

The Mother's Brother

Kinship and Community among the Sidāma of Northeast Africa

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The Mother's Brother / Sister's Son Relation

Bloch and Sperber have recently suggested a novel way of relating idiosyncratic representations to the normative representations of culture (2002). Although kinship relations structured as systems may be historically and culturally unique they share certain natural and biological phenomena that lead to a process in the development of representations that Bloch and Sperber refer to as "epidemiological representations" (726–728). By this they mean that close psychophysical relations to persons in the immediate environment over time lead to changes in thinking that differ from historically established norms. Individuals remain aware of the latter, but through the process of interaction develop idiosyncratic interpretations. Thus there is an analogy to a disease which may affect all individuals, but in differing degrees of intensity. They then raise the question as to why some normative representations become widespread and remain important. Bloch and Sperber suggest it is because these norms become a means for stabilizing social relations, so as to prevent individual psychobiological differences and experiences with others leading to social chaos. The stabilizing norms direct "learners" to focus on particular stimuli, even to the point of distortion in varying contexts, because idiosyncratic responses, though possible, do not favor stabilization (732). As they indicate unilineal kinship systems create "inequality of treatment" between closely related relatives necessitating the development of means for compensating the imbalance. The mother's brother's / sister's son connection, especially in patrilineal structures, often becomes a means of stabilizing the connection between agnatic and affinal relatives.

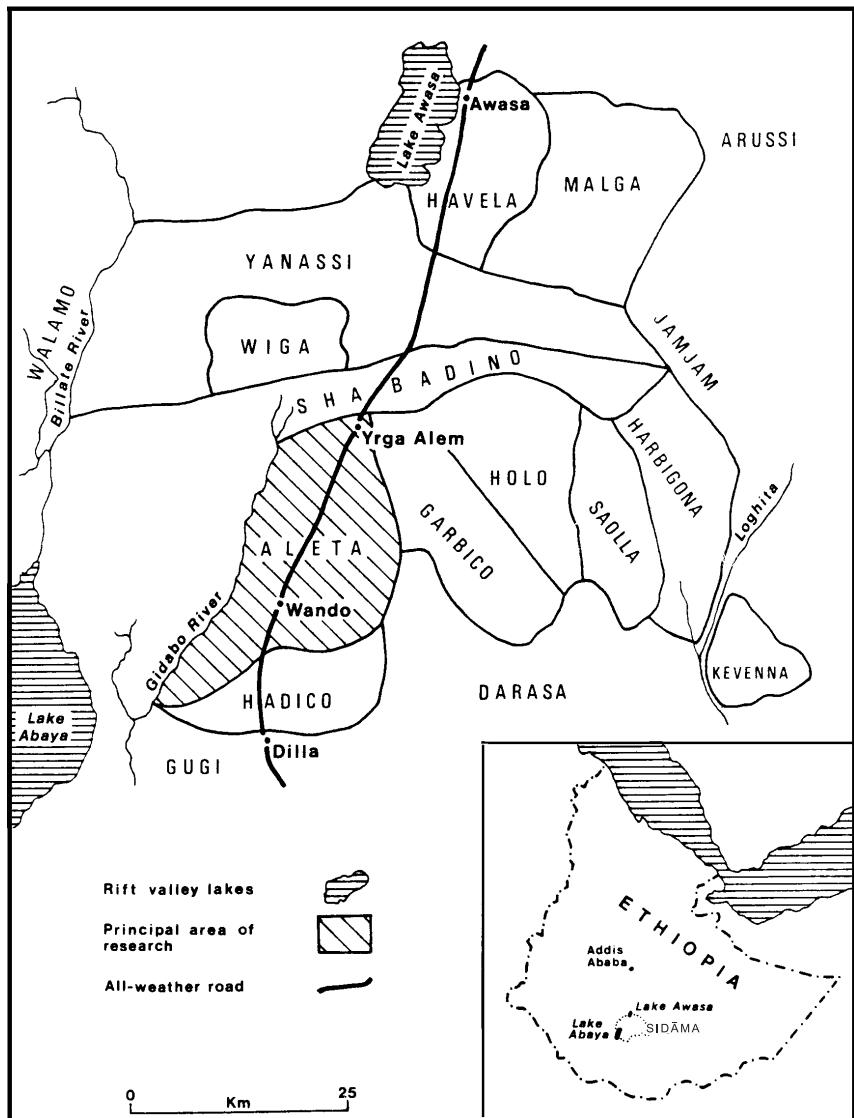
The classic hypothesis concerning the mother's brother's / sister's son was formulated by Radcliffe-Brown, primarily in regard to patrilineages, in the early 1920s (1952: 27 f.). His formulation was that the behavior of sons toward their mothers in family life was extended, with modifications, to the mother's sisters and brothers in her own patrilineage. The prescribed relationship of respect and deference in keeping with the authority of the

