

The Meritorious Complex

A Research Focus of the Frobenius Institute in Ethiopia

Ulrich BRAUKÄMPER

Apart from a political mission that failed in Eritrea in 1915, Leo Frobenius, the founder of the institute that was named after him in 1946, was not active in Northeast Africa. He preserved a vivid interest in this region, however, and initiated the expedition of his collaborators Adolf Jensen, Hellmut Wohlenberg and Alf Bayrle to Southern Ethiopia in 1934–35 (Jensen and Wohlenberg 1936). After World War II, Jensen, who by then had become director of the institute, resumed the tradition of ethnological field research in the area with two more expeditions, in 1950–52 and 1954–56. He was accompanied by Eike Haberland, Willy Schulz-Weidner, Elisabeth Pauli, Helmut Straube and Wolfgang Kuls. When Haberland, in turn, became director he undertook three further campaigns, in 1967, 1970–71 and 1972–74, accompanied by Siegfried Seyfarth, Werner Lange and Ulrich Braukämper. Apart from documenting hitherto undocumented ethnic groups, these researchers became particularly fascinated by a cultural phenomenon that they labelled the ‘meritorious complex’ (*Verdienstwesen*). According to their observations this consisted of three major strands: (1) The ‘killing system’, a detailed scale of honorary rewards for the killing of male human adversaries and/or dangerous animals; (2) ‘feasts of merit’, festivities occasioned by the possession of a certain number of cattle (or, in the case of some peasant peoples, of material resources of a more general character,) which were usually associated with the award of honorary positions and titles; (3) conspicuous funeral ceremonies associated with memorial monuments erected for the glory of ‘heroes’ and noblemen who had achieved the first two criteria. For comparison, phenomena of this type were also investigated and analysed in other parts of the world, for example in South-

east Asia, where they were associated with practices of headhunting and feasts of merit involving water buffaloes in particular.

To some extent the meritorious complex represented a kind of pan-Ethiopian pattern, but its essential characteristics were mainly manifested in Southern Ethiopia, particularly among the Oromo, the Highland East Cushitic-speaking and the Omotic-speaking peoples. Its



Fig. 1: During the mourning ceremony of the Sidaama the *dori* tree is erected to represent a deceased dignitary 1954/55

features tended to be more prominent in egalitarian than in monarchic societies. By the middle of the twentieth century, major elements such as big-game hunting and traditional warfare became obsolete and the *per capita* property in cattle as a basic prerequisite for feasts of merit started dwindling dramatically. In the 1970s, however, the basic features of the complex could still be documented comprehensively by a systematic recording of oral traditions as well as by an analysis of ethical concepts and an inspection of various types of monuments.

The meritorious complex was primarily a male-oriented matter, in which females usually had a passive role. The ideal of the courageous, wise, enterprising and rich man was idealized to such an extent that it became a core element of the societies associated with the complex. For an ordinary man the most common way to gain 'merit' was by killing human enemies or dangerous species of big game such as elephants, lions, leopards, rhinoceroses and buffaloes. In order to prove his deed, the killer took trophies from the men or animals he had killed: genital organs from the dead men he had slain or tails, tusks and skins from the animals. The details of honouring 'heroes' differed from society to society, but they followed a basic pattern. Upon the return of successful hunters and warriors, they presented their trophies to their groups and received numerous rewards such as butter and livestock from their families, as well as symbols of dignity such as rings of brass, silver or ivory from the political and religious leaders. They were offered opulent banquets and performances and were expected to praise themselves in extemporized songs and had henceforth to observe particular behavioural patterns and taboos. The societies of the meritorious complex possessed different systems of 'counting-up of killings'. Among the Hadiyya, for example, a slain man counted as one point, a lion three and an elephant nine points. The number nine generally carried the meaning of 'much' or 'numberless', and when it was reached by a person in whatever combination of 'killing units' a new series of counting started. Aspects of the killing system had been described in old Ethiopian chronicles, but the Austrian researcher Phillip Paulitschke provided the first detailed analysis on the Somali, Afar and Eastern Oromo at the end of the nineteenth century. Although killing for honour and



Fig. 2: Man wearing a headband with phallic symbol that marks him as killer, Wäläyitta 1954/55

the removal of genital organs for trophies were condemned by Islam as 'barbaric' and later rigorously banned by the modern Ethiopian state, these practices have occasionally been resumed during times of war in the second half of the twentieth century.

