

## Culture, Contact, and Identity

### The Multiethnic Composition of the Bashada of Southern Ethiopia

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Let the cattle fill the country  
Goats shall fill the country  
Humans shall be born  
Together with their coffee-bowls, people shall move to Bashada  
They shall move over from Banna  
They shall move over from Hamar  
From all countries they shall move over to us  
Cattle shall come from there  
Goats shall move over from there  
They shall make us many...

(blessing by Bashada ritual leaders)

#### 1. Introduction

When I began fieldwork among the Bashada in 1994, I knew that they were nearly identical in language and culture with the neighboring Hamar and Banna. For outsiders, the Bashada were often considered as part of the Hamar, whereas local administrators considered them as a regional subgroup of Hamar. Even the Bashada themselves when talking to me often referred to their language as “Hamar *apho*,” to their traditions as “Hamar *dambi*,” and to themselves as “Hamar.”

Thus I was surprised that throughout my research I discovered differences between the Hamar and the Bashada which were actually stressed by the Bashada. When, for example, I learned about the *arsis*, a unique part of the Bashada initiation rite for males (which is otherwise nearly identical to the Hamar rite), I was proudly told that this rite was Bashada-*gente* (Bashada property) that it was *Bashada imbà* (purely Bashada), and that neither the Hamar nor the Banna knew about it.<sup>1</sup> The more I proceeded in my research, the more the Bashada people seemed to understand that I was interested in their own specific cultural traits. They thus began to reveal their own customs to me in detail, even though, due to their recent geographical and cultural approximation to the Hamar, they had started to abandon some of them.

In addition, I noticed that, depending on the situation or social context, the Bashada stressed different aspects of their identity. Whereas they sometimes identified

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<sup>1</sup> The term *imba* literally means “father.”. It is also used to express ownership, (*Woxa ka sa imba ai-ne?* Who is the owner of this bull?), competence and responsibility (*Delk ka sa imba kissi ne!* He is the one who is responsible for this talk!), and to emphasize historical deepness: when the Bashada speak of *imba peno*, „land of the fathers,” or *eyke peno*, “land of forefathers,” they either allude to those regions where their ancestors have settled first, or to Bashada land proper as opposed to other peoples’ lands. With an accentuation on the final syllable, the term *imba* expresses originality, pureness, and realness of something, so that when a rite is called Bashada *imbà*, it means that it is considered „pure Bashada,” and has not been adopted from any other group.

strongly with the Hamar, and also the Banna, in other cases, they emphasized shared aspects of their history and identity with the Kara, the Aari or the Nyangatom. During one ritual occasion they expressed the fact that their group actually consists of migrants from many different ethnic groups who have settled (and continue to settle) in the area that is called Bashada today. Finally, there were also situations in which the Bashada clearly distanced themselves from other groups and emphasized that they were Bashada and nothing else.<sup>2</sup>

### **1.1. The Bashada and Their Neighbors**

The Bashada are a small group who live in close proximity with fifteen other ethnic groups in the South Omo Administrative Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State, Ethiopia. The population of Bashada is estimated at about 2500.<sup>3</sup> In the ethnographic literature, the Bashada have only been briefly mentioned by a few authors. As they form a kind of cultural unit with their closest neighbors (namely, the Hamar, Banna and Kara), with whom they share a common language and most rituals and institutions, freely intermarry, and warfare is prohibited (Lydall 1976:393), they were often considered to be a branch or subdivision of the Kara of the lower Omo valley (Cerulli 1956:52; von Höhnel 1892 II:169) or the Hamar. Only some authors have explicitly acknowledged the Bashada as an independent group (Jensen 1959; Lydall & Strecker 1979a, 1979b), or have marked them on their maps (Bryan 1945; Cerulli 1956). Still, in many recent publications on southern Ethiopia, they have been neither mentioned in texts nor located on maps (see for example Ayalew 1997; Tadesse 2005; Tornay 2001). The Bashada themselves explicitly claim their own, independent identity – at least in certain contexts. In others, they identify with one or several of their neighbors, and neither claim nor insist on ethnic differences. In the following paper I will explain on what basis the differing identities are claimed and articulated.

### **1.2. Ethnic Identity and Flexible Boundaries**

As it appears, the Bashada are an interesting example of a group with blurred and variable boundaries (Barth 1969, Schlee 1989:1), a widespread phenomenon among the groups in southern Ethiopia and also northern Kenya (Schlee 1989, 2001; Abbink 1991, 2000; Wood 2005; Spear & Waller 1993). One explanation for such unclear and flexible boundaries could be, according to Kopytoff (1987), that they, like most African societies, actually consist of “bits and pieces – human and cultural – of existing societies” (Kopytoff 1987), i.e. that they actually have come to existence and expanded by settling in no-man's land and by incorporating strangers.

In his theory, Kopytoff closely connects the question of genesis and history of a group and its identity and relation with ethnic neighbors. In the introduction to his

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<sup>2</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES) at Trondheim, Norway (2.-6.7.2007)

<sup>3</sup> According to an official census carried out by local administration in Dimeka, the population of Bashada was 2559 in the year 2003 (pers. comm. Sintayu Garshu, November 2006).

book, "The African Frontier" (1987), he states that traditional African societies periodically eject individuals, often social outsiders. These outsiders then move into "frontier areas," i.e. "areas between inhabited regions, polities or societies." These areas have either no policies or very weak ones. Kopytoff calls this an "institutional vacuum." This allows the newcomers to establish a new polity, usually based on ideas about social or political organization brought from their home region. First settlers often attract followers, either from the same or different regions or societies. Authority is usually given to the "first comer(s)," whose arrival is often idealized and subject to mythical stories about the genesis of the group. The late-comers attribute their precedents with special power (Kopytoff:22ff).