father was extended to the father's brothers and sisters. But the demeanor of ego toward the mother's brothers and sisters was conversely one of taking liberties, even to the point of jocundity, and their response was of "tenderness and indulgence" similar to that provided by the mother (20).

Other anthropologists have also dealt rather extensively with the mother's brother's / sister's son's connection. Fortes, for example, stressed the concept of "amity" as the essence of domestic social connections and "complementary filiation" between agnatic and affinal relatives (1969). In the monumental work on African kinship edited by Radcliffe-Brown there are several references to the mother's brother's or sister's son (1950). Kuper in discussing the South African Swazi indicated the sister's son could take beer from the mother's brothers without permission and was protected by the latter in disputes with the father (1950: 102 f.). Likewise, Schapera (1950: 144) reported that among the Tswana maternal kin were considered more "affectionate and devoted than agnates" and Gluckman found the mother's brother's / sister's son relation for the Zulu similar to that of the Swazi (1950: 196 f.). Nor was the phenomenon of sister's son taking liberties with his mother's brothers confined to Africa, for Radcliffe-Brown was able to show a similarity of the bond found among the South African Ba Thonga for the Fiji and Tongan islanders in the Pacific (1950: 16 f., 25).

Only in the case of the Ila-speaking Africans did Radcliffe-Brown mention the possibility of the mother's brother having more authority over his sister's son than the latter's father (1950: 24). Much later, however, Goody was to have more to say about the issue of the rights of the uncle over his sister's son (1959: 63 f.). From his observations in West Africa of children interacting with the adjacent senior generation of agnates and affines he discovered a reciprocal "ambivalent" attitude developed between the two generations. This was very much in keeping with the current Bloch and Sperber discussion of individual variability and the development of behavior which was both "attractive" and "unattractive" (2002: 733). Goody was able to show that among the West African Lo Dagaaba the sister's son's rights entailed reciprocal duties to the mother's brothers and among the Lo Wiili, where the mother's brother could demand as much respect as the parents, the connection was far more formal than a "joking relationship" (1959: 70).

Other than this mention of formalism and respect in contrast to the snatching of food and general jocularity of the mother's brother's sister's



Map: The Sidāma with clan division.

son connection, both Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 17) and Goody (1959: 62) suggest the importance of the impact of institutional relations other than close agnatic-affinal ties. Goody, however, seems to confine reference to inclusive kinship institutions beyond the domestic family. In this paper concerning the Sidāma,¹ though I want to emphasize the

importance of the sister's son's obligation to the maternal uncle as extending beyond kinship to the generational class system.

I seek to respond to the question raised by Bloch and Sperber as to why some representations, despite variable emotional and contextual experiences, become widespread and remain important over time. There is agreement with their point of view that the normative representations are "stimulated" by a biological grounding of close kinship ties, but are not created out of the latter (Boster 2002: 735). Nevertheless, I concur with Goody that the biological phenomenon does "give rise to ambivalence, doubts, and contradictions" (2002: 738). Consequently, it will be possible to show how imaginative, experiential, and circumstantial differences in Sidāma interpretations of the bond between mother's brothers and sister's son determine

1 Research among the Sidāma was done in the 1960s and 70s with grants from the Ford Foundation, Great Lakes Colleges Association, and The Canada Council. Brief interviews were conducted with Sidāmo intellectuals in the 1980s and 90s. Anthropologists and others have identified the people in several different ways. For example, Sidāma is the designation of the Aleta people where most of the research occurred. Brøgger (1986), Cerulli (1956), and Vecchiatto (1993) use the term Sidāmo. I use the term Sidāma as recommended by a Sidāmo author (Hotesso 1983). In this article I use Sidāmo as an adjective.

the way in which the latter understand the norms. What I wish to propose is that the connection is extended in the imagination, beyond the domestic and agnatic/affinal kinship divide, to community social control. It becomes a norm which all Sidāma share, constituting a form of stabilization linking often discordant personal relations in a coherent political whole.

