

CAUSES OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

*WITH EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS FROM CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN
NORWEGIAN PUBLIC OFFICERS AND OROMO REFUGEES IN THE SOUTHERN
ROGALAND, NORWAY*



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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to discuss misunderstandings in intercultural communication. As human communication is based on learned traits, cultural backgrounds are taken as important factors to understand why people communicate the way they do. Several scholars have been engaged in studying aspects of communication within cultures for several years. New theories have been developed to enhance communication skills among people of diverse cultures. As a student of global studies, the subject of intercultural communication has motivated me to focus on knowing more about intercultural issues. In fact, this is reinforced by my profession as an interpreter. With this in mind, this thesis attempts to make some empirical illustrations from field study conducted among some Oromo refugees and Norwegian public officers in and around Southern Rogaland. The thesis tries to make some possible assessments around what causes misunderstandings between the two parties in communication situations. Different perspectives are utilized and references are made from various scholarly products to strengthen what has been observed and conversed with informants. It is important to take into account contemporary challenges on different levels. Concepts like globalization, multiculturalism and integration are basic concepts that contribute as important factors in intercultural issues.

Knowledge of the cultural dimensions as a vast complex of communications on many levels would be virtually unnecessary if it were not for two things: our increasing involvements with all people in all parts of the world, and the mixing of subcultures within our own country as people from rural areas and foreign countries pour into our cities. (Rogers & Steinfatt 1999, 243)

Globalization

The era of globalization has made the demand for intercultural communication skills relevant. Jan Aart Scholte defines globalization from different perspectives. One of his definitions and what is relevant for our purpose is as follows: *The term globalization reveals most about social relations when it is understood as the spread of transplanetary (and in contemporary times also increasingly superterritorial) connections between people* (Scholte 2005, 424). Technological advances have allowed people from every corner of the world to communicate

more often and with greater ease than ever before. Messages are also sent and received from and to each other in second's duration. Thus the globe has now become a village where, as in my culture, people can gather at short notice in times of need. Advance in technology has also allowed people to travel both as tourists and immigrants to different parts of the world. This tendency has made a great contribution to enhance intercultural interactions on different levels. As the number of immigrants and refugees is fluxing, authorities in different host countries have made all possible adjustments in their social and legal codes to accommodate the new challenges. The previous mono cultural western societies have become multi cultural. The concept behind the phrase multi cultural society emphasises that people of different cultural backgrounds can live together with mutual respect and tolerance within any given national state. Fred E. Jandt defines multiculturalism as *understanding, acceptance, and constructive relations among people of many different cultures and subcultures* (Jandt 2007, 432).

Eriksen and Sørheim, on their part consider multiculturalism as an unavoidable challenge. Their book *Kulturforskjeller i praksis*, discusses this issue under the topic, *Verden kommer til Norge* (Eriksen & Sørheim, 93). According to them, even if one leaves immigration aside, Norway is already a multicultural country. Satellite televisions, the internet, travel and so on have threatened the national distinctive features. This tendency contributes to political involvement like arguments against globalization and commercialization of cultures. Another example is the debates around membership in the European Union, EU. Even so, multiculturalism is here to stay. Therefore efforts to tackle, or rather cope-with the challenge has to be made.

Integration

As many authorities must have reached similar conclusions as Jandt, integration policies have been introduced in their respective countries. In Norway for instance, the integration policy was directly administered and monitored by the Directorate of Immigration on a national level. As this task became more and more vital and demanding more efforts, another authorized body by the name "*Integrering og Mangfolds Direktoratet*" (IMDI) was formed in 2006. This effort illustrates the need for working with multiculturalism and integration simultaneously.

Multiculturalism and integration are better understood in relationship to the concepts of majority and minority. As we all know every person in one way or another feel connected to one state. People who move from their original state to another are considered to be minorities. Immigrants in Norway are considered a minority group whereas Norwegians themselves are the majority. In the principles of integration, the minority must adapt to the majority. Eriksen and Sørheim define integration as follows: *Med integrasjon menes deltagelse i samfunnets felles institusjoner, kombinert med opprettholdelse av gruppeidentitet og kulturelt særpreg* (Eriksen & Sørheim 2007, 79). As we can see here, this definition leaves much room for discussion. Phrases like maintenance of group identity and cultural distinctions are ambiguous and difficult to apply. According to this definition, integration aims at making minorities participate in all society's institutions in the same way as native Norwegians. At the same time it encourages difference. The question is then how can one make limitations? Given that this is not the objective of this thesis, I better leave the subject for a different study.

Intercultural Communication

In order to implement integration policies adapted, authorities need to communicate with the people who are being integrated. Here, intercultural communication is a key concept. The objective of communication is generally to understand each other. Understanding requires different skills. Dahl mentions the following in regard to this:

The common denominator of all communicational activity is understanding. Understanding involves listening, interpretation, comparison, application of different reference schemes, cultural assumptions, attribution of meanings, use of stereotypes, and prejudices in the everyday construction of meaning. Sometimes we can see how some or several of these aspects in a specific social setting affect the construction of meaning. The result can be understanding, misunderstanding, or unwillingness to understand due to political or ideological factors. (Dahl, Jensen & Nynås 2006, 8)

The objective of this thesis is to deal with the important elements mentioned above and give some empirical illustrations from the field study.

Delimitation

As the concept of intercultural communication involves cultural issues and communication process, it is a very wide subject. Several scholars have been engaged and the study of this has become more intense due to the increase of global issues. Therefore, it is obvious that this thesis can not address all aspects of intercultural communication issues. It focuses mainly on communication behaviour between public officers in the public sector and Oromo refugees settled in and around the Southern Rogaland region. The public sectors involved are: health, social, children welfare, and the police. The informants were both observed and interviewed. The Oromo refugees were selected on the basis of age, gender and previous work experience. Everyone included in the study is kept anonymous but referred to by codes given to each. The conversations were either in Norwegian or Oromo language, so the direct citations are translated from either language.

It is important to note that the work in this thesis is very limited in scope, and shall not be regarded as true for all cases. However, the illustrations used are based on facts observed and conversed with informants. Therefore, one can use the facts presented as a basis with similar issues in dealing with the Oromo in general. The thesis has no intention to argue on cultural values or world views as being stagnant or valid at all times. On the contrary, the thesis views culture as both dynamic and subject to change. At the same time it considers Dahl's concept of culture as an inherent code that often regulates behaviour. As the scope of this thesis is limited, its content is kept to few issues that illustrate themes related to what may cause misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Theories from different scholars are used as basic references to strengthen the discussions presented.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters with different subtopics under each chapter. Chapter two deals with discussing methods applied in carrying out this work. Under this chapter, qualitative research method is discussed in depth. Under chapter three political and cultural aspects of Oromo is briefly discussed. The main aim of this chapter is to give the reader a brief introduction to the background of the Oromo culture. The Political aspect is included in order to explain why the Oromo in this thesis came to Norway. In addition to that, I am

convinced that what people experience politically has impact on shaping their world view and behaviour. In chapters four, five and six, different issues related to cultural views are discussed. The discussions include communication behaviours between the Norwegian public officers and the Oromo clients they conversed with. Several theoretical perspectives are used as references. In the final part, conclusion, main points raised in the previous chapters is repeated as summary. Reference list is presented as bibliography.

Remarks

It is important to underline that the issues discussed here shall not be used as a universal measure to characterize the people concerned and their social and group identities. As we all know differences are always subject to context, and other social factors. Therefore, I want to emphasise that knowledge about concepts like prejudice, stereotyping and ethnocentrism are important means to help avoid undesirable conclusions.

In addition to that, I also want to mention my methods of conducting this field work. The theme, as presented, concerns Oromo informants in relation to their Norwegian counterparts. As an Oromo, I share a great deal of cultural views with my Oromo informants. But as a researcher, I have kept my own cultural knowledge aside and concentrated on the situations that I was observing. During interviews I posed questions even if I believed I knew some of the answers. However, to my surprise I got many new answers, but of course I was confirmed on some issues too. This is true from both informant sides. Therefore, I may say with great confidence that the work has been valuable and educational.

Another important thing to mention is regarding chapter three. It is about cultural values and political aspects of the Oromo cause. As mentioned above, the importance of this chapter is to give a brief introduction to Oromo life in general. Hence, my writing is never intended to reflect my personal views about issues that concern the Oromo. Finally I would like to underline that this thesis is not meant to solve any of the problems it raises. But it is my hope that it can be used as a means to pave ways for solutions in the future.

Chapter Two

METHODOLOGY

As this thesis is based on first hand research, it is of importance to present the applied methodology to accomplish the thesis. When a scientific study is under construction it is important to ensure good quality by applying accepted methods to the process of the study. Based on this notion, the concept “field study” has been used to describe such a method. The basic approaches in field work are classified mainly in two categories, qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative approach is the primary concern of this thesis.

Qualitative Research

As the term qualitative indicates, this approach tries to deal with the study of a given object or subject in its own territory. The concept of quality refers to the nature of someone or something under consideration. Similarly, qualitative research is a study of a given object or subject under consideration in its own territory. It attempts to explain its relations from that perspective. The qualitative research method is discussed in different forms. In some areas of study the term, *participant observation* dominates whereas other studies make use of the concept ethnography. *Qualitative inquiry, fieldwork, interpretive method and case study having fuzzy semantics boundaries. In fact, there is no sharp distinction...* (Emmersly & Atkinson 2005, 1). Likewise, the work in this thesis has references to any of these.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a clearly defined and the most frequently applied concept in empirical studies. Utilising this method requires a great deal of effort and patience. Learning the principles and adjusting them to the needs inherent in the study requires substantial effort. Observation based on purpose is time consuming and sometimes leads to confrontational conversations and even discussions; therefore, there is a great need for extraordinary patience. As the researcher chooses to also be a participant, the researcher is subject to additional strain through the necessity of leaving his or her attitudes, belief system, knowledge and all intellectual and emotional impulses behind in order to fully experience the field somewhat in the same way as if he or she were a child learning something entirely new. Keeping focus on

interaction and completely embracing the society under study on the society's own premises and terms require a great deal of care and wisdom. Anthropologist Fredrik Barth writes:

For å få del i andre folks virkelighet må vi altså få vite hva de vet, og glemme det vi vet. Det er bare folkene selv som kan gi oss denne nøkkelen til sin verden. Og for at vi skal klare å ta imot den, må vi bli ydmyke i vår tro, vi må være villige til å legge tilside –ja midlertidig gi slipp på – hva vi selv vet og verdsetter, og stole på at det vi derved skal få del i også vil ha verdi. (Barth1991, 10)

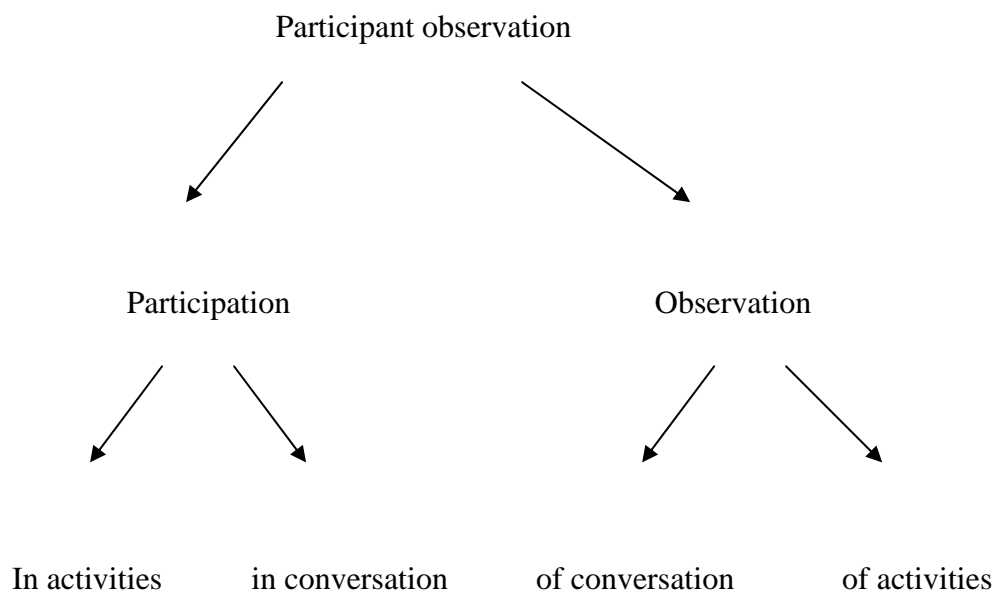
This is most likely the same as founding social anthropology on the basis of cultural relativism.