The killing system can be conceived as a hypertrophied element of masculine ethos which, at the same time, demanded orgies of self-glorification. Females usually did not play more than a passive role in it, but they enjoyed the advanced status of their husbands or male relatives. Behind this killing system lay the concept of an inseparable unity between the destruction and the recreation of life. According to the prevailing norms, only a man who had destroyed life, was able to procreate new valuable life. A man was expected to kill enemies and dangerous big game to prove his capacity to beget children. This implied that a male who wanted to marry was expected to have accomplished one of the killing deeds beforehand. However normative this prerequisite may have been, the majority of the male population did not fulfil it in practice. The



Fig. 3: Man with killing insignia, Wälāyṭṭa 1954/55

Oromo, for example, although continuously engaged in war-like actions demanded by their age grade order (*gadaa*), mainly expanded by incorporating other people through a non-violent process of assimilation (*gudfachcha*).

Feasts of merit are the second pillar of the meritorious complex. They are rooted in the concept that an individual can improve his status by demonstrating his property (cattle in particular) and organizing a ceremonial banquet for a large number of guests. In order to transfer material capital into social capital, it was imperative not only to accumulate goods, but also to redistribute them. According to the prevailing ethical concepts,

wealth always necessitated generosity and greedy hoarding was rejected as abhorrent. Among the Oromo, Hadiyya and Sidaama societies of Southern Ethiopia, where the economy was based on livestock-breeding, the cultural patterns were marked by what has been labelled 'cattle complex', a phenomenon in which value concepts vastly exceeded the material importance of the animal and which involved the ethical and religious spheres. Cattle were the favourite means of paying bride price and blood wealth, of settling court cases, of performing rituals and offering sacrifices to the supernatural world. In such societies the prevailing chance of achieving a higher status was – and to a certain extent still is – provided by the amount of cattle property. When the herd of an individual owner amounted to 100 head of cattle above the age of



Fig. 4: Memorial for a deceased killer, Hadiyya 1970/71

calves, the owner was entitled to organize a big feast, which lasted for several days. The owner received insignia and a title of dignity, his relatives were blessed by the participants who sprinkled milk, mead and the blood of sacrificed animals on them as well as on the herd in the cattle kraal. This was conceived as a rite of fertility in order to make his descendants and his livestock multiply and prosper. A young cow was chased into the bush, to carry away with it any potential threat to the herd, and usually taken by the potters who provided various services in the context of the ceremonies. The ceremonies that the host had to perform differed in the various ethnic groups of Southern Ethiopia. For example, he might have to dip into a hole filled with milk or wear the rumen of a slaughtered bull as a kind of cloak. His wife or wives were honoured by putting strings of a slaughtered bull's stomach fat around their necks. After the feast the host had to distribute a part of his herd among his heirs and friends. Such feasts of merit could be repeated much more sumptuously for growing numbers of cattle: 200, 300, 500 and finally 1000. Detailed reports about such events were col-



Fig. 5: Singers praising a deceased man during a mourning ceremony, Hadiyya, 1972–1974

