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Marriage, Residential Movement and Cultural Innovation of Women in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada Cluster

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*Marriage, Residential Movement and Cultural Innovation
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Jean Lydall

Shada Alma:

“What hunt does a girl have? A girl’s hunt is when she marries. (laugh)
Otherwise does she go hunting? She just stays at home with her mother.”

(Two girls go hunting, LYDALL and HEAD 1991)

Duka Aike: “A girl’s hunt is when she marries. That’s when I’ll go hunting.”

(The women who smile, LYDALL and HEAD 1990)

Introduction: marriage and the movement of women

The idea for this paper arose from a seemingly simple fact: as in most patrilineal societies, it is the women in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster who move upon marriage, while men stay put with their parents (i.e. there is patrilocal residence upon marriage). Seen another way, parents keep their sons with them, and send their daughters away. In the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster, parents prefer to keep their sons with them because, as one young father put it:

“The reason I want many boys is the goats and the cattle. One can go after the cattle, another after the goats, one to the field, and another to the beehives. Boys set a person up within one day. Girls, growing up, eventually join their husbands.”

(Sago in *Duka’s Dilemma*, LYDALL and STRECKER 2001)

Parents can control the marriages of their sons by determining when they can be initiated, and by negotiating whom they can marry.

In Hamar, for example, where herding livestock is very important, parents often delay a son’s marriage until he is well into his thirties, thus forcing him to remain dependent on them, and making him available to herd their livestock in the distant grazing areas (see LYDALL 2005). But, if parents keep their sons with them, then they have to let their daughters move away in marriage. When a girl is born she is called a ‘guest’ because, it is said, her rightful home is that of the man who will eventually marry her. After growing up in her parents’ home she moves to her parents-in-law’s place, where, even if her husband dies, she will establish a new home, building a house, collecting goats and cattle, making a field and bearing children. Upon marriage a woman joins another family with its own specific clan traditions. She also moves to a residential area

that is in most cases new to her, and quite often far away from her natal home. The new residential area has its own distinctive environment and climate, and its own particular local community composition.

Residential movement and women as agents of cultural innovation

If marriage in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster entails residential movement for women, does this not mean that women take the ideas, knowledge and skills they have gained in childhood, and adapt them to those they learn in their adult home? Could the movement of women upon marriage, therefore, turn women into agents of cultural innovation and channels of cultural diffusion?

Let me explore these questions by considering the cases of several women I have come to know well, and whose lives I have followed over the past 42 years.

Aikenda, who grew up in Banna, was married to Abara, son of Berimba, a great Hamar spokesman who, by the time Aikenda moved as a bride to his homestead in Kadja, in the Hamar Mountains, had accumulated so many cattle, goats and donkeys, that his wives and daughters-in-law didn't have to cultivate fields of sorghum, but could simply acquire grain and flour from bond friends, or in exchange for livestock. In her new home Aikenda had only to put down green fodder, sweep up the dung of the animals, and smoke the milk containers. These were tasks Aikenda rarely had to do in her natal home, an area of Banna where the land was not suitable for goats, but was excellent for agriculture. The high bank of dung and earth around Berimba's cattle enclosure, which remains a distinctive feature in Kadja today, is attributed to Aikenda's great effort. But after Berimba died, the family moved down to Dambaiti where Aikenda's agricultural knowledge and skill, and her expertise in brewing beer, were much sought-after and came into their own. No one else in the family had so much knowledge and skill. Ginonda, for example, who was married to Berimba's eldest son, had grown up herding cattle and goats, and had no idea how to make a field, let alone to brew beer. Aikenda was able to give Ginonda guidance, which she also passed on to her daughters and nieces, and many years later to Birinda.

Like Ginonda, Birinda grew up in the south of Hamar where there was no land suitable for cultivation, just vast grazing areas ideal for livestock. Birinda moved to Dambaiti bringing great proficiency in cattle and goat herding, but having no idea about agriculture. Birinda's husband died before she became a bride, and then Birinda was brought in as a widow-bride by Aikenda, who introduced her to cultivating a field and brewing beer. To this day, Birinda's agricultural efforts are very improvised in comparison to Aikenda's, but her management of livestock far excels that of Aikenda.

