

The power of women in an ostensibly male-dominated agro-pastoral society

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Introduction

If you were to visit Hamar in southern Ethiopia, you would probably gain the impression from what you see and hear that this is a relatively egalitarian yet also male dominated society. The elders appear to be equals, each self-sufficient and independent, and no one being noticeably wealthier than another. You would be received as a guest in so-and-so's homestead, the son of so-and-so. Your host would order his wife and daughters to lay out a cowhide for you to sit on, put on coffee for you to drink, and make fresh food for you to eat. If it is evening, he would call his son over and instruct him which cow to milk for you, and which goat to bring for you to slaughter and eat.

When the wife has made the coffee, she will first serve some into her husband's gourd bowl, which she keeps by her side while serving coffee to the guests. Once her husband's coffee has cooled enough, the wife offers the bowl to him with her right hand, lowering her head and body in a submissive pose as she does so. Her husband does not look at his wife directly and only slowly condescends to take the bowl. The husband and other elders who are present, individually spray coffee from their lips and invoke health and good fortune for the home, the neighbourhood and the whole country, before they begin to drink. The wife does not drink coffee but sits at the hearth, breast feeding her infant and

refilling the bowls whenever they are handed to her. Meanwhile the elders talk animatedly about this and that.

Next morning your host may take you to visit his neighbour to drink coffee. At the neighbour's homestead you get the same kind of treatment and observe the same kind of behaviour as at your host's home, only this time it's the neighbour's mother who serves coffee, as his wife has already gone to work in her field. The neighbour's mother serves herself coffee before serving the others. She gives her son his bowl in the same way she hands coffee to the other elders, looking him in the eye and telling him to take the bowl. You may not notice, but before she drinks from her own bowl, she spills a little coffee at the hearth; it is for her deceased husband. As well as drinking with the elders, this woman also joins in the conversation. She does not spray coffee or obviously call forth good fortune, but in an undertone she echoes the phrases uttered by the elders.

The view of Hamar as an egalitarian society corresponds to that characterised by James Woodburn for delayed-return societies, viz.: "the community of political equals is usually a community of property-holding household heads whose relations with their wives and female kin and with their junior male kinsmen within the household are far from equal. Intergenerational inequality and especially the inequality of holder and heir is usually stressed. The household head has the right and the duty to maintain and control the assets held by the household and to direct the labour of its members." (Woodburn, 1982, 446) James Woodburn assumes here that household heads are male.

In Hamar, however, if one looks a bit closer behind the rhetoric of naming, ritual, gesture and speech, one gets to see another reality in which women also act as household and homestead heads, maintain and control assets, and direct the labour of household members. In short, behind the apparent male domination, we find a hidden, but non-the-less effective, female domination. This is what I want to demonstrate in this paper.

### Household and homestead heads in Hamar

In Hamar, a distinction is made between household (*ono* – house) and homestead (*dele* – livestock enclosure). Houses and their hearths are associated with individual women and those who depend on them for food and drink. Although her husband is acclaimed the household head (*ono-imba* – house-father), a woman is also acknowledged as the female household head (*ono-imbano* – 'female house-father'). A homestead consists of one or more households making use of a semi-permanent cattle and/or goat enclosure. A married man can establish a homestead in his own name only once his father and his father's wives are dead. As in the case of households, both a man and his senior most wife are recognised as heads of homestead, the one male, the other female. When a man dies, his senior most widow becomes his female successor, *djalattono*, and her senior most son becomes his male successor, *djalatta*. The homestead will continue to be called the homestead of the deceased man, but his widow and her son, if or when he is married, become the homestead heads. Until her son gets married, a widow may share the homestead with a younger brother of her husband, or with an unrelated lover. When a widow dies, her junior co-wife, if she has one, or the senior most wife of her senior most son, becomes her successor and the female head of the homestead. Households of junior co-wives or junior brothers are usually incorporated into their respective senior co-wife's or older brother's homestead. Households, which are not yet able to establish their own independent homesteads, may temporarily attach themselves to other people's homesteads. In some cases a wife may be estranged from her husband and attach her household temporarily to someone else's homestead. Given these regulations, how does it look in practice on the ground?

### Dambaiti 1973 – 1983

Dambaiti is the settlement area in Hamar where Aike Berinas resided, and where Ivo Strecker and I built a house so we could live in Aike's proximity and benefit from his friendship and teaching. Dambaiti encompasses a ridge of land about 2 km wide and 3.5

km long, lying between two tributaries of a sandy riverbed, the Mulmule, and the middle reaches of another riverbed, the Pere.

In 1973 and again in 1983, I made a survey of all households residing in Dambaiti. In 1973 there were 52 households incorporated in, or attached to, 17 homesteads. By 1983, 9 of these homesteads had been disbanded, the homestead heads having moved away from Dambaiti, and 10 new homesteads had been established. All but one of the new homesteads were established by people whose households were formerly attached to Dambaiti homesteads, or by people who were previously dependants of Dambaiti households. Although there were more homesteads by 1983, 18 instead of 17, there were fewer households, only 40 instead of 52.

<u>Dambaiti households, headed by:</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1983</u>
married man with wife/wives	21	12
widow	29	27
widower	0	1
estranged wife	2	0
Total number of households	52	40

<u>Dambaiti homesteads, headed by:</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1983</u>
married man with wife/wives	4	5
widow with married or widowed son	8	6
widow with husband's married younger brother	2	2
widow with unmarried son or unmarried husband's younger brother	3	5
Total number of homesteads	17	18

What is remarkable about these data is that in 1973 as well as 1983, there were more widow-headed households (29 in 1973, and 27 in 1983) than ones headed by a married man and wife (21 in 1973, and 13 in 1983), and two to three times more homesteads were headed by widows, either alone or together with junior married men, (13 in 1973 and in

1983) than were headed by married men with their wives (4 in 1973, and 5 in 1983). In other words, there were many more women in positions of authority than one would have expected in such an ostensibly male dominated society. How does this come about, and how do these women wield their authority in a world where men are supposedly dominant? Following James Woodburn (see Woodburn in this edition), I suggest the answer can be found by exploring the rights to property and the ideologies linked with such rights.

