

Individuality as Mysticism: on the Concept of *Burji*

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The purpose of this paper is to analyse briefly some of the culturally standardized ways of expressing individual identity in southern Somalia. Although research on aspects of individual identity is a big field of interest in anthropological discourse (e.g. Mauss 1938, CNRS 1973, Beattie 1980, Jacobson-Widding 1983, Carrithers et al. 1985), we lack an understanding of such matters in the Somali culture.

Somalis are sometimes described as a « proud » people, though such descriptions usually miss the point that « pride » has to have a reason. The other side of the alleged pride then, is that the Somali culture recognizes a strong position for the individual, apart from whatever social functions he or she may fulfil.

To demonstrate this and some further points, I will limit myself here to a discussion of a single concept, which in Somali is called *burji*. I will show how this concept covers a central dimension in the ideas about what an individual is. I also want to show how this concept, by possessing a certain obscurity, can be made to contain and express a number of different experiences in daily discourse. In fact, this « obscurity » is central for a proper understanding of *burji*, because this property is in sharp contrast to properties of other aspects of personal identity.¹ Because of this, the term is difficult to define. It may be helpful, though, to say that to the layman at least, *burji* is thought of as a mystical force or power, which is innate to individuals and which directly influences their success in everyday life.²

Apart from the use of the term *burji* in daily discourse, there are also experts who have a more elaborate understanding of the concept. These are the religious specialists, the *wadaado* or *culmadda*. *Burji* is seen as a part of the area of competence of these men; i.e. the *cilmi* or religious knowledge. *Cilmi*, in turn, is

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¹ The property of obscurity may be seen as a semantically particularly powerful one. It can only be identified as such, however, when consciously contrasted with other, and non-obscure, categories.

² Cf. the definition given by Keenadiid (1976: 43): « to be born in a good star ». I should add, however, that in the interriver area at least, *burji* is not by necessity « good ».

conceived of as distinct from knowledge of worldly matters, *kasmo* or *caqli*.³ *Cilmi* and *kasmo*, religious and mundane knowledge, belong to entirely separate spheres of thought and action. In two papers, Lewis has analysed this dualism within the contexts of notions of power and of role stereotypes (Lewis 1963, 1965).

In that part of the interriver area of southern Somalia where I worked,⁴ people attach great importance to the ideology of patrilineal descent (*tol*). While « in reality » they are organized through a system of largely unrelated lineages and families, this organisation is conceptualized and expressed in terms of common descent from lineal ancestors.⁵ According to the values of this system, the prestige of an agnatic line depends on its numerical strength and upon the length of the genealogy that connects any particular segment to the eponymic clan ancestor.⁶ This is also reflected at the level of personal prestige or honour, as a man from such a group will be referred to as *magac dheer* - « with a long name ». This expression is a direct reference to the fact that the genealogy of a numerically strong and politically important segment is usually longer than that of minor sections.

It is important to mention that in daily life nobody pretends to be descended from a particular clan if this is not so. On the contrary, there is a strong awareness of the fictitious dimension of clanship in this area, at the the same time there are many contexts where clanship has virtually no importance whatsoever. Nevertheless there are other contexts for which the segmentary model is « practical » and, not least, it serves to unify the clan and its constituent lineages vis-à-vis other groups. Such a unity is relatively easily maintained, because genealogical knowledge, or knowing the affiliation of those one interacts with, is overt, common knowledge. Knowledge of individual character, however, is not considered to be within the domain of lineal collectivity, and the notions of *burji* in particular, reveal the complexity that such knowledge is thought to entail.

I am suggesting, then, that the category of the person is culturally constructed by drawing upon two opposed aspects of the wider society and culture. One of them relates the person to his group of patri-kin, the other emphasizes individual uniqueness by the use of values that contrast with the ideology of agnation.

