

Report, Assessment and Recommendations regarding the Hamer people of the South Omo region

1. Report

1.1 Overview on the situation of the Hamer people

The Hamer, also spelled Hamar, are one of the Southern Peoples, Nations and Nationalities of Ethiopia (SPNN). Along with approximately 25 other indigenous peoples, they live in the South Omo region, which has one of the highest densities of cultures in the world. Together with the Banna, the Hamer share the language Hamer-Banna. Demographical figures for Hamer members or speakers of the language vary, depending on the sources, between 15.000 and more than 46.000 persons.¹ More than 38.000 Hamer-Banna speakers are monolingual, which can be seen as an indicator of a vital culture.² However, recent developments pose some extreme threats on the indigenous peoples of that region. This applies not only to the Hamer; however, their situation is representative of the general situation of the indigenous cultures of the region.

Already in 2007, the human rights situation of the Hamer and other peoples was addressed in a United Nations General Assembly report on the Human Rights Council's ninth session (A/HRC/9/9/Add.1).

¹ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/hamar/#further1>>,
<http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf>, 12 July 2012

² Cf. <ethnologue.org> for the latest figures.

1.2 Overview on the measures taken

In November 2011, we had inter-disciplinary meetings at Addis Ababa University and at Hawassa University, as well as at the OSSREA (Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa) office in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. During the meetings in different departments, it was especially the Institute of Indigenous Cultures and Languages of Addis Ababa University, which pointed out the problem that land was given to Indian and other foreign investors for the production of energy plants such as sugar cane and soy beans, as an immense threat to the indigenous cultures.

Both at Addis Ababa University and Hawassa University, presentations were given by the author to inform about the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its implications.

After that and with support from Addis Ababa University, we visited the Hamar region, where encounters with the Hamer people took place in a minimally invasive way.

Further research was carried out as follow-up to the Ethiopia excursion.

2. Assessment

When analysing the changes of the Hamer culture itself by means of cultural semiotics, a progression of globalisation, topographically intruding into the Hamer territory from the north, becomes apparent. This is especially manifest in the Hamer's self-presentation, as the traditional appearance, which has been the way of defining themselves for long historical periods, is abruptly abandoned. Hamer women are affected first, since in the onset of these changes, like other indigenous women in similar situations, they suddenly start to cover themselves with a shirt, thereby adding a bodily taboo zone that had not existed before. Psychologically, this new behaviour pattern implies that the traditional visual manifestation of the self is now seen as something negative, which has to be avoided. Whereas up to then, the traditional appearance of the women was linked to female self-confidence and emotional security, now the externally induced standards of the progressing dominant culture persuade the persons concerned that they have to be ashamed of what up to then had been a natural part of their personality, and, at the same time, a part of their culture's everyday life. The change taking place is not only a loss of a particular feature of indigenous culture in semiotic terms, with the global dominant culture gaining ground and, as in thousands of other cases, deleting characteristics of a unique culture, but it is also, on the personal level, a severe destabilisation of indigenous identity, triggering psychological processes, which, for the collective, then lead to the disintegration of their culture. Globally, these mechanisms are about to destroy humanity's last cultural resources.

At the time of our visit, i.e. at the end of 2011, the topographic boundary between authentic culture and culture affected by globalisation was just north of the town of Turmi. Evaluation of accessible film and photo material shows that about two years before (2009), this boundary had reached the town of Dimeka, and about five years before (2006), it had been at the town of Konso. As a matter of course, the advancing globalisation is not only relevant to the Hamer culture, but it affects all indigenous cultures, upon which it hits in the course of its expansion.

From its initial stage, the globalising influence gradually spreads to other characteristics of the culture. Men and children also change their self-definition that is manifest in the way they present themselves – and thus assign themselves culturally. By and by, traditional indigenous cultural elements become replaced by the externally induced elements of the dominant culture. However, these cultural elements have different effects on the identity of those concerned, and thus to the stability of the cultural system. The less relevant a cultural element is to the bodily definition of the person's self, the less it affects his or her identity, and the less destabilising impact it has on the cultural system. Interestingly, Hamer men on their way between Turmi and Dimeka use to carry old rifles – this has become a cultural characteristic of its own, without modifying these men's identity in a way that clothing does.