Kopytoff's theory seems to fit well the historical accounts about their origin and the contemporary expressions of Bashada identity, and possibly also for many other groups in South Omo. Like the Bashada, most of them claim to be composed of migrants from neighboring groups, such as the Hamar (Lydall/Strecker 1979b:2), the Aari (Gebre 1995:14; Jensen 1959:51), the Maale (ibid:278), the Arbore (Ayalew 1997:144), the Mursi (Turton 1994:18) and the Bodi (Fukui 1994:38f, 43).

Kopytoff calls societies consisting of "bits and pieces," i.e. consisting of members of different origin with different cultural practices, "ethnically ambiguous societies." Their ambiguity seems to allow the Bashada to play with their identity, i.e. to downplay, emphasize or exaggerate one or the other aspect of their history, according to their interest in a given situation.

## **2. Ethnogenesis and Multiethnic Composition**

### **2.1. Bashada Stories about Their Origin**

There exist different stories about the arrival of the first settlers in Bashada. The most well known says that the first Bashada came from the East, from Arbore. When they reached the area where they live today, they found an uninhabited land. The only evidence of former settlements were some graves with remarkably high stones erected on them.<sup>4</sup> At that time, the country was hot and people were desperately looking for water. One day, as the story goes, one of their cows disappeared for several days, and when it returned it had obviously drunk water. When, after a day or so, the cow left the herd again, some men followed it and thus eventually found the Omo River where the animal had gone to drink. When the men returned to their group and reported that they had found water, part of the group decided to move on and settle next to the river. These people, from then on, were called *the Kara*, or "those who eat fish."<sup>5</sup> Others were too exhausted to reach the river and decided to

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<sup>4</sup> These stones are said to belong to the Korre or Koore, who had formerly lived in that area. From there they moved east, to Hamar, and then disappeared. The Korre are probably identical with the Samburu (Strecker 1976:7f).

<sup>5</sup> The term *kara* means „fish.“ While the Bashada say that the Kara people got their name because they are fish-eaters, the Kara deny that and claim that the two terms are pronounced differently (pers. comm. Girke, August 2006).

stay behind in the hilly region. They were from then on called *the Bashada*, meaning “the exhausted ones,” i.e. “those who stayed behind.”

These first settlers are said to have been the younger brother of the Hamar *bitta* (ritual leader) and his family. Their clan name in Hamar had been Gatta, but as soon as they arrived in Bashada, the *bitta's* brother decided to rename his clan and thus they became Bitole.

First Bitole entered this land. After them came Warran, those who were later called Shako. Next came Gasi. These three became *pen sa imba*, “fathers of the land.” After them all the others followed and filled the country. They came one by one. One came liking the land, another one, liking it. They begot children, and as they had brought their clanship with them, the country filled. (Interview with Belaini, 7th of August 2006)

The institution of the *bitta* exists in Bashada, Hamar and Banna. The *bitta's* task is to perform rituals to ensure the safety and prosperity of all inhabitants of his land. His office is hereditary and the *bitta* of all three groups are said to be descendants of the same *babi*-family from Aari:<sup>6</sup> The first Bashada *bitta*, Zinka, had left Hamar after a conflict with his elder brother, and then moved South, to Arbore, together with his family. After some time in Arbore, they moved on into uninhabited land, where the Zinka established himself as the first ritual leader.<sup>7</sup>

This story resembles that of the Hamar myth of origin. Their first *bitta*, Banki Maro, is also said to have been the first to settle in their region, from where he later attracted people from all directions:

He, the *bitta*, made fire, and seeing this fire people came, many from Ari, others from Male, others from Tsamai, others from Konso, others from Kara, others from Bume and others from Ale which lies beyond Konso. Many came from Ale.

The *bitta* was the first to make fire in Hamar and he said:

“I am the *bitta*, the owner of the land am I, the first to take hold of the land, may you be my dependents, may you be the ones I command.”

“Good, for us you are our *bitta*.” (Baldambe in: Lydall/Strecker 1979b:2)

A different story tells that some migrants from Maale entered Bashada land before the *bitta* Zinka arrived. One of them was observed when he found earth bees and started digging for their honey:

One man saw him, came over and asked: “What are you digging for?” - “It is *shako*.” - “Yih, what is there about the *shako*?” - “It is honey.” - “Eehh. So you shall be called *Shako*.” He said that jokingly, “You shall be called *Shako* from now on!” (Gude, 19th of February 1999)

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<sup>6</sup> One member of the *babi* family left Aari and settled in Banna to become a ritual leader there. Later, his younger brother quarreled with him and went to Hamar to become a *bitta* there. The role of the *babi* is similar to that of the *bitta* in Hamar, Banna and Bashada. While there exist two *bitta* in Banna and Hamar, and one in Bashada, there are several *babi* in Aari, each responsible for his own region.

<sup>7</sup> This goes along with what has been reported by Matsuda (1997) on the history of the Banna *bitta*, and what Strecker and Lydall wrote about the history on Hamar (1979b:2f). Zinka, the first Bashada *bitta*, was later followed by his son Babi, Babi's son was Bonko, Bonko's son was Baasha, and Baasha was the father of the present *bitta* Bonko who today lives in the village Argude. Until today the *bitta* of Banna, Hamar and Bashada consider each other to be relatives. Assuming that each of the *bitta* may have been 30-40 years old when fathering his first son, the first *bitta* must have arrived in Bashada around 150 years ago.

