

## SMELTING IRON: CASTE AND ITS SYMBOLISM IN SOUTH-WESTERN ETHIOPIA

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*“Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product. – The institutional world requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be ‘explained’ and justified. – The reality of the social world gains its massivity in the course of its transmission. This reality, however, is a historical one, which comes to each generation as a tradition rather than a biographical memory. – The original meaning of the institutions is inaccessible – in terms of memory. It therefore becomes necessary to interpret this meaning – in various legitimating formulas. These will have to be consistent and comprehensive in terms of the institutional order, if they are to carry conviction to the new generation”* (Berger and Luckmann: 1966: 79).

### Introduction

Conceptualisation of processes explaining culture-historical developments in any particular place or region will be vastly improved by being placed in a comparative analytical framework. In ethnographic fieldwork we have the opportunity to observe the interplay of ecological, social, and symbolic processes and on the basis of this improve the analytical framework by which we explore and interpret the remains of the past.

Humans live in a world of material objects they themselves have produced, in a world of institutional rules and regulations they have created, and in a world of symbolic meanings they have constructed. Objects have the special quality that they have a material existence that is readily observable. The activities involved in production and use of material objects is observable, but activities do not have the concreteness of material objects. Furthermore, to observe that a particular actor performs actions involved in the production and use of particular objects, for example, iron objects, does not by itself demonstrate why this type of activity is performed by a particular type of actor. This has to be understood against the background of the institutional order regulating allocation of roles in society. To understand why actors categorized as blacksmiths perform the activities involved in blacksmithing one has to place blacksmithing in the context of the institutional rules regulating the division of labour in society. Even among anthropologists who in principle have access to the observational material required for such an analysis there are significant disagreements about how such an institutional

order should be conceptualised. Since archaeologists cannot observe the prehistoric institutional order there are of course even more severe constraints on the kind of inferences they can make in this field. When it comes to the symbolic universe ‘explaining’ and legitimating activities undertaken within a particular institutional order, we enter the methodologically difficult task of interpreting the meaning of objects and activities.

We shall in this article, based on ethnographic observations from a small community (Oska Dencha within the former Tsara chieftainship) in South-western Ethiopia, start with material which both anthropologists and archaeologists can observe, namely human-made material objects, in this case productive equipment used in iron-smelting and the material output of the smelting. In contrast to archaeologists we had the privilege to observe the actual human activities involved in the making of iron. Furthermore, we could explore the institutional structure that was mobilized in these activities, and we had the opportunity to inquire into some aspects of the metaphoric linkages of the symbolic universe legitimating the institutional order.

In another paper we have focused on the institutional order of iron-production in this ethnographic region (Haaland et al. manuscript). Our focus here is upon the universe of ritual symbolism in terms of which people understand and execute the operations involved in smelting. Within this universe focus shall be upon the metaphoric association between smelting and pot making, activities involving the polluting transformation of sacred earth by fire to produce important cultural products like iron objects and pots. We shall from the perspective of the idea of the sacredness of earth discuss how this is related to the construction of the social identities of both the smelter and pot maker as polluted, and of low ranking caste. We shall also discuss how sacrifice and offering are important parts of the smelting activities and how they are related to the identity of the smelter.

### Fieldwork: The Ethnographic Setting and the Natural Environment

Oska Dencha is located in a rugged area of mountain ridges, hill slopes, and lowlands between the old kingdoms of Konta and Kafa (**Figure 1**). This area was a kind of buffer zone