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My own first acquaintance with the concept of *burji* was in overhearing a discussion concerning a public quarrel that had taken place. The quarrel had been quite animated and neither of the two contestants was thought to have « won » it. The way this was expressed was by saying that the two men « *waa isku burji* »,

³ *Cilmi* itself is of course far from uniform; as pointed out by Cassanelli (1975) there exist in the history of Somali Islam a distinct contrast between what he calls a mystical and a theocratic tradition. We will here only be concerned with the mystical tradition (see also Lewis 1955/56). For a brief but informative discussion of « rural » and « urban » Islamic versions, see Thomas (1982).

⁴ An area locally known as Ooflaawe, the largest part of which lies in the Qansaaxdheere district.

⁵ These aspects of interriver social structure have been described by e.g. Colucci (1924), Helander (1986a), Lewis (1969) and Luling (1971).

⁶ The connections between length of genealogies, lineage numerical strength and political power have been analysed in detail by Lewis (1961). The fact that genealogical alterations occur in the interriver area does not diminish the role they hold ideologically. It does, however, restrict this role to certain contexts (see Helander 1986a).

that they had the same or similar *burji*. At another occasion it was jokingly said to a man who had failed to kill an insect, that the *burji* of the insect was bigger than his.

Such expressions triggered my curiosity and I began to ask questions about this strange concept. I found that people had difficulty in explaining the term other than by relating examples of it. It was said: « when a boy falls in love with a girl but feels that something stops him from approaching her, then it is her *burji* that is bigger than his ». Similarly, I was told that « the one who can always persuade others to agree with his propositions, it is his *burji* that helps him ».

Apart from such examples, there did seem to be some general properties of *burji* that most people agreed about. These were that everybody has a *burji*, and that knowledge of the character of one's *burji* could be gained through procedures known by the shaikhs. It was also pointed out that one's *burji* is not liable to change although it was observed that to beget children could alter the strength of one's *burji*. This latter idea was exemplified by mentioning how some men and women seem to grow in personal ability and maturity as a result of having children. However, it was also stressed that the fact of having children does not necessarily contribute to the strength of one's *burji*. It might just as well mean that people are « eaten up » by the problems caused by their children.

This relationship of *burji* to the consequences of parenthood is significant. It illustrates that *burji* is conceived of as separate from the prestige or status that falls upon a person by virtue of his position within the kinship system. As I have mentioned, the ideology of patrilineal descent and its associated values hold a firm position in Somali thought. According to those values, however, it would be inconceivable to suggest that a person could be *weakened* by the birth of children. On the contrary barrenness — *goblan* — is a state that people fear, partly because it may imply that « one's name is forgotten ».

It was claimed that coming of age may affect one's *burji*. Yet, old age would not automatically imply a stronger *burji*, rather it was believed that for a man, the height of his *burji* is reached when he is in his thirties. In other words definitely long before he could be regarded as an « elder ». This is again in contrast to the values of the kinship system, because according to those, a man's power and ability ideally increase with his age.

This discussion makes clear that if we want to understand what *burji* is thought to be, and see how it is connected to other ideas, we must search outside the realm of the ideology of kinship. The brief examples indicate that apart from whatever external attributes a person may possess, there are also some things which are believed to be internal to the individual and which may be revealed in what this person is capable of doing.

Such internal traits of individuals are entirely unrelated to the prestige or honour as defined by the kinship system. Actually, rather than using the kinship-related term *magac* (name) for talking about honour in these contexts, people will use the term *sharaf*. Since it is borrowed from Arabic, this word is thought to be intimately linked to the religion. One well-known derivation of the term is in the word *Ashraf*, the name of a clan believed to be direct descendants of the Prophet's lineage. Members of this clan are sometimes nicknamed *shariif*. It may also become a nickname for anybody else who is said to « respect himself and others ». The same explanation is also given for the meaning of the concept of *sharaf* itself. It is sometimes said that *sharaf* is the same thing as respect (*ix-*

tiraan). This is important because respect is not held to be unilateral in a relationship, but is seen as a reciprocal or « mutualistic » quality. It would seem then, that the type of honour represented by *sharaf* is focused on a level of individual conduct, rather than that of group membership. Further support for this interpretation is that *sharaf* is often confused with the terms *daacad* and *lillahi* which mean « honouring an agreement », « honesty » or « sincerity ».