Today, members of the Shako clan claim that they were the first to settle in Bashada and that they have lived there without any ritual leader for some time. Later, Zinka arrived from Arbore and said that he wanted to be their *bitta*. At that time, most people living in that area did not know what a *bitta* was, but as some of them had seen the Hamar *bitta's* rituals bring well-being and prosperity to the Hamar, they persuaded each other to accept the stranger as their first ritual leader.

A rather mythical story about the origin of the Bashada *bitta* and the first clan was told to the German anthropologist Jensen in 1951:

The first king came from the sky by a rainbow. His name was Zinka and he was from the clan Bitole. Under his right armpit he brought the bees, under the left he brought the sorghum and all the other fruits. In one hand he brought the arrow used for blood-letting, in the other one all the animals. He also brought illness. On earth he gave everything to the clan Shako, which was then the only one. Then the Binnas group came from Baka (Ari), the Galabu from Kara. They all wanted a part of the gifts, but they did not recognize him as their *bitta*.

In the first year Zinka made rain and the harvest was good. In the second year Zinka asked cattle from the people, but they said "Why should you be our *bitta*? We are all our own *bitta*!" and they went away. Then the rain stopped and all the fruits died. So the people came back to Zinka and asked him to be their *bitta*, they would from now on follow him always. After Zinka followed Babi, Bonko, and Basha. (Jensen 1959:342f)

This myth also acknowledges the multi-ethnic composition of the Bashada and the two moieties into which their clans are divided, Binnas and Galabu (see below). It also mentions the clan Shako to be the first to settle in Bashada.

In 1995, when I asked my friends in Bashada about this story, no one had heard of it. To think that Zinka had come to a place where people were living without any ritual leader, i.e. the idea that anyone else other than the *bitta* (lit. meaning: "the first") could have settled first in Bashada, was unthinkable to some people and actually made them laugh. However, the genealogy of *bitta's* has been confirmed by my Bashada informants, and the present *bitta*, Bonko, is the son of Basha. The Bashada also confirmed that the ritual leaders of Bashada, Hamar and Banna are all descendants from Aari.

The differences in the stories about Bashada origin could partly be caused by the fact that the Bashada are becoming culturally closer and closer to the Hamar, and therefore may be copying some of the Hamar origin myths.

## 2.2. The Integration of Strangers

As mentioned above, many of the peoples in southern Ethiopia see themselves as a composition of branches of other groups. This ethnic diversity is usually mirrored in their clans, i.e. migrants from one ethnic group form their own clan. As members of distinct clans, many keep some of their original cultural practices.

The process of integrating strangers is going on until today. However, the way the groups in southern Ethiopia deal with migrants follows different rules (also see Thubauville and Gabbert this volume, for examples of detailed negotiation processes of the integration of migrants).

The Bashada say that when the first people settled in their area, these were only very few. Therefore, they had a strong interest in attracting migrants from other groups. By integrating migrants and thereby increasing the number of inhabitants, they thought to improve their life in different ways: first, being small in number it was difficult for the few Bashada to control the bush land which was infected by the tsetse fly breeding in the high grass. As soon as more people had settled, the Bashada claim that the land was either cultivated or used as pasture, and the tsetse fly disappeared. Second, as a bigger group it was easier to defend themselves against enemies such as from the Mursi with whom they were at war for many years. Third, when the Bashada were a very small group, the choice of marriage partners was very limited. In the past, it is said that relatives (i.e. members of the same clan or moiety) had to sleep with relatives, though this was considered a prohibition. By marrying women from outside and integrating strangers, this could be avoided. The *bitta*, together with some elders, is said to have blessed the country with the following words:

Let the cattle fill the country  
Goats shall fill the country  
Humans shall be born  
Together with their coffee-bowls, people shall move to Bashada  
They shall move over from Banna  
They shall move over from Hamar  
From all countries they shall move over to us  
Cattle shall come from there  
Goats shall move over from there  
They shall make us many...

In Bashada and Hamar, it is a cultural premise that strangers who settle among them give up their traditions and assume a new identity. This becomes clear in Baldambe's account on what the Hamar *bitta* said to the new settlers he had attracted:

You, who have come from Kara, leave the customs of your fathers and listen to my word. You, who have come from Ari, leave the customs of your fathers and listen to my word. You, who have come from Male, leave your language and listen to mine. You, who have come from Konso, leave your language and listen to mine. (Baldambe in: Lydall/Strecker 1979b:22)

The Bashada integrate strangers in the same way as the Hamar. That is, newcomers must give up their original customs and submit to the Bashada *bitta* in order to become fully integrated. A typical way for a male migrant to become Bashada is to be initiated. As during initiation ritual parent-child relations are established, an initiate can assume his ritual father's clan identity. Thus, after initiation he will perform all Bashada rituals in the way as it is done by his ritual father's clan members. In this way, migrants soon identify with Bashada, and it is common to say, "*Wodi Bashada-peen ardaise bashada matidi!*" ("We have entered Bashada-land and become Bashada!"). Females are integrated into the patrilineal society of the Bashada by marriage: after marriage, a female is associated with her husband's clan. Children who are born on Bashada land, and whose umbilical cord is buried on Bashada territory, are also considered to be Bashada.

The example of the neighboring Kara shows that there exist great differences in how migrants are dealt with. The Kara, a similarly small group, do not allow strangers to become fully recognized members of their group, to a certain extent migrants always keep their original ethnic identity and are not allowed to perform the Kara's major rituals (such as initiation) or to marry Kara girls. Even those who become outwardly part of the Kara, such as the Bogudo or Murle<sup>8</sup> who speak and dress like their hosts, do not become full Kara (pers. comm. Girke, August 2006).

