

Rezensionen

Abbink, Jon, Michael Bryant, and Daniel Bambu: *Suri Orature. Introduction to the Society, Language, and Oral Culture of the Suri People (Southwest Ethiopia).* Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2013. 203 pp. ISBN 978-3-89645-289-4. (Verbal Art and Documentary Literature in African Languages / Wortkunst und Dokumentartexte in afrikanischen Sprachen, 33) Price: € 29.80

For people who want an excellent overview of Suri society, language, and oral culture, this thoughtful and well-written book will be very useful. Divided into four parts: “Suri Society,” “Suri Language,” “Orature – Samples from the ‘Literature’ of an Oral Culture,” and “A Suri View on Suri Life and Society – Daniel Bambu’s Accounts,” this book brings together the long-term experiences of anthropologist Jon Abbink, linguist Michael Bryant, and mission-educated Suri Daniel Bambu, whose stories are featured in the last section of the book. Let me begin by briefly discussing the basic contents of each part and its merits. Then I will raise a couple of critical points, although I find the book overall to be a clearly presented and straightforward overview of Suri language and orature.

The introduction (Part 1) pulls together various strands of Suri society from “arts, crafts, and trade” to “conflict,” “religion,” and “traditional medicine.” Drawing on his ethnographic research in Suri since the early 1990s, Abbink provides a lucid summary of the rapidly changing culture of the Suri (which includes Tirmaga, Chai, and Baale) and situates their current “challenges of an uncertain future” (21 f.). These challenges, which are synonymous with large-scale agro-development, hydroelectric dams, and government plans to sedentarise the Suri help to contextualise why the Suri find themselves “in a state of insecurity and transition” today (21).

Part 2 provides readers with the linguistic and technical ins and outs of one of the Surmic languages. Bryant begins by making the point that Suri is an ethnonym that describes a people, not a language. This is an important point, since the Tirmaga-Chai-Baale are often lumped together as agro-pastoralists who “share the cultural practices of ceremonial stick duelling by men and the wearing of lip plates by women” (25) and are falsely assumed to speak “Suri.” However, as he clearly shows, the three groups might be culturally similar, but they differ linguistically. Throughout this section he highlights various distinctions between Tirmaga and Chai, who speak a Southeast Surmic language, and Baale, who speak a Southwest

Surmic language, and provides a typological overview of Tirmaga. Like Chai and Baale, Tirmaga (formerly Tirma) is a tonal language with “a full set of implosives” (27).

Part 3 introduces the various genres of Suri orature, of which there are at least eleven basic genres (104). Readers not only interested in the linguistic structure of the language can find rich summaries at the end of each sample of folktales, public discussions, and traditional songs. These are verbal art forms in their own right, which, especially in the case of personal-history songs (which, in Mursi, are also referred to as “personal praise songs”), possess a historical reality with such depth that only a certain Suri “insider” (e.g., member of a certain clan) would understand (141).

The final section (Part 4) is most useful as an account through which the lived experiences of Daniel Bambu are distilled and made meaningful as a historical and biographical sketch of a Tirmaga man. While Bambu’s perspectives are, at times, distinctively shaped by his mission education, common threads shared by non-Christian Suri can certainly be found and will no doubt “inspire other Suri to sincerely reflect and express themselves on some of the issues that the Suri are currently wrestling with ...” (156). Most readers will arrive at the end of this section with the feeling that they want to read and learn more about Bambu’s challenging life experiences.

There are only two issues I wish to raise more as critical comments, rather than technical or stylistic faults within the book. The first has to do with the linguistic analysis. While Bryant does an excellent job to break things down for ordinary, general readers, the analysis of Tirmaga grammar still assumes some basic linguistic skills. Although the focus of the book is oral culture, for untrained Suri students, or educators interested in communicating, teaching, or writing in Tirmaga, Chai, and Baale, one small wish would have been to include a basic linguistic summary outlining the main differences between Tirmaga-Chai-Baale languages.

While Abbink, Bryant, and Bambu successfully bring into focus the general types of oratory in Suri, it would have also been interesting to hear more about the context in which certain types of orature are delivered, how women’s oratory is different from and similar to that of men’s, or how it might be compared to or contrasted with the orature of neighbouring groups. Although the matter of excluding women’s oral culture is raised in the beginning, the authors never allude to why comparisons with women

or neighbouring groups are excluded. Nods to other cultures like the Mursi and Bodi, who share similar oral culture, would have been a welcome addition to the text and, if anything, a way to honour the different oral traditions in southern Ethiopia.

This book is clearly meant to serve as an introduction to Suri society and oral culture. The book also shows that anthropology and linguistics are not only for a small group of experts, but are also useful to educators, students, and the Suri community in general. As the Suri transition into new – and often unfamiliar – sociocultural contexts, in which their involvement in government school-based education will no doubt increase, the pedagogical value of the book for future literacy programs in Suri will be important.