One approach to examining the above examples is to focus on the dualism of values that the Somali notion of the person is framed in. It may be argued that, for instance, the expected submissive behaviour of youths vis-à-vis elders emphasizes primarily values linked to their roles in the kinship system, whereas interaction that falls outside the kinship domain draws upon characteristics of the actual individuals involved. This is not to say that determinants of such interaction are entirely contextual or situational. Rather, what should be observed is that the notion of these individual criteria seems composed of values different from those that define the person as a member of his group of patri-kin, family and lineage. Even within kinship contexts, however, the recognition given to individual characteristics seems to influence the nature of the interaction taking place.⁷

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There is a distinctly religious element to the notions of the individual. Not only is individual honour directly associated with religious values, but when asking questions about *burji* itself, most of my informants directed me to the religious experts. I was told that *burji* is a large and complicated concept but that those men who possess astrological knowledge (*xiddigis*), secret religious knowledge (*asraar*) and religious knowledge in general (*cilmi*), also have holy books where the secrets of *burji* are revealed.

The books referred to were the fragments and excerpts of works by medieval Muslim mystics that many rural Sufi experts possess.⁸ These documents play a prominent role in the practices of religious experts, and their reliability is sanctioned by the fact that they are written in Arabic.⁹ Indeed, it is considered blasphemous to speak about them as « books » (*buug*). Instead the Arabic word *kitaab* should be used. Since this word in Somali is used for the Koran, it gives to these documents an air of « holy book ».

The knowledge of *burji* possessed by the religious experts is indeed much more specialized and technical than that possessed by laymen. According to them there are twelve different, named *burji*. To find out which *burji* a person has, his name is written with Arabic characters and the position numbers assigned to each one of the characters within the Arabic alphabet are then added together. The sum reached is by further calculations made to correspond with the number of a *burji*.

Each of the twelve *burji* are believed to be distinct, and the qualities of each

⁷ It is thus not enough, as La Fontaine (1985) seems to argue, to seek for the cultural grounds of a « concept of person » within a social structural context alone. Clearly, as the southern Somali case indicates, such concepts may also emerge in conscious reflection upon, and opposition to, social structural variables.

⁸ One of the documents was that by Al-Ḥalbi (1931-32).

⁹ This point has also been demonstrated for the Merina of Madagascar by Bloch (1968).

one are determined by how it is correlated with other factors. Half of them are said to be « male » while the other half are « female ». There is also a link to the four elements so that, in sets of three, the different *burji* can be grouped as « fire », « water », « wind » or « sand ». Within each one of these categories, different strengths are assigned to the element in question. For instance, within the category of *burji* that is « fire » there are subdivisions of embers, small flames and big flames. There are similar subdivisions within the other categories.

Burji is also connected to what was called « the small stars ». In Arabic they are known as *manaazil* and there are twenty-eight of them. Each one of these stars is linked to one of the characters of the Arabic alphabet, and through this link it was claimed that another connection between the name of a person and his *burji* could be established. The « small stars » are dependants to, or « soldiers of », the seven « big stars » (in Arabic *kawaakib*). These, in turn, are related to each one of the seven heavens, and they are also related to different prophets. Because of this latter link, a person can be informed about which one of the prophets is « his ».

The twenty-eight small stars can be further rearranged into four groups with seven stars in each. Each one of these four groups is related to one of the four seasons and, therefore, the different *burji* are linked to the seasons too. In addition, some of the experts are able to establish a connection between the *burji* of a person and a day of the week. Such days may be said to be the proper day to pursue various difficult tasks.

This system, then, is enormously complex. It should be stressed, however, that none of the experts I consulted with, knew other than fragmentary bits of it by heart. Throughout the interviews they had to consult their documents and notes on the subject, and even so, many questions remained unanswered. Furthermore, the answers I got from one expert frequently contradicted the answers of another. I should also mention that there were tendencies among the experts to make the subject even more « mystical » than it already appeared. For instance, all names of the stars and of the different *burji* etc., were consequently given in Arabic even for those that have Somali names.¹⁰ It should also be observed that several aspects of this system, like « the four elements », are normally not a part of Somali symbolism.