In the Hamer region, the process of cultural loss is further accelerated by projects of the Norwegian Save the Children Fund, which are carried out in an invasive and non-sensitive way. The school compound that we saw near Turmi and the teacher, who was employed there by the fund, obviously served culturally non-sustainable functions, in defiance of Art. 14 and 15 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which grant indigenous peoples sovereignty on their educational system, and requires its cultural specificity.

However, other external influences of globalisation have come about that are even more rapid than those mentioned, and therefore pose larger and more radical threats on the indigenous peoples of the South Omo region. The Hamer men will hardly be able to fight off the effect of the newly built highway running from Weyto Bridge southwards through Dimeka and Turmi. This road, built by a Korean company, certainly makes sense in connection with the land use by foreign investors. We gained knowledge of plans for a railway line parallel to this road. Apparently, a need for further transportation capacity is expected. The busy traffic that can be anticipated will surpass the present gradual influx by far, and put the indigenous peoples of that region into a disorienting dilemma.

There are reports of indigenous resistance against the land use by foreign investors, and also of massive repressions by the government against the indigenous peoples, with the purpose of breaking their resistance and scaring them away.³

The mere basis of indigenous peoples' existence is also endangered by the Gibe III dam, which is presently being built, and which is going to interrupt the cycles of flooding and harvesting, on which the traditional agriculture relies. Ecosystems linked to the Omo River can be expected to be destabilised. Further cultural destabilisation is approaching, as the electricity produced at Gibe III is going to attract industry and globalised people from other regions. Apart from the dam, there is already an impact of the global climate change on the region. During our excursion, it was supposed to be dry season, but it actually rained. As the harvest could not dry, it could not be collected and was prone to rot. This impact, too, brings about existential problems to the inhabitants of the region.

³ <http://indigenouspeoplesissues.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13253:ethiopia-compilation-of-reports-from-south-omo-ethiopia-on-land-grabbing-and-indigenous-people&catid=25&Itemid=58>, 12 July 2012

2. Recommendations

To counteract the destructive processes, which threaten the Hamar and other indigenous peoples, the following recommendations are given:

The starting point should be the recognition of land rights of the indigenous peoples, according to Art. 8 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Measures should be taken immediately to ensure the conservation and protection of the environment according to Art. 29 of the Declaration. For the indigenous territories, it should strictly be defined that all persons in it, inhabitants and visitors alike, have to observe the traditional visual culture, especially with regard to self-presentation, in order to respect the indigenous culture and to strengthen indigenous identity, to prevent further destabilisation, and to support cultural revitalisation according to Art. 11 of the Indigenous Rights Declaration. Doing this without compromise is extremely important, because individuals define their identity primarily by their visual appearance, and any aberration would undermine the semiotic system of the indigenous culture as a whole.⁴ Visitors, regardless of their status, have to either obey to these rules or keep out of the territory. Intervening on the level of material culture also serves the objective of ensuring Freedom of Information.⁵ It should be well noted that this regulation pertains to a territory. This policy ensures the adherence to Human Rights in general, and Indigenous Rights in particular, as anyone, both indigenous and non-indigenous, enjoys the freedom of choice in the sense that he or she can choose whether to stay inside or outside the traditional territory, and can also freely move in or out. Since the members of the non-indigenous, dominant culture are responsible for the external factors, which bear on the indigenous culture in a destructive way, it is their obligation to keep these factors out of the indigenous territory.

Article 29

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

S.A.C.S. will be happy to answer questions with regard to translating the Indigenous Rights into action.

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⁴ Compromises could even worsen the situation. With regard to body semiotics, accepting that women cover the breast despite the former tradition would not only point out that exception, but even stress a psychological mechanism of denying essential positive concepts related to motherhood, female self-confidence, feeding, comfort, cosiness and shelter.

⁵ Controlling what people should know, think or belief would be a violation of Human Rights.