioreligious context, resulting in new meanings, it seems to me equally important to acknowledge that in recent times no southern Ethiopian man of knowledge has associated the *kallačča* with the phallus. I am concerned here exclusively with the current situation, for this is what the interpreters are referring to.

The statements of southern Ethiopians and critical study of the sources should give rise to serious doubts as regards the phallus association. But the topos has been very persistent. Some anthropologists, when referring to the *kallačča*, seem to have used the expression “phallic symbol” as an academically established term without examining its value. Those, however, who took a closer look at the matter, ultimately contented themselves with external observation. They wanted to understand as well, but they obviously found it difficult to share the indigenous mind’s view of reality. As a consequence, they kept projecting their own models of thought into the others’ thinking. Of course, an indigenous explanation or interpretation is not necessarily correct, but it would have been worthwhile to reflect upon it.⁴⁰ Referring to the context of killing and fathering (which exists among some ethnic groups), they came close to the sacred meaning of the *kallačča*, but the phallus they had in mind blocked their view of more far-reaching considerations.

To use the terms of representation theory, we can say critically of the phallus interpretation that the *kallačča* is not pure *imitatio* of a human organ, but *mimesis* in the sense of a reflective and abstract creation (*poiesis*). We will return to this idea again, but first we will look at the changes that have affected the worldview of those people for whom the *kallačča* was “the most respected of all ritual objects.”

7 Modernity versus Tradition

Up to now we have not mentioned changes. The most drastic change in recent times was brought about without doubt by the conquest of present-day southern Ethiopia and its integration into the

northern Ethiopian empire at the end of the 19th century. As the external political, economic, and demographic factors that had an impact on these peoples during that time are well-documented, I will not discuss them here.⁴¹ Among the various effects of conquest by a strongly hierarchical Christian society on the social structure, let us mention just two: the introduction of a forced labour system (*gabbar*), which ruined not only the economy but also the social order, and the fact that the sacred rulers lost their political power. The most serious case was Kafa, which put up a successful military resistance for many years. The king later died as a prisoner, bringing about the end of the kingdom there.⁴² However, many other earlier rulers were integrated into the imperial order in accordance with the system of indirect rule (cf. Donham 2002b).

It is in the past fifteen years that dramatic changes have occurred in the socioreligious sphere. Of course, there were changes before, but both in imperial times and under the Italian occupation, and even under the rule of the *Derg*, many societies in the south successfully resisted attempts to influence their worldview from the outside.

Thus, for example, western missions in Konso up to 1990 had only relatively little success.

After this date the situation changed rapidly. Even the Orthodox Church has recently carried out mission work.⁴³ Today the majority of the Konso, at least in the younger generation, are Christians.⁴⁴

In the 1990s, under the new federal order, indigenous officials were appointed at the local centres of power. In principle, this was a good thing. But these “educated people” were trained in modern institutions. Many of them have learned to look down on their own “backward” culture with shame and disdain. The effect of this change in relations between people and state authorities is that criticism and pressure against deep-rooted cultural conceptions and values now no longer come from *outside* alone but from *inside* the society (Amborn 2002: 93).

40 In this respect the present study can also be regarded (in the widest sense) as part of an emic/etic discussion. For one of the latest articles on this subject, see Strang (2006), where the relation between anthropological concepts and indigenous knowledge is discussed.

41 E.g. Amborn 1988: passim (concerning the Burji-Konso-cluster); Braukämper 1980: ch. 3.6–3.8; Donham 2002a: passim; Haberland 1963: 27.

42 Bieber’s informants talked about this event as belonging to the recent past.

43 Whereas earlier the Orthodox Church did no mission work at all in most of the southern regions, apart from occasional, purely formal, if coercive, proselytizing.

44 Watson 1998: ch. III, 8, 3. Shako Otto (2004: passim) extensively states his indigenous view on the influence of Protestant missionary work in Konso. He divides their activities into three historical phases and gives his particular attention to their negative attitude towards Konso culture.

In other parts of southern Ethiopia, like Burji or Hadiya, the Islamic influence has been predominant. According to Braukämper (2002: 175), in Hadiya the old belief system of the *Fandaano* religion no longer exists.

Consequently, with such drastic changes in religious beliefs, the *kallačča* has lost its significance for large parts of the society. When people turned to book religions, traditional certainties were eroded. Without its socioreligious context, the *kallačča* is no longer an item charged with spiritual power and is reduced to a mere object.

Occasionally among the proselytes one can still observe respect for the religious values of the old people, for example, in the statement of a Mačča Oromo speaking to Lambert Bartels: “Our fathers had the *kallacha*, we have the cross” (1983: 253).

But for many Ethiopians the *kallačča* has become a mere material thing and, even worse, meets with disapproval. Christian or Muslim fundamentalists consider it simply devil’s work, to be trodden on. In 2003, I saw boys playing football with a *kallačča* in the Konso administrative town (*katama*) of Karatti.⁴⁵ A sense of shame regarding their forefathers’ values has by now turned into the shameless handling of things that were sacred. When your own life design is being exposed and seen as valueless, what should prevent you from selling such an old-fashioned symbol, and the more effective you are with it, the more successful you become in transforming the once-respected values into the symbolism of the world the potential customer lives in. So it happened that the natives who learned English also learned of books in which they could read about themselves – how they had been in the old days.