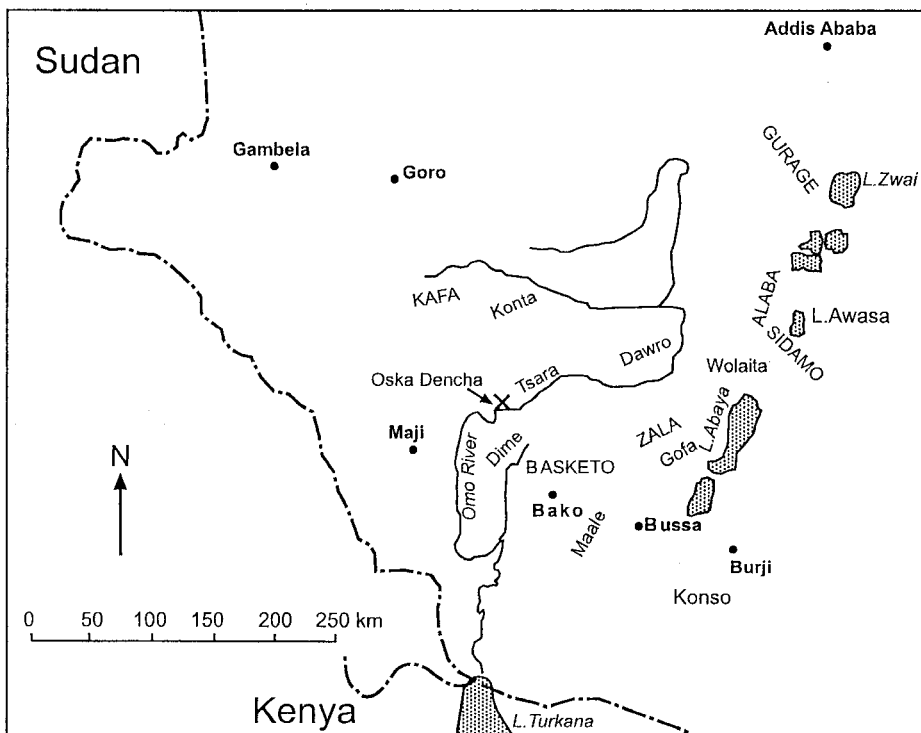
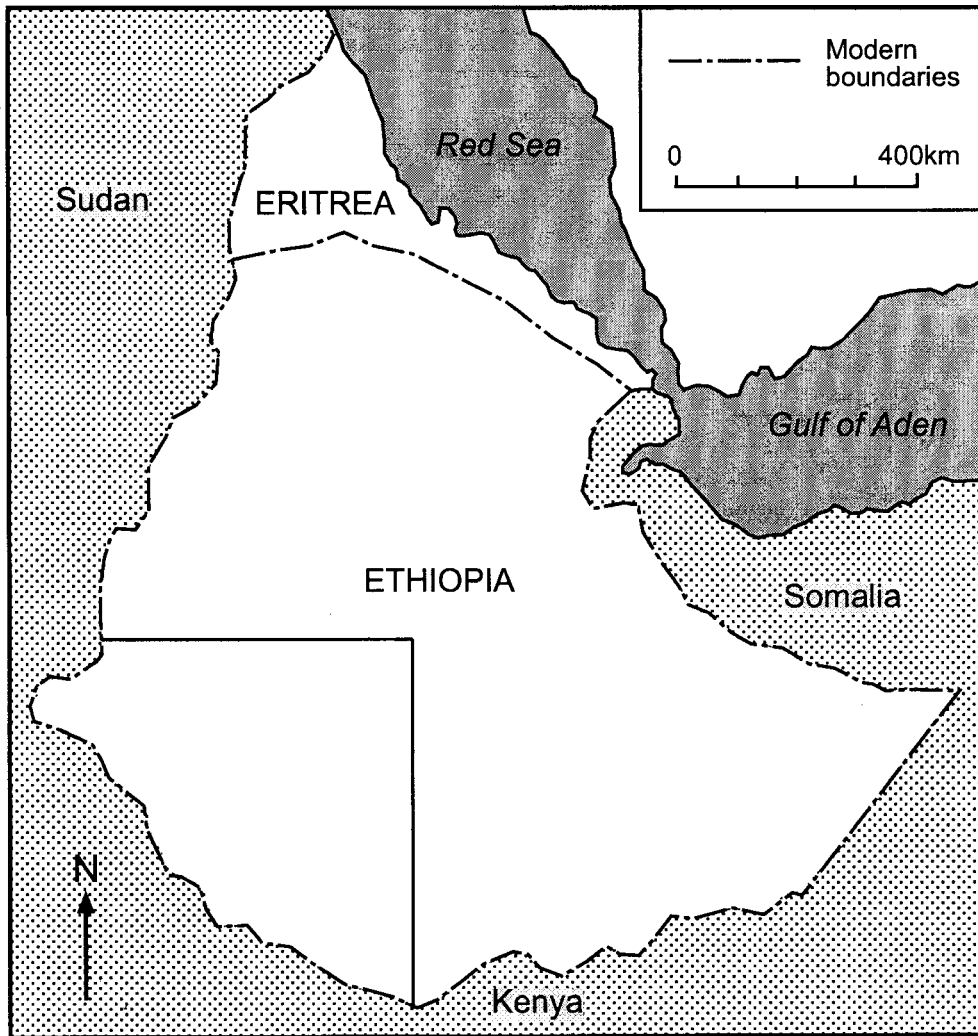


Figure 1. Map of south-west Ethiopia showing the location of Osk Dencha and, inset, some of the major ethnic groups in the region.

between these kingdoms, and was occupied by several smaller chieftainships (Basketo, Dime, Tsara) that like the Dawro, Konta and the Kafa spoke different languages of the Omotic language branch of the Afro-Asian language family. These languages fall into different sub-branches of the Omotic branch. For our purposes the most important sub-branches are Northwest Omoto (including Dawro, Konta, Wolaita and Maale), South East Omoto (including Tsara), and Kefoid (including Kafa). The villagers are farmers and keep some livestock, mostly cattle and goats. Ploughs are used on a few cleared plots for cultivation of teff. The main agricultural tool is the digging stick, with or without an iron point.