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lected, for example, by Haberland for the Wälāytta and the Boorana-, Gujji- and Arsi-Oromo (Haberland 1957; 1963) and by Braukämper for the Hadiyya and Kambaata (Braukämper 2002; 2014). Unlike other features of the meritorious complex the tradition of cattle feasts still existed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In Southern Ethiopia feasts of merit were commonly associated with cattle ownership and other types of animal could not be substituted for this particular purpose. However, among some peoples with fewer livestock but who practised an intensive type of agriculture and were additionally engaged in weaving cotton textiles, feasts of this type could be based on material resources of a more common type such as wealth in land, agricultural yield, modern means of transport and cash. The Dorze, an egalitarian society of cultivators, for example, had developed a complicated system for acquiring the rank of a *halaka* – a position occupied by two men simultaneously installed as leaders for a limited time. In principle, every free-born male person among the Dorze could

achieve this highly prestigious status and function, if he was rich enough to invest his capital, agricultural products and money to organize the necessary set of conspicuous feasts. Additionally, the candidates were expected to display the rhetorical skills and intelligence that would enable them to perform successfully as a *halaka*. Data on the *halaka* system were first investigated and depicted by Helmut Straube (1963).

The third major component of the societies belonging to the meritorious complex was the prominence of funeral customs and memorials for the dead. To a notable extent it was these memorials that first attracted Jensen's attention to Southern Ethiopia, offering as they did the chance to



Fig. 6: Stone stelae at Mount Fela, Gide'o, 1934–35



Fig. 7: Drawing of one stone stela at Mount Fela, Gide'o by Alf Bayrle, 1934–35

explore both contemporary societies and throw light on the practices of earlier peoples. The peoples of the meritorious complex erected stone stelae or various anthropomorphic and zoomorphic wooden sculptures on the burial places of important people in order to memorialize their deeds.

The more recent of these monuments could be explored in their wider ethnographic context and, at the same time, seemed to offer an insight into the interpretation of spectacular archaeological remains. The rituals performed at the funerals of a 'big' person, a dignitary of an advanced rank and/or a killer, were spectacular among the adherents of the traditional folk religions and they have still preserved some of their former splendour today. Hundreds or thousands of people come to express their condolences and huge quantities of food provided by the relatives of the deceased are redistributed among the guests. Weapons, insignia (and currently photographs too) of the dead person are ostentatiously displayed. Music, dances and equestrian feats are performed in his honour and his deeds are praised in various types of songs. But all these exciting and colourful acts are over in a few days and more durable monuments serve to memorialize his glory for a longer time.

The sepulchres of important Arsi-Oromo, which consist of flat decorated steles surrounding the burial place, contain certain codes of information about the deceased person's military and hunting successes and possibly about the number of his wives, children and livestock. Grave-stones with figurative sculptures and paintings are still widespread despite the rejection of this custom by orthodox Muslims and Protestants. The decorations of the tombs may sometimes exhibit parallels to pre-historic stone monuments, for example of Ṭəya in Gurageland. Lithic steles in a phallic shape, which are widespread in Southern Ethiopia, are associated in the popular traditions of the present inhabitants with Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, nicknamed Grañ (the Lefthander), a Muslim conqueror from the sultanate of ʿAdal in the sixteenth century. Verifying or falsifying historical connections is definitely beyond the capacity of ethnographers, however. Among the Konso and some related groups, such as the Gato, wooden grave effigies (*waka*) manifest such a unique artistic tradition in North-Eastern Africa that they are the subject of international endeavours to rescue them as outstanding examples of