#### Hamar country and subsistence economy

The mountains, hills and lowlands of Hamar lie between the rift valley of the Woito River in the East and the Omo River in the West, in southwest Ethiopia. Rainfall is low, unreliable and usually unevenly distributed across the country. In this environment, the Hamar have developed an economy of mixed subsistence involving pastoralism, slash-and-burn cultivation, apiculture, hunting and gathering.

Most of Hamar country is covered by thorny bush scrub, which is particularly suitable for keeping goats. Grass depends on rain, and is scanty except in the low-lying areas on the outskirts of the country. Cattle, goats and sheep are kept in small numbers in the hills and mountains where slash-and-burn cultivation takes place. Additional animals are kept in shifting camps in the outlying grazing areas.

Sorghum, maize, beans and pumpkins are cultivated in small quantities, on a shifting slash-and-burn basis, in gullies and alongside sandy river courses. Up until the mid-1980s cultivation was done by hand with the use of metal hoe and wooden digging stick, a task undertaken primarily by women. Ploughing with oxen has since been adopted by more and more people, and is undertaken primarily by men.

Hamar country is good for bees, especially in the middle altitudes where flowering acacia bushes proliferate. Here young men make beehives and collect honey.

The outlying lowlands used to be well stocked with game, and until recent years there used to be plenty of small antelope and wild pig in the hills and mountains, which men could hunt for meat.

At certain times of year leaves, fruits and roots can be gathered from the bush as a further source of food. Gathering is mainly a female activity.

### Control of material assets and labour

#### Land and its products

People say land is and should be free. There is little incentive to own cultivation sites on a permanent basis. When a man and/or woman abandon one field they do so because the land has become exhausted or overwhelmed by weeds. The old field is left to revert to bush for up to ten years when it may be suitable for cultivation again. The former users retain a pre-emptive right to reuse it, but only if they assert this right actively, otherwise someone else can use it. The important thing for anyone is not to retain exclusive rights in abandoned field sites, but rather to have access to unused land that can be made into fields.

Land is also free for pastoral activities. Pastures get worn out, water gets scarce or animals get sick, and herds have to be moved to new areas to graze, water or recover health. No one is interested in having exclusive rights in pasture or water holes. Married men are associated with named territorial areas, usually where they have been born and their grandfathers have been buried. In critical times, such as severe drought, these men may oblige others associated with other territorial areas to move their livestock out of the area. Control of access to land in such cases is only possible on a communal basis, never on an individual one.

Hunting, gathering, and bee-keeping activities as practiced in Hamar do not entail exclusive rights in land. Firewood, timber and grass for house and kraal construction, stones for grinding stones, clay for plastering houses or making pottery, herbs for medical treatment, water for human consumption, and many other useful products of the bush and land are all regarded as free for whoever makes the effort to collect them. Ownership

only begins once someone has collected something, cut or stacked it, or put it into a container and brought it back to their house, homestead, field or camp.

### Livestock and labour

Unlike land, livestock is not free but is owned and controlled in various ways. Labour is also controlled. The control of livestock and labour are closely linked, as I will clarify below. There are, of course, many other material assets besides land and livestock, which could be considered, such as rifles, houses, clothing (both skin clothes of women and cloth of men), beads, metal tools, etc. I will, however, concentrate on livestock because it is the most important property, the control of which underlies the whole social organization. In December 2000, while making the documentary film, *Duka's Dilemma*, I conducted many interviews with the main characters of the film: Duka, the daughter of our special friend, Aike Berinas; Sago, her husband; and Sagonda, her mother-in-law. In one conversation, Sagonda expressed the importance of livestock in the following way:

You've all grown up, look after the goats well, the cattle well, if the goats are many, the cattle are many, your name will be big, Sago, your name will be big. Sorghum, even if you grow stacks and stacks, you have no name. It's just shit. White things – goats and cattle – raise your name. "Bargar's son, Sago. Bargar's son, Sago."

### General division of labour

Individual family units try to be self-sufficient, using their own labour to engage in all forms of production: pastoralism, slash-and-burn agriculture, apiculture, hunting and gathering. Regular labour is employed in three distinct spheres: in the fields where sorghum and other crops are cultivated; in grazing areas in the vicinity of the fields and homesteads where herds of goats and milk cows are kept; and in distant grazing areas on the outskirts of the country where mixed herds, dry stock as well as milk animals, are kept. Women and girls provide the regular labour required in the fields. Boys provide

regular pastoral labour required in the vicinity of the fields and homesteads, teenage boys being chiefly responsible for herding goats. Young men provide regular pastoral labour required in the distant grazing areas, their main job being to defend the herds against dangerous wild animals and raiders from neighbouring groups (e.g. the Dassenech who are sometimes friends and sometimes enemies, or the Mursi who are now friends and used to be enemies). These young men, in their turn, go from time to time on raids hoping to bring back livestock to augment the herds, or go hunting for meat or glory. Raiding and hunting are immediate-return activities. Some young men also put up beehives in tall trees, and collect honey when it's available. Older men engage in both agricultural and pastoral activities in all three spheres, providing labour required on an occasional basis, such as cutting and burning off the bush to make a new field, repairing the thorn bush fencing around the fields, checking beehives, or collecting livestock from debtors. Women and girls combine their regular agricultural activities with immediate-return activities such as daily food processing (grinding grain and cooking), fetching water, or seasonal gathering of wild fruits, as well as innumerable other jobs like sweeping clean the goat kraal, curing skins for clothing, plastering the house, etc. Children from an early age are involved in daily tasks such as looking after kids and calves, scaring away birds from the fields, carrying younger siblings, or running errands.