The population of the village mainly consists of Tsara. Ironwork is an occupational specialization associated with a social category called *mana* in Tsara language. Within that category males do the smelting and forging, while women make clay pots. *Mana* homesteads were located in a lower lying part at the outskirts of the main village. Previously they were not allowed to own land and livestock. In the past it was claimed that they were dependant on the chief for their food and in return had to provide iron objects needed for agriculture and for warfare, as well as special spears for the investiture of chiefs.

## The Smelting

Iron ore is found along the hills at a distance of one hour's walk from the furnace. The ore was extracted from small pits with digging sticks. Nine men from the village and the master smelter Chilacho worked together to dig out the ore (no other members of the smiths family participated in this activity). Before extracting the ore the Chilacho sat down to drink the local liquor after first having poured part of it on the ground outside the pit, as an offering (*yarshua* in Omoto languages) to the spirits (*ayana*) of his ancestors. They dug a 3 metre deep hole in the hillside to reach good pieces of ore. When the group of diggers sat down to take a meal of food, which had been brought from the village, the master smelter took his part aside and consumed it in a place separate from the others.

A range of activities took place in connection with construction of tuyeres, bellows, the furnace, and with the actual smelting operations transforming ore to bloom. Both Chilacho and his wife made the tuyeres - small (12 cm long) ones called *zeida* and a larger (25 cm long) flared type called *tsole*. *Tsole* (all the names connected with smithing are in the Tsara language) also refers to penis while *zeida* refers to the foreskin of the penis. The final number of tuyeres was 30, 15 of each of the two types.

Chilacho told us that new furnaces should be constructed by the smelter, his wife and his sons. The furnace should be built outside the homestead in bush land in order to prevent people who were ritually unclean (mainly menstruating women) harming the smelting operation. Elsewhere in Africa the common practice is to destroy the furnace after the smelt in order to remove the bloom from the pit (Haaland 1985).

In Oska Dencha the furnace was constructed in a way that allowed for removal of the bloom through the top opening of the furnace. The furnace we observed in Oska Dencha had thus been used several times (**Figure 2**), but had to be repaired before the smelting could start.

The furnace was 80 cm high, and underneath the furnace was a 40 cm deep slag pit. The furnace wall was 12 cm thick and the inner diameter of the furnace across the mouth (opening) was 42 cm. Radiating around the base of the furnace were 15 holes made for the 5 pot bellows to be attached to the tuyeres. Each pot-bellow had three openings for the small tuyeres.

When the repair of the furnace was completed a goat was sacrificed (*shuka* in Omoto languages) and the blood was spread around the outside of the furnace. This was said to ensure a successful smelting operation. The blood must not come inside the furnace since this was said to cause the people who ate the sacrificed meat to die. The only taboo connected with furnace construction was focussed at women who should



**Figure 2.** The furnace and pot bellows are repaired and ready for smelting (photo. Gunnar Haaland).

not be menstruating since this ritual impurity was said to be harmful to the smelt. There are otherwise no prohibitions on women participating in making the furnace or smelting the ore.

An incident occurred when we first came to the place of the furnace. Three clay pot bellows had been broken. According to Chilacho noman children in the village had done this. He was very furious and would not come near the furnace until some of the people from the village had removed the broken pieces. He then offered

ore and one tuyere together with 10 birr (Ethiopian currency) which he put under a tree circa 10 metres away from the furnace. From a cup, he drank some liquor and poured of it on the ground as a sacrifice. This expression is generally translated as the father's devil, but it carries very different meanings for people of different religious affiliations. For Chilacho the term *tsalahia* (devil) has benevolent connotations more like a spirit, while for those influenced by Christianity the term *tsalahia* is identified with the devil of the Bible. He then cursed the people who had broken the pot bellows by the names of Meriam (St Mary), his father's spirit, and his father who created him.