The People

I have written extensively elsewhere on Sidāma culture (see especially 1987, 2003), so it is necessary here to provide only a brief summary. The Cushitic-speaking Sidāma have an overall gerontocratic social structure based on a generational class system that exists to perpetuate elderhood authority so as to maintain community harmony in cattle herding and the production of the food staple *Ensete ventricosa* (*wese*). They live in small hamlets surrounding plateaus in an area on the edge of the Rift Valley, between Lake Awasa and Lake Abaya (see Map). According to the 1984 census, taken soon after the period of fieldwork, there were approximately 1.5 million persons in this locale with an estimated population density of 240 persons per square mile (*Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission* 1984; Hamer 1987: 19 f.). Rituals and labor exchange are organized in neighborhoods of residents who work together in building houses, maintaining interconnecting trails and ponds, and aid each other in the performance of ritual redistribution feasts. Today they cultivate coffee, where soil and moisture conditions are appropriate, as a cash crop. And, as previously indicated, subsistence is based on *Ensete* in addition to maize, garden vegetables, and milk and butter from cattle. The latter also provides fertilizer which is crucial for the growth of the staple *Ensete*. Production for subsistence involves a division of labor in which wives generally manage household tasks and prepare food while husbands do the heavy and arduous work of preparing gardens and herding cattle. In both spheres of labor they are assisted by their children (Hamer and Hamer 1994).

The Sidāma are organized into patrilineal clans (*gurri*) in which the members follow the widespread unilineal descent system of marriage exogamy for women. Though women identify with the clan into which they are born, they have no rights of access to clan land and authority in general, whether it be that of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Moreover, male authority is unusually

hierarchical in the sense of a pervasive respect and deference for male seniority. For men this is structured throughout the life cycle in which men of the fathers generation are universally conceptualized as fathers or foster fathers regardless of agnatic or affinal connections. In youth older siblings always take precedence over younger, while in adulthood older men must be recognized and deferred to by younger. Since age is not recorded in this nonliterate society it is reckoned in terms of sequence of one's generational class in the order of their promotion to elderhood. Women do not belong to generational classes but like men defer to their elders from youth to old age. Indeed old women, beyond childbearing age, will often converse and share food with old men. Like the latter they will be symbolically honored in death with a smaller version of the larger bamboo fence which is reserved for deceased male elders.

It is not necessary to go into the details of the *lua* generational class system in this article.² Suffice it to say there are five classes changing every seven years and following in sequence in a 35-year cycle. Once a young man is initiated, regardless of age, following his father's promotion to elderhood in the preceding class he remains in this *lua* for life. Ego will be promoted 28 years after finishing the first seven years of his initiation cycle, an important period of ritual and in the distant past of cattle raiding. With the beginning of his 35-year-elderhood cycle his son(s) will begin their initiate cycle in the *lua* preceding egos. Prior to initiation of ego he is under the aegis of an alternate initiate class beyond that of his fathers, in effect his great-grandfather's *lua*, whose members become his foster fathers (*eko-anna*). When ego becomes an initiate he will reciprocally be a foster father to the next generation of the latter's sons. Thus ego in his life cycle will be linked to the *lua* of his father, that of his foster fathers, the preceding class of his son(s), and the *lua* following that of his father which will constitute the foster fathers of ego's son(s). The whole arrangement proceeds in a clockwise direction changing every seven years throughout the 35-year cycle. Put most simply all males are linked directly or indirectly in a father-son and a foster-father-foster-son relationship at different periods in the life cycle. These bonds entail real or symbolic, paternal, kin relations which support the overall ideal of gerontocracy.

2 For the general form and dynamics of the *lua* see Hamer 1987: 79–105; 1996: 532–536.

The *lua* system ritually and structurally is basic to the norms of gerontocratic authority, since elders constitute councils (*songo*) at hamlet, neighborhood, lineage, clan, and in one area, Aleta, a confederation of clans. These are essentially dispute-settling assemblies in which elders make the final decisions, but initiates are encouraged to hone their debating skills and learn correct deportment and procedure (Hamer 1972, 1998).