Duka is the daughter of Aike, another son of Berimba. After being born in Dambaiti, Duka moved with her mother, aunts and grandmother up to Kadja in the Hamar Mountains. Here the women made fields like they had begun to do in Dambaiti, and Duka learnt to chase away birds and weed the sorghum. Duka's uncle Baali spent much of his youth at his mother's brother's homestead in an area close to Buska, up in the highest part of the Hamar Mountains. There he saw how settlers from northern Ethiopian were

using oxen to plough their fields. In the rest of the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster people cultivated their fields using hoes and digging sticks, and planted the seeds using long poles to dig the holes. Back at his mother's place Baali carved a yoke and plough, and trained oxen to pull the plough. As a teenager, Duka gave her uncle a helping hand and learnt how to drive the oxen. After her mother died in 1979, Duka moved to Dambaiti with her unmarried brothers and sisters, her step-mother and her father. After a while her father sent his second wife back to Kadja to look after his aging mother. Duka then became mistress of the house and a field that she helped her brother plough.

Ten years later, by the time she was brought to her husband's home in Bashada, Duka was accomplished in ploughing as well as all aspects of cultivating, harvesting and storing sorghum, preparing food and drink, entertaining guests, helping the neighbours, and generally running a household. She brought all these skills and knowledge to her new home in Bashada, and being one of the first women to learn to plough in Hamar, she became the first woman ever to plough in Bashada. Could one not say that Duka acted as an agent of cultural change (women ploughing with oxen had never been practiced in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster before) and a channel for cultural diffusion (by bringing her newly acquired skill with her to her husband's home area)? Duka's husband, Sago, claims to have introduced ploughing to Bashada, having learnt it from his cousins in Dambaiti, who in turn learnt it from Duka's uncles and brother. Sago also acquired plough oxen from Duka's father as a marriage gift. In this respect, Duka could be seen as a channel for cultural diffusion.

When upon marriage a woman moves to a different ecological area, does she not facilitate the movement of scarce assets between the homes of her parents and her parents-in-law? For example, if a girl moves from an area where sorghum cultivation is the main source of subsistence, to one where animal husbandry is most important, could she act as a conduit for bringing sorghum to her husband's home, and livestock to her parents' home? Let us listen to the advice that Sagonda gave to her niece, Gaadi, on the eve of her being brought to her husband's home:

"If your mother-in-law beats you do not run back to your father's homestead. If your husband beats you, do not come back. Just sweep up the goat droppings, just put down the green fodder, and work well. Fetch water, and stay in the house. The Hamar are not sorghum cultivators, do you understand, so just smoke the milk containers and hang them up early at the fence. Milk is their sorghum, and when they drink milk they will not ask for sorghum food. But should they ask for sorghum food, then come here to Alma's (Gaadi's father's) home, and you will find a granary which is full, and you can scoop out sorghum and load it onto donkeys, and bring it to their house. Do not cultivate a field. If it's said, "cultivate a field", answer: "I will not cultivate. I will not cultivate". Then, taking a whipping wand and a milking pot, put on sandals and herd the goats. Go and herd the cattle. Only if your husband says: "I haven't eaten any sorghum food. Bring me sorghum food to eat," then, coming early next day to your father's homestead, you will be able to load two, three donkeys with sorghum. Then there's my field. I, the niece of Sula! If Alma sends you up to me, I will throw plenty of sorghum

in front of you. You won't have to go further afield. I will be there. That's all".
(Recorded for *Two girls go hunting*, LYDALL and HEAD 1991).

Residential movement and the preservation of traditions

The above cases show that residential movement upon marriage can lead women to be agents of cultural change and diffusion, and to act as channels for the movement of assets. But isn't the opposite also true? Doesn't residential movement have the effect of forcing women to conform to the standards and customs of the new home and local community? Aren't women constrained by traditions that quash their innovative spirit?

The movement of a woman to a new home poses questions of authority and control. In her parents' home a girl grows up under the loving care and authority of her parents, whom she normally respects and obeys. There are no ritual restrictions on an unmarried girl. Once her marriage has been sealed, however, she has to start observing ritual restrictions such as not milking cows, and other taboos that are specific to her husband's clan. In her new home her parents-in-law, especially her mother-in-law, may assert their authority over her by enforcing or manipulating ritual prohibitions and prescriptions. The bride is obliged to observe these ritual restrictions if she wishes to bear legitimate children. The movement of a woman to her marital home, therefore, subjects her to ritual constraints. In time, when she in turn becomes a mother-in-law, she too will assert and impose ritual constraints on her own daughters-in-law (see LYDALL 2005).