Though migrants become fully recognized members of Bashada society, it seems that those who have come from Hamar and Banna like to keep some of their regional particularities. When they perform certain rituals, they like to stress their origin and cultural difference more than migrants who have come from totally different ethnic groups. Sentences like "*Wodi Banna ne. Gilo wonti wana ne!*" ("We are Banna. Our rituals are different!"), or "*Bashada daise, inta Banne ne!*" ("Being Bashada, I am Banna!") can often be heard, while I have never heard anyone say "I am from Ts'amakko, I do things differently."

### 2.3. The Multiethnic Composition as Mirrored in the Clans

The Bashada, like the Hamar and Banna, have two exogamic moieties, both of which contain several clans.<sup>9</sup> People who belong to the same clan are considered *äda* (relatives), sometimes also called *an edi* (lit.: "hand people"), an expression that hints at the social or material support, or the assistance with rituals one can expect from them. All clans are patrilineal and women attain the abilities and prohibitions of their husbands' clan through marriage.

The names of the moieties, Binnas and Galabu, are identical in the three groups, though there are some differences in the individual clans.<sup>10</sup> The following table shows all Bashada and Hamar clans as well as their claimed origin.<sup>11</sup> Most settlers are said to have come from the North and Northeast (Aari, Banna, Maale, Ongota, Konso, Ts'amakko). Only few came from the Southeast (Arbore), or West (Moguji, Bogudo, Nyangatom, Kara), and none from the South (Daasanach). Since many Hamar migrants kept their clan identity when they settled in Bashada, many of the clan names are identical in both groups. The earlier origin of some clans who have migrated to Bashada from Hamar seems to have been forgotten, so that for example the clan Ba in Hamar is said to have come from Ts'amakko, while Ba in Bashada is said to have originated in Hamar.<sup>12</sup> Some Hamar clans are known in Bashada, but no

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<sup>8</sup> The Bogudo have been incorporated by the Kara and the Murle by the Nyangatom (Strecker 1976:14ff).

<sup>9</sup> The term *ger* is used for both, the "clans" and the "moieties." This may be why often people mixed up the categories and listed the names of the moieties among the clan names when I asked for the clans. Most (adult) people knew only about the prohibitions and abilities of their own clan, and little or nothing about the other clans.

<sup>10</sup> Like in Hamar, the Bashada moieties are said to be represented by two types of the aloe plant, one of which is spotted, and the other one is plain (see the drawings of these plants in Lydall/Strecker 1979b).

<sup>11</sup> The specifications on Hamar clans are Baldambe's (in Lydall/Strecker 1979b).

<sup>12</sup> However, as I did not talk to representatives of all clans, it may be possible that individuals, especially elders, know more about the history of their respective clans.

settlers have come to live there. Those Bashada clans that do not exist in Hamar have either come via Banna to Bashada (Shille), from the Bogudo in the west (Elondo), or changed their identity (Bitole, earlier Gatta).

Clan name	Presumed origin in Bashada	Presumed origin in Hamar
<i>Galabu Moiety</i>		
Shille	Maale, via Banna	does not exist
Misha	Ts'amakko	Ts'amakko
Gasi (has two subsections), Gimale Gasi and Attula Gasi	Hamar, from Aari via Banna	Ts'amakko
Duma	Hamar	Unclear
Gulet	Kara	one section from Nyangatom, one from Kara
Lawan	does not exist, only one man who individually came from Hamar	Ongota
Maize	Hamar, possibly from Marle	Unclear
Wolmuk	does not exist	Unclear
Kursi	only few individuals, from Hamar	Unclear
Bucha	does not exist	Konso
Ziran	does not exist	Unclear
Babate	Hamar	Sun rise
Arka	Hamar	Unclear
Olasha	Hamar	Unclear
Adasa	Hamar, (Lala, near to Marle)	Unclear

<i>Binnas Moiety</i>	Bashada	Hamar
Worla	Hamar	Sun rise
Ba	Hamar	Ts'amakko
Elondo (Bogudo-Elondo)	Moguji, Bogudo	does not exist
Gatta	Aari	Aari
Shako	Maale	does not exist, equivalent to Warran
Bitole	Aari, via Arbore	does not exist
Dadaso	Hamar (many of them in Hamar, few in Bashada)	unclear
Berda	Aari, via Banna	unclear
Karla	Hamar (Lala), only one family in Bashada	Kara
Garshima	identical with Gatta, from Aari	unclear
Ratsh	Aari and Hamar, the two	Ts'amakko



	subsections met in Bashada. Can marry all clans except Maize due to possible common origin	
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Table 1: Clans and their claimed origin

Some of the clans carry the specific cultural traits (abilities and prohibitions) of the respective original group. To give an example: the clan Misha is said to have magical abilities, just like the Ts'amakko, the group from which they are said to have originated. The concepts of coolness and heat are generally applied to the two moieties: all Binna clans are said to be "cool" and to be able to call forth rain and prevent sickness. All men who hold hereditary ritual offices, such as the *bitta* and the *parko* (who perform rituals for bees and cattle), and the *gudili* (who performs rituals for the fields), are Binna. Their ritual power enables them to bring peace and health to the land. Binna people without ritual offices have similar powers, but in a minor form. The "hot" moiety, Galabu, is said to have magical powers, and thus they can, for example, control the fire when a new field is burned, or cast spells and drive away pests. Some of the Galabu clans have more magical power than others and may bring about powerful magicians, called *edi arti*.