To appreciate the importance of the discontinuity between normative representations, variability of human experiences, and the response to changing temporal-spatial contexts, it is useful to briefly consider Sidāmo childhood and young adulthood in the socialization of norms. Infancy and childhood are fraught with contradictions that relate to authority and control by the parental generation on the one hand and generosity and amiability on the other. It begins with the mother who, as in most African societies, retains close bodily contact with the infant until weaning. At this time she seeks to placate the infant's frustration with the breast as a pacifier and source of nourishment, but often with a certain amount of indifference and/or distraction. For example, the mother whose child vomits while she is serving food to guests. Instead of going quickly to comfort the wailing child her first concern is to clean up the mess so as not to disturb the decorum of the adults, and only then does she bother to placate the toddler. Numerous instances are recorded of disturbed infants and toddlers whose attention seeking is initially ignored by a mother preoccupied with household tasks, before the unhappy one is picked up with one hand and given the breast while the mother continues with her work. In this manner, from earliest experience, the infant learns that the activities of the elders nearly always take precedence over his own immediate needs.

The precedence of age seniority and its enforcement continues to be socialized throughout childhood and adolescence. Therefore, the younger child learns that he/she will have behavioral responsibility to older siblings, who in turn receive instructions and orders from their parents for control of younger siblings. One mother describes the relationship to her older sister as like a mother demanding labor and the performance of errands. This leads the younger child to complain bitterly that the mother cares more for the older sister, especially following physical punishment by the latter for disobedience. Still, this same mother admits that older are often gentle with their younger sisters, and there is actually much affection between them after marriage. Indeed, the younger

often weep at the departure of an older sister at marriage since they "love each other because they are of the same womb."

Older brothers, being males, have more authority than sisters. For example, one day I observed a boy of eleven beating a nine-year-old sister with a stick. Upon inquiring it turned out the parents had gone to market and told their son to watch the cattle grazing in a nearby field and see that his sister stayed in the house, insuring that strangers or thieves would not think it empty. When she left to play with friends her brother returned from the pasture and beat her for disobedience. Much more frequent was the situation of an older boy, not necessarily a relative, beating and chastising a younger for carelessness, typically for carelessness in herding grazing cattle. The rule is that the older boy must always be obeyed. In fact, however, I observed frequent resistance to such admonitions through argument and running away from the conflict. Ultimately the older lad would be supported by an adult and his adversary would reluctantly obey.

For those in the formative years and beyond it is especially important to treat all men of elderhood status with respect and deference. It is evident that the key to understanding the controlling authority of the elders is in the training provided by the parents. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that there are certain contradictions relating to authority, leniency, and knowledge concerning the parent-child relationship. Parents will declare that all children are different, but will then add that most are passive and unresponsive unless taught how and when to respond to directives. On one occasion, visiting a family well-known to the anthropologist, the mother tells her three-year-old son not to sit on a grinding mortar. When the little boy ignores her she yanks it out from under him and he has a temper tantrum. The father, instead of supporting the directive of the mother, picks up his son and jokingly says, "mother bad." Despite this example of the benevolent father, parents generally have no qualms about administering physical punishment to children. Time and again I witness such punishment as a father whipping a small boy for leaving cattle to play with other children; an old man lashing several boys with dried *Ensete* stems for lounging about the door of the house rather than herding cattle in the pasture; or a small boy approaches guests who have just been given food and takes a piece of *Ensete* pancake from the serving plate, when suddenly the mother and father swat at him with dried *Ensete* stems and he quickly backs away. Parents emphasize the importance of

prompt obedience and service. Consequently, there is a widespread belief that the favored child is the one who serves his/her parents the best. And parents recognize that they reward children with extra praise and food for such unusual initiative.