When a bride reaches her new home, she is completely dependent on the new family and has to accept their habits and fit in to their ways, whatever they might be. This is well known to the senior women who have already been through the same experience themselves, and who then give advice to a girl when she departs to her marital home. When, for example, Ginonda gave advice to her niece, Duka, she told her to make the best of whatever comes:

"I have given you. Having brought you up, now go and when you reach that place, if the homestead is slovenly, or if it is haughty, if they make you put your hand on your eyes (i.e. make you cry), or if they push you aside, you should say: "I have eyes, I have ears, I have feet. I'll take on any bitter task." Here you learnt how to serve food. Here you learnt how to put things away. Whether your mother-in-law will dominate, or your sisters-in-law will dominate, I don't know. But let me hear only good things said about you" (Ginonda in *Two girls go hunting*, LYDALL and HEAD 1991).

Movement upon marriage also means that a bride has to get to know and relate to all sorts of new people: her husband's brothers and sisters, the age-mates and friends of her husband and those of her father-in-law, the female friends and neighbours of her mother-in-law, and the distant kinsmen and bond friends who come to visit the family. Sagonda, giving advice to her niece, Gaadi, recommended self control and dissociation as ways of accepting the demands of her in-laws and their friends, and establishing good relations with them:

“The one who runs away to her father’s home is bad. The one who runs away when her husband beats her is bad. The one who insults her father-in-law and runs away is bad. Staying put, control your feelings. Do you understand? Control yourself and sweep up the goat droppings, put down the green fodder for the kids, the fodder for the calves, and take the sandals of the age-mates. If your husband’s age-mates come to whip you, say: “I am the daughter of spokesman Alma, I will not run away from the age-mates.” And closing your eyes you will go and take their guns, and take their sandals, and carry them to the house. If you place the things in the house, and put on coffee, then the age-mates will tease and laugh with you, and when they come again tomorrow they won’t whip you. They will call you ‘age-mate’, and call you ‘hunting friend’. They will not whip you if you work well. If your father-in-law’s age-mates come and you say, “Who are those people?” they will be cross with you, saying, “My son’s wife will not look at me and address me well. She doesn’t put on coffee for me.” They will be angry. What you should say is: “*Åke* (polite address for senior man),” and they will answer: “Yes.” Lay out the cowhides for them, put on coffee for them, give them tobacco. When they come you should take their sandals and their guns, and you should laugh and not get upset and hang your head. You are the child of a successful man. You should look upwards. Don’t look down like this. A person who looks like that is a dog. The child of someone who hasn’t collected cattle, who hasn’t collected goats, who hasn’t put up beehives, looks down at the ground. The child of someone who has collected cattle, who has collected goats, who has put up beehives, looks upwards like this, and looking up will take the guns, and when they whip you with whipping wands you should say: “Where did that whip crack? Did it crack on my skin? Where did it crack?” When you say this, the beating will be as if you are drinking the milk of your father’s cattle, as if you are eating honey. So take their things and put them in the house, and put on coffee. Don’t let the age-mates curse you. Don’t let your father-in-law’s age-mates curse you. If your father-in-law’s age-mates bless you, saying: “Abundance, abundance, abundance! and if your husband’s age-mates bless you, then you will give birth to children” (See *Two girls go hunting*, LYDALL and HEAD 1991).

Residential movement and the challenge to create a great homestead

“Girls are like castor-oil seeds (*aati* - *Ricinus communis*), which, when cast from the ripened pod, establish new plants wherever they land”. (A Hamar saying)

Although movement upon marriage constrains a woman, doesn’t it also offer her an opportunity to prove her worth, and, even in the face of all odds, to build up a homestead, filling it with children and livestock? Doesn’t the move free her from her relationship to her parents as a dependant child, and allow her to become a mother of her own children and mistress of her own home? Doesn’t residential movement upon marriage also involve a moving up in status? Before the move she was a dependant child with no rights to bear children, collect livestock or found a home. After the move she is a married woman with these rights. The moving up in status continues as she gives

birth to children and later becomes a mother-in-law and finally a grandmother. To begin with, of course, her mother-in-law tries to assert her authority over her and constrain her through rituals, but when she begins to collect her own livestock, to bear her own children and to build her own house, a woman progressively gains independence and authority, and becomes more and more mistress of her own destiny.