### Work parties

Local work parties are organised by individuals for accomplishing certain agricultural jobs such as weeding or harvesting, or for other tasks such as constructing the roof of a new house. When a woman invites her neighbours to join her work party for which she has brewed beer, or will slaughter a goat, she should invite each person personally or send someone in her stead. Those invited should not refuse to participate unless they have an acceptable excuse, such as sickness. Participation in a work party is a moral obligation, and even if you are never likely to hold a work party yourself, you are obliged to go or send someone from your family in your stead. As James Woodburn says about the sharing of meat among the Hadza (see Woodburn, 1998), participation in work parties



in Hamar is obligatory and does not necessarily imply reciprocation. In this sense it cannot be seen as a form of exchange. The participants in a work party are given food and drink which is an immediate-return for their efforts. A person's work party may be boycotted if they have offended the local community in some way, e.g. because of not participating in preparations for a local initiation. To gain the forgiveness of the locals, the offender has to admit his or her offence and offer compensation, such as giving a goat or brewing beer. The construction of a goat enclosure and the erection of a roof must be done together with the neighbours. This obligation gives the local people a way of accepting or rejecting someone as a full resident. Although land and residence is free in theory, local people can ultimately decide on whether newcomers are fully accepted or not. Since local people have to participate in crucial rituals such as a child's naming ritual, it is only possible for someone to remain in an area in the long run if they have gained local acceptance.

#### Joint herding units

Joint herding units, both in the settlement areas and in the distant grazing areas, are common, allowing families to pool their limited livestock and labour resources. The owners of livestock held in joint herding units are often close kinsmen or age-mate friends, but may also be unrelated. There is constant movement of personnel and livestock between the camps and the settlement herds, as well as changes in the composition of joint herding units. In the dry season when there is no agricultural work to do and no grain left to eat, whole families and their livestock may go to the distant grazing camps to survive on a diet of milk and blood. People are always free to segregate their livestock and go their own ways, or join up with other people. In most cases people can avoid conflict in this way. But here we are not dealing with individual persons, rather with individual or composite family units. Members of family units cannot easily operate independently of each other.

#### The labour of sons, daughters and grandchildren

As James Woodburn predicts for delayed-return societies, the division of labour in Hamar involves a high degree of inter-dependence within family units. It is the heads of family units who want a division of labour in the first place, and who want to control other people's labour, especially that of their sons. This was clearly expressed by Sago when I interviewed him in March 2000:

Sago: I said, "May I have many boys" The reason I want many boys is the goats and the cattle. One can go after the cattle, another after the goats, one to the field, and another to the beehives. Boys set a person up within one day. Girls, growing up, eventually join their husbands. I was my mother's only son; for the cattle – I, for the goats – I, for the beehives – I. Then my father died, and I had to struggle on. "What can stop me from struggling? Could it be my wives? If I marry wives they'll give birth and that will relieve me of my struggle on the cattle path, the goat path, the field path." Saying this, I married two wives so I could have many boys. Ulde is my only brother, and our mother has no one else with her, that's what makes me struggle. "May fortune grant me many boys" That's what I thought.

Jean: Now Bona and Marro (two of Sago's daughters) ran to your mother's field

Sago: They ran. They run errands for their grandmother, down in the field. If Bona and Marro weren't there, now that my mother has gone to get injections, there'd be no one to stay in the field would there? Now these, her son's children have grown up, they are the ones who stay in her field and guard it against the cattle, baboons and pigeons, and then come back to me in the evening. Later when their grandmother returns, Marro is her girl. She'll go to her grandma and keep the cattle away, and throw stones at the pigeons in the field.

#### Parental control of sons' labour through control of livestock

Sago wants sons so they can relieve him and his wife of the struggle they have doing all the jobs needed to make the fields, herd the livestock and collect honey. How can he control the labour of his sons? What will prevent them from going their own way? The

answer is simple: he and his wife will do the same as their parents before them, control their son's access to livestock and his ability to found an independent family unit, thus making him totally dependent upon them until they allow him to marry, possess livestock and have children in his own name. Unmarried sons are rarely allowed to own the livestock they collect by their own effort. There are three categories of livestock that an unmarried man can collect:

#### 1) Stolen livestock

When a son comes home from a raid driving stolen (*banki* –spear) cattle, he sings a glory song announcing the buttermilk cow he's bringing his mother. If his father is alive, he should hand all the stolen cattle to him, otherwise to his father's heir, his eldest brother. Only if he is his father's heir can he keep the cattle for himself. His father will hand on one stolen cow to his mother's brother or father's mother's brother if he hasn't done so before, as a mark of appreciation for the ritual protection afforded by these relatives. If a son brings home stolen animals on several occasions, his father or older brother will eventually hand him some and he will then also give one to his own mother's brother. That at least is the theory. Even if the son is granted a stolen cow, he cannot do much with it until his father, whether alive or dead, has performed the *erra* (milk and water) ritual. Until this ritual is done a stolen cow cannot be used for marriage payment, or as a *garo* calf, which a man needs for his initiation rite, nor as a *sari* calf, which is slaughtered during mortuary rites to provide a hide to envelop the deceased. By postponing the *erra* ritual a man's father can control his son's use of stolen cattle.

#### 2) Exchange livestock

A son can also acquire livestock through exchange of things such as honey for a goat, sorghum for a goat or cow, tobacco for a goat, goats for a cow, or any of these items for money, as happens more and more frequently. If a son acquires such exchange (*shani*) animals he should hand them to his father or his father's successor, i.e. his older brother. The father or older brother may let him keep certain animals if he collects many. A cow

bought with goats, *k'uli-wak* - goat-cow, is very special. The first goat-cow acquired by a man should be given to his father or older brother, subsequent ones can be retained but still belong to the father or older brother. A son or younger brother will be told that if he hides bought or stolen animals from his father or older brother, this will bring misfortune, which will be revealed in the intestines of sacrificial goats. Unlike stolen cattle, cattle bought with goats can be used for marriage payment, but this doesn't help a son gain independence from his parents because he can't get married before he is initiated, and his parents control that. As in the case of stolen cattle, a goat-cow cannot be used as a *garo* calf for an initiate, or as a *sari* calf for a deceased person, nor can it be exchanged for goats, before a ritual has been done to free it for these purposes. As in the case of stolen cattle, this ritual has to be performed by a man's father, whether he is alive or dead.