#### 2.4. Pariah Groups: *Bajje* and Blacksmiths

Besides the clans mentioned above, there are some other categories of people who live among the Bashada. One of them is the *bajje*, a pariah group or "avoided caste" (Jensen 1959:344), who perform cleansing rituals and the *dotin gilo* (sitting ritual) for the Bashada, Banna and Hamar. The *bajje* are said to have originally come from Aari. Today those who perform the rituals (only three families) live on Hamar and Banna territory, while descendents of *bajje* families can be found among all three groups. Their rituals *dotin gilo* is performed for newlywed couples and are an integral part of the rites performed to become a full adult. Cleansing rituals are also performed for women who have experienced a miscarriage or an abortion.<sup>13</sup>

The *gito* (blacksmiths) are another group of outsiders who settle among the Bashada, Hamar and Banna, and again most of them come from Aari or Maale. Apart from agricultural tools and spears, they produce ritual objects (such as iron rings or metal pieces needed for a first wife's collar) which are indispensable for the initiation ritual and marriage in Bashada, Banna and Hamar. People say that even though the

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<sup>13</sup> There exist two kinds of *bajje*. One kind performs the *dotin gilo*, "sitting ritual," which newlywed couples have to undergo in order to achieve full adult status once they have conceived their first child. The other *bajje* purify women who had an unclean conception or abortion or women whose front skirt fell down and touched the ground - events that both make a woman impure. In the past, the latter *bajje* were closely associated with the *bitta*. They assisted in a *bitta's* initiation, and when a *bitta* died, a *bajje* had to guard his corpse until it could finally be buried. The *bajje* live on agricultural products and raise small stock. Because they do not perform the same rituals as Bashada, Hamar and Banna, *bajje* men may not marry their girls, and *bajje* girls are only married as second wives by these three groups. *Bajje* may also not be buried on the burial sites of these three groups.

*gito* are *mingi* (impure), the objects they produce are *charangi* (pure), and like the *bajje*, the *gito* can also perform certain cleansing rituals for women.

Both *bajje* and blacksmiths are not full members of Bashada society, which means that they do not perform any of the Bashada rituals and are not allowed to intermarry with them. Blacksmiths are neither allowed to cultivate fields, nor to herd cattle or small stock. They may not fetch water from public waterholes, and it is prohibited for them to enter the homesteads of certain clans. Any food or coffee bowls they touch become impure and are not used by the Bashada anymore. The *bajje* raise small stock and cultivate fields, and in the last decades they have been more and more integrated into Bashada society. *Bajje* females traditionally can be married as second wives by Bashada men, and their children are not considered *bajje* anymore. Some *bajje* males, whose mothers had been adopted by Bashada families and grown up among Bashada, have been allowed to leap over the cattle and thereby become full member of Bashada society. This was possible because they had found respected Bashada elders who offered to serve as their ritual fathers during initiation.

## 2.5. The *Marsha* Ritual – Expressing the Group’s Multiethnic Composition

The origin of the clans is remembered and articulated regularly during the performance of the *marsha* ritual, a ritual meant to protect the country from sickness.<sup>14</sup> Other than in Hamar, the ritual is not confined to a certain month, but is performed whenever too much sickness is said to have entered Bashada. During the *marsha* ritual, people face the direction from where their ancestors have come. I observed it in March 1998.

When the sun began to set, people slowly gathered on the public meeting place. Altogether there were not more than forty people, including small children. Banko (the oldest man in Gunne) sat down on his headrest, holding a branch of a *baraza* tree with leaves in his hands. The other men sat down in small groups around him, the women and children sat down opposite the men.

After a while, everyone got up. The people formed a kind of circle, standing with their backs turned to the centre of the meeting place. Everyone looked into the direction from which his or her clan was said to have originally come. Bargi explained to me, “Some people look up there onto the mountains, it is Binna people. Those from Gulet look down to Kara. Others, like Wolmuk, look towards Mursi, people from Rach look down to Hamar, people from Maize look towards Ts’amakko...”

Next, Banko walked around the people. He encircled them four times, holding up his *baraza*-branch. Then, he put the *baraza*-branch and some *wolkanti*-branches onto the ground. All people approached and spat onto them.

Then, Banko picked up the branches and gave them to a previously selected boy [from Binna]. The boy was then sent into the bush to throw the branches into the direction of Kara [i.e.: to the west where the sun sets].<sup>15</sup> (unpublished fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1998)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Marsha* (in Hamar: *maersha*) may be translated as “(...) any magical act that is performed to ensure well-being and good luck.” (Strecker 1979a:213, fn 87). The term is also used for the sacrificial rituals performed for the deceased at the ritual gateway (*kerri*) of a homestead. The *bitta*’s and *parko*’s ritual gateways are called *marsha-kerri*.

<sup>15</sup> The sickness, symbolized in the collected snot and spit of the people, is thrown into the direction of Kara, not to send the sickness to the neighboring group, as I had first assumed, but to make sickness disappear with the setting sun. The expression “*Karander*” – “towards Kara” is often used referring to

Besides ritually driving sickness out of Bashada, the *marsha* ritual is also an occasion for people to remember and express their individual origins and clan memberships. Whoever I talked to about the ritual proudly mentioned his or her clan membership and told me where the clan had originally come from. The tone in which people talked to me and the words they used gave me the impression that the origins of individuals, though they do not play a role in everyday life, are nevertheless vividly in people's minds. Their non-homogeneity, i.e. the fact that Bashada is composed of members of many different groups with which the Bashada still entertain a variety of neighborhood relations is acknowledged by everyone, and even seems to be highly valued.