It is important to mention that in the procedures where the name of a person is used as a basis to determine the *burji* this is not the normal, patrilineally transmitted name. Instead, to the first name is added that of the mother of the person. In this area of Somalia I know of only one other context where a matrilineal name is given to a person. That is during a short period of time during the funerary rite. In that context, as well as here, it serves to emphasize the uniqueness of the individual and to cut him off, as it were, from the group of patri-kin (see Helander 1986b).

One of the many uses that scholarly knowledge of *burji* has, is to determine whether it is appropriate to marry a specific person. In such contexts one can observe how the fluidity of the system gives rise to a big variation of the interpretations offered. Sometimes the name of the potential wife will be used to derive a specific *burji*. It may be shown that this *burji* is related to *jilaal*, the dry-season,

¹⁰ This appears, by the way, to be one important difference between this southern system and the northern one, so thoroughly described by Muusa Galaal (1968).

and thus indicative of her possible infertility. In other cases, the sum of the wife's name is subtracted from that of her husband. The result may be a « female » *burji* which may be taken to mean that the marriage, if it should come about, will only be blessed with daughters. On the other hand, the same *burji* may be related to the star *qalbi*, heart, a possible sign that the wife will love her husband dearly. I have also witnessed how the same basic facts are given a different interpretation at another occasion.

These brief examples show that there are generous margins within this system of beliefs and the number of possible interpretations appear to be infinite. This applies not only to contexts of marriage, but one can note the very same tendencies of a « looseness » in the interpretations within every possible area of application.

I am not alone in making such observations. Many ordinary informants admitted that what the experts said did not always seem to be internally consistent. However, to them this fact underscored that *burji* is a big and complicated thing. Someone might also take this opportunity to deliver a cautious criticism of the local experts by calling them *kitaab gablow* or *Yaasiinleh*, terms that imply that these men have only been taught a tiny fraction of the Koran. It is true that some experts I consulted did not enjoy a generous reputation for their learning. However, many of them were regionally recognized shaikhs, trained in Baardheere or in other reputable institutes of religious learning. The fact remains that detected inconsistencies only seem to amplify the beliefs in that the system of knowledge concerning *burji* has the nature of obscure, hidden truths.

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To conclude, I would like to emphasize the contrast that has been demonstrated in this paper. The ease by which personal identity, prestige and status is determined within the framework of the kinship system, is in sharp contrast to the obscurity and mysticism that characterizes ideas surrounding the individual and her internal characteristics. I believe that this contrast has to be seen in relation to the more general contrast between, on one hand, the emphasis of patrilineal ideology and, on the other, the acknowledgement that this ideology cannot sufficiently account for individual variation.

There are many daily situations where clanship norms only insufficiently provide guidelines for behaviour. This is especially true for the interriver area where, due to long-standing processes of genealogical accomodation of stranger groups, clanship has turned into something of a « collective fiction ». To strut in borrowed plumes in the shape of more or less prestigious genealogies is simply not enough. Maybe as a consequence of this, a strong position for the individual is defined, completely independent of roles within the kinship system. However, in the same way as kinship roles have to be expressed in a formalised system of genealogies, these notions of the individual have to be formalised in some way in order to persist. The solution seems to be that the explanations for individuality are « mystified », for instance by being tied up to Sufism or through the use of Arabic terminology. As we have seen, even the matrilineal ties of a person find a place in this process.

The point made here is that mysticism itself seems instrumental for defining

the particular status of an individual. Since the concept of *burji* is thought to belong to the realm of « religious knowledge », it is thereby also set free of any connection with mundane clanship-ties and genealogical prestige. Rather, it is seen as linked to eternal values of religion and other-worldliness. It would seem that through the acquisition of a cognitive status of obscurity and mysticism, the value given to the individual can be maintained and symbolically perpetuated as separate from that of official roles.

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