### 3) Bridewealth livestock

An unmarried man can acquire livestock as bridewealth (*kemo* – marriage) from his sister's husband, but if he has an older brother he has to give them to him to administer. These bridewealth animals do not belong to a man's father or mother. The parents of a girl also claim gifts of goats and sheep from their son-in-law, but these are not counted as bridewealth. Bridewealth cattle are not usually reproductive stock unless they are substituted by sheep. Bridewealth animals can be used for further bridewealth transactions, or to purchase a rifle (between 8 and 15 cattle depending on the rifle and the cattle), but they cannot be used as a *garo* or *sari* calf until the bridewealth payment has been completed and a finalizing ritual has been performed. Bridewealth payments are not usually completed in a man's lifetime, so this means a son cannot usually use the bridewealth cattle for these purposes. In theory, by collecting bridewealth animals a man acquires the animals he needs to give as bridewealth when he marries. He can only marry, however, once he has leapt over the cattle, an initiation rite he can only perform when his parents allow him to. Since he's not allowed to marry when he wants, an unmarried son will usually use the bridewealth he collects to purchase a rifle instead, as Sago explained to me in March 2000:

Sago: That's the girls. When I say they are like a bank, it's because of them there will be cattle, and goats. For Bargar and Gadi and Tammo and now Tini, the girls, Bona and Marro and Kaira, are their rifle, their cows, their goats, their honey. If I am poor and don't collect any wealth, Bargar will take a rifle from Bona, from Bona's husband, he'll also take bridewealth cattle. Gadi will take a rifle from Kaira's husband, and take bridewealth goats and cattle. Also Tammo will later take a rifle from Marro's husband, and take goats. When the girls and boys are equal in number, then older brother and younger brother won't squabble. "You go over there." For example, if Gadi asks his older brother, Bargar, for a rifle, and he says "My father didn't collect any cattle or goats, and now my brothers want cattle and goats, where should I get the animals to buy a rifle or marry you to a wife? Go to your in-law and let him give you cattle. Go to Kaira's husband and let him give you cattle." And so he'll go and collect enough cattle to buy a rifle. That's why I say, girls are a bank. They are worth a lot. Girls are important.

#### Control of son's initiation and marriage

In order to gain some independence from his parents, a man needs to get initiated, married and have his wife brought in as a bride, for it is only via his wife that he is able to acquire livestock which are his outright property, or as the Hamar say, his *siti* – hair. Let me quote from an unpublished paper I wrote in 1985: "By going through his transition rites a Hamar man gains the right to marry and the contingent rights to claim children and livestock as his own, i.e. the children his wife bears and the livestock she receives as gifts from his relatives. Unless a man goes through these rites he is not allowed to marry, claim children as his, nor own livestock. But without a wife, children and livestock he cannot normally hope to achieve economic independence, and he is forced to depend on his parents, relatives and neighbours. Even once he has gone through the rites, a man normally has to wait a number of years, frequently up to ten years, before he can fully realize his rights. This is because he depends on his parents to arrange his

first marriage, and they usually arrange for him to marry a very young girl. Although he is officially married, yet he has to wait a number of years before his wife is allowed to be brought in as a bride and before she can collect gifts of livestock and bear children for them both. During these years a man remains dependent on his parents, relatives and neighbours. The transition rites can be seen, therefore, as a way of controlling the age at which a man is allowed to gain economic independence.

First and foremost the parents of a man would be interested in keeping him dependent so that he could provide the labour necessary to herd their cattle in the distant grazing areas and protect these herds from theft by enemies, as well as maybe augmenting them by raiding cattle from enemy country. Close relatives and neighbours who don't have adult sons of their own would also be interested in controlling the age at which a man gains independence. In fact the cattle of many economic units are grouped together in order to be herded by available young men in the distant grazing areas. If we take a look at the transition rites we find that they require the participation of all interested parties, i.e. parents, close relatives and neighbours. Any one of these can impede the performance of the rites by refusing to participate. A man cannot perform his rites without the consent of the interested parties, which is demonstrated by their participation in the rites."

#### Bridewealth payments and their equalizing effect

Once a man's marriage has been settled, his brothers-in-law have the right to claim bridewealth. When Baldambe (Aike Berinas), told Ivo Strecker and me about his country's customs, he explained that the first Hamar elders, having appointed a *bitta* – ritual leader, asked him to tell them how much bridewealth they should give:

"*Bitta!*"

"*Woi!*"

"The people are all poor, they have no cows, they have no goats. It would be bad if one had to give much to get married. Tell us what to do."

"Do you ask me as the *bitta*?"

"We have asked you"

"*Eh-eh*. My country has mountains only. Over there Irgil Bala, here Mama Dunta, and up there Bala Kuntime. Give twenty-eight goats plus one male goat and one female goat."

"Good. What about the cattle?"

The *Bitta* said:

"Both rich and poor should give the same; eighteen head of cattle, plus one 'stone cow' and one 'cloth bull' which makes twenty altogether." (Lydall and Strecker, 1979, 5-6)

If the Hamar were poor, it seems at first odd that the *bitta* should have stipulated such a high bridewealth. It is very difficult to calculate how many cattle and goats people possess in Hamar; livestock should not be counted, and people like to be vague about how many animals they own. The surveys made by Ivo Strecker and myself suggest, however, that in 1973 there was at least one head of cattle per head of population, and three or more head of small stock. Unlike Mursi bridewealth, which is "fixed by negotiation in advance of marriage, (and) is paid in a lump sum" (Turton 1980, 90), Hamar bridewealth is fixed at a set sum for everyone, and paid in instalments, the size of which are negotiated each time the bride's brothers and cousins claim an instalment. The bride's husband may seek contributions for the bridewealth from his brothers and patrilineal cousins, or collect outstanding bridewealth from his sister's and cousin's husbands. Whatever the case, there will be a limit to how many animals he can provide in any one instalment and he remains indebted to his in-laws for the rest of his life, a debt his sons and grandsons may even inherit. The wife's brothers or their successors return again and again to claim bridewealth whenever they need animals and believe the husband or his successor has animals to spare. The high bridewealth debt which men incur upon marriage can be seen to have a levelling effect on livestock holdings because whenever a stock owning unit acquires more than usual number of animals, members of their wife's brothers', mother's brothers' or father's mother's brothers' patriline will come

and claim outstanding bridewealth debt. As a result, no man in Hamar can remain wealthy for very long.