### **3. Historical and Contemporary Relations with Neighboring Groups Considered as Relatives**

The Bashada entertain different kinds of relations with their neighbors. The relations with those they consider as *äda* (relatives), are either based on common origin, on cultural contact, on exchange of ritual specialists and items, or on historical events. With members of these groups the Bashada cooperate, entertain individual bond friendships, and avoid conflict.

#### **3.1. Aari: the "Ritual People" of the Past and Today**

The Aari live approximately 80 km north of Bashada. They mainly live on agriculture, but also raise some cattle and small stock. Like the Bashada language, Aari belongs to the Omotic languages and so the two groups can understand each other a little. The Bashada, Hamar and Banna see the Aari as their ancestors, as many of their clans have originated there. They also link the two major ritual offices (*bitta* and *parko*), and origins of important ritual items to Aari.<sup>17</sup> The coffee used for blessing in ritual and daily coffee sessions may only be cultivated in Aari and Maale, and also sorghum is said to have come from there.<sup>18</sup> To my knowledge, there has not been any frequent or intensive contact between the Aari and Bashada in the last decades. Only recently, since Jinka has become an important market place, especially in times of drought, people from the South now travel to Jinka (often by truck) to buy sorghum and it seems that with the increased contact the Bashada have developed a growing interest in establishing or re-establishing bond friendships with the Aari.

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the place where the sun sets.

<sup>16</sup> On the day after the *marsha*-ritual, new fire is made and brought to all homesteads and nearby cattle camps to keep sickness away from people and cattle (for a more detailed description see Epple forthcoming:66f).

<sup>17</sup> These include some metal objects produced by Aari blacksmiths needed for initiation and marriage rites, a certain kind of pot needed for children's naming ritual and for funerals, the *parko's* ritual beads (called *boor*), as well as his staff (*parki*).

<sup>18</sup> In their daily coffee sessions, the Bashada boil the coffee shells. Only for some rituals coffee beans are needed.

### **3.2. Bashada, Hamar, Banna and Kara: a Cultural Cluster**

The Kara live west of Bashada, in the lower Omo Valley. They speak a dialect of the Bashada, Banna, Hamar language (South-Omoti, see Lydall 1976) and their culture is in many aspects similar to that of the Bashada.

As mentioned above, the Bashada often stress their historical and also cultural connection with the Kara. I often heard the sentence, "*Änna, Bashada be Kara be edi kalla ne!*" ("In the past, Bashada and Kara were one [kind of] person!"), by which people usually reaffirmed that in the past Bashada and Kara were one group. Depending on the context, they either referred to the common origin of the two groups, to the similarity of the dialects they speak, or to the similarity of certain customs, rituals and traditions they share or are said to have shared in the past.

In the last decades the relationship with the Kara has become weaker, whereas the Hamar (and Banna) have become not only geographically, but also culturally closer to the Bashada. The numerous immigrants moving to their area are most likely a major contributing factor to Bashada, Hamar and Banna culture being nearly identical today. As the three groups also speak the same language, they can hardly be distinguished by outsiders. While many of the older people, mainly men, have spent their youth in Kara and therefore speak a dialect which contains Kara elements, the young Bashada speak the same dialect as the Hamar. Nowadays, Bashada men usually marry girls from Bashada, Banna and Hamar, and not from Kara. Likewise, I heard of only very few women who were married off to Kara a few decades ago.

One aspect that links the Bashada to the Kara until today is their age-organization. The Bashada have a rather simple age-organization which classifies their males into age-sets to which females are associated through marriage. The main social purpose of the age-sets seems to be that interaction between the members of Bashada society are ruled, therefore conflicts avoided. In the last three decades, since the Bashada have become closer to Hamar, they have begun to neglect some of the central rituals connected to their age-organization and the social relevance of their age-sets is decreasing. More and more they now follow a more generalized principle of senior-junior relations, very much like the Hamar, who have given up their age-sets many decades ago. Nevertheless, whenever the Bashada speak of their age-organization they still like to stress that until about three decades ago it was identical to that of the Kara, whose age-organization is very active (probably entertained by the closeness to the Nyangatom, who have age- and generation-sets). The Bashada also like to mention that, in the future, they would like to re-install some of the common rituals.

### **3.3. Bashada Age-Organization in Context with those of the Kara and Nyangatom**

The Bashada believe that the age-sets of the three groups are named in succession with their origin in Nyangatom, and in fact, many age-set names in Bashada and Kara are the same. Most of the names are also known in Nyangatom, but are not used for age- or generation sets, but rather to denote groups of young men who

make themselves known for their outward appearance or courageous behavior.<sup>19</sup> As the table below shows, most of the old Bashada age-set names are in Nyangatom language, while some more recent names are said to be “pure” Bashada (Pullanti, Logodo, and Ch’arra). Only Logodo, the only recurrent name, is said to be an *eyke nabi*, “name of the forefathers,” while Pullanti and Ch’arra are new inventions. The Nyangatom names are used by the Bashada without them knowing the exact meaning.