Many an educated Konso who is not very knowledgeable about his own people’s traditions, has read Hallpike’s monograph.⁴⁶ Thus, anthropological “facts” have trickled through in a way that can be conjectured but is hard to reconstruct.⁴⁷ Since tourists find their way to southern Ethiopia, some “anthropological standards” have found their way into tourist guides. Thus, an interpretation which is nothing more than a meagrely substantiated speculation has attained wide distribution and succeeded in dissolving the boundary between religious emblem and phallic

symbol, with the unexpected result that, in an act of reversal, tradition has been newly invented by the anthropological reading: finally, the *kallačča* has become what Europeans always said it had been. The story has come full circle. In Konso, native tourist guides wishing to lead tourists to *waaka* (memorial statue) sites attract them with the promise of showing them the “totems with a penis on the head.” Also the mini-*waaka* which are now produced for the tourist market show the *kallačča* unmistakably as a penis, as can be seen from the explicit addition of the *ostium urethrae externum*. The myth of the phallic headdress is wonderfully suited to satisfying tourist wishes for exotic souvenirs.

But the inherited belief system is not yet completely dead. There are exceptions and people have also found ways to combine their tradition and modernity. For example, when Burji from different diasporas come together for the all-Burji meetings, the first prayers of the opening ceremony are performed by their respected, hereditary religious dignitaries in the traditional form, notwithstanding that they may be Christians or Muslims. After that, priests from the other religious communities join in.⁴⁸

Nor has the *kallačča* as a sacred object disappeared everywhere. In spring 2007, when the Guji performed their *gada* transition ceremony, every man who had a *kallačča* and who was entitled to wear it, wore it proudly (personal communication Tadesse Berisso). This also applies to the installation of a lineage elder. It can be seen even at official political events in the Ethiopian capital: The *abba gada* of the Borana always wears his *kallačča* when blessing the attendants at the opening ceremony of the Oromiya parliament in Addis Ababa (Godana Biyo Tufa, M.P. and Lemmu Megerssa, M.P., personal communication October 2007).⁴⁹

The following was observed by Yvan Houtteman in 1996 among the Daasaneč. During the *dimi*, the main rite de passage for girls before marriage, they wear on their forehead an emblem which is called *kallatč* and which consists of a funnel-like object like the bottom of a flashlight battery or the narrow neck of a plastic bottle. This emblem, Daasaneč say, refers to the connection of the candidates with *waag* (the supreme being).

45 It must be noted here that this is the administrative centre of Konso. Village boys would not have done this at that time.

46 This is also true of many Oromo who get *their* information from Haberland’s “Galla Süd-Äthiopiens.”

47 These days, anthropological terms like “culture,” “clan,” and many others are part of the vocabulary of educated southern Ethiopians.

48 Audio tape by Woche Guyo in Marsabit, Kenya.

49 Oromiya is a “regional state” within the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The *abba gada* is the designated leader with ritual obligations for an eight-year period of the *gada* (generation-grading set).

Obviously the battery and the narrow neck of a bottle are derivations of the metallic *kallačča* (personal communication).

In some other places, the dignitaries keep the *kallačča* out of the public eye, which, as we have mentioned, is not contradictory to tradition at all. Where connections to the traditional context have not yet been totally severed, the conduct of people towards this mystical object and the value concepts associated with it are at least ambivalent and depend on the actual situation. Even when common people only have a dim reminiscence of the *kallačča*, in situations of grave crisis, such as a drought, it may become important again.

8 Noema

There is no doubt that some parts of the southern Ethiopian population today see the *kallačča* as a materialized representation of the phallus, but it can confidently be assumed that these are people who have become alienated from their own spiritual roots. Of interest in this case is the meaning that is attributed to the *kallačča* by those for whom it is, as Knutsson writes, “the most respected of all ritual objects” (see above); only from them can we expect insights into a foreign way of thinking.

With their reference to fertility, the phallus-interpreters touched on the religious sphere, but in doing so they restricted their view to one aspect that was strongly oriented towards this world. The importance of this aspect cannot be denied, for the fertility of man, animals, and crops is an important topic among the people. However, this aspect is not isolated but is part of a bigger frame of reference. Let us take a brief look at this.

There is no uniform conception of God in the area concerned. Conceptions also differ because of the varying degrees of Christian and Islamic influence over the centuries, the new ideas being linked to indigenous ideas of a creator God. But even where these influences were strong, the deity still has features of a supreme solar *deus otiosus* who created the world but left his uncompleted creation largely in the hands of humankind. As in many other parts of Africa, this deity has no particular cult of his own. Among many ethnic groups even up to recent times, direct personal relationships with the deity were rare or were restricted to a few religious dignitaries, and even then only during communal ceremonies (Amborn 2001: 43).

The idea of the soul offers a key to understanding the conception of man (Amborn 2001: passim).