#### Choice and control of son's wife

A man's parents not only determine when he gets initiated but they also decide whom he should marry and when his wife will get brought in as a bride, and finally, when she will be given to him. Even when his wife has been brought in as a bride, an event in which he has no role to play, his parents, especially his mother, continue to assert control over him and his wife. He only gets to sleep with his bride several months after her arrival, when his mother thinks fit and his bride has completed the rituals his mother does with her in order to prepare her for bearing a legitimate child. When Duka became a bride in 1990, Sagonda, her mother-in-law, explained to me that Duka was now her child, would work for her and give her first child to her:

Sagonda: When she was in her father's home she grew up and ground flour. But this is our Hamar custom. Now I have given birth to her anew, like her father gave birth to her before, just as I gave birth to Sago before. I have given birth to her and rubbed on butter, just as one rubs butter on a newborn child. As one feeds a baby with butter and breastfeeds him, I will feed her with food, cook good food for her, milk the cattle and feed her with milk. I'll rub butter on her and tell her to sleep, putting her down to sleep. She will be like a child, and then I will bring her up and when she has grown up after three or two months, I will give her to her husband saying, "She's grown up now." Now I have covered her with butter she is my child, and this month she won't do any grinding, she won't fetch water, she won't come down from the loft, she won't fetch firewood, she won't sweep up the goat droppings. The same goes for the next month. Then I will say, "You should sweep up the goat droppings a little," and in the night she will get up and sweep the goat droppings and spill them away, then return to the loft. I will keep cooking food for her and give it to her, and she will keep being my child. She will only sweep up



goat droppings. Then she will put the kids away and bring the goats away and the calves, and the next month she will go and fetch green fodder for the kids and fetch firewood for me, but she will not fetch water, she will not grind the grinding stones. When the last month is over, I will advance her by doing her rituals. Didn't I tell you the other day about how her hands will be rubbed with water and then I will give her to her husband? Then she will grind for me, and she will put on coffee for me. I won't prepare coffee anymore. I won't grind and cook anymore. She will do the grinding and will feed me. She will put on coffee for me. I will cultivate my field and when I come back I will call out "Hey, children, have you put on coffee for me?" "Old woman, we have put on coffee for you." "Then serve it up and give me some. I want to drink coffee." Also food will be given me so I can eat. A cowhide will be put out for me. "You are old," they will say, and I will rest. Then my child, the one she gives birth to, she'll give him to me. Then she will have grown up and I will hold her child while she goes to fetch water, to fetch fire wood, and when she is doing these things I will say, "I am now old," as I breast feed her child, holding him. If the child keeps crying I'll call out, "Come and feed your child, he is starving," and I will give him to her. That's the way we do it. Her first child, when I lie down I will have the child by my side. My son's eldest son, that's mine. I am the one to bring him up. He's called the grandmother's child. The next one she gives birth to will be hers.

Sagonda clearly states here how she expects her daughter-in-law to work for her, how she supervises her daughter-in-law's rituals and how she intends to take her daughter-in-law's first child for herself. It is by supervising her daughter-in-law's pre-conception rituals, as well as those involving her children – the naming (*gali*) ritual, the necklace (*katchi*) ritual and the band-tying (*gor*) ritual – that a woman asserts control over her daughter-in-law and her son. In December 2000, Duka explained this to me as follows:

Duka: It's our Hamar ritual isn't it? If Sagonda had left without doing the ritual (naming ritual for Duka's baby) what could we do? If she refuses to do the *gongolo* (ladle) ritual, it's bad, if she refuses to do the *gali* (naming) ritual it's bad. She wouldn't have refused if we hadn't done wrong. If we wives, when she got sick, had ground flour and given it her, collected fire wood and given it her, fetched water and given it her, then when she came for the ritual, she wouldn't be cross with you. When she was laid up sick, we just looked, her son did nothing, we wives did nothing. When my husband told me to ask her to do the ritual, "You abandoned me when I was sick, I will die. Let your husband do the *gali* (naming) ritual, let him do the *gongolo* (ladle) ritual, or find some one else to do them." That's the anger of an old person. After she brought in her son's bride and brought her up, when she then bears children, she gets angry on those occasions when you have rituals to do. "Who ties the bands for your child? Who does the naming? Brewing beer for the bands, and taking it to the phallus man's home, who showed you what to do? Sitting down, "So-and-so's home, please tie the bands for my children." Only once I've told you, can you go." Because of that she was angry with her son. "Your wife doesn't fetch water for me, doesn't collect wood for me, doesn't grind flour for me." If she says this and Sago says, "Why didn't you do these things?" you think about it and do the things for her. "Ah, my son's wife fetches water for me, collects firewood for me, cures goatskins for me, I won't refuse to do her rituals, won't refuse to do her child's *gali* (naming) ritual," and quietly she does it. If you are angry with her, don't fetch her water or collect wood for her, then she'll be angry at the ritual, saying: "Let her learn something. If the *gali* (naming) ritual is not done, once that child has been weaned, will she give birth to another child?" If a child's naming ritual is not done, once the child is weaned, another child shouldn't be born. For us Hamar such a child would be unclean, and the newly born child as well as the previous one will be thrown away. Because of this trap we attend to the old woman. It's the same for the *katchi* (necklace) ritual.

As these texts reveal, a mother-in-law controls her daughter-in-law by way of managing the rituals that legitimise her daughter-in-law's reproduction, and by promoting an ideology that sanctions these rituals and her own indispensable role in their performance.

#### Acquisition of livestock in own right

Once a man has been initiated, has married and his bride has been brought in and given to him, he can finally acquire livestock in his own name and with full ownership rights, which he shares with his wife. To do this, however, he depends on his wife who has to claim the livestock from his parents, other kinsmen and his parents' cattle bond-friends. His wife, on the other hand, can claim such gifts even after her husband has died! These gifts are distinguished into two general categories, those called 'bowl' (*sherka*) animals, so called because they are given with the presentation of a bowl, and those called 'drawn out' (*buls*) animals, so called because they are drawn out from other homesteads.