<b>Age sets with living members in Bashada (2005)</b>	<b>Origin of name as claimed in Bashada</b>	<b>Possible equivalent in Kara</b>	<b>Possible equivalent in Nyangatom</b>
Kapello	Nyangatom via Kara		Ngiligabelo, Ngi-kapelo*, (white flanks of male ostriches)
Inkatakurr	Nyangatom via Kara	Nykatakori	Nyakatakori
Limirpuss	Nyangatom via Kara		Ngimeriputh* (emblem of generation)
Nyamatak’ach/ Nyimirlim	Nyangatom via Kara	Nabwuan	Nyemerlim
Nyemesek	Bashada, first name given independently from Kara	Nyikarkat	Nyemesik
Pullanti	new Bashada name	Nyamrpus	-
Logodo	<i>eyke</i> name from Bashada	Nyakomo	-
<b>Provisional names</b>			-
Ch’arra	Bashada	Nyichekapus	-
Luzilikurr	Nyangatom via Kara	Nyserikori	Ngisilkori
<b>Names of informal age-groups</b>			
Nyramalay	Nyangatom via Kara	Nyiremalai	Nyramalay
Nyinyankot	Nyangatom via Kara	Nyinyankot	Nyinyankot
Ullaguita	Bashada , (also in Kara)	Ullaguita	-
<b>Children</b>			
<i>dibini bunsu</i>	nickname for children	Nyanyok	-

Table 2: Age-set names in Bashada, Kara and Nyangatom

The three junior most Bashada age-sets existing in 2006 (Ch’arra, Luzilikurr, Nyramalay), have not been named in a proper ceremony, thus their names are considered provisional by the Bashada. Because provisional age-set names cannot

<sup>19</sup> I used the names of Kara age-sets as listed by Gezagh (1993:69f) and Girke (pers. comm., August 2006). The explanations about Nyangatom were provided by Philemon Nakali, a Nyangatom student who in 2006 lived in Jinka. The three marked Nyangatom names (Nyerinkoryo, Ngikapelo Ngimeriputh) were the only ones I could find in the lists provided by Tornay (1981:167).

contribute to the ritual balance of the country (resulting in enough rainfall, good harvests, absence of conflicts), later, I was assured, these provisional names will be substituted by “proper” names during a ceremony held according to previous customs. While the name Ch’arra is of Bashada origin, the other provisional names apparently came from Kara where they are proper age-set names (pers. comm. Felix Girke, August 2006).

The age-set called Luzilikurr, was provisionally named in 1998. The members of the set to follow, Nyramalay, had already formed a group by then, but not formally received their name.

Besides parallels in naming and also the performance of initiation or naming ceremonies, there exist many other parallels in Bashada, Kara and Nyangatom age-organizations (for more on this see Epple forthcoming, Gezaghn 1994 and Tornay 1981).

In all three societies, the members of adjacent age-sets consider and address each other “senior and junior brothers.” Among the Nyangatom, the fact that the sets are actually subdivisions of the Nyangatom generation-sets explains why the members of adjacent age-sets consider each other as siblings:

Each individual belongs to the generation immediately below that of his father (pater). (...) Since adjacent generations represent the relationship between father and son, a single generation can then be conceptualized as a collection of brothers, the senior brothers being old men or even already dead, while junior brothers are still being born. (Tornay 1981:163f)

The Bashada and Kara do not have generation-sets, but they also denote the members of adjacent age-sets as “senior brothers” and “junior brothers.” This differentiation has an influence on how men are expected to interact with each other. In public, the order of seniority is overtly made visible through the sitting order during public meetings and rituals where men sit together with their age-mates, apart from others, through the standing order during dances, and through the distribution of meat or other food. As well, when individuals meet, interaction between men is ruled by the asymmetric relation between seniors and juniors, and this principle also includes their wives and children.

As typical for societies with age-organization, the members of one age-set consider each other to be age-mates, and are linked through a special feeling of solidarity and companionship. However, unlike many other societies, the age-sets of the Bashada, Kara and Nyangatom do not move through a set of grades, and a man’s initiation and marriage does not depend on his age-set affiliation, but rather on his position in his own family.

When members of these three groups meet, age-set affiliation enables and facilitates communication during public meetings and helps avoid inappropriate or disrespectful behavior.

### **3.4. Nyangatom: “Relatives” with Different Origin**

Besides their link through similarities in age-organization, the Bashada also view the Nyangatom as one of their relatives. Like the Kara, the Nyangatom live west of

Bashada along the banks of the Omo River. Their language classified as Nilo-Hamitic or Para-Nilotic, (Tornay 2001:9), differs completely from that of the Bashada, and also the cultures of the two groups show few similarities. Nevertheless, the two groups consider each other as related. They explain their relatedness with a conflict in the past, in which some Nyangatom (the Bashada call them Bume) had killed some Bashada. After the warriors had cut scarification on their chests, these scars became infected. The warriors got very sick and, since no treatment helped, they finally died. This event was interpreted as an indicator and proof, that Bashada and Nyangatom should not kill each other. Belaini from Bashada recounted what the Nyangatom had said:

*“Ána kira wossa k’ais!* These people [Bashada] are our prohibition. They are really taboo for us! They seem to be our relatives! Let them become our relatives. We shall not kill each other anymore.” And then they made peace [with the Bashada]. They reconciled. (...)

There are the Hamar. There are the Banna. Do the Banna go [to visit] to their [Nyangatom] country? Only we do go there, those called Bashada. When Nyangatom and Hamar kill each other and cut *paala*, it is good. The [killer’s] family and homestead is fine. The Daasanach, they kill. When they cut *paala*, it is fine. They kill Mursi, the *paala* is fine, they kill Kara, the *paala* is fine.

Having killed each other [Bashada and Nyangatom] we saw the bad about it. If you kill someone and then die, it is bad, isn’t it? This is how our *ádamo* (relatedness) was brought about. (Belaini, 9th of August 2006)

This example shows that to consider ethnic neighbors as relatives does not necessarily require a common language, common customs or claimed common roots. In the case of Bashada-Nyangatom relations, the bad outcome of a hostile interaction served as an indicator of relatedness, as killing a relative is said to cause misfortune. The disastrous outcome for the Nyangatom after killing a Bashada thus led the two groups to the conclusion that they should consider each other as relatives. The Nyangatom today actually warn their warriors not to mistake a Bashada for a Hamar when they go to war, as killing a Bashada, they believe, would again cause misfortune and the death of the respective warrior.