A researcher is often out to investigate foreign social phenomena. In several cases however, the researcher is engaged in field studies of his or her own respective culture. This mainly refers to studies of social interaction, social relations and, patterns of communication in specific areas such as working environment, a particular life patterns etc. This to say that social research is not necessarily conducted by a researcher alien to the environment, situation or culture. Cato Wadel discusses this issue in his book *Feltarbeid i egen kultur*. He mentions that it is easier to work within ones own culture, since one shares the same basic cultural categories and language with those one study. However, still one has limitations to grasp most of his or her own cultural aspects than that of a foreign culture, simply because one has taken them as they are with out adequate reasoning. (Wadel, 1991,18) Furthermore, Wadel quotes Whitehead that strengthens his own argument: *Familiar things happen and people don't bother about them. It takes an unusual mind to discover the obvious* (Ibid.19).

As mentioned above, the main method applied to this research is the participant observation concept. To validate a participant observation method, a number of conditions have to be met. Before discussing these conditions, it is important to mention that this work is based *on research on own culture*. The reasons for mentioning this will be mentioned in the sections discussing ethical issues. Even in cases where the culture under study is the researcher's own culture, the study requires access to specific areas during the study. This is especially necessary in order to apply the participant observation method.

Cato Wadel lists three types of challenges where a participant observer must develop skills: Acquiring access to participation; widening one's own role during the field work and finally, being a sociologist to study own behaviour (Wadel1990, 27). As that of Wadel's idea, my

initial thoughts after deciding to do a thesis on this subject concerned the collection of data. Though I had decided to use participant observation, the complexities involved in access to the area of study were not yet apparent to me. When things began to take form however, the process of defining roles both in relation to own behaviour and in terms of interaction with both individuals and the community as a whole began to evolve. Interaction as participant observer is illustrated in the figure below as presented by Wadel.



(Adapted from Wadel 1991, 46)

As illustrated above, the role used here as a field worker focused on the two categories, participation and observation simultaneously. The theme of the thesis as mentioned is based on communicative behaviour. Communication is widely used as a means of sharing ideas and thoughts, including both verbal and non verbal behaviour. It is worth quoting Fiske's assumptions that help in comprehensive studies of communication.

... communication involves signs and codes. Signs are artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves; that is, they are signifying constructs. Codes are the systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs may be related to each other. ...transmitting or receiving signs/codes/ communication is the practice of social relationships. ... Communication is central to the life of our culture: without it culture of any kind must die. Consequently the study of communication involves the study of the culture with which it is integrated. (Fiske 1990, 1 - 2)

Access to the Field

Participant observation as opposed to passive observation requires the approval of all participants. In order to get access to natural communicative behaviour, as this is the focus of this thesis, specific ways and strategies enabling the researcher to do so need to be constructed. A researcher normally needs to approach key informants through a number of different stages. Gate keepers are said to be the first to be approached in order to be permitted in to the field. (Hammersly & Atkinson 2005). In fact, they are not key informants themselves. Once negotiations with the gate keepers produce a successful outcome, entry into the field is granted. After entering the field, acquiring access to the real and natural interaction requires massive effort. Information flow can be both superficial and real. In a field where informants are used only as verbal informants, the information gathered may probably be superficial. Often informants may try only to meet the desire of the researcher without trying to reason their behaviour. However, information gathered through participation in action combined with observation gives a more real and deeper meaning of interaction. In order to achieve this desired outcome, the researcher needs to enter the *back stage* (ibid) where the real actions take place.

In terms of attempts made to enter the field work in this thesis, the real gate keepers encountered were the informants themselves. Observation was conducted by approval from parties who communicated; the Norwegian public officers and their Oromo counterparts. It didn't require much negotiation to enter the field as the entrance itself was supported by the professional role. This issue will be presented later in this thesis.

Ethical Requirements

Social research itself demands ethical awareness. A researcher using participant observation as a method enters the field with an objective to *watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms* (Kirk & Miller 1987, 9).

Therefore, a researcher needs full approval and acceptance from the people who he or she is going to study. To know people internally means to know their precise ins and outs as well as their intimate relations. In order to achieve this objective researcher's knowledge, values, beliefs etc. must remain neutral during the period of study. This is often a big challenge for researchers. A move from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism is an absolute need for a field worker who is determined to reveal the implicit meaning behind interaction between and

among people. Respect for the people opens for trust and confidence in interaction. All information gathered must be used in a proper way without exposing the informants to ridicule or any other form that could harm them as individuals. Their collective identity is also in this case regarded with high importance and is thus respected. Professor Cato Wadel mentions both merits and disadvantages involved when conducting field work in one's own culture. Based on what is considered to be merits, Wadel writes the following:

Å gjøre felt arbeid innen sin egen kulturkrets innebærer at en studerer en del av sin egen virkelighet. Man skulle tro at det å utføre slik feltarbeid er mye lettere, både rent praktisk og også faglig, enn felt arbeid i fremmede kulturer. På mange måter er det også lettere, i det minste rent praktisk. Vi kan ofte språket. Vi kan også gå ut fra at de vi studerer har andre ting til felles med oss: - visse grunnleggende antakelser om naturens beskaffenhet, virkelighetens beskaffenhet, den menneskelige naturs beskaffenhet, handlings – og samhandlingens beskaffenhet. (Wadel1991, 18)

When considering the situation in this field work, it is possible to observe that what Wadel discusses above has been met. I am born and raised as an Oromo. The Oromo cultural codes and norms as well as the cultural assumptions are an important part of my identity. Although I have lived in Norway for the last 19 years, working among Oromo refugees and immigrants in Norway for the last 17 years has contributed to the continuity in my knowledge and experience of Oromo values and norms. Access to homeland through technological devices and my home visits have also played a role in developing and furthering my understanding of the culture. I also share much of the Norwegian culture. I am married to a Norwegian woman, and we have lived together for the last two decades. This has profoundly contributed to my exposure to Norwegian values and norms perhaps even more so in my case than in the case of other immigrants who come for other reasons than mine. This is further strengthened by the challenges I encountered raising our two children as Norwegians. Contacts with my many Norwegian friends and probably the interaction with my parents-in-law who spoke no English could be mentioned as an important reason for enhancing my intentions to adopt the language and values. Therefore, I feel I am in a strong position to claim a sense of belonging to two very different cultures, referring to basic values and norms. The other aspect that Wadel considers important is language. I have taken the language requirement courses, studied at a Norwegian college, and participated in different gatherings and meetings conducted in Norwegian. All this has helped me to improve my Norwegian competence. Hence, I can say that I master a great deal of the basic Norwegian concepts for adequate communication. This is further strengthened by my profession as an interpreter and translator.

My Oromo language knowledge and competence is as fluent as it used to be, and is continuously updated. Taking part in all possible social gatherings among Oromo in exile, as well as working as an interpreter and translator in the Oromo language keeps my skills fresh and upgraded.

The aspect that Wadel considers to be a disadvantage in field works in own culture is the risk of overlooking values that may be of importance to mention. When we are born into a culture or have adopted a culture as our own, we tend to accept what happens around us everyday as normal without being bothered much about it. By doing so, we miss exposing what may interest others and even fail to explore what we know about ourselves. Naturally we are curious to know about things which we did not know before. This is probably why Wadel uses the concept *å være sosiolog på seg selv* as an important reminder in the field work.

Conducting field work in one's own culture requires attitude, knowledge and skills to pose a hypothesis about the reason why things happen as they happen. This type of hypothesis helps in the search for empirical reasoning. This does not mean that pre knowledge, skills and assumptions are of no importance. They are rather basic conditions that open our eyes and ears to be more attentive to our surroundings and help investigate cause and effect relations. In having similar cultural values as that of our informants, we must begin with using our selves as informants.

Informed Consent

Informed consent refers to two areas. These are the legal as well as the ethical aspects. The legal aspects deal with protecting individual rights based on legal codes. The ethical consent is what the social research principle demands from researchers when dealing with field studies. In both cases, it is the duty of a field worker to inform and get consent from the concerned parties. These consents may be given in both verbal and written form.

After achieving consent, the field worker enters the everyday life of informants as part of his or her objectives. To come in to the real life of people, intimate relationship must be established that give development to confidence and trust. And it is here that the field worker is challenged to sustain and maintain the established confidence and trust to ensure an

effective outcome. *Intimacy is a powerful instrument that you must use with care so as not to violate the trust established, nor abuse the confidence that has been given to you* (Bernard 1998, 188).

To conduct this field work, I made use of my own profession as an interpreter for both Norwegian public officers and their Oromo clients. Though I have been working as an interpreter for the last 17 years, it is not before now that I made the use of my profession as part of a formal study. Therefore, after having confirmed my theme of work, I began thinking of the legal as well as the ethical aspects of field work. I have chosen some informants from both categories, Norwegian and Oromo. I made calls mainly to my selected Norwegian informants and asked them for their consent to be informants for the field work I was to conduct. I tried to explain the purpose, the limitations and the method I was going to use. In addition to that I have underlined the confidentiality of information to be gathered and anonymity of informants. A few people declined the request for various reasons. Many accepted the request. In terms of contacting the Oromo informants, they were mainly contacted physically, where I explained all about the work I wanted to conduct. Almost all gave me their consent, with some expectations from the work. Some Oromo informants have said that my work may have a positive influence on their relations with their Norwegian counterparts. This was revealed to me by the expression two of my Oromo informants used. *We hope you make things easier for us.*¹ The other said: *We hope they can understand us better if you write well about us.*² My Norwegian informants were also curious about the outcome of my work, by mentioning it *will be interesting to read what you are going to write.*³

The challenge encountered during this work was to convince the Oromo informants that the work was not directed to solve problems, but to bring facts and the encounters of intercultural communication to light. It was clear that this was a basic ethical issue, in order to avoid unrealistic expectations.

The other ethical problem encountered was maintaining a balance between my identity as an Oromo and a Norwegian at the same time. As an Oromo, I had to follow the Oromo communicative behaviour that usually required lengthy conversation in order to come to the

¹ In Oromo: Interview informant 10, Stavanger, October 23 2008

² In Oromo: Interview informant 9, Bryne, August 30 2008

³ In Norwegian: Interview informant 2, Bryne, October 16 2008

main issue. A field worker who has little time can easily offend his or her informants by simply pushing the subject to get what he or she wants from the informants. Moreover, direct pressure can also block the intimate relationship that could have led to trust and confidence in communication.

I took all the encounters as a challenge, and chose to be an attentive and tolerant listener and posed questions only when fitted. I met them where they wanted to meet me and guaranteed them that I would listen to all they wanted to tell me. As opposed to Oromo informants, all my Norwegian informants preferred to be met at their respective working places.

During the observation, both parts were informed that the work is related to writing a master thesis focusing on intercultural communication. Detailed information about the purpose, the confidentiality and anonymity of that which is observed and who is observed have been clarified with all subjects used as examples in this study. In all cases, resistance has never been met.

Practical application of Participant Observation method during this Field work

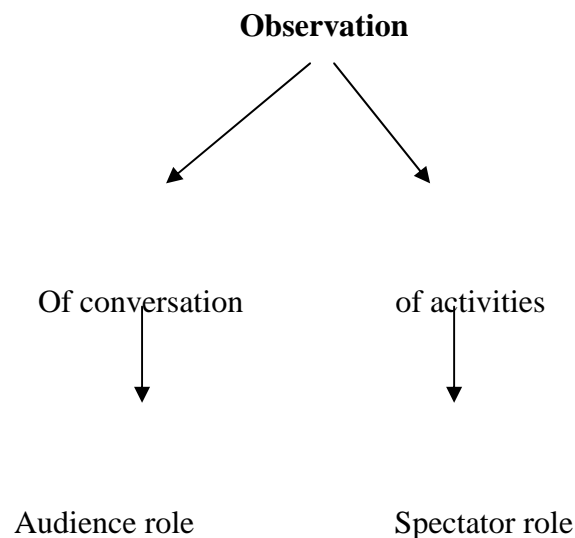
Where participant observation is involved, the researcher must find some role in the field being studied, and this will usually have to be done at least through implicit, and probably also through explicit negotiation with people in that field. Access may need to be secured through gatekeepers, but it also has to negotiate and renegotiated with people being studied; and this is true even where ethnographers are studying settings in which they are already participants. (Hamersley and Atkinson 2005, 4)

Based on the above statement and using Wadel's model modified, I would like to discuss how I made use of observation and participation as methods respectively.

Observation

Observation in its literary term refers to simply watching what is happening. But observation in the field work is more purpose oriented. It is applied in order to find a relationship between cause and effect in interaction. However, it is wise to be aware of arguments about detaching the two concepts, participant and observation, that undermines the objective of the research. For example, Bernard quotes the following: *Pure observation, as used by some sociologists and psychologists, (...) seek to maximum extent possible, to remove the researcher from the*

action and behaviours so that they are unable to influence them (Bernard 1998, 262). In order to overcome this shortcoming, let us see Wadel's model that represent alternative utilization of the concepts observation and participation. One can not participate before knowing what to participate in and how to participate. Therefore, observation precedes participation. The following is Wadel's model of discussing the concept observation in field work.



(Adapted from Wadel 1991, 46)

A field worker needs to fulfil different roles at different times in order to utilize the method participant observation. Likewise, I had to make my self aware of the different roles I had to my disposal as well as acquiring access to those I hadn't. In almost all cases, it was rather easy for me to enact these different roles due to my profession as an interpreter. The challenge was in fact to utilize the roles adequately and effectively and know when to remain in the part and remain a spectator respectively.

Audience Role

The conversations between Oromo clients and their Norwegian counterparts used in this thesis are mainly conducted through the use of an interpreter. They spoke in their own respective languages directly to each other as if they spoke the same language. The interpreter interprets what is said in one language in its original form so that it gives meaning in the other language. This is where an interpreter becomes an observant as audience. The interpretation ethics obliges the interpreter to remain non participant in this respect. Even if the interpreter

has his or her own personal views and meanings about what has been said, it is the duty and the responsibility of the involved parties to make judgments. Interpreters' duty is always to repeat what is said in one language in another language. Despite its shortcomings, this role makes an interpreter a very good observant of cultural dynamics expressed in communication situation.

Spectator Role

According to communication theory, humans communicate mainly through non verbal behaviour. Non verbal behaviour can be observed during conversation. It either strengthens or weakens the verbal message, and it can also contradict what is said verbally. Tone of voice, speed and, volume of speech, gestures, facial expressions, etc are some of the non verbal cues that usually accompany verbal messages. All these are culturally conditioned. The interpreters' professional ethics limits the role of an interpreter to interpreting only verbal message. *...en som gjengir muntlig, og på et annet språk, en persons tale for andre lyttere på det tids punktet ytringen blir gjort* (UDI 2003, 6).

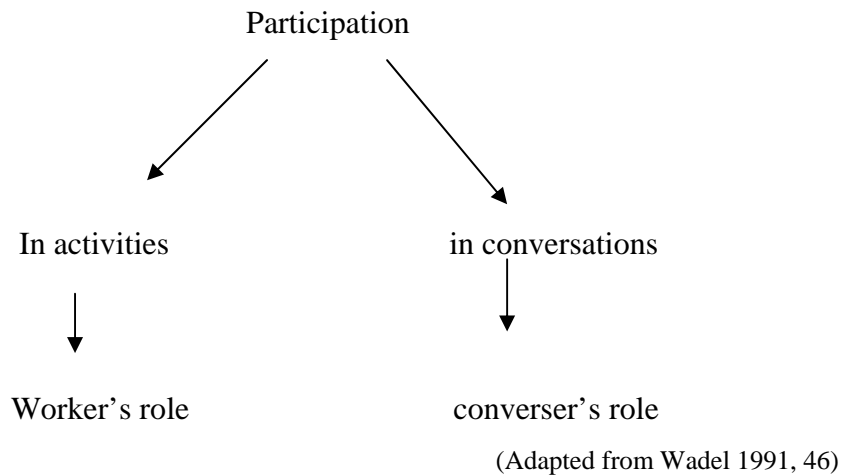
This limitation of an interpreter's duty encourages the interpreter to remain observer of non verbal behaviour. Due to this professional duty, the role as spectator is well utilized.

Participation

Participation is the most popular method in social science since it is regarded as *emotional involvement*, (Bernard 1998, 263) of the researcher. Rules of behaviour are best learned through actively participating in the every day lives of the people under study.

A complete participant role means that the observer is wholly concealed; the research objectives are unknown to the observed and the researcher attempts to become a member of the group under consideration. The complete participant interacts with the observed as naturally as possible in what ever areas of their living interest him and is accessible to him. (David & Chava1987, 287)

Using the following modified structure of Wadel's concept, we shall see how different roles are applied under the concept participation:



As the above figure demonstrates, participation includes both activities and conversation. Activity in this context is not limited only to performing a duty. As the social science research is concerned with interaction between and among people, the term should be understood this way. It is through a defined role that one is able to interact with others. Likewise, the following are the roles made use of in achieving the participant part of the method.

Worker's Role

Wadel uses the terms *lærling / arbeids roller*, (roughly translated, trainee/ worker's roles) and conversation role in discussing participation. The former refers to other activities whereas the latter refers to communication behaviour. According to Wadel, participation is the widely known research method which is always accessible if the researcher is determined that studying other people includes learning from them.

Access to the worker role in this context, has not been a big problem since the profession as an interpreter was right at hand. It helped watching both the verbal and the non verbal behaviour of the parts in conversation. It is in definition an activity, since the role of an interpreter is to actively listen and interpret what is said. This activity helps the interpreter grasp an understanding of cultural values expressed in both respective languages. This make the interpreter's role unique, because the interpreter may discover and understand differences in values more easily as an observer than those participants actively engaged in communication.

Entering a field study disguised under worker's role, can contribute to more precise data since the informants are not aware that they are being studied. Many, in fact, do not know how to be studied (Wadel 1991, 34).

Conversation Role

This role was mainly used in conducting an unstructured interview with informants. It is by definition an activity as it was a direct involvement in dialogue with informants. Some statements and some questions were posed where the informants commented and explained issues.

Even if the main part of this role focused on verbal behaviour, it was possible to observe the non verbal aspects that revealed emotions, attitudes etc. At that moment it was possible to ask direct questions about what and why. This has helped to widen my view on issues to be studied. In addition to that, this active dialogue has contributed to confirming or /and explaining what has been observed. It is also through conversations that one can pose different questions that can lead to new and probably important information that has never been thought about. Wadel writes: *Mens observasjon uten deltakelse i både aktiviteter og samtaler Kan være en bevisst og planlagt måte å foreta et feltarbeid på, er deltakelse uten observasjon vanligvis ikke bevisst eller planlagt* (ibid. 49).

Data

The basic purpose of field work, depending on participant observation, is to gather most available events, information etc relevant to the theme of study. In order to achieve this objective, the researcher enters the every day life of people's actions and conversations. Though it is said that a field researcher is subject to adapt to the situation of those to be studied, the researcher has to simultaneously be able to be selective in observing events, interactions, dialogues, etc. related to his or her theme. As these situations are very common and happen every day, the researcher is supposed to note all social interaction that interests him or her for further analysis. Collecting events through observation and conversation from a range of sources during a field research is what is called data collection.

During this field study, the data collection refers to the theme of intercultural communication. In order to do the work, different areas of observation and participation were selected. The many years experience I gathered through my profession has also helped me to select a context and setting for the field study. In other words, I have already made some important assumptions about what to observe and participate in.

From Assumptions to Theories

Studies of intercultural communication as well as other social science studies made it possible for me to focus on this social issue. First, I tried to memorize the events I have been through both as an observant and a participant when I attended lessons, especially in the subject intercultural communication. I tried to connect what I read and learned to what I have experienced. This is probably a move from studying others to focusing on my own assumptions and knowledge. Therefore, I often tried to reflect on my own experiences by writing term papers related to subjects in social sciences. However, these writings have never been based on research work, following defined methods of study. The study of research method has also encouraged me to go ahead with my intentions of doing scientific work.

Cato Wadel, in his book *Den samfunnsvitenskaplige konstruksjon av virkeligheten* writes that all human beings can be characterized as social scientists. This is due to that social researchers study issues that are ordinary and well known to most people (Wadel 1990, 9). My theme of writing is likewise a much known issue among those to be studied. Though a researcher and his or her informants have some things in common, the difference between ordinary person's wisdom and a researcher's knowledge has different paths to go.

Fellesskapet fremtrer også i det at både vanlige folk og vitenskapsfolk er opptatt av å finne orden og mønster i en mengde inntrykk og "fakta" som de kommer bort i. Vanlige folk krever orden for seg selv, for å finne fram i samfunnet. Vitenskapsfolk krever orden og mønster fordi dette er den eneste måten han/hun kan utføre sitt arbeid. (ibid. 11)

Being equipped with a research method, I re-entered the settings familiar to me to collect information and events related to the theme "What causes misunderstandings between Norwegian public officers and their Oromo Clients?" These collections of information and

events are categorized in to pre planned categories, analyzed and interpreted in relation to the relevant theoretical framework and then presented as a product, in the form of a master thesis.

The other aspect that makes the work different from that of ordinary persons writing is the process conducted to undergo the work and the way in which it is presented. The study is conducted by investigating dynamics of interaction in the search of cause and effect relations.

The Question of Reliability and Validity

In order to deal with this issue, it is again important to mention quantitative and qualitative methods. Their applications are determined by the objective and the nature of the research to be conducted. The former's main attribute is numerical as well as statistical expressions, Whereas the latter deals with illustration of the nature of the subject studied. Comparing the two approaches, Kirk & Miller write the following: *Technically 'qualitative' observation identifies the presence or absence of something, in contrast to 'quantitative' observation which involves measuring the degree to which some feature is present* (Kirk & Miller 1987, 9).

As this fieldwork is based on qualitative method, it is wise to see the concepts reliability and validity in that context. This work, as has been said, depended on observation of and participation in reality. Reality refers to how the subject under study views themselves, each other and the world around them. Since human beings conceive reality differently, the meaning of reality is therefore relative. It is exactly this basic issue that caused interest to me to undertake this fieldwork. The fundamental questions are what, why and how in relation to thoughts and actions. I am well convinced by the notion that reality is something out there in the real world, and also something in our heads. Observation of both phenomena is appropriate (ibid.71).

As we all know, life is full of challenges and it has to be confronted. Our confrontations depend on how we have experienced similar challenges before and how we have overcome them. It is clear that we also face inexperienced challenges too. It is here we try to construct mechanisms to stand against challenges. The point here is to illustrate that challenges are out in the world whereas knowing how to challenge it exists in our heads. Similarly the attempt to

assessing communicative barriers between two persons of different cultural backgrounds properly fits the claim.

Interaction being a basic phenomena to be studied by the method of participant observation, it is difficult to express it fully with a measurable unit. It involves behaviour of the involved in its different forms. In this case, the behaviour observed is basically communicative cues. These cues are both verbal and non verbal. Therefore, it is difficult to justify the findings with quantitative measurement. The only justifiable measurement for reliability is therefore, how much the findings coincide with all existing theories on similar issues. This work is not based on grounded theory, theory production, but rather explores some aspect of the life of the people who are being studied, finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves (Hamersley and Atkinson 2005, 3).

In regard to validity, all possible attempts are made to exclude personal views, attitudes and previous knowledge of certain incidents. However, I am fully aware of the difficulties involved in measuring the validity of this assertion. Through the application of scientifically verified theories and methods, necessary measures have been taken to reduce errors which otherwise may have occurred in making final statements. However, it is important to bear in mind that

Validity consists of a relationship between the definitions of specific mental constructions and specific observations. It follows that we assess data and finding validity with references to whether or not, or the degree to which, specific mental constructions correspond with specific observations. (Bernard 1998, 555)

As this work reflects relations of mental constructions, and actions in forms of both verbal and non verbal behaviour, it is possible to argue that it fits the above statement on validity.

Chapter Three

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE OROMO PEOPLE

Historical and Political Aspects⁴

Oromo is the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The figure given by different scholars varies from 40 to 60 percent of the whole Ethiopian population. Even during the late 1890s, a French Catholic missionary, Martial De Salviac, wrote:

...they (Oromo) make up most numerous of his (Menilek the Abyssinian king who subdued Oromo) subjects, because one puts them at 10 million, where as Abyssinians, a mixture of peoples in the Arabic sense of the name, do not make up more than four millions. (Kanno 2005,1)

The Oromo belong to the Cushitic speaking people of the horn of Africa. The Oromo language, afaan Oromo, known as *Oromiffa*, is said to be the third most widely spoken language in Africa, after Arabic and Hausa (Malba 1988, 9).

It is their unique social and political organization known as *gada*, that made the Oromo people known to others. *Gada* is a very complex democratic system where each individual Oromo takes part in decision making on social affairs. This system makes the Oromo people unique.

Gada is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo ethnic identity, but as with most symbols, it may have multiple meanings. It manifests itself in a wide range of social phenomena, including perspective rules, ceremonies, rites, public offices and actual physical villages. (Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996, 150)

Thus, *Gada* is a system that rules the overall social life of the Oromo people. To day this social system is reduced to mere minimum for a number of reasons. The constant contact of the Oromo with other peoples, the conquest of the Oromo by the Abyssinian, the internal self interest among the Oromo leaders etc have contributed to the merge existence of the *Gada*

⁴ The discussion under this topic includes some political issues that reflect the political situation in the Ethiopian empire. As an Oromo the issue concerns me too. Being aware of that, I would like to inform that my writing in this thesis is not intended to reflect my personal political view. The aim of including the theme is to make the reader get some important ideas about why the Oromo included in this thesis have come to Norway. It is my sincere wish and hope that it will be understood from this point of view.

system. Until the colonial era in Africa, the Oromo lived as an independent people. It was during this period that the strong Abyssinian king of Shoa, (*one of the regions in central Ethiopia today*) Menilik, invaded and subdued the Oromo people and land under his power by the help of fire arms and ammunitions donated by European colonial powers. This happened parallel with the scrambling of Africa by the colonial powers. Melba mentions different reasons why Europeans did not colonize the region that is known as Ethiopia today. On the contrary they helped the strong king of Shoa. Among many reasons, the moral question is worth mentioning here. Abyssinians, who the king was part of, was the only Christian kingdom in the whole region. Therefore, writes Melba: *it was against European moral norms to colonize a people that professed a form of Christianity* (Melbaa 1988, 50). Hence, the Oromo call the invasion of the Oromo land colonization by a black African power. Deepening this claim, Melba writes the following:

Menilek's predecessors (...) had made several attempts to occupy Oromia. They had failed because of the superiority of Oromo unity and war techniques. Menilek, like his grandfathers... clearly understood that the old ways of doing things would never work. He was convinced that he needed two things: firstly, European firearms and military knowledge (...) He obtained massive quantities of firearms and ammunition from France, Italy, Britain and Russia. ... employed several European mercenaries in different military fields and political advisers. (ibid. 52)

To day, the Oromo use the same term in arguing against the dominance of the Abyssinians in the whole social and political affairs of the Oromo in particular and in Ethiopia in general.

Resistance of the Oromo since the occupation and annexation of the Oromo land to the Abyssinian rule under the empire Ethiopia has continued. The resistance conducted by the Oromo during the period of canonicalization has resulted in mass massacre of Oromo everywhere, especially in the Arsi region where several million Oromos suffered inhuman tragedy. During the era of Emperor Haile Selase, the late king, the Oromo people continued their struggle against the Abyssinian rule in different regions. The Bale peasant uprising in 1960s is good example to mention (ibid. 128). As his predecessor, the emperor also used his European contacts to help him subdue the popular uprisings. Though the emperor had introduced modernization to the empire, the Oromo people had little benefit from it. The great majority of Oromo people who received education were those who lived in areas where missionaries opened schools. *Schooling opportunities for Oromo and people of other nationalities were available only in the few mission and Koranic schools* (ibid. 75). As the

Oromo people received education, they became aware of their ethnic identity, the unjust rule, and exploitation of Oromo natural and labour resources by the ruling aristocrats. This geared up the resistance of the Oromo people against injustice.

In the early 1970s the resistance opened up further. The university students and other Oromo elites demanded land reform to ease the deteriorating lives of peasants serving the Abyssinian land lords and the Orthodox Church. These were entitled to claim more than half of what the peasants earned. The struggle, coupled by the drought that caused death to millions of citizens resulted in a mass revolt in the country. This in turn led to the deposal of the emperor. After the Emperor was deposed, power fell in the hands of the armed forces.

Because of lack of political experience and absence of political organization, in the empire, no genuine leaders of the people emerged to advance the revolution to its ultimate goal. This led to the usurpation of power by the military which was the only relatively organized force but at the same it was the mainstay of Hail Selassie's regime. (ibid. 80)

Representatives from different units of the armed forces were elected and formed a committee of about 126 officers by the name *Derg*. This committee later named itself *Provisional Military Administration Council* and assumed power.

This event was expected to bring some improvement to the empire and to the Oromo in particular. On the contrary it resulted in disaster. The *Derg* turned to the east block at the time and introduced Marxist Leninist as the leading ideology for the country. The peasants were organized in small units called *kebele* and were tightly controlled by the regime's administrative apparatus. Mismanagement and unjust rule caused for internal unrest again. External problems from neighbouring Somalia led to open war in the east part of the country. The liberation fronts at the time: the Eritrean, Oromo and Tigrean intensified their claim for independence. Youths at schools, university students and elites in general protested in different ways. Armed resistance by the opponents to the military rule increased in cities and big towns. In order to subdue the internal and external problem it faced, the *Derg* needed more forces. Thus, through its control organ *Kebele*, peasants were ordered to contribute not only financially but also with human resources to oppose these conflicts. The slogan, *Revolutionary Motherland or death* was cited every day and hour in available mass media. Peasant children were targeted and several million peasant and their children were recruited to

the army the so called *people's militia*. After a minimum of training, they were all sent to the front lines of the war. Most were killed and the remaining sent home with different degrees of disabilities. Many families, as a result of this, were destroyed. Women were left to care their children alone. The period is remembered as a period of terror and fear among Ethiopians in general.

The suffering of the Oromo under *Derg* and the previous regime contributed to deepen the Oromo ethnic awareness. The Oromo Liberation Front, OLF, fighting for Oromo's right for self determination, was formed during the early 1970s. It fought against the military regime parallel to the other liberation front. When the military regime was overthrown in 1991, the OLF was one of the major forces contributing. Soon after the regime was avoided, the Eritrean force declared Eritrean independence. OLF and the Tigrean Liberation Front, TPLF, drafted a charter which could help them form a just democratic system for Ethiopia. An interim administration was formed with these two as main forces to lead Ethiopia on a new path.

The OLF and the TPLF, however, were not in good terms from the outset. The latter considered the former's political views as inappropriate to the whole Ethiopian situation. Therefore, TPLF had a plan to weaken OLF's political views demanding Oromo rights for self determination to secession. The Oromo cause has always been opposed by successive Ethiopian ruling elites and pro Ethiopians. From the struggle against the military regime, the TPLF had many Oromo war captives. The OLF requested the TPLF to hand over the captives. But the TPLF rejected the request, and organized the captives into another Oromo organization, Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization, OPDO. *TPLF therefore set up a "sister party" OPDO (...) initially, the members consisted mainly of Oromo government soldiers who were prisoners of war* (Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996, 266). However, both TPLF and OPDO reject this allegation. Relations between OLF and TPLF worsened following this incident. The OLF regards OPDO as a puppet organization and a quisling who sells the Oromo cause to foreigners. It was despite these differences that the two rivals, OLF and TPLF, made an agreement to pave ways for democracy in the country.

After the formation of the transitional government in 1991, the OLF made a considerable success in agitating the Oromo. It recruited many members and got support from almost all Oromo in the Oromia region. TPLF and OPDO were almost abandoned in the region. The

OLF accused both the TPLF and OPDO, for intimidating, arresting, torturing, and murdering its members. According to the OLF, the TPLF and OPDO intensified their act in fear of losing the upcoming election later that year. As a response to these acts, the OLF announced its withdrawal from the transitional government. The following day, TPLF waged war on OLF members and supporters, declaring OLF illegal. As a result of this, several Oromo were imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, and suffered harassment. Since that, the OLF has been a banned organization throughout Ethiopia, and any one observed or suspected of sympathizing with it suffers serious charges

The attempt so far has been to present some historical background about the Oromo people in Ethiopia. The cause of the Oromo people has not always been known globally as it is today. The basic reason for this is that Oromo people were known only as Ethiopians. During the last decade, many Oromo came to different countries in Europe, America, Canada and Australia as refugees. It is an indication that their cause is internationally recognized. UNHCR still continues to ask countries like Norway to receive more Oromo refugees who are in different refugee camps in neighbouring countries like Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan.

Some Basic Oromo Cultural Values

As the scope of this thesis is limited, and the concept of cultural values is very wide, it is important to underline that this thesis just focuses on few selected issues that may help the reader understand the Oromo as people. The Oromo people have rich culture, but much of their inheritance does not exist in written form. The oral tradition has helped preserve Oromo values and wisdom. It is through the oral tradition that children learn about historical events, values and norms peculiar to Oromo. In his discussion on Oromo culture, an Oromo anthropologist writes the following:

The most elementary trait of Oromo culture is the belief systems; ethnicity and identity of the Oromo are given historically in the oral tradition. ... Unlike other peoples who have adopted religions which were not indigenous to their societies, in the case of Oromo, the people and the belief system have evolved together. The religion not only proclaims beliefs and dictates behaviour, but also imposes itself on the minds of the people as a vocation, life-giving purpose and guarantee of existence. (Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996, 94)

It is probably due to these intermingled cultural and religious aspects that several missionary writers focus on Oromo studies.

The other aspect of cultural manifestation is Language. As culture generally does not exist without language, neither does the Oromo culture and language. It is, as mentioned above, through the Oromo language that the Oromo cultural values are transferred from generation to generation. Lack of exposure to literacy and the historical suppression of the Oromo people are factors of great importance in this context. Today, we see and experience flourishing Oromo cultural and oral treasures in written materials. To this, the contribution of Oromo national movement has to be mentioned. The Latin alphabet in writing the Oromo language was first adapted by Oromo in exile during the 1970s since it was illegal to write in Oromo in Ethiopia. However it was not before the early 1990s that it was officially allowed in the Ethiopian empire.

As people whose culture, beliefs and ways of life have been neglected, the Oromo protested against such suppression both in actions and words. Discrimination and unjust rule has also encouraged and strengthened the use of Oromo oral treasure to express grief. Additionally, the Oromo use proverbs when teaching their children wisdom, arguments, explaining events, gender roles and how to conduct both private and public gatherings. The one who masters these qualities is regarded as a wise person. A wise person is often called an elder, despite age. Surprised by the Oral wisdom expressions, Zitelmann quotes the saying of an Oromo elder that used double meanings in blessing and agitating people at the same time. This happened during the first years when political forces were trying to convince the people as their liberators’.

Peace is with our land, Peace is with our people, to be peace, let the people rise to help each other, let God support us to each other for the unity of our country. Let our hands join to help each other. The one who has left us and moves through the borderlines, let God make him return. Let the guests who came to our land return to their country in peace. In order that they return in peace, let God be helpful. If they refuse to return, let God help us that we help each other to return them to their country. (ibid. 104)

Several of these words are meant to protest against OPDO who wanted to appear as liberators but were not welcomed by the people. The message is clear to an Oromo audience, “go home

in peace, if not we will stand together and chase you away”. Several such poetic uses of the Oromo language continue to exist both in public and private affairs.

The Concept Saffu and Its Application

This concept is a very popular term among the Oromo. It is an overall term that embodies all ethical and moral order. Reverend Dafa Jammoo tried to describe it as *a term used in prayer that denotes respect, expression of admiration (translated from Oromo)*. If a person is not guided by saffu, according to reverend Jammoo, he/she is just like an animal. From this point of view, it is possible to interpret the concept *saffu* as an overall order or norm that guide the Oromo behaviour. Similarly Lambert Barteles considers the concept mainly in its religious context as it *implies both rights and duties. In people’s eyes wisdom knows saffu and abides by it* (Bartels 1983, 170). Jammoo writes different areas of concern about the role of saffu. For the sake of illustration, some areas of concern that reflect attitudes and actions among the Oromo is selected and dealt with in the following:

The Concept saffu in Relation to Family Life

The Oromo traditional family often consists of husband, wife, and children born to them, adopted from relatives. The parents of the husband often live together with them. As the eldest in the family, they have a considerable decision making rights in the affairs of the whole family. This is often the case when the parents of the husband live in the same or separate home. The husband and the wife are expected to be loyal, and listen to the advices given to them. In fact, parents from both sides make all the necessary arrangements when the couple gets married. Traditionally the Oromo form families through arranged marriages where the parents from both sides have negotiated a long term settlement of marriage requirements. When married, the girl moves in with the boy’s family, usually a home made for them close to the parents. The parents are advisors, and monitor the young family to make sure they have what the tradition requires. They are involved at once if a problem arises between the couple and help them settle any dispute. They help them raise their children, and with domestic practicalities. Their specific duty is to advice the couple. Failing to accept advices and being resistant is considered as breaking the concept of *saffu*. Reverend Jammoo regards this as similar to the fourth commandment in the Christian faith, respect your father and mother. Respect is manifested in its different forms peculiar to that culture. For example,

elders are the ones to bless in different gatherings and rituals, elders have the final word in disputes and discussions, elders are the first to be seated their blessings or curses are regarded valid and so on.

Relations among Siblings

Reverend Jammoo further writes that the Oromo *saffu* also focuses on the age difference among brothers and sisters. The older brother or sister, according to the *saffu*, should never be addressed by their respective name by their younger brothers and sisters. The first born sister is addressed as “*adde*” and brother as “*obbo*”. In some situations where it is needed to identify who the *adde* or the *obbo* refers to, the real name is added. For example, my younger brother addresses me as only *obbo* when he talks to me directly, but if he says something about me to others, he says *obbo* and my real name. Today these concepts have widened its meaning and used to denote the English concept of, Miss, and Mr. respectively.

The older brother is said to be the most advantageous person in a family. The tradition awards him with the right to inherit. This happens even if there is an elder sister. As mentioned above, the reason is that a girl when married leaves home, whereas the boy brings a wife home to him. This and some other similar aspects of the tradition give a better status for boys than for girls. A man who has a son is often addressed as a father of X. The same is true for a mother. It is very seldom among the Oromo that the father and the mother are called by their daughter’s name as it is with son’s. Probably this is an indication about value differences in having sons and daughters.

Division of Labour According to Saffu

Discussing work or job divisions, reverend Jammoo basically considers the role of gender according to the traditional Oromo society. His explanation refers to the mode of life depending on substantial farming. Men are supposed to work outside homes whereas women are tied to domestic duties and to raising children. Children are taught these distinctive divisions of labour. Boys follow the footsteps of their fathers and daughters follow their mothers.

Wives make food, feed their husbands and children, fetch water and firewood, wash clothes keep homes in order and perform other obligations related to the home/household. Men work outside the home with work such as clearing forests, farming, ploughing, grazing cattle, building, repairing, trading, taking part in public affairs, responsible for financial recourses etc. If a man or a women does not fulfil these obligations, it is called “*qaani*” a shame in the Oromo language. If a woman is observed ploughing with oxen, people would be surprised, and say “*saffu*”. The same may be said if a man is observed carrying a fire wood on his back. In its mild form the utterance “*saffu*” in this context denotes breaking a norm. Because of these deep rooted traditional practices, people are observant and avoid doing things that contradicts these norms. Men have the dominant role in a family, whereas wives and children are expected to be subordinates. Boys have upper hand over their sisters, if the age difference is not very big, as they follow the gender relations practiced by the parents.

Child- Raising

Saffu determines which values to stress and which norms to follow in raising children. Children as in all cultures are raised to keep and maintain the values and norms embodied in their culture. These include what to do and how to do things. All issues discussed above are the basic values and norms embodied in the Oromo concept “*saffu*”. The first thing a child should learn is to respect his parents and elder brothers and sisters by being obedient. Breaking this norm leads to sanctions, mainly by the parents becoming angry and consequently beating the child. Beating a child with thin sticks (*ulle*) is not to harm but to lead a child onto the normal path, says an Oromo elder. This is expressed in the Oromo proverb, “*Ullen qodaa qofaa cabsa*”, roughly translated; a stick only destroys or breaks households, but doesn’t harm a child. A child, who is raised in contrast to the concept of *saffu*, is said to be called “*addege*”, roughly translated wild. To have such a child in a society is also a “*qaani*” for the parents. Proper behaviour is first and foremost showing respect by being obedient. In fact obedience has a lot of areas that we have no room in this thesis to discuss.

A very basic value in the life of a person is how to form a family. A son or a daughter is expected to follow the decision of his or her respective parents about whom and how to get married. Even if they choose each other, it is expected that the parents confirm it. The tradition requires a long process where the parents are engaged first and foremost to find out

if at all the question of lineage allows them to go ahead with the marriage proposal. Any blood relations up to 7 to 10 generations from both sides are regarded as family. Getting married within this generation is understood as “*haramuu*” a concept that resembles the English term “incest”. If a person breaks this norm and gets married anyway, their children are regarded as “*dhala haramu*”, a product of incest, and practically excluded from social affairs.

Children are expected to consult their parents in all aspects of challenges they meet in life. This is despite adulthood and managing one self in life. If a parent curses a child, it is believed that it has an effect in the life of the person. Reverend Jammoo stresses that respect for elders must exist beyond wealth, education, authority and public roles.

Boys and Girls

There are certain value differences in raising girls and boys. Generally, girls have very close relations to roles of their mothers while boys of the fathers. “*All girls from puberty onwards are hiriya (equals). Due to the fact that their social contacts are so limited and closely watched, they form the closest group of all* (Bartels 1983, 325). Boys are generally less monitored by their parents as their duties lie outside of the home. They take their fathers roles as models of behaviour towards the opposite sex.

Husband and Wife Relations

As in other African societies, the Oromo have patriarchal family structure. Husbands have the overall decision making right. The wives respect this position to the extent that they do not even address their husband by name. Husbands are addressed in a much respected manner and a formal pronoun similar to the old Norwegian form “De”.

During family conflicts, the wife seek refuge with her parents’ - in-law. In worst cases, she can flee to her own parents. Whatever conflict it may be, it is always settled through negotiations held by community elders. Elders are respected community members who are in the position to settle issues even as grave as murder. Disrespect for the elders’ advice and comments are regarded as breaking *saffu*. A woman’s value is mostly measured by her obedience to her husband, ability to bear and raise children, and keep an orderly home. Men are regarded as men by women in respect to their ability to earn the livelihood of the whole

family, the roles they play in community affairs and how they show their bravery. A husband who is a coward is despised by his own wife, *One of the things women have always despised most in men is cowardice (...)*you are a woman like me, are still a common challenging quarrels between women and men, girls and boys (ibid. 274).

Taboos

The concept *saffu* often refers to taboos. The advanced learner's dictionary defines the term taboo as *(a) cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people finds it offensive or embarrassing ...* As per this definition and as it is normally in different cultures, the Oromo also have areas of concern in this respect. In relation to verbal behaviour on different themes, age, sex, relationships, settings etc play a large role among those communicating. Certain themes are never raised among adults when children are around. Men have some topics that they do not talk about at the presence of women. The reverse is also true. As actions are equally communicative, certain features are also regarded as taboos depending on who does what. For instance, as Jammoo says, it is a taboo if a girl initiates dating or proposes marriage or show interest in a boy. Whoever it may be, it is taboo to talk about sexual intimacy directly. Intimate body parts are never addressed or named. In regard to this concept, Barteles writes the following expression from his fieldwork:

Parents and children cannot speak with one another about sex. If a mother wants her daughter to be advised about her conduct with boys or about things concerning menstruation, she will ask the girl's grandmother to do so... The same holds good for father and son. (ibid. 312)

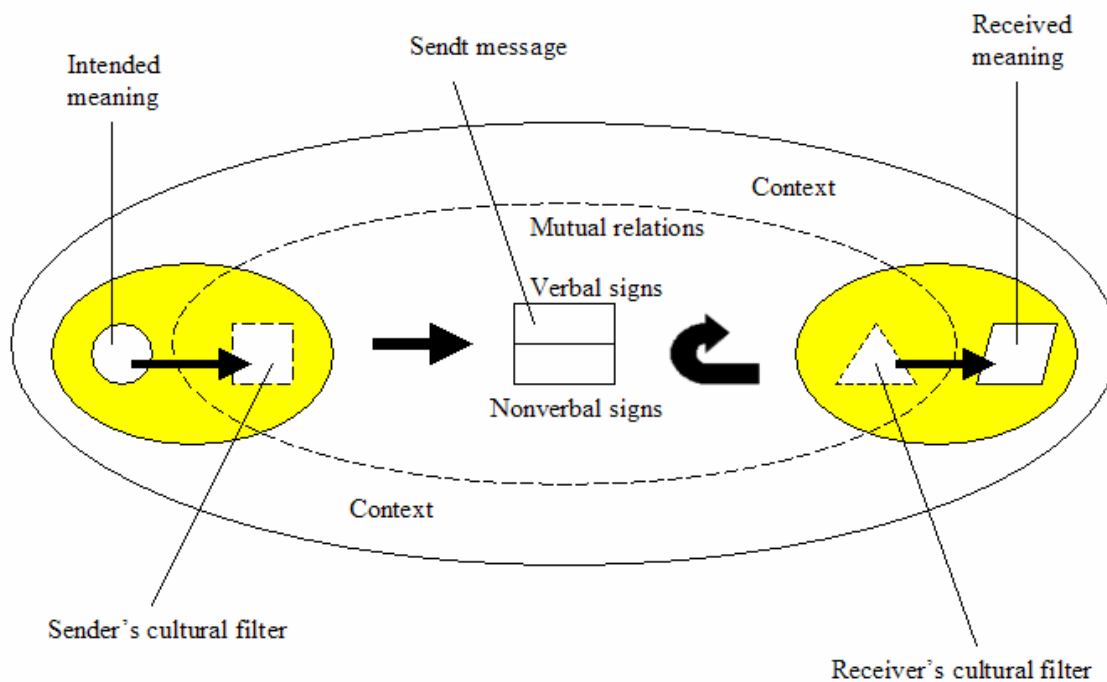
Øyvind Dhal stresses that communication involves persons, not cultures. However, persons communicate based on their cultural codes, *kode i bak hodet* (Dahl). Therefore it is of great importance to consider the underlying cultural influences when two persons with different cultural backgrounds approach each other. *Human beings are creatures of curiosity and explore different areas of the world around them, not only to meet personal needs but also to understand them* (Hiebert 2006, 44). It is often on the bases of these different cultural filters between those who communicate that misunderstandings happen.

This chapter has attempted to present some basic Oromo cultural values in order to help the reader make some assumptions of, if not to understand, the Oromo culture. The Oromo people's worldview, as guided by the *saffu*, is determined by their relationship with each other, the nature around them and other people they interact with.

Chapter Four

NOT UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Communication as a process of sending and receiving message between people has been a concern for social science studies for a long time. Different theories have been developed and utilized discussing communication. The two basic theories, the process and the semiotic have contributed a great deal in order to find out how communication really functions. Though, the two theories use different approaches, they do not seem to contradict each other. According to Øyvind Dahl, the two approaches compliment each other in order to make the study of communication behaviour better understood. Based on this, Dahl has made a very important figure that illustrates communication laps. I find it wise to use this figure for further discussions.



Adapted from Dahl 2001, 66

The contents of this figure can be described as follows: The sender's ideas or thoughts are placed in the white circle marked *intended meaning*. These ideas and thoughts are connected to the sender's cultural filter represented by the square, *sender's cultural filter*. The arrow between the circle and the square illustrates the move from mental images to cultural

categories. After the thoughts and the ideas have passed through the cultural filter, a message is formed both as verbal and nonverbal. This is illustrated by the two combined rectangles in the middle of the figure, *verbal & nonverbal signs*. When the message approaches the receiver, the incoming message goes through the receiver's cultural filter that helps him/her make meaning from what is received. The triangle represents the receiver's cultural filter whereas the rhombus stands for the meaning formed by the receiver. In other words, the whole process is presented as encoding and decoding of communication signs by the sender and the receiver respectively.

It is because of this complexity that one experiences dynamics of communication. The culture filters play vital roles in what we call understanding and misunderstanding. Cultural filters include all aspects of behaviour unique to groups, communities and societies at large. The more those who communicate share the same or similar cultural categories, the greater is the possibility that they understand each other. On the contrary, if the cultural categories are far from each other, the degree of misunderstanding and not understanding is great. Cultures are regulated by values and norms. It is these elements that help people perceive events in specific ways.

Apart from facilitating goal achievement, norms serve to increase regularity and predictability in the operation of the group. Members can determine, with reasonable accuracy, what is likely to happen in most situations. This also means that they have certain guidelines as to the nature of their own involvement. (Hargie, Sounders & Dickson 1994: 296)

Not Understanding

Cultures are constructed according to the challenges human beings confront in their co-struggle for existence. These challenges are often met in groups. The group communicates with each other about how to deal with these challenges. They form collective standard of behaviour towards the challenges. This collective behaviour is what we call norms. On the other side, people also give names to things, phenomena according to their common experiences. As people experience the nature different, they name the natural elements by different names. If one has not experienced or has not been told and explained a certain thing, the thing remains foreign to him or her. One fails to find references in his or her mental pictures, *cultural filter*. It is here that the concept not understanding becomes strong. If we don't find any thing to refer to, what we perceive has no meaning to us. If there is no meaning

to what we are exposed to, it is natural that we have not understood it. However, people who communicate always try to relate what is said, how it is said, what is observed etc. to some sort of experience or knowledge from before. Communication, as Dahl puts it, is simply a negotiation between people about meaning. In the process of negotiations, people can come to both agree and disagree about meaning. In fact, this depends on how each interprets the messages sent from one to the other. The result of communication is finally evaluated by the receivers behaviour related to the original message by the sender. Generally, not understanding refers to lack of reference in mental picture.

Misunderstanding

In addition to the three components in the concept of communication, information, utterance, and understanding, there is also a fourth factor that is crucial for understanding communication process, and that is whether you have success or not. To be understood and to get acceptance are two different matters. How do you get approval, and how do you convince? (Dahl, Jensen & Nynås 2006, 79)

Understanding mainly refers to sharing the same idea or thoughts between the sender and the receiver of a message. However, it is quite clear that since *each of us lives in our universe of meaning make the possibilities for misunderstandings and breakdown in communication...* (ibid).

In communication, be it within a given culture or outside a culture, the communicator often finds some kind of references to the encoded message. This happens with both verbal and non verbal cues. In other words, the encoded and the decoded message are subject to cultures. As communication is a negotiation about meaning, parties involved use efforts to convince each other about the encoded and decoded message. If each has similar references, the negotiation most likely does not take long time. On the contrary, if the encoded and decoded messages are based on different cultural filters, the negotiation takes longer, because the parties interpret the signs differently. This is where misunderstanding is explicit. Misunderstanding is thus different interpretation of the encoded and decoded signs intended to produce similar meaning. The differently encoded and decoded signs lead to different behaviours. It is important to bear in mind that the term interpretation, in this context, refers to how those who communicate connect what they experience to their earlier knowledge. Hence, misunderstanding happens more often than not understanding.

Let us consider the following example from how one can misunderstand an event or a concept. Once there was an Oromo woman who went to a doctor to seek treatment for her complaints. When called in to the doctor, as Oromo usually do, she greeted the doctor stretching her right arm supporting it with the left hand. The doctor, observing how she approached him, said worried: *what has happened to your arm, are you injured? Is it painful?* The woman answered surprised that nothing was wrong with her arm and told that she was just greeting him. The doctor began to apologize for the misunderstanding. The polite form of greeting in the Oromo tradition is bowing; stretching out the right arm supporting it by the other hand is very common. As the doctor was puzzled by the event so was the Oromo woman by why the doctor misunderstood her greetings. (see the illustration on the front page)

From this example, we can see that a simple action can be misunderstood because of earlier experiences and values peculiar to each person in a communication situation. This example can also be illustrated from a contextual perspective. Coupled by cultural difference, the settings may have also contributed to the misunderstanding. The doctor may probably have interpreted the event differently if it was outside the doctor's office. The fact here is that the intension of showing politeness was interpreted as having pain. The probability of misunderstanding could have been less if the doctor shared the same cultural filter as his patient.

The Role of Cultural Values and Norms

It is obvious from what has been discussed that communication behaviour is culturally explained. Culture is also defined as how people behave and give meaning to their own behaviours. The basic elements in a culture are what we call values and norms. Before considering these concepts, it is wise to begin with paying attention to similarities and differences among people. Thomas Hylland Eriksen discusses characters of human society in his book *Små steder, Store Spørsmål*. His characterization categorizes humans as both natural and social beings. Under both categories, one finds both similarities and differences. Related to this, Eriksen emphasizes on the following:

Selv om mennesker er født sosiale, er vår menneskelighet ikke medfødt, den må læres. Det sant menneskelige, slik antropologien ser det, er først og fremst sosialt og samfunnskapt, ikke individuelt og naturlig. All oppførsel har et sosialt utsprang; hvordan vi kler oss, hvordan vi kommuniserer med språk, ansiktsuttrykk og bestemte gester; hva vi spiser og hvordan vi spiser alt dette er lært. Selvsagt er mennesket også et biologisk artsvesen med visse medfødte behov, men det finnes alltid sosialt spesifikke måter å tilfredsstille disse behovene på. (Eriksen 2004, 52)

Erikson's idea is also well supported by Cato Wadel's view, that cultural variations and similarities are human constructions that can be explained from relations, *Relasjonelle forklaringer* (Wadel 1990: 36). This chapter tries to illustrate the validity of this view from the field study made.

Cultural Values

As mentioned, the phrases cultural values and world views are often used as alternatives in the social sciences. Øyvind Dahl defines the term values, *Verdier*, as follows: *Verdi er grunnleggende prinsipper for menneskelige valg. De er på den ene siden uttrykk kultur i betydningen "koder i bakhodet" – hva mennesket som individ ser på som ønskelig, hva som er verdt å forsvare, hva som er verdt å dø for* (Dahl 2001, 139).

From this definition, we can see that value is a strong cultural element that guides all human behaviour. As it is a socially constructed principle, it follows given rules of behaviour. Abiding by the value is honoured whereas violating rules of behaviour are sanctioned. This rule of behaviour is what we call norms. *Normer er regler for atferd, ofte avledet av verdiene* (ibid. 140). Therefore, when one talks about values, at the same time the norms are considered.

As this chapter tries to draw empirical illustrations on value and norms, distinct areas of concerns are selected. Let us see some areas of concern when the Norwegian public officers meet their Oromo clients in communication situations:

Family Matters

As presented under chapter two, the Oromo have traditions that define a family and relations within a family. Marriage among Oromo is a life long agreement. This value is well observed among Oromo both in rural and urban areas. Disputes that arise among family members are

always social issues which elders⁵ in the community are involved to bring the dispute to an end. According to a conversation with an Oromo informant, the Oromo in Norway have attempted to practice this cultural value in some cases. When asked how successful the attempt was, the informant answered that the issues of negotiations have always been very difficult. He added that the Oromo have no longer respect neither for the tradition nor the elders. Therefore, the results of the efforts made were almost in vain. The following is an extract from conversation with one of my informants:

You know we have come to a country where things turned up and down for us. We have no longer control over our own lives. We were used to work hard to support our selves, provide and maintain the need for our families. Today, we are refugees separated from our families, culture, property and country. We are exposed to a new culture and system that encourages disintegration in a family as opposed to what we are used to.

-How?

Let me be honest with you. The public officers, especially when they approach our women they ask questions that ignites problems. Without any reason they ask questions, like does your husband beat you? Does he help you in the house? Does he... Not only that, they encourage our women to abandon us. They do this by telling them only about the rights women have if separated from husband or live alone with kids. How do you understand this? Isn't it an attempt to disintegrate a family life?

-How do you know all about this? Were you there when it was said?

Both yes and no. I have and some of my friends have experienced that the public officers tend to encourage these thoughts. Furthermore, my wife has told me that on some occasions the public officers have asked her exactly what I said. Some friends told me the same story.

-What do you think lies behind this?

I don't know except assuming that they don't understand us and pay attention to our values. They don't consider our backgrounds, many of us have lived together in difficult times, undergone several difficulties while fleeing. When we at the end believe our problem is eased, we confront other harder problems. You know yourself what a family means to each of us. It is sad to see the already disintegrated families. What would their parents say if they heard about all of these?⁶

The concept elder is a culturally conditioned term. In addition to denoting age, it also represents respected persons in the community who can play the role of leading negotiations. This concept is widely used among Oromo in the Diaspora.

⁶ In Oromo: Interview informant 10, Stavanger, October 23 2008.

The discourse around this issue has been long and at times so emotional that it can not be expressed in a written form. From the context, it was possible to understand frustrations and fear. The informant answered the following when asked if he or the others had talked about this issue with the concerned public officers. The answer was clear; *we don't dare to do so, because they have no time for us, we are there only to hear what they tell us. In addition to that, they have power and can do what they want.* Similar, if not identical, sayings have been collected from other informants (*informants 6 & 8*). When it concerned female informants, informants 11 and 12 confirmed that they have got information about their specific rights regarding the theme discussed above initiated by public officers. In relation to how they regarded the information, the women have slightly different opinions. “*Good to know what rights one has*” was a general answer from female informants who were all reluctant to say more. The Norwegian informants, who were all women, on their part have their own view about their relation with their Oromo clients. The following is an extract from an informant regarding this issue:

The biggest problem we encounter is that they don't respect appointments. They don't come on time, and sometimes they never appear at all. That frustrates us. I have the feeling that they are ashamed to come to women and apply for money from the social welfare and explain how they used and will use the money they get. I have the impression that their wives also make a pressure on them to earn more money.

-How do you know that?

Yes, from experience we know that women seldom complain. When they complain they are not direct.

-How do you see the gender difference in your work?

I know that men can feel uncomfortable to come and ask for money when they have always been used to earning themselves and make their own decisions over their earnings. The biggest problem in our relation is when it concerns money. When it concerns women, it is likely that they are favoured, because they meet women like themselves in most cases. Probably we have not done enough on men's side.⁷

⁷ In Norwegian: Interview informant 2, Bryne, October 16 2008.

Value, as Dahl puts it, is a very strong inner conditioned code of behaviour that makes people even die for it. From the above, we see that the Oromo informants argue for what they are used to, world view, and how they consider the move from traditional social values to the Norwegian individual rights based system. Paul G. Hiebert writes the following on the effect of world view: *Our world view helps us to select those that fit our culture and reject that do not. It also helps to re interpret those we adopt so that they fit our overall cultural pattern* (Hiebert 2006: 49). It is probably due to that the Oromo informant mentioned that they wanted to solve their social problem in their own way.

While the Oromo argue according to social values and norms, the Norwegian public officers focus on individual rights referring to juridical codes. For an Oromo a social value is more worth than the juridical codes. For instance, the elder's role in managing social as well as juridical issues is valid procedures within their own country. The Oromo says, *jaarsi gumma iyuu niaraarsa*, elders can settle even cases like homicide. Recently, though it is considered by different opposition groups as a political game played by the authorities, the case of political prisoners in Ethiopian jails was solved through negotiation conducted by elders. Therefore, Oromo always try to negotiate all issues. When these expectations fail, it leads to regression from further dialogue with the counterpart. As the Oromo informant said, it is of no use to meet them because it is them who decide whatever, and they come there only to say yes to what they are told. This relation is a typical power relation:

Power is the degree to which one part controls resources valued by another party. People have power in relationship to others if they can change the other person's behaviour. Financial ability is one measure of power. Unequal power affects human interaction, although this influence may go unnoticed by the more powerful person in communication relationship. (Rogers & Steinfatt 1999, 133)

Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Torunn Arntsen Sørheim have made an important study on cultural differences in practice with in the Norwegian multi cultural society. After similar discussion on the issue mentioned above, they wrote the following evaluating the Norwegian public officers' role:

... opplever blant annet flyktningkonsulenter, lærere og helse- og sosialarbeidere at mange med minoritetsbakgrunn stiller spørsmål om barn, fedre og mødre – spørsmål som ansees irrelevante og tolkes av individorienterte profesjonelle "hjelpere" som utidig nysgjerrighet og overskridelser av privatlivets grenser. (Eriksen & Sørheim 2007, 150)

Child Affairs

In relation to family issues, children's matter is another area of concern in communication. Values behind having and raising children are different from culture to culture. As presented in chapter three, the Oromo traditionally have basic reasons why they want to have many children. Children mean a lot to a family. In addition to maintaining lineage, they also help parents and relatives in carrying out some work. They are the only guarantees for their parents and relatives when they retire. As the mortality rate among children had been very high, the Oromo always wished to have as many children as possible because of the fear that some may die. This fear can also be considered as one factor for practicing polygamy among Oromo. As the value of having children has high priority in marriage, a wife who for some reasons can not bear children (barren) is traditionally often abandoned. Parents with many children are regarded wealthy, because of children's contributions mentioned above. As parents have great expectations from their children, they consider them to be their future hope. In a court case here in Norway where a mother was charged with not giving adequate care for her child, she expressed her fear as follows. *My child is my vision, taking a child from me is just to leave me blind. He is my sight.*⁸ The more children parents have, the luckier they are considered. A son is more worth than a daughter in the Oromo tradition for the reason mentioned in chapter three.

Children are taught to respect values and maintain them. Today, Oromo at home and in Diaspora try to teach their children about Oromo values and norms in order to strengthen the Oromo ethnic identity. Identity, as an expression of belonging to, is what the Oromo want to cultivate in child raising. The Oromo who participated as informants in this study have commented that the challenge is strong to implement it here in Norway. The challenges are the confrontation with the new norms and systems. Informant 11 said that they (Oromo) no longer have status of fatherhood to their children, as the authorities have taken all the power. The issue about how to care and bring up children has been area of concern. Therefore, especial attention has been paid to it under this study. More observation and conversation has been conducted at different settings. The following was an incident observed in the year 2006 at a meeting between parents together with their child, and children welfare officers at their office. The parents had problems with their child who had not been obedient and loyal. The

⁸ In Oromo: Observation, Trondheim, August 27 & 28 2008.

issue came up to the children welfare section and the parents together with their child were called for conversation. The conversation went very well where the child at the end admitted guilty. As a final remark and warning to the child, the father said: *Now we have cleared up the problem. But if you do the same mistake again "I will kill you"*. It was possible to observe the Norwegian public officers' reaction to what the father said. Silence dominated for a while until the interpreter gave a remark on the saying: *it is a culturally conditioned assertion*. Due to the interpretation ethical principles, the interpreter could not say more even if the public officers were curious about what was meant.

The point here is not to discuss the outcome of the event, but to underline the cultural differences in communication that could have led to a juridical case. For a Norwegian such assertion can be understood as a serious threat, whereas Oromo regards it usually as a serious warning. Parents often use the phrase when they are serious to their children. It is important to notice here that there is no other alternative phrase if one really wants to commit murder. Context and how it is said determines the meaning.

The observation conducted and situations attended when it concerns confrontation between parents and child welfare section involved mostly single mothers (divorcees). The areas where the child welfare is involved are especially around what the welfare evaluates as inadequate care, ill-treatment and the alike. Due to the limitation of this thesis, let us only see these two areas and assess how both parties see the concepts inadequacy and ill-treatment respectively.

As an authorised body, the children welfare is involved in issues where children are said to be affected. Due to this involvement in the affair of the family, power conflict arises.

Traditionally, Oromo families are entitled to bring-up their children in accordance to basic values. Deviation from respecting values results in socially valid sanctions. Back to Dahl's assertion, the concept *kode bak i hodet* guides behaviour of people wherever they are. These codes make people react in a certain way they are used to. And these reactions are usually spontaneous. Regarding children and their roles in a family and in the society at large, basic behaviours are vital and expected. Parents who don't bring-up their children in a proper manner are criticized even among Oromo in Diaspora.

Based on the above, let us consider the following case from the field study. During the conversation conducted with Oromo informants the following was stressed. In regard to

proper manner expected from a child, all informants mentioned that children have to be obedient to their parents. Parents wish the best for their children. The best they wish them in this country, according to informant nr, 12, is to keep them away from the “immoral” behaviour she observes around her. Another informant mentioned the following when asked about the same issue:

Looking at children, let alone the youth, who even don't give seats to elderly while travelling in busses, girls who wear clothes that hardly cover their body, boys and girls who don't help their parents but demand this and that, ways children talk to parents and adults in general, make me think that I came to live where there is no “saffu”. The worst I experience is that children, let alone adults, make intimate relations in public that we consider as saffu.

-What is that?

They kiss and keep each other so close as if [was silent]. What does this mean? After all when the adults do it open what do they expect from their children? Is it how we raise children? God help me!⁹

To the question how they tackle such challenges, different answers were gathered. Let us see some of the sayings:

We advice our children not to do things that go against our values. We tell them how we grew up and preserved our values alive. I, for example, tell them that there is nothing wrong in respecting adults and follow norms that make people happy. Those who respect adults get blessings from them.¹⁰

The following was said by another informant on similar issue:

You know the era is when things have turned up side down. Children have taken the role of parents and parents have become children. Instead of children listening to what adults say, adults are forced to listen and obey children's orders.

-How?

Yes, children threaten us often. If we don't do what they want us to do, they will report us to the authorities that we don't give them necessary care. Some children have done that, and the result was bad. Take (x) for instance. The authorities are trying all they can to take away the child from her.¹¹

⁹ In Oromo: Interview informant 7, Bryne. September 19.2008.

¹⁰ In Oromo: Interview informant 10, Stavanger, October, 23 2008.

¹¹ In Oromo: Interview informant 12, Bryne, August, 30 2008.

Another informant stressed the following:

I love my child. I do all I can to make her happy and cope with demands that the children welfare tells me to do. I always get complaints from the welfare that I don't do enough for my child. They tell me that they receive worries about the child from different persons and sections. Sometimes the kindergarten, schools, health stations and even neighbours call and tell that I am not a good mother to my child. I don't understand this society. They are all against me. I am alone and I have only a child who is close to me. If I am sick I ask her to bring me something because I am lying sick. I tell her that I have pain and worries. This has become a big issue claiming that I exposed my child to my private problems. Don't they themselves tell their children that they are sick?

- How does the welfare know all about this?

A very strange society, the people in the welfare told me at times that they would assign a person to help me learn things. But the person they assign comes with double purpose. Helping is just a pretext; this person is observing and reporting all about me instead of helping me... That is the evidence they use against me. At the kindergarten, at School, they ask children if I give or do this and that for her. They make children say what we do at home, what we say and find all possible wrong things about us. Because of this I have become very afraid to talk to my own child. That is all they use against us.

-Have you been to consultation with the child welfare section?

Yes, many times. What is the use? They don't say much, but press me to talk. I am sceptical to meet them. I don't understand why they press me to answer all the questions. Often they ask me irrelevant questions.

-What? For example?

My background, my religion, how I came to Norway, about my family, age etc.

-How do you try to tackle this challenge?

I come to the meetings they call me to listen and try to be as short as possible in conversation. How? Since I know that they want to dig out all possible reasons to punish me, I try to agree to what they say by answering ja or nei. I have the feeling that they don't accept me as I am, but want me to be as they want me to be.

-Do you believe that they try to help you?

What do you think yourself from what I have already told you? Is it a help when they focus on how to get a child away from you? ¹²

¹² In Oromo: Interview informant 9, Bryne, August 30 2008.

Another event was observed on the 28th of January and 3rd of February 2009 at the police station where a couple was called for interrogation after notification from children welfare's section. The children welfare had gathered information from the school and the kindergarten their two children attended. The charge was that children told their respective teachers that their parents beat them. The couple was called spontaneously to the police with no notification in advance. It was a dramatic event for the couple as they were kept apart from each other at the police station. During the interrogation, both couple admitted that the children had been punished only once. The reason was that they got up in the middle of the night and turned on the TV. When the parents discovered that, the children were brought back to bed by their father. Sometimes later, the children got up again and did the same. It was on this second time that they were beaten on their hands once each. The couple said that this is the only event the children told their teachers at school when asked regularly. The event took place more than a year ago. The father said the following in a conversation with the police officer:

*Our children have told us that the teachers are asking them if we beat them. First of all we don't understand why these people (public officers) ask such questions with out any reason. We love our children and we do all the best we can. If we don't make clear limitations for children, how can they learn the norms?*¹³

In addition to that, the couple was very surprised that the children welfare personnel reported them, because they believed that they had already cleared the matter with them. This was even the reason for the welfare personnel to promise them proper follow up by an assigned advisor who comes to them regularly. While waiting for this help, the couple was called to the police. The mother stressed that this was unfair. *They asked us several questions related to our culture. We told them that in our culture it is not forbidden to beat children when they break norms or disrespect regulations.* On separated conversation the father said the same thing and added the following from the tradition at homeland:

When we beat children we don't do it to harm them. We don't beat them so hard that they are harmed. We do that in order to show them that breaking norms are also harmful. It is often that children cry after being beaten. Then it is the responsibility and the duty of parents to comfort the children by holding them close to oneself. The children need this affection. While doing so the parents tell children how happy they

¹³ In both Norwegian and Oromo: Quoted while observing conversation between the police officer and the concerned father, Sandness, February 3 2009.

are with their children and explain expected behaviour. Children also tell each other that breaking norms can be sanctioned. This is how it is in our country, and that was what we told the public officers at the meeting. They have turned all these explanation against us and now charge us as guilty. We have never said that this culture is right and therefore we beat our children on that base.

-*Did you use interpreter or talk directly?* (The police officer asked)

*No, we talked directly using the little Norwegian we could. They always said ja, ja and so on when we explained to them. We thought we were understood, but we see the result now. Instead of helping us they preferred to charge us as guilty.*¹⁴

The police officer mentioned that the children welfare section is obliged to report events that are against the law.

Another important event during this interrogation was the direct conversation between the father and the police officer. The father told that his father had four wives with whom he had 23 children. To have many children meant a lot to his father and he was proud of them. He now lives retired with assistance from all his children. He also mentioned that he and his wife have only two children now. Their plan is to have four children and underlined that this is very few compared to what his father has. Since the conversation interested me, I paid very good attention to the dialogue (the conversation was in Norwegian). The police officer said that she has only two children and she added that two is many enough. She further said that it demands much time and energy to have many children. The Oromo father shook his head and said: *Children are blessings, when they grow up they help their parents and their relatives at least in our culture. Even if we live in foreign countries we support our families at home financially. We also want our children to know their roots and help them.* Using this opportunity, I posed a question to the police officer: *Why do you want to have child (ren)?* She was silent for a while and said *it is just nice to have children.* That was the only answer. This saying was similar to what I once got when I posed similar question at a gathering during one of the sessions I was asked to speak. The answers were: *it is to maintain the lineage* while some simply said *it is just nice to have children.*

What we have learned and lived with follows us wherever we find ourselves. When we are confronted with situations that contradict to what we are used to, we react negatively to it. The situation we have gone through in this chapter depicts this reality. As seen in chapter

¹⁴ *ibid*

three, the cultural view of the Oromo in relation to family life is different from that of Norwegian values. When these values are threatened, it is considered as a conflict. In the Oromo tradition, the elders are engaged when crises arise. In Norway this tradition is replaced by the role of the authorities. The Oromo regard this involvement by the authorities as unfair, because the authorities take personal rights prior to family relations. Family rights include that of children, parents and other relatives. This assertion has been repeated by informants and observed at different meetings. Similar to family issues, children cases are also a big area of concern from an intercultural aspect. Eriksen and Sørheim again take account of differences that exist between two types of society as a basic explanation for such encounters. The types are the so called traditional and the modern societies.

Moderne samfunn preges av å være industrialiserte, egalitære, byråkratiske, ikke religiøse, kjernefamiliebaserte, individ, skyld- og rettighetsorienterte. Tradisjonsbaserte samfunn er i alminnelighet basert på primærnæringer, de er hierarkiske (...) basert på personlig og familiebasert organisasjon, religiøse, familie/selektivbaserte, kollektivistisk, skam- og pliktorienterte. I samfunn hvor ære og skam er sentrale verdier er ytre sosial kontroll, altså klare regler for oppførsel, viktig. (Eriksen & Sørheim 2007, 153)

The character we read above fits what has already been mentioned in the previous chapter about the Oromo culture and worldview. As we understand, we reflect our world view through our communication be it verbal or non verbal. The example based on dialogue between the police officer and her Oromo client presented can well illustrate the simple reason about having children.

Another important aspect in intercultural communication is how we receive a sign from a single event and make use of it. The instance about the Oromo couple explaining about their tradition of up-bringing children is good to mention. If we assume what the couple said true, it is obvious that the public officers may have taken a simple generalisation and concluded that this couple practiced what they told. The other alternative reason can just be language problem since the Oromo couple already mentioned that their Norwegian language skill was not adequate enough for such conversations. Let us consider these areas of concern respectively.

A simple generalisation is often due to what we call stereo typing. Stereo typing is a mechanism that people extract a simple event, behaviour or saying from group or community

members and use it as a universal aspect for the group or community. Ron and Suzane Wong Scollon in their book, *Intercultural Communication*, write the following about stereo typing:

Stereotyping is simply another word for overgeneralization.stereo typing carries with it an ideological position. Characteristics of the group are not only overgeneralized to apply to each member of the group, but they are also taken to have some exaggerated negative or positive value. These values are then taken as arguments to support social or political relationships in regard to members of those groups. (Scollon & Scollon 2007, 168)

In regard to language problem, it is obvious that the parties can simply misunderstand because the public officers speak Norwegian as their mother tongue, whereas the concerned couple speaks Norwegian as their third or probably fourth language. Even if the couple speaks Norwegian a little bit, probably the structure of the Norwegian they spoke did not fit to the normal Norwegian structure. Multilingual people, who don't speak the concerned language well enough, have difficulty to adjust to the structure of the language under consideration. For instance, answers like yes and no in Oromo language can be misunderstood by Norwegian or English speakers. If a question like "you didn't come to school yesterday?" is posed and the Oromo answers just "yes", this can be misunderstood by a competent English speaker. The English speaker may understand it as "yes, I was at school". In the Oromo language, however, answers are given either to confirm or deny assertions. In this respect, the answer confirms that the person was not at school. Use of first language structure in speaking a foreign language may lead to such misunderstandings. Even if it is said that language and culture are interrelated, often multi lingual have problem to cope with this challenge. If a person thinks in his/her first language and speaks in the second language, such incidents as above are most likely. From the illustration above one can regard this issue as a cause for misunderstanding.

Another probability can also be that the couple might have wanted to shorten the conversation and thus answered "ja" and "nei". Often when people have given up, or converse without paying good attention to what was really said the same may happen. Generally, the effect of values and norms embodied in one culture has a decisive role when people with two cultural backgrounds meet for conversation. We meet each other with full baggage of our cultural codes that guide our behaviour. These behaviours may be confusing or probably contradicting our expectations.

Chapter Five

THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND MORAL ISSUES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

All religions have values and norms that guide behaviour. These values and norms are often different from religion to religion. Therefore, they have considerable effects when we communicate interpersonally and even more in intercultural communication. The way religious people speak and behave may be different from non religious people. Therefore it is of great importance to give proper attention to this aspect in these situations.

Morality is a very essential component of our culture that tells us what is regarded as right and wrong. Moral issues are related to what people consider as fair and unfair in interaction. It has no reference to legal codes. Therefore it is possible to consider moral as unwritten principle of behaviour that exists in every culture. As cultures differ, moral principles also have differences. Therefore, morality is a shared standard of behaviour among people belonging to a certain culture.

Since these two concepts refer to world views, they have vital role in intercultural communication. Hence, it is important to consider their effect with empirical illustrations from the field study.

Religious Views

The Oromo traditionally believe in one creator who they call *Waaqa*. He is the creator of the universe and everything in it. The concept *Waaqa* is equivalent to the English term God (Bartels.14). The weakening of the Oromo social, political and religious institution, *Gada*, coupled with the influences from missionaries and traders contributed to people adapting to other religions. Today, most Oromo follow three main religions, Christianity, Islam and the traditional Oromo religion known as *waaqeffana*. The latter is very popular among Oromo nationalists.

As presented in chapter two, the suppression and discrimination that the Oromo experienced enhanced the development of Oromo ethnic identity, *oromummaa*. An Oromo professor in

sociology, Asafa Jalata writes the following in regard to Oromo identity: *Oromummaa as an element of culture, nationalism, and vision has two power to serve as a manifestation of the collective identity of the Oromo national movement* (Jalata 2007, 14). This aspiration has contributed to very rapid improvement in the use of the Oromo language both in writing and spoken. Religious institutions, specially the Evangelical Churches have intensified their work among the Oromo in their own language. The Oromo easily identify themselves with the Evangelical Christianity rather than the Orthodox Christian faith. Barteles gives the following reason: *In much of the Christian message they recognized their own concept of Waqqa; their feelings of dependence on him, their idea about peace among people being a condition for Waqa's blessings* (Bartels 1983, 357.)

The Oromo in Diaspora are also very active in promoting the Oromo identity in different ways. They prefer to talk in their own language when called to conversations at public service offices. They have established groups and congregations that worship in their own language. The Union of Oromo Churches is established on global level that promotes the Evangelical work among Oromo in their language. The Oromo Evangelical Church in Oslo is a local example of this. When it concerns the Oromo traditional religion, *Waaqeffana*, many articles and even some books have been issued the last few years by Oromo nationals. In Bergen, Norway, the Oromo group has arranged an annual celebration of thanks giving day (*irreessa*) in the month of September, during the last four years. I have attended the last two celebrations and the feast. The focus has been mainly on *Oromummaa*, Oromo identity.

To understand someone from another culture, it is important to consider the religious background of the concerned in communication situation. There is nothing wrong with having assumptions and pose questions when we are puzzled about behaviours.

Often we assume that a group's religious character is interesting because religion influences the group's goals, or its success in meeting them. Sometimes we treat religion as a basic status characteristic, like gender or race. Other times we treat it like a fundamental worldview that shapes everything people do. In either case, religion is treated as a causal variable, even if it is an invisible one. We ask why groups do what they do, why they succeed or fail, and because we assume that religion is by nature a motivator, we wonder if religion is the cause of the action we observe. (Ammerman 2007, 139)

The Oromo show their beliefs in an open and expressive way in everyday conversations. In greetings, for instance, the Oromo express thanks to God for being healthy. When greeting, the Oromo also asks about the wellbeing of families, relatives and friends. This is a common expression among Oromo despite differences in religion. The Oromo talk about religious matters and can ask each other about religious issues. Religiosity is not a private matter, but a common value that every single person has or belong to. A person is believed to have one or another religion.

As most Oromo often regard religiosity as a normal human value, they expect that all people have some kind of religious faith. Speaking against supernatural beings, especially against God, is considered a taboo. Therefore, both Muslim and Christian Oromo react negatively to people who make fun of God. Religion is part of their culture as discussed in chapter three where the concept *Gada* was presented. Secularism, about what some Norwegians talk about, is usually not appreciated. During one of the introduction classes for immigrants, a speaker from the Human ethics was invited to lecture on the subject. The Oromo attendants, in this case some others too, reacted to the teaching by not listening. A Muslim Oromo woman said to me afterwards that she has never in her life heard any one say that there is no God. She added that it hurt her, because she believes that it was God that helped her through all her difficulties when fleeing her country. She has prayed and God has answered her prayers by bringing her to this safe country. She did not understand the objective of the lesson. At the end, she mentioned that if she had known about this lesson, she would have not come to school that day.¹⁵

Regarding religious views the following was said by a Christian informant:

We are happy that we have come to this blessed country. Look at the plants that grow on rocks. See the wealth that the country extracts from oceans. Even if the climate is very cold still the country produces more than it needs. Where does all this come from? It is from God. The Norwegians themselves tell us that some years back this country was very poor. Because of that many migrated to America. At the same time we hear from Christian friends about Norwegian missionaries who devoted their lives for the Gospel in different countries. We believe that it is because of their efforts, their prayers and devotion that God blessed their offspring. And it is this blessing that this generation enjoys. We are also sharing from these blessings. I don't know if this

¹⁵ After a case I was interpreting in Stavanger, 2006

generation understands this. It is sad to see that most people don't come to church and thank for what God has done for them.¹⁶

From this conversation, it is possible to understand that the informants have religious views about what to say and how to behave. Even if the Oromo follow different religions and live with other people with different religions, they have respect for each other's faiths. Religion in this context might even strengthen their identity. People always find some common basic values that can identify them with others. Therefore, communicative behaviours can promote or hinder good relations. Based on this, Jan Svennevig writes the following:

Å bruke gruppespråk innad i et felleskap kan være med på å skape innforståthet mellom deltakerne og dermed knytte dem tettere sammen. Å bruke det utad, overfor personer som ikke deler koden, kan være et middel til å markere ulikhet og dermed distansere seg fra dem. (Svennevig 2005,117)

Many understand that religion can cause communication problems. Some Norwegian informants have mentioned that Muslims are more restrictive in communication than non Muslims. One informant disclosed that those who go to church understand more about the Norwegian norms. She underlined that the reason could be that they share *similar thoughts behind words*.¹⁷ Likewise some Oromo informants mentioned about their church attendance and what they experience there. They said that speaking with Norwegians at the Church has opened ways for them to be closer to them. In addition to the worship, the coffee hour after church service is time when people come together and talk. They regard this as an arena where they meet Norwegians in a natural setting outside the official meetings after appointments.¹⁸

Religious views also make people characterize each other by different qualities. Cato Wadel mentions that we often tend to characterize people from inner attributes (*egenskap forklaring*). By doing so, we develop attitudes toward each other. Attitudes affect communication behaviours. Let us consider how attitude is defined and see its main contents:

A mental and neural state of readiness organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects (where object is understood in a broad sense to mean persons, events, products, policies,

¹⁶ In Oromo: Interview informant 8, Bryne, September 19 2008.

¹⁷ In Norwegian: Interview informant 4, Bryne, October 14 2008.

¹⁸ From private conversation with the couple at home in Bryne, November 2008.

institution and so on) and situations with which it is revealed. (Hargie, Saunders & Dickson 1994, 248)

The three components drawn from this definition are the cognitive, the affective, and the conative aspects. The assertion of both the Oromo and the Norwegian informants illustrates this component. The value realization of Christian faith by both informants coupled by church attendance strengthens the development of positive attitudes. In regard to the affective component, emotions are involved. It is through emotions that what we like or not is revealed. From the example above, we see that both informant categories appreciate each other's behaviour in different forms. The final component is the conative, which refers to behaviour towards persons against whom attitude is developed. From the example, no explicit behaviour is expressed, but it is a clear saying from the Norwegian informant that it is easier to communicate with the Christians. From the Oromo informants, no behavioural reaction is mentioned except the positivity of meeting Norwegians in other context.

Even if this study does not include all assumptions around intercultural communication behaviour, it is important to pay attention to the person's attitudes. Religious factors especially cause a lot of misunderstandings. The more people share similar religious values, the easier it is to communicate with each other. Even if one says that one can follow rules of conduct according to situations, experiences show that it is difficult to do so. Attitudes will always affect you, even if you try to leave them behind. *The rules that tell me who I am at work are not the same rules that guide my behaviour at home or at church, but no one succeeds in keeping everything perfectly separate. (Ammerman 2007, 228)