Parents consider that adolescence is a difficult time, especially for girls. By the early teens the latter are permitted to attend dances, when accompanied by a male relative, and are usually married by the mid-teens (approximately 16 years of age). In the year or so prior to marriage controls are relaxed, so that they may complete household chores in times of their own choosing, visit with peers and relatives, and go to market when they please.³ This is considered the best period of their lives, one of relaxed parental controls and freedom from the drudgery of married life. For soon they will leave their lineage and clan relatives and live among "strangers" for the remainder of their lives. The situation for sons is quite different as they remain under the control of their parental lineage and other generational class elders (*lua*). It is a time in which they may, along with gardening and herding activities, participate in council debates and rituals. They generally do not leave their lineage and clan where they will at marriage acquire land and cattle. If they should seek more productive gardens and better pasture in other descent groups, they will remain under the authority of "fathers" and "foster-fathers" according to their position in the generational class system.

Continuity of authority and land rights that will enable a young man to strive for community esteem is very different from the discontinuity of experience for a young woman who will be removed from the close biosocial ties of her early life. She will only indirectly have control of resources through her husband which, according to her individual skills, may win her community approval. She must after marriage accept the authority of a husband who is more or less a stranger, and a mother-in-law who may abuse through insulting her lineage and clan of origin. Many young brides rebel against such treatment. One middle-aged woman explains to the anthropologist how she behaved "foolishly" with her first husband and he beat her because she did not know the "difference between right and wrong in marriage." In this way most women come to rationalize the authoritarian punishment of childhood as training to help them accept the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Nevertheless, in the early years

of marriage many young brides return to their relatives and husbands must negotiate a return with their brothers and fathers. When, however, a son is born a wife is unlikely to leave her husband. Since bridewealth has been received by her kin, it is a point of honor that she returns to the people who have originally provided the gift, often today in the form of cash, which formalizes the marriage agreement (Hamer 1987: 73–77). Should she refuse, future marriage arrangements will lack honor and authenticity, and will be difficult to arrange.

The birth of a son means that she will have support in her old age and a new sense of legitimacy among her affines. It is now that the importance of the mother's brother's sister's son relationship becomes apparent. Both in a secular and ritual sense it is the elder brother who, next to the parents and their cognates, has held the most authority over his eldest sister. This relationship will be enhanced as the former's generational class (*lua*) authority increases over time. But after marriage of his sister the sociobiological connection between these persons of the same womb will be extended to the sister's firstborn son. It is not simply demonstrated by ritually symbolic connectedness through visiting, but in serving him as his sister once did in the performance of household tasks.

In sum, the experience from birth to maturity interacting with others is what helps create broad, if varying degrees of commitment to normative representations, in the sense in which Bloch and Sperber use the concept of "epidemiological." The maturation experience is grounded in the ambiguity of nurturing permissiveness on the one hand contrasted with stress on respecting authority on the other. In early childhood it involves neglect and enforcement of the principle of adult dignity, both obedience to and indulgence by older siblings, and persistent verbal support for the authority concept. By the time of early adulthood young men remain secure in a familiar and relatively favorable social environment, while young women venture into an unfamiliar and unpredictable environment of marriage, often with a virtual stranger. Only after the birth of a son can she begin an important, if often ambiguous, relation linking her and her son with her brother, which may later contribute to security within her own household.

Consultants' View of the Bonds with Mother's Brothers

Much information concerning kinship was gathered from collecting genealogies, observing and

3 The market place is as much social and convivial as it is commercial.

inquiring specifically about brother-sister, father-son, husband-wife, and other dyadic bonds of interactions in differing social contexts. Of eight genealogies collected it was possible to obtain more or less detailed information from seven conferees.⁴ Two had no personal experience because spatial difference was too great, the mother's brothers had died early in their lives, or because they claimed indifference to their affines. The latter may be explained by the cash cropping in coffee and Christian mission proselytism which, for a minority, had tended to complement the new economy that developed after 1950. This was an indication of how even the psychobiological connected ties to kin could be eroded by changing social norms. Both old and young men suggested that close kin in the past not only "loved" one another, but worked together in the arduous tasks of subsistence production, house building, and other community activities. By this assertion, since from my observations people still seemed to work together, they must have been referring to a developing lack of emotional commitment to such activities. By the 60s and 70s, as they expressed it, money had made everyone "equal" and the minority who had become Christian converts preferred to work for themselves to increase their wealth, irregardless of kinship commitments (Hamer 2002: 611–614).