#### 1) 'Bowl' livestock

'Bowl' livestock are reproductive animals, mainly female, which a woman can claim from her husband's senior patrilineal kinsmen and their wives or widows, especially her father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband's eldest brother and his wife. A man's mother controls the occasions when her daughter-in-law can claim gifts of 'bowl' livestock. When a woman is brought into her husband's home as a bride, she can refuse to enter the homestead before she is given a gift of a female goat. In Duka's case, because her father-in-law was dead and Sago has no elder brother, it was her mother-in-law, Sagonda, who presented her with such a goat. When the bride's *bingere* (neck band, which shows she is her husband's first wife) is put on, she can claim further gifts. Sagonda granted Duka a female cow on this occasion. When a bride's rites are completed and she is handed to her husband, she may claim further 'bowl' gifts, which are referred to as the 'dung' goats in reference to the goat droppings she sweeps up as a bride. Further, whenever a woman bears a child and the child's *gali* (naming) ritual is performed, and later his/her *gor* (tying-on-of-bands) ritual, she can claim further gifts from her husband's patrilineal seniors. These patrilineal

kinsmen are those to whom her husband has had to hand over any livestock he collected by his own effort. In so far as this is the case, 'bowl' gifts can be seen as reciprocation. The senior patrilineal relatives cannot be forced to make these gifts, and they only give them when claimed in person by their kinsman's wife. A man cannot claim these gifts on his own, but his wife can do so even after his death. Needless to say, all the occasions when a woman can claim 'bowl' livestock are ones where her mother-in-law is in charge, so long as she is still alive.

## 2) 'Drawn out' livestock

Once a woman's bridal rites have been completed, and she has been given to her husband, he will go with her to visit his relatives and his parents' cattle bond-friends to introduce her to them. The woman can use this occasion to claim *buls* (drawn-out) gifts of reproductive livestock. The main relatives whom she claims gifts from are her husband's mother's brothers and his father's mother's brothers' sons, or their widows. Since these relatives benefited from the bridewealth they received for their sisters, and gifts of 'spear' cows from their sisters' sons, these gifts can be seen as reciprocation. However, the mother's brothers and father's mother's brothers cannot be forced to give against their will, and they only grant gifts if the woman claims them in person. A woman may also claim gifts from her father-in-law's sisters' sons or her husband's brothers-in-law, but in these cases the gifts are counted as bridewealth gifts. The bride may also claim gifts from her parents-in-law's cattle bond-friends. In each case the woman has to claim gifts in person, and may do so even if her husband is dead. The donors only grant gifts if they have appropriate animals to spare, but they may promise future gifts when they become available. They cannot be forced to make gifts against their will, although they may feel morally indebted to the woman's husband because of previous bridewealth or stolen cows received.

The 'bowl' and 'drawn out' gifts of livestock are reproductive stock, both cattle and small stock and maybe donkeys, and form the basis for a couple's herds. Because the wife can claim further 'bowl' gifts each time she bears a child and performs the naming and tying-

on-of-bands rituals, this basic herd can be increased as the family also increases. The overall effect of the 'bowl' and 'drawn out' gifts is the continuous redistribution of livestock from those who have livestock to spare, to those who are in need of them.

### 3) 'Inheritance' livestock

Far less important than the pre-inheritance gifts just described, are the inheritance (*gos*) gifts a man can claim when his father's or mother's brother's mortuary rites are performed. When an elder dies, those animals he acquired through his own efforts ('spear' cattle and 'goat' cattle) cannot be alienated from him and transferred to others as outright property unless special rituals have been completed, so these rituals are the first to be done during the mortuary rites. There are many people who can claim some of the dead man's livestock. Those cattle bond-friends to whom he gave cows on loan, will probably want to continue keeping the cows. If the widow and eldest son of the man, i.e. his successors (*djalattono* and *djalatta*) agree to extend the loan, the son performs a ritual in which he blesses the bond-friends and the cows, which remain the property of his father and, therefore, his mother. On the other hand, the widow of a deceased man will want to retain the loan cattle she has from her husband's bond-friends. In December 2000, Sagonda told me how she persuaded her husband's bond-friends to let her keep the loan cows:

Sagonda: Sago, your father died when you were still a child. Keeping the cattle bond-friends, I put coffee on for them, brought out beer for them, cooked fine food for them, and when they had eaten, they said, "I came to reclaim a cow." "Oh, my husband has died, how shall I bring up my children? I have no cow to give." "I have drunk coffee, it was good, and I ate good food. Indeed, how can she bring up her children? She herds the cows for me, may they reproduce." So the bond-friends went home empty, and I could feed my children with milk. My home is full of orphans: my sister's sons and husband's younger brothers. I am the only one. What to do?" Going on like this, I transferred the cattle to Sago, transferred the goats to Sago, married him to a wife, "Now let your father's bond-friends come to you.

Haven't you taken over your father's beehives?" "I've taken them." "Have you received goats?" "I have." "If you go on a trip, let your wife look after the goats, may she shout at the children to look after the cows and goats. Now I have brought you up." That's how I concern myself about things.

The wives and daughters-in-law of a man have the right to claim 'bowl' gifts whenever a child's naming or tying-on-of-bands ritual is performed. For this reason these rituals are performed as part of a man's mortuary rites before livestock is distributed as inheritance. Then the sisters' sons and daughters' husbands can claim livestock as inheritance (*gos*). Before doing so they come singing their praises of the deceased, and then perform special rituals for him. The dead man's male successor, his eldest living son, distributes gifts to these claimants. Finally the sons and daughters of the deceased can claim animals, if any remain, as inheritance. They too sing their praises of their dead father, and sacrifice oxen or goats in his honour. The eldest son of the dead man does not give away livestock that his mother has collected as 'bowl' and 'drawn out' gifts without her consent. A young widow will need to keep most of her property to support her family that will continue to grow even though she is not allowed to marry again. The timing of a mortuary ritual is decided upon by a dead man's widow and son and can be postponed for many years.

#### A widow's control over her married son

Even after his father's death, a man remains dependent on his widowed mother, especially if he is the eldest surviving son. Both mother and son may try to control the other, which may lead to conflict, but in the end the mother has the upper hand because she has the power to curse her son, or, by refusing to do the rituals for his son's wives and children, to doom his children, as Duka explained above. In December 2000, Sago's mother refused to do the naming ritual for Duka's newborn son. The local elders, who had come to take part in the ritual, intervened and persuaded her to do the ritual. Then a discussion ensued in which Sagonda and Sago aired their complaints about each other, and the

elders reconciled them, giving them their advice. Here I present the essential parts of this dispute.