According to this model, the human soul consists of several parts which are integrated to different degrees in the present and in the flow of past and future generations. When death occurs, the breath soul leaves the body, but the state after cessation of breathing is understood as a slow sliding away. In the final funeral rites (often a long time after the burial), the excursion soul (which may take the form of a spider among the Dullay; Amborn 2001: 48) is transformed into an ancestral soul. During this tense time, the *kallačča* is worn.

The conception of the soul is closely connected with the clan/lineage concept. The lineage in the ideal sense is a corporate unit which in addition to the living also includes the ancestors and the unborn. The lineage elders are considered to be the direct descendants of the first people, whom they represent paradigmatically.⁵⁰ They symbolize the unbroken sequence from the beginning to the future. In a spiritual sense, each individual is a part of a socially unified body in which the not-yet-born, the living, and the ancestors are united (Amborn 2002: 86).

The generation-grading system (*gada*) virtually summated the genealogical lines of descent, since membership was defined through the fathers and grandfathers. The *gada* system was set up by the ancestors, and so they come to the sacred grounds on the occasion of big ceremonies which concern the whole of the people and the whole land (Amborn 2001: 51).⁵¹

Rituals are the interfaces where people have contact with the spiritual sphere, and it is also here that the *kallačča* appears.

By comparing the statements about their insignia made by the dignitaries in Konso, D’iraašša, and Amarro, and by the initiands among the Daasaneč, we can assume that this emblem is to be attributed to that area of symbolic action and thought which concern man’s relationships with the supernatural. Specific mediators such as the *kallačča* function as agents that are able to create such relationships. It is as if it becomes a medium of communication. The longing for such a connection is expressed reciprocally in the widespread complex of myths that tells how heaven and earth were separated in primeval times. The overcoming of this separation is very clearly expressed in the idea of an iron world-pillar set up by God on a

50 In societies in which one lineage has asserted itself successfully over the others, this role is attributed to the central authority (“king”).

51 In particular Baxter (1978) has pointed out the importance of the *gada* system as a ritual system, finding many successors.

hill among the Janjero (Yem), which once formed a connection between heaven and earth. Until recently, the high priest carried out sacrifices annually at the stump of the fallen pillar.⁵² The spider as a thread-spinning soul carrier also belongs to this context.⁵³

The desire to be close to heaven is also reflected by the siting of sacrificial grounds on mountains, for instance, or by the compounds of the most important priestly dignitaries (*poqalla*) which among the Konso are on mountain tops, isolated from the other settlements (Demeulenaere 2005: ch. VI.9).

In the light of these facts, Russell's association of the Old Testament horn with the *kallačča* two hundred years ago came closer to its meaning than its interpretation as a phallus, for the horns on the corners of the Israelite altars obviously symbolized a link with God.

Of course the material communication media are not isolated, but elements among others which, in interdependence with other partial areas, form a complex system (cf. Gladigow 1990: 226). In our context this means the public performances of rituals, whether initiations, rites to celebrate becoming an ancestor, first sowing rites or sacrifices, which are always carried out by priestly dignitaries "in the presence" of their insignia. These dignitaries may wear the *kallačča* on their foreheads or carry it hidden on their bodies, or they may have anointed it in the ceremonial house in their compound. It is also a part of the system that all those present are actively involved, for instance by eating the sacrificial meal or being smeared with the blood of the sacrificial animal; or on special occasions there is an answer from the supernatural communication partner, expressed through natural phenomena such as earthquakes, or, as in the example from D'iraašša, through bolts of lightning that proceed from the *kallačča* just at the moment when the components of the soul leave the body of the *d'aama* and seek connection with the solar deity. The discharging of lightning is a sign that the free components of the soul have successfully made contact.

Regarding a new interpretation the following can be said: instead of being a symbol of virility, the *kallačča* might be described as a spiritual communicative mediator which is able to bundle

positive and negative "cosmic" (for want of a better word) energies. It is therefore dangerous, and only qualified persons may have contact with it. The *kallačča* symbolizes a link between the human and the extrahuman, supernatural world; its function is to open up this connection between different spheres.

The ideas which I have discussed in this article are intended to do away once and for all with an old established topos in research on Ethiopia. But beyond this, I hope they will serve as an encouragement to examine and reflect upon more closely even those facts which appear to be quite clear. In conclusion I would like to mention again two pitfalls which easily beset anthropologists: the first is the danger of transferring one's own, supposedly universal convictions to other societies, and the other is that of resting in the shadow of the definitional power of the West. These are traps into which researchers have often fallen, as in the case of Arctic hysteria. Disproving a topos does not necessarily require new fieldwork; frequently it is enough to re-read the sources critically, and above all self-critically, "against the grain" as it were, in order to free the described phenomena concerned from their narrow interpretation, and to find where emic voices might be hidden which alone can give us an extended view of the phenomena within their particular frame of reference.

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52 According to tradition, the pillar was knocked down after too many people fell from it in the attempt to climb up to heaven. This sacred site was destroyed by the northern Ethiopian occupants (Straube 1963: 258). – The "ladder to heaven" is a frequent motive in African mythology, e.g., Baumann (1936: 149).

53 See for instance Baumann (1936: esp. 140 note 1).

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