The men all agreed that the sister's son should visit and serve his mother's brother. Still, three of them indicated physical contact was limited by distance. This was attributed to the marriage rule of clan (*gurri*) exogamy which meant that there might be miles separating the households, involving as much or more than a day of walking, rather than a short jog between adjacent hamlets (*cača*). Even so, a sister's son was expected to visit at the request of his maternal uncle at least once or twice a year. Three of the men indicated the mother's brother referred to the sister's son by the term *beto*, the same term used to refer to one's own male descendants. One man suggested that father's brothers were far more important in his life. Another indicated that his mother's brothers lived too far away for the use of such a familiar term as son (*beto*). A third maintained that only his given name was used, though a sister's son should be treated as if he were a mother's brother's son.

As Bloch and Sperber predict there is variation in the emotional commitment of these men to

4 Genealogical information was provided by six men, five of whom had been circumcised and promoted to elderhood. More general material was obtained from two Aleta elders noted for their wisdom.

their mother's brothers based on their differing experience and possibilities of contact with the latter. This creates a kind of ambivalence, such as Goody portrays. They all recognize the existence of an historically created norm for the sister's son of respect and service; but only four of the consultants are sure of receiving protection from maternal uncles and assistance in acquiring extra land and/or cattle.⁵ In regard to the latter, there is a growing awareness of increasing population and land shortage. Consequently many mother's brothers, in recent times, no longer have available resources to share with sister's sons. There is also the possibility of individual prioritizing in seeking land from varying sources. Thus, if one knows of a hamlet (*cača*) where land is available, he has only to request permission of use from an elder who, because of the generational class system and if the individual is of his father's generation, constitutes a fictive father anywhere in Sidāmo land, for he is part of a set of political bonds that tend to supercede that of the affinal connectiveness with the mother's brother.

Given the variation in consultant's cognitive views of the importance of maternal uncle's bonds with sister's sons is there any normative representational aspect that all can agree is important, whether or not it has been part of their life experience? As it happens, all conferees agree that it is obligatory for a sister and her son to attend her brother's circumcision ritual, to bring food and make a token payment to the man performing the operation (*orgāsse*). Indeed, I never attended such circumcision ritual where this practice and the presence of the sister and her son did not occur. If the sister is deceased, the duties of presenting food and paying the *orgāsse* fall upon her son (Hamer 1987: 53 f.). This ritual constitutes the preliminary to the promotion to elderhood, the most important event in the life cycle of a Sidāmo man.

Consequently, the years of visiting, expressions of respect and trust by the sister's son with possible gifts from the mother's brother tend to be individually variable, but preliminaries to elderhood promotion of the latter. This ostensibly constitutes the basis for the normative representation of the affinal

5 If there is a known surplus of land in another clan area, a man may request permission of the elders to farm and live as a "stranger." He will be accepted as part of the community except for marriage exogamy and certain clan rituals, as will his descendants. Indeed members of his adopted community are forbidden to mention or discuss the fact he is a "stranger." See Hamer (2003) for discussion of how *luu* classes crosscut clan boundaries in providing for cooperative resource exchange in a favorable environment.

bond. It is, however, also a ritual foundation for a political norm of authority which encompasses all social relationships. It helps to create what Bloch and Sperber refer to as behavior which is both “attractive” and “unattractive” (2002: 733), in the sense that it could lead to destabilization of the mother’s brothers sister’s son nexus.

The variable preliminaries and the culminating ritual of promotion to elderhood is an “attractive” normative representation supported by all conferees. But there is a latent negative sanction which implies the possible use of “unattractive” force by the mother’s brother, should he fear for the legitimization of his future elderhood status because of neglect by his sister and her son. Also, there exists a reciprocal fear by the latter that failure to support mother’s brother will ultimately impact the sister’s son’s future promotion. An even wider threat of social destabilization is that of agnatic/affinal relationships in general as well as more inclusive community harmony. In regard to the latter, it is the gerontocratic authority of elderhood that is threatened through the erosion of the promotion system which would impair the dignity of the elders and the overall Sidāmo polity. Furthermore, this could create a crisis for the moral code (*halālu*), the foundation of community harmony as the way of life (Hamer 1996: 528–530). This could spread fear in the minds of all people.