Sagonda: Banna rituals are different (i.e. from Hamar rituals), now the girl (Sago's second wife) will her mother say she wants to grow up with her daughter (i.e. stop bearing children when her daughter starts) by throwing the goatskin (a Banna ritual)? If she says "I'm young and will bear children," she should show us her ritual surrogate. Sago said, "You did the *gongolo* (ladle) ritual for my first wife, why don't you do it for the little one? You left your father-in-law's custom behind (i.e. the goatskin ritual), so you should do the ritual for this wife." " No, I won't do it. Aike's daughter (Duka) is Hamar, and in Hamar women are not taken to their father's home, the mother-in-law performs the ritual.

Banqo (a local elder): That's what I say, the rituals are different from place to place.

Sagonda: The mother-in-law performs the ritual. I do it (for Duka). I grew up (stopped having children) with my son's wife (Duka) and now I can do rituals for others (as a ritual surrogate). But in this land (Banna) there is another custom. "The country you've entered is different." When I said this, he (Sago) didn't like it. Boro's mother told him she wouldn't throw the skin cape, "I'm young and will bear children, let Narinda throw the skin cape for me." Later she'll give her a female cow, won't she? When my daughter married, I was still young and wanted to bear more children, so I put myself behind a ritual surrogate, but now I've stopped bearing children. It was that woman who transferred me over the poles, and she received a female cow.

Banqo: The customs are the same, just a little different.

Sagonda: That's why, in case Boro's mother gets angry with me, I refrain from doing the *gongolo* ritual. If she wants to do as I did, she should ask Narinda to throw the skin cape. I didn't refuse for bad reasons. Now where should she go for the *gongolo* ritual? I didn't refuse for bad reasons. Now Boro has born a son, and for the boy's *katchi* ritual, because Narinda has died, there's no need to find someone to throw the skin cape. So I, the grandmother, should do it. "The boy (Tammo) has chewed

fresh grain, the cattle (i.e. his teeth) have come up, go now to the child's grandma for the *katchi* ritual." If this were said, I would do it with my *tiri* (head-dress), putting it on four times. Then his wife may rub on *bodi* (i.e. perform the pre-conception rituals) in order to birth. When her ritual (i.e. menstrual period) comes she'll seek me and I will do the *gongolo* (ladle) ritual, do the 'finishing' ritual, and make all well so she can go ahead and bear a child. Like the *katchi* (necklace) ritual that he did on his own, let him do the *gongolo* (ladle) ritual for his wife alone. Don't let him send her to me.

Bona (a local elder): Just as he did the *katchi* alone. That's a big problem.

Sagonda: That's one. Now the house: When Sago got married he had his own house and he built me a house. It's called the 'old one's house'. This coffee should have been served in my house; the *gali* ritual should be done in my house; the *gor* ritual in my house. Now I don't have a house, only my field house. Instead of looking at cattle in the morning, I look at sorghum. There is no gateway. Rituals have to be done at my husband's gateway; the *gali* and *gor* rituals. Now the head of this house was I, when out of the blue he tells me to leave for my house. Where should I stay? They should come to me to do the rituals. So this house is someone else's now. Should I do the rituals in the house down there? Will he come to me saying "Mother," or will he go elsewhere to get his rituals done?

Bona: You've told us now why you ran away. The concern people have varies from home to home. Some homes quarrel when an initiation is held, or when there's a work party. When they eat and drink they quarrel, and when they feast. Other homes, when they have a ritual to do, they ask their friends how to do things, and they tell them do this, give that ... they tell which goats to give, and which beer. Now this *gali* ritual, like an initiation or other ritual, if she leaves and stays away, the ritual will be left undone, won't it? Why should she abandon it? But she reconsidered and returned, afraid of offending the elders. May *barjo* (good fortune) bless her. Being a woman she has an important role to play.



Sago: Now the *katchi* ritual, I didn't know I'd done wrong. Now I've understood. The problem that led me to send her off to her field house, please straighten it out for me. A son and his mother, the father and his son, if the father and his wife survive they will have their own house, and their young son, the one who cuts the bush and cares for the livestock, will care for them in hunger and sickness. He looks after his mother's livestock and buys his father a blanket. Now her husband has died, she's in her own house, with her own milk cows – the quarrel my mother has in her stomach is quite something else. My word is hot. If a ritual takes place and there is an argument, I don't like it. I believe most people are envious of my homestead. Now since my father and his brothers died, my mother and I have stayed together. Beer makes her crazy. When I say 'Don't drink,' she says, 'I won't stop.' Then, when going to rituals – children go away – later, when going to rituals, being still youthful, there's beer for the locals and the mothers' brothers, or for the girls. There's her husband's younger brother who hasn't leapt over the cattle yet, and there's her son. On the occasion of their initiation there'll be trouble. Since I married and my father died, I haven't initiated anyone. When Tini was initiated, for Kadde's wife and Kasa's wife, she caused trouble. She brought the trouble to the phallus man. There was trouble in the home. If they didn't brew beer or grind flour for the mothers' brothers and the girls, you should ignore it. But she complained, "You didn't come with beer, you didn't do something, nor something else." It's the beer causing trouble, a fight and blows. They landed in the phallus man's house. Sagonda had brewed beer and the phallus man took it, and the two chased the other women away. I'm not an incompetent person – but I don't know about women's rituals. I know about working for the community and the welfare of my home. I don't know the details of the *gongolo* ritual she talked about.

(After further discussion Sago made the following comment): Why doesn't she grow up and stay put. The cows and goats are hers, and when I take a goat to town she can ask, "Which goat did he take yesterday?" "One to buy mead." "Which goat did he take the other day? Where's he put the honey?"

Sagonda: Where am I when ...

Sago: Wait, let me finish ...

Sagonda: Get lost! Where am I to see you take a goat? Where am I to see you put money in your pocket to get the mead I want, or to see you drive a goat? I have lots of goats to get the things I want. Thinking of your mother and buying me mead, saying "Here, drink this. Brew mead with this honey." When did you ever do this? When did you give me honey so I can stay at home, or buy me *arike* (gin) to drink at home?

Sago: Stop, you are right, stop now.