“Suri Orature” is also an important book in that it offers an example of the kinds of practical solutions needed to resolve current paradoxes of development in Southwest Ethiopia. As Abbink so pointedly puts it: “... new ways must be found to give meaning to the process of ‘development,’ which is not a mono-dimensional economic development working from the top down and with coercion, but a broad process of social and political adaptation and educational change, starting from local conditions” (22). Currently, alongside large-scale agro-developments in southern Ethiopia, resettlement sites are being built by the government in order to transform the lives of agro-pastoralists like the Suri and their neighbours by turning them into settled cultivators with irrigated plots, but with few or no cattle. These plans are being carried out in the interests of national development and in the firm belief that it will also benefit the local population. Past experiences show that ambitious and well-meaning projects like this have often had tragic consequences for those they were intended to benefit, mainly because the planners failed to involve local people in project planning and, thereby, to respect local knowledge. Lessons on the injustices that characterise displacement are evidenced, for example, by the introduction of state-run school programs, which are often unable to provide teaching in local languages, often despite policies that encourage mother-tongue learning. Ethiopia is no exception.

According to section 2.2.12 of the Ethiopian government’s “Education and Training Policy,” ethno-linguistic groups have the right to learn their mother tongue: Amharic for national communication, and English for international communication. Primary education can be taught in the mother tongue, and if it is not Amharic, the latter should be learned as a subject in order to facilitate national communication. When Amharic is taken as the medium of instruction, the mother tongue can be taught as a subject (LaTosky and Zehle, *Schooling for Agro-Pastoralist Communities in the Sala-Mago District, South Omo Zone. Vignettes from the First Generation of Mursi Schoolgirls*. Addis Ababa 2015: 214). However despite the Ministry of Education’s “[s]trategies for promoting primary and secondary education in pastoralist areas,” which includes an evolutionary narrative featuring ‘backward’ peoples who would benefit from formal education (MoE 2008: 5 f.), mother-tongue learning has so far been

neglected” (LaTosky and Zehle 2015: 216). The reasons for such neglect have mainly to do with a lack of specialist teachers, language resource materials, and commitment by education authorities to ensure mother-language based multilingualism. One can only hope that future state-run education programs will come to adopt and further develop progressive mother-tongue literacy projects like the one in Suri, thanks to the efforts of linguists like Michael Bryant (and others mentioned in the book).

As an anthropologist deeply concerned with the quality of future education projects for agro-pastoralists in South Omo, and especially their ability to fulfill the practical needs of the community, I am grateful to the authors (Abbink, Bryant, and Bambu) for showing readers in such a clear and straightforward manner that a basic understanding of Suri language, society and oral culture is not only useful and interesting in its own right, but a practical first step towards protecting linguistic diversity and cultural heritage in southwest Ethiopia. The book will indeed “... contribute to the further development of the Tirmaga-Chai language (usually called Suri) and educational materials in this language, thereby providing the people with a healthy means of integrating into the greater Ethiopian community and global society” (26).

Shauna LaTosky

Aguilera, Sabina: *Textiles ralámuli. Hilos, caminos y el tejido de la vida*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2014. 215 pp. ISBN 978-3-7861-2729-1. (Estudios Indiana, 6) Preis: € 34.00

Die Autorin untersucht die Herstellung und Gestaltung von verschiedenartigen Textilien in der Sierra Tarahumara, namentlich in Coyachique der Barranca de Cobre und einem Stützpunkt indigener Weberinnen in der Siedlung Padre Carlos Díaz Infante, S. J. der Stadt Chihuahua des gleichnamigen nordwestmexikanischen Bundesstaates. Mit Hilfe von mehreren Informantinnen und Informanten erschließt sich die Autorin die Bedeutung der auf den Textilien (Gürtel und Decken) dargestellten Zeichen als Ausdrucksformen ihres Weltbildes bzw. einer historisch-sozialen Erinnerungsform ihrer indigenen Kultur. Die Textilien werden auch heute für den Eigengebrauch, aber auch für den Verkauf an Touristen in großer Zahl hergestellt und gehören zu den herausragenden kunsthandwerklichen Produkten dieser Region. Die Sierra Tarahumara ist das Heimatland zahlreicher Gruppen der Rarámuri (Tarahumara), die zum Teil erhebliche sprachliche, rituelle, politische und materielle Unterschiede untereinander aufweisen und deshalb nicht als eine kulturell einheitliche Ethnie betrachtet werden können. Daher wählte die Autorin die regionale Aussprache “Ralámuli” als Volksbezeichnung ihrer untersuchten Region. Dies mag zu Irritationen hinsichtlich der bisher einheitlichen Bezeichnung Rarámuri führen, reflektiert aber die Diversität der Region, die durch die Städtewanderung, die seit mehreren Jahrzehnten stattfindet, noch verstärkt wird. Mehrere noch permanent ihr Handwerk betreibende Weberinnen und zum Teil auch Weber leben heute fast ausschließlich in den Städten des Bundesstaates Chihuahua