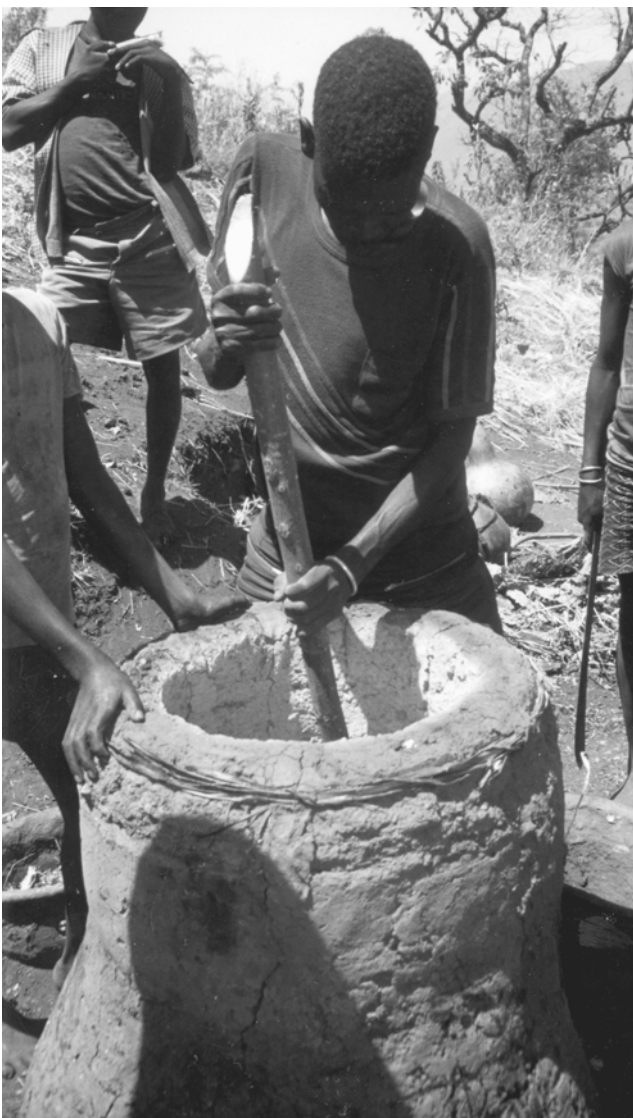
Chilacho went on to say, "what they broke were the pot bellows, what they meant was to make me and my family sick. Since they broke the pot bellows I have been sick and my family have been sick. To protect me from the evil actions I have to sacrifice". If he did not sacrifice he said he would suffer from misfortune caused by me (moral transgression). Chilaco showed us his finger which had been damaged when smithing and said that this was due to his pots having been damaged. When they were re-making the clay pots for the bellows, he took a stone, threw it into the furnace, and again

Chilacho also operated a small smithy under a thatched roof with open walls. When a smithy is made, according to Chilacho, a goat is sacrificed before it can be used, in order to ensure that the iron tools will be good. The blood of the sacrificed goat is put on the pot bellows, the hearth and the anvil.

Figure 3. Chilacho is overseeing the killing of a goat for sacrifice during the smelting operation. (photo. Randi Haaland).



**Figure 4.** The two types of tuyeres are attached to the pot-bellows and furnace (photo. Randi Haaland)



**Figure 5.** The bloom is recovered from the furnace with an iron pick (photo. Randi Haaland).

Chilacho and his wife are not involved in any puberty rites, or rituals related to birth, marriage, or death. Chilacho however, is the person who makes the metal aprons that girls wear, as part of their growing into puberty. They start wearing strips of metal, two or three, from the time they start walking, and end up with a full apron when they have reached adulthood and are ready to marry. At this time they also add cowry shells to the apron to signal that they are sexually mature. These aprons are worn both by the females in the family of the smith and by the Tsara females in general.

The *mana* is accused of breaching human food taboos by eating dead animals as well as other ritually unclean (*tuna* in Ometo languages) food. One evening Chilacho himself told us that the *mana* eat the meat of animals that had died without being slaughtered. Once his group of smiths had been invited to the town of Sawla, to demonstrate their skills in iron working and everything had gone well and they had been praised for their good work. However on the way back to their village they came across a dead animal which they ate. When the villagers got to know this trouble erupted and their stigmatisation was further reinforced.

### The Institutional Context of Iron-production

The material items described in this summary sketch may be similar to those found in archaeological contexts, and the practical activities and technical relations we observed in connection with the construction and use of these items may serve as a relatively straight forward key to infer practical activities connected to material remains of prehistoric iron production based on similar technology. However our sketch also contained observations of features that relate to the institutional order regulating the flow of events connected to iron working.