Sagonda: Like a wild pig you creep, bringing things to your wives. What have I done to make you to lift your nose and say, "I don't like her going to town"? Of course, when I get the desire for *arike* I'll go to town. Of course, I'll sell my vagina for drink.

Sago: You elders tell us what you think?

Bona: This is not a fight, listen, it's a discussion, straightening things out. (Bona gives an example of a man and his wife who sent their sons away. In time of hunger they had no one to get grain for them. Then their children came and slaughtered goats and the couple revived. The man was sorry he had sent his sons away before. Had they stayed he and his wife would not have suffered. That's what will happen if Sago and Sagonda quarrel.)

Banqo: (After a long speech): If you say bad things it's like a rotten tooth; if you don't pull it out the rot spreads. It's bad talk that destroys the home. Only if you stop will things be all right, and it'll become just a game. As the father said in the past, let the discussion be a game.

Tsasi: (Duka's brother who was visiting, gave a placatory speech saying Sagonda should be happy she has such good fortune, to which Sagonda then responded.)

Sagonda: True; my fortune is special, my forehead is special. When he was a child Sago wondered, "Where was my mother born to come to my father's home?" Just like Aike Berimba's child (i.e. Tsasi) has said, I brought the cattle fortune with me. My

husband's people only ate chillies. I saw no bleating goat, no mooing cow. When my husband rose up, collecting things and putting up beehives, the Bashada wondered because his father, Ditto, used to steal from beehives. What made him successful? It was my forehead (i.e. fortune). Full of goats when he was born, full of cows when he was born, lacking nothing, Sago bought gun after gun. Planting sorghum, I put aside grain and initiated him. How many orphans have I brought up? *barjo* (fortune) made them feeble, otherwise they would have collected cattle for me, and supported my son. Bashada people have mixed origins, Banna have mixed origins. If he had married someone else's daughter, if he'd been married to Likomba's daughter, would this prosperity (*majono*) have reached the homestead? If he'd married Lotchomba's daughter, would this good fortune have entered the home? I rubbed the staffs and gave them to my husband. He had dreamed his father had told him to go to Aike's homestead. Everyone else had been chased away from the Berinas homestead as rubbish. The good fortune was brought by my forehead. When my husband died, I took the staffs and went there. I blessed her (Duka) to fill up the homestead, to give birth like a dog. I am not crooked. Even if I'm not sick, but say I am, won't you slaughter a goat for me? If I long for *arike*, and cry out for mead or *arike*, won't you get me some? Won't you ask, "How are you doing?" The house is the topic. He should leave this house and make another for his wives. All the cattle and goats are mine, the ones my husband collected. There are no animals that he and his wife have collected. When I lay suffering rheumatism, he and his wives stayed here. No one came to ask how I was. I want to tell the elders this first so they can judge. That's part of doing rituals.

Abo (the senior most elder present): If you forbid your mother to go to town, and forbid her other things (e.g. to drink beer at home), how about the house? She's right to want her own house. She should sacrifice to her husband at her own hearth, not her son's. That's how it is in Banna. In Banna, she spills coffee to placate the dead so the cattle and goats will graze safely. I don't know the customs down there (in Hamar). In Banna she does that in her own house, not her son's. So build her a

house. Next time you do a ritual like this, let her placate her husband there. This is ritual isn't it? Placating the dead and doing rituals. The other stuff is domestic squabble. As for the town, those who stay in town, do they have sorghum or livestock? Away with it! Sago says he has collected the cattle and goats for himself and his wives, but this is not true, they are his mother's. She is the shade for the cattle, the goats, the wives, the children, the sorghum. Look at my older brothers Anombe and Bazabe. The home getting mad, where was there honey (as *bitta* they should have called forth the bees)? Only after Bazabe died and Anombe died have things gotten better. Now there's honey again. Now that they have died, there's no more quarrelling.

Sagonda: Once the house is erected ...

Abo: Build the house.

The upshot of this dispute was that Sagonda got what she had wanted: a new house and renewed attention from her son and his wives. Sagonda used the ritual as a source of coercive power over her son and his wives.

#### A widow's control over her husband's younger brother

A widow can also assert control over her husband's younger brother. If his parents are both deceased, she controls their livestock as well as her own, and her husband's younger brother relies on her to make gifts to his wife when she becomes a bride and each time she bears a child. If he is not yet initiated, she may initiate him and provide marriage gifts and bridewealth for his wife's family. Because he is dependent on her, he is an ideal partner for her to co-habit with and bring up children. In the case of Birinda, a woman in Dambaiti who became a widow before she even became a bride, she was advised by her husband's kinsmen to cohabit with her dead husband's brother, Woro. As both his parents were dead, Woro was completely dependent on Birinda, who bought him a rifle, initiated him and married him to a wife. Birinda then brought Woro's wife in as a bride and gave her gifts of livestock. Meanwhile, Woro sired Birinda's children, looked after her

livestock and helped with making and caring for her field. Once he was married and his wife had collected gifts of livestock, Woro tried to make himself independent of Birinda, but she still kept him under her sway by controlling his wife's and children's rituals.

### Conclusion

Following James Woodburn's approach, I have explored how property rights and the ideologies that support them explain how Hamar women have so much hidden power in their households and homesteads. In the last resort, property rights and the ideologies behind them can be traced back to the exigencies of the Hamar economy. Married couples want to have many sons to provide the labour required for their diverse and dispersed subsistence activities. In order to control the labour of their sons, they control their rights to own livestock, to get married, to be united with their wives, and for their wives to bear children and collect livestock for them. Men's marriages are thus usually delayed, often into their mid-thirties, while girls' marriages are usually contracted while they are still children. As a consequence, the age difference between men and their wives is usually well over ten years. If a man's wife is brought in when he is over thirty years old, and the same happens for his sons, it is unlikely that a man will still be alive when his sons' wives get brought in. Women, on the other hand, becoming brides around the age of seventeen, are more likely to be still around when their sons get their wives. This explains why so many women become widows, some of them already as brides or young mothers (29 out of 52 women in 1973, and 27 out of 39 women in 1983, were widows in Dambaiti). Those women who bear sons, bring them up from the start to be dependent on them, and even when their sons are married men, their mothers continue to assert their authority over them controlling their livestock, wives and children.

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