A typical theme in the advice given to brides before they leave their parents' home is that they should work hard and build up a fine and flourishing homestead, filling it up with livestock and children. Let's consider the advice Baldambe told me his son would give his sister Duka on the day of her departure:

"Duka, here am I, the one who brought you up. I wonder if you will cause insult to your father? I wonder if you will cause insult to me, becoming a hyena (i.e. being mean), becoming a feeble baboon (i.e. doing no work). I have brought you up. You have hands. You know how to clean the milk containers. You know how to sweep up the goat droppings. You know how to cultivate the fields. You know how to serve the bowl to the guests. Having served your younger brothers and sisters, having milked the cows, haven't you served your father? Having cultivated the field, haven't you fed me? Haven't you gone to the initiation rites singing your song? Now, in the same way, go to the home of Ditro's son, and heat up the homestead there. Here is your mother-in-law. Don't say your mother-in-law is bad. Don't say of your mother-in-law that she is feeble. Don't say of your husband, that he is no good. Compliment him, rather, and help him. How about Duka, the mother of Omalle, wife of the old man Kolmo. Now was it he who made the goat enclosure? No, it was Duka who did it. It was Duka who raised the embankment of the cattle kraal. It was Duka who made the name of the homestead famous. Now what has Kolmo ever done? She had the misfortune to marry him, but she got up and said: "I will make Kolmo great". In the same way, you should make your homestead great" (Recorded for *Two girls go hunting*, LYDALL and HEAD 1991).

When Baldambe gave his own advice to Duka, he didn't urge her to work hard, but simply gave her a blessing, saying that good fortune should go with her:

"May the goat droppings, which you swept up, go with you (i.e. may your good fortune go with you). Now your mother-in-law is the child of a person (as opposed to an enemy). The other day it was your mother's brother and your uncle who gave you (agreed to your marriage), they are the ones who gave you. May the rains go with you, may the fortune of your father's goats go with you, may the fortune of your father's cattle go with you. Fill up the cattle pond (*dalba* the lower end of the cattle enclosure where rain water collects and cow dung accumulates, and which symbolizes good fortune) and the crevices (i.e. collect cattle and bear children). May bad things go beyond Mount Saka. You are a *barjo* baboon (i.e. like a baboon, you will prosper and reproduce without difficulty)".

Residential movement after marriage

Marriage is not the only reason for residential movement in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster. The vicissitudes of life may drive a family to move residence. For example, my friend Banda moved away from Dambaiti when one of her daughters died there. She hoped the new place would bring her better fortune. Another woman moved away after people started accusing her of having the evil eye. Bokonda moved away in fear when Galeba (Daasanech) came to Dambaiti and killed her sister's son and co-wife – she moved close to the town of Dimeka where she thought the police would provide some protection. Galte moved when her field grew exhausted and she needed to find another place to make a new field. All these women were widows. Women with living husbands may also move residence, as did Hailanda who moved with her husband Alma to Dambaiti. Alma undertook the move primarily because a good friend of his had settled in Dambaiti, and via him he had access to land for cultivation.

When a woman, whether with a living husband or as a widow, moves to a new area and community, does she not face similar problems and challenges as a woman who moves for the first time to her husband's home? A woman needs to be accepted by the new community, and to achieve this she has to fit in. The new community may try to control her through imposing ritual constraints, and she will use all her creative energy to find ways of making herself attractive and indispensable to the new community.

In memory of Duka's mother-in-law, Sagonda, who unfortunately died earlier on in 2012, I would like to retell a story Sagonda once told me about her husband's grandmother, Kaddi's widow, who fled from Banna to Bashada in order to save her only son. It is a story that was told to Sagonda by her father-in-law, and which she surely embellished in her own way for her own ends, and which I now reproduce and summarise for my purposes.

Sagonda's story began with Kaddi, her husband's grandfather. Kaddi was found as a small child in the bush where his parents had died of hunger. That was in the wake of the Ethiopian conquest when there was a great famine, and most people in Banna had fled to Galeba (Dassanech), Kara or Aari in order to survive. Kaddi's parents had been collecting wild fruits and gum in the bush and feeding their little son, who was about 7 or 8 years old at the time.

In Sagonda's words:

“Then a woman called Ubanda, saying to herself: “I will feed my children with *kaddi* leaves. Going into the bush, let me collect *kaddi* leaves which I will wash and bring to them”. So putting a sling over her shoulder she went into the bush. When she came, he was eating gum: “Fellow! – Yes. – Please come here”. And he came to her. “Whose son are you? What's your father's name? – My father's name is Gino. – Gino's father, who was he? – Gäto. – Eh, where are your mother and father? – My father and mother, falling asleep, have stopped getting up. They wouldn't get up so I went through the bush eating gum. They are over there in the bush, lying on their backs. The hyenas have eaten them. – What's your name? – My name is Garsho. – Eh, let's go”. She cut *kaddi* leaves and put them in her

sling, and she led him to her homestead. She cooked the *kaddi* leaves and gave him some to eat. Early next morning she shaved his head. “Children, elders, I have collected a child. When I asked his father’s name he said Gino. – What is your grandfather’s name – Gäto”. He is one of us, a Banne. “What is your father’s clan? – Gasi, he said. Breaking *kaddi* leaves I collected him, so now call him Kaddi. Abandoning the name his mother and father gave him, call him Kaddi”. So everyone called out “Kaddi! – Yes”. She called, “Kaddiyo, the one I collected in the bush. Kaddiyo, Atcha (Fallen Leaf) – Yes”.