Belaini also made it clear that the relationship between Bashada and Nyangatom differs from that of Hamar and Nyangatom as well as Banna and Nyangatom relations. This shows that in political contexts the Bashada act as an individual group.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that Bashada identity is based on several factors. These can be distinguished by historical, ritual, cultural, social, and political factors, each of which may, depending on the situation, influence the way the Bashada see and present themselves and interact with others.

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<sup>20</sup> Many groups in South Omo regard the Nyangatom as the “fathers of names and songs.” The Hamar, Banna, Bashada, Kara, Daasanach and Arbore (possibly others as well) use Nyangatom words to name their favorite oxen, to honor killers and they prefer to sing Nyangatom songs during their night dances.

Bashada stories about their origin clearly belong to the historical aspects of identity. Their myths of origin reveal that the ancestors of their ritual leader originally came from Aari, settled in Banna and diverted again, settled in Hamar and diverted again, and finally settled in Arbore. In all places the migrants had become the ritual leaders of the area, a hereditary office. In all cases it was the younger brothers of the ritual leaders who had left and migrated further and established their own regions in which they became powerful. Only in Arbore, the migrants did not settle, but moved on to uninhabited land (or at least only inhabited by very few people). Here, in this “institutional vacuum,” the migrant could establish himself as a ritual leader to the few people living there who formerly did not know about the institution of *bitta*. All “late-comers” have to accept this institution and, if they want to be part of the group, submit to the Bashada *bitta*, though they do keep some of their original cultural practices, now legitimized in the clan differences. From the new place, later, some individuals split and moved west. In connection with this, the Bashada claim to have a common history with the Kara of the lower Omo valley, with whom they have been sharing the same dialect until recently.

Thus, when talking about their history and origin, the Bashada are able to trace historical links with five of their neighboring ethnic groups: the Aari, the Banna, the Hamar, the Arbore and the Kara. Sometimes the Maale are mentioned as the very first settlers (before the arrival of the *bitta's* family) in Bashada. Most frequently the Bashada usually emphasize their relation with the Kara, saying that they and the Kara “have been one” in the past. The Aari are considered as the true origin of all important ritual practices, offices and items. The historical connection with Arbore does not seem to play a great role nowadays, maybe because the Arbore have only been hosts to the pre-Bashada, but no Arbore have migrated to Bashada land to become part of the group. The connection to the Hamar and Banna is emphasized less when talking about the past, but when it comes to the present the Bashada have become very close to the Hamar, both culturally and linguistically. This is due to the numerous migrants from Hamar, and Banna, but also because the Hamar have started to move into Bashada territory that has formerly been uninhabited. Increasing intermarriage and peaceful relations may also have contributed to the many similarities. Today, the Hamar, Banna and Bashada are not only culturally very close, but also act like one group when it comes to initiation and marriage: member of the groups freely intermarry, initiation rituals are nearly identical, and the *maz* (unmarried initiates) of all three groups band together and travel through all territories in order to initiate others, as if there were no ethnic boundaries at all. Due to their cultural closeness and similarity, the Bashada are often not distinguished from the Hamar by outsiders and even the Bashada themselves call themselves Hamar in situations when a clear distinction from their much more numerous cultural neighbors does not play a role. In fact, the regional administration does not even acknowledge the Bashada as a distinct ethnic group, but are classified as a territorial subgroup of the Hamar.

In many ritual contexts, as we have seen, the Bashada either stress their contemporary unity with the Hamar and Banna (initiation, marriage), or their



historical unity with the Hamar, Banna and Aari, mentioning that the ritual leaders of the Bashada, Banna and Hamar all belong to the same patriline that originated in Aari. Nevertheless, in some rituals, such as those performed for the protection of their land (*marshā* ritual), they express and articulate the diversity of cultural origins of their members). When a new ritual leader is initiated, the boundaries of Bashada are emphasized.

When it comes to social organization and settlement patterns, again Bashada, Banna and Hamar can be considered as nearly identical. The only difference is that today the Bashada are the only one of the three groups who still has an age-organization. This organization resembles much that of the Kara and also has some similarities and links with that of the Nyangatom, mainly in that they share common age-set names. As age-sets partly serve not only for intra- but also intercultural communication, their common age-sets give the three groups, at least from the perspective of the Bashada, a feeling of connectedness and brotherhood, and they like to stress that this is a great difference between them and the Hamar and Banna.

In political contexts, for example during conflicts or peace-making with neighboring groups, the Bashada act independently. The relationships with neighboring groups are partly based on historical relationships (as with Aari, Hamar, Banna) or events (as with Nyangatom), and therefore differ from the relationships their close allies (such as the Hamar) have with other groups. Practically this means for example that even though the Bashada often say “we are all Hamar!”, and when the Hamar are in conflict with the Nyangatom or Kara, the Bashada clearly distance themselves.

The aim of my paper was to show that the Bashada can and should be considered as much - or as little – an ethnic group as most of their ethnic neighbors. Though more research has to be done on their genesis and history, the material existing today seems to clearly indicate that they are not only a very young group, but also an interesting example of a group composed of many different identities. These, as I have shown, are creatively used by the Bashada depending on the context in which they speak about themselves, especially when they want to stress their relatedness, unity or friendship with one of these groups. Not all groups from which the Bashada have integrated migrants are nowadays considered as relatives or allies. My impression was that this kind of relationship could be “remembered” and enacted, for example, during peace-building processes, when relationships are being redefined. However, more research has to be done on this.

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