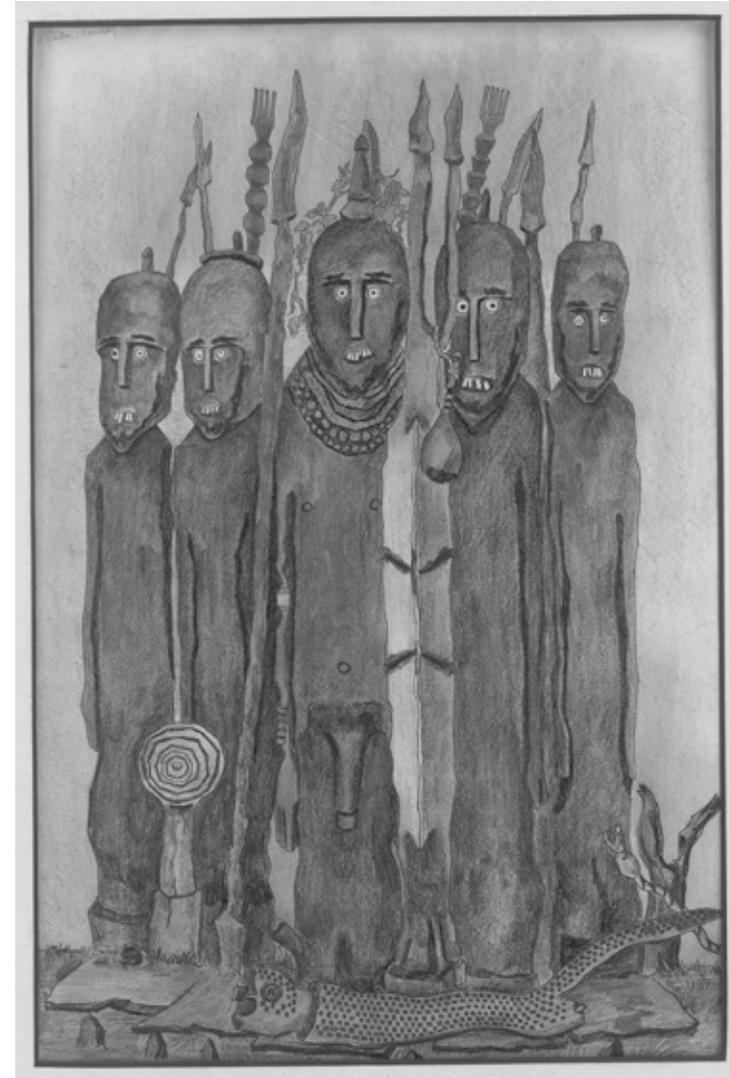


Fig. 8: Konso *waka*, wooden stelae symbolizing a deceased killer (middle) with four wives and a leopard that he killed (front) (painting by Alf Bayrle 1934–35)

national cultural heritage (see Poissonnier 2009). Groups of figures are usually composed as ensembles showing the 'hero' wearing insignia, such as his phallic headdress, in the centre, surrounded by his wives and his slain enemies. These sculptures are in turn encircled by bundles of spears seized from his enemies and by imitations of trophies and sculptures of killed animals. The agricultural wealth of the deceased is shown by a circle of big stones, symbolizing the terraced land he owned.

The question of why the meritorious complex became a particular focus of fieldwork and theoretical considerations for protagonists of the school of culture history of the Frobenius Institute can briefly be answered as follows. Adolf Jensen and his disciples were particularly interested in the origins of cultural achievements such as the invention of plant domestication and agriculture. In other parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia, they had come across myths that revealed an inseparable connection between ritual sacrifices and death on the one hand and cultural innovations such as crop cultivation on the other hand. Although items of mythology are not of central importance in the culture of Ethiopian people, the phenomena that later became known as the meritorious complex suggested promising empirical data for comprehensive theories of cultural evolution. For example, a basic idea lingering behind 'killing for honour' was the concept of an inseparable unity between the destruction and the recreation of life. Megalithic monuments, another basic feature of the complex, were eagerly investigated all over the world between the 1930s and 1960s and thus splendidly fitted into one of the major paradigms of anthropologists focused on culture history. Finally, the meritorious complex stressed the male ideas of braveness, chivalrous pride, generosity and the 'big man' in general. In the male-dominated subject of cultural anthropology – in those days much more than today – these factors have obviously fascinated numerous researchers. For the German anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century the meritorious complex could help them compensate for particular historical and political deficits they felt themselves exposed to; as losers of two world wars and 'have-nots' in the colonial arena they were eager to alleviate their feeling of inferiority by emphasising the great and meritorious personality.

Thus, in the context of a modern post-colonial discourse three particular factors have to be critically considered and analysed when trying to evaluate the research tradition of the Frobenius Institute scholars in Ethiopia from the 1930s to the early 1970s: a focus on cultural history employing an extensive comparative approach, a decidedly male-oriented perspective and a bias derived from specific national-historical conditions.

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