Ubanda brought up the boy, who herded the cattle and goats for her husband. When he was old enough they initiated him, Ubanda having grown sorghum and brewed beer. They had to find kinsmen for him. In Banna it is the mother’s brother who gives the *boqo* stick, without which a youth cannot start preparing for his initiation. They found distant patrilineal relatives of Kaddi’s mother, who agreed to give him the *boqo*. The family of Ubanda’s husband declared that Kaddi belonged to their clan, and that they would sew on the *banzi* (phallus) and draw out the *garo* calf for him, and a girl of theirs would provide the goatskin cape. Kaddi was then married to a Banna girl, and together they established a homestead in the south of Banna, collecting animals and bearing two sons and two daughters. One daughter died, the other ran off with a *Gal* (highland Ethiopian). Eventually Kaddi died. At that time, the ritual leader of the Banna, *Bitta Dore*, was taking children and selling them to the *Gal* (northern Ethiopians). Kaddi’s younger son was taken away on the pretext was that the boy’s upper teeth had come through before the lower ones. Fearing for her remaining son, Ditto, Kaddi’s widow decided to flee to Bashada.

In Sagonda’s words:

“On the way an Aari man, fleeing from the north, met her and became her lover. In Bashada she cultivated a field, and the sorghum ripened. Being a Banna child, she brewed beer. At that time Bashada women didn’t know how to brew beer! By now my father-in-law was grown up. He fetched honey for his mother; set traps and killed wild animals for his mother. She, a married woman, was like a man. “Hey, we will chase that Aari man away! She has moved to our country. Chasing the Aari man away, let a man from here marry her (i.e. be her lover), we will find a partner for her in this country”. So the people talked and talked, and then they beat her Aari lover. “We will not kill you, go to your country”. Then Yärangole, Haila, was given to her: “She is an accomplished woman. She brews beer and cultivates fields!”

Kaddi’s widow then initiated her son Ditto, brewing beer and sending him to her family in Banna to get the *boqo* stick. Once he was initiated, Ditto was married to Ailo, the daughter of a Bashada spokesman called Gurdo. It was Haila, his mother’s Bashada lover, who bore the staffs to negotiate the marriage. Ditto’s first wife gave birth to six children before dying after having an abortion. The eldest son was Bargar, who eventually married Sagonda. When Ditto finally died, Bargar brought him back to Banna to bury him. But before he himself died, Bargar asked to be buried in Bashada, the place

where his after-birth had been buried, and where he had become *pe edi* – a countryman, a person who belongs to the place.

Kaddi's widow, whose name Sagonda never mentions, simply referring to her as *aka* (my grandmother), moved to Bashada and gained acceptance there by proving herself a competent farmer and brewer of beer. Sagonda says that at that time no one in Bashada knew how to brew beer. This was probably an exaggeration, and what she meant was that Kaddi's widow excelled at brewing beer, not unlike Sagonda herself. Wasn't growing sorghum and brewing beer her way of getting herself accepted in the new community? Then she grew sorghum and brewed beer again in order to initiate her son. Necessity had made her move to Bashada, but once she was there she needed to be accepted by the new community. Furthermore she was driven by her own desire to create a prosperous home for her son and her descendants. Could it not be that such needs and desires, which are part and parcel of movement, gave her the strength to excel in the cultivation of sorghum and the brewing of beer? And wasn't it due to her efforts that her son was able to marry a local girl, and her grandson, Bargar, was subsequently fully accepted as a Bashada man?

Conclusion

In this essay, I posed several questions arising from the fact that women in the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster move, upon marriage, to a new home. I looked at several cases to show how, due to this movement, women bring new knowledge and skills to their marital home, act as agents of cultural innovation, as channels of cultural diffusion, as well as conduits for the movement of assets. In contrast to these creative aspects, I then drew attention to how movement upon marriage also puts constraints on women, who are obliged to obey their in-laws and conform to local expectations. Turning back to the positive side, I noted that movement upon marriage involves a moving up in status, and provides impetus for women to prove themselves and become mistresses of their own destiny. Finally, I considered the movement of women subsequent to marriage, looking in particular at the case of Kaddi's widow who fled with her son to Bashada, and by excelling in sorghum cultivation and beer brewing gained acceptance from the local residents, and married her son to the daughter of a local spokesman.

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