The threat of negative sanction (*boha*) is that of expulsion from the kinship system. Only more formidable is the curse of the elders in council and the imposition of a more inclusive exclusion (*sira*) from the community (Hamer 1987: 115 f.).⁶ *Sira* turns a recalcitrant who refuses to admit his wrong doing, into a nonperson. Other Sidāma should not work, eat, or socialize with such a person. *Boha* in placing an individual at least partly outside the kinship system threatens their identity with their affinal relatives.

It is interesting that none of my consultants, including two old elders, could recall a specific example of the imposition of *boha*.⁷ Their explanation was that it seldom occurred in the past and was now dangerous because an angry sister or nephew might take the mother’s brother to a government court, where he would be heavily fined. Nevertheless as one young man, not yet ready for elderhood promotion, suggested, sons were continually

warned by mothers that to fail in duties to their maternal uncle would lead them to become like Hawačo or Hadičo, members of despised artisan castes considered as non-kin by most Sidāma.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the potential fear and guilt associated with the possible imposition of exclusion is an ironically “unattractive” aspect that helps to stabilize what is considered an “attractive” normative representation that not only underpins the agnatic-affinal connection, but constitutes the whole institutional basis for Sidāmo political cohesion.

The fact that the psychobiological bonds of the mother’s brother’s sister’s son exist helps, as Bloch and Sperber suggest, to “favor receptivity” to the information provided by cultural representations (2002: 732). In an abstract sense the opposing values of benevolent nurturance and controlling authority, of incorporation and exclusion, become stabilized through the *boha* tradition. The threat of exclusion encourages incorporation that maintains the linkage between opposing descent groups and contributes to the cohesion of disparate forces in the generational class system. The mother’s brother’s sister’s son’s connection becomes the basis for stabilizing generational differences in all of Sidāmo land.

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6 Five of eight men whom I questioned on the *boha* concept spoke with emotion of its attributes in great detail.

7 Some said that a father and mother’s brother might collaborate in imposing *boha*, though others denied the likelihood of such action.

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Tribal Kinship in Central India

A Reply Article

Robert Parkin

Professor Georg Pfeffer has recently (2004) returned to his ideas concerning the nature of kinship systems of peoples in central India who are usually

characterized as “tribes” by both academic and legal convention. His basic aim in this new article is to reaffirm his longstanding claim (see Pfeffer 1982, 1983, 1985) that these systems are best interpreted as four-line systems of affinal alliance, for which the Aranda (or Arunta) system in Australia has long been the textbook example. Here he is seeking to reinforce this argument in a number of ways: 1) by presenting considerable kin-term data from twelve of these tribes; 2) by offering ostensibly new ways of diagramming these systems; 3) by directly comparing one of them, that of the Juang, with the Aranda as described by Spencer and Gillen nearly eighty years ago (1927); and 4) by referring to the as yet largely unpublished findings of a cohort of students and colleagues who have recently been working in the area. Unfortunately, this new cornucopia of evidence and presentational techniques does no more than expose even more graphically than before the impossibility of Pfeffer’s basic hypothesis. In the brief discussion below, I shall restrict myself to the first, second, and third of these points, before introducing some field data of my own which points in a totally different direction for the tribe that has been most central to this debate, namely the Juang. I shall mostly refrain from simply regurgitating arguments I have made before in this context (but cf. Parkin 1993a, 1993b), since they are not substantially affected by Pfeffer’s latest article.

Throughout the article, if intermittently, Pfeffer appears to treat me as his main antagonist – not without reason. Indeed, the reader should be alerted to the fact that the ongoing exchange between Pfeffer and myself has as its background the breakdown in our personal and professional relationship that he himself alludes to (2004: 388, n. 30). Given Pfeffer’s decision to reopen the dispute, I beg the reader’s indulgence to reply to this aspect of it here too. Pfeffer’s account of the circumstances of this breach is broadly correct, with the addition that it was brought about means of a personal letter he wrote to me accusing me of a variety of professional misdemeanours, including most particularly plagiarism, that I had allegedly committed in a paper I gave to a conference on transformations in kinship in Moscow in spring 1992. Since the letter did not make it at all clear whom I was supposed to have plagiarised, at the time I assumed it was himself. Now for the first time I infer that it was actually Sasanka Sarkar, an obscure but worthy Indian anthropologist writing in the 1930s. In the conference paper that Pfeffer mentions, I had presented a general argument backed up by specific but minimal data, including Sarkar’s, and with a