First of all, the term *mana* does not only refer to an occupational specialist, but to a total social identity associated with iron-working. We have elsewhere (Haaland et al. manuscript) argued that division of labour among Omotic speaking people is based on an institutional order which can be characterized as caste, i.e. a social system based on status summation in such a way that having one particular status, for example blacksmith, entails that one also is incumbent of a specific cluster of other statuses, for example position in ritual, kinship, political structures. From a sociological perspective caste is a type of social organization based on a ranked clusters of statuses. *Mana* is just one ranked identity among the Tsara, another such identity is the farmer caste ranked above *mana*. The separation between the occupational castes are made relevant in restrictions on commensality, on intermarriage, and in earlier times also in ownership of land.

Comparative ethnographic material (Barth 1960; Berreman 1979; Tuden and Plotnicov 1970) indicates that structurally very similar forms of stratification have emerged in very different cultural contexts, and that they are intimately linked to the growth of political power centres with control of coercive force strong enough to squeeze out an agricultural surplus from a large number of cultivators. The livelihood of the crafts and administrative specialists thus depended on maintenance of the redistributive political centre. This generalization may serve as another key in our interpretation of possible organizational contexts of prehistoric material remains. The importance of such provisional interpretation is that it can serve as guidelines in our search for other types of archaeological material (for example, settlement structures, location of different types of production sites as well as ritual sites) which may indicate whether occupational tasks are performed in a caste-like organizational context, or in a context characterised by more egalitarian principles, for example many Bantu communities (see Haaland et al. 2002 for further discussion).

As pointed out by Donham “Omotic Kingdoms must have risen and fallen, and the power of kings waxed and waned” (1999: 20). These kingdoms varied significantly in scale from powerful centralized states such as Kafa, Dawro and Woleita, to middle range chiefdoms like Male and Gofa, to small decentralized tributary communities like Tsara and Dime in a buffer zone. No matter the scale of the political systems, the association of crafts with specific ranked identities was an important principle of social organization in all of them, although the occupational tasks associated with specific identities as well as their relative rank, varied with the scale and complexity of the political centres. We shall here only give a short description of a variation of the caste system as found in the powerful state of Dawro. In the previous kingdom of Dawro social identities, each associated with occupational tasks, are still taken as basic principles for daily interaction in a variety of fields, e.g. economy, marriage, ritual, residence (Data Dea 1997). These identities are ordered in ranked strata (*yara* in Dawro dialect) as follows:

- Malla* - Citizens, farmers, rulers
- Wogatche* - Iron forgers
- Degelle* - Tanners

*Gitamana* - Iron smelters

*Mana* - Potters

*Manja* -charcoal-makers, forest users, hunters

An interesting point in this connection is that iron forgers belong to a distinct caste ranked above the caste of iron-smelters.

## The Symbolic Universe

The causal connections between the activities we observed and the material objects (furnace and smelting tools; ore and slag; bloom and slag) are so closely constrained by functional technical requirements, that we think that it gives a good basis for analogous interpretation of techno-ecological relations in prehistoric processes of iron-smelting based on similar technology and natural resources as exemplified in the work of Randi Haaland in Mali (Haaland 1980). We also think that the organizational connection we observed between the occupational specialization of iron-smelters and the institutional order of caste is strongly favoured by the political economy of early states. With a critical application we thus think our sociological analysis can be used in the interpretation of the institutional context of prehistoric iron-production sites.

Berger and Luckmann have argued “Symbolic universes – are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality, “– the symbolic sphere refers to the most comprehensive level of legitimation” (1966: 113). In our description of iron-smelting in Oska Dencha we tried to indicate that particular objects and activities are not only linked to technical and organizational processes, but that they are part of a symbolic universe of meaning in terms of which people understand their ‘world’ and act in it. To explore that universe of meaning we would have needed material that we did not have the opportunity to collect during our short stay. However following Donham’s argument that the “Omotic societies to use Edmund Leach’s phrase (1954), shared a common ritual language” (Donham 1999: 20) we shall try to interpret the fragments of observations we made in Oska Dencha in the light of observations from other Omotic communities.

We shall start with some general considerations on the relationship between a caste based institutional order and its symbolic legitimation. The “roles that symbolically represent the total institutional order have been most commonly located in the political and religious institutions.” (Berger and Luckman: 1966: 94) In India the social order is symbolically conceived as a body (the primal man Purusha) and the *varnas* (caste categories) as his parts with the Sudra *jatis* (service castes) as his feet, the Vaishya *jatis* as his thighs, the Kshatriya *jatis* (ruling castes) as the arms, and the Brahmin *jatis* (priestly castes) as his mouth. The social structure of castes is understood as metaphorically analogous to the configuration of the body. Maintenance of the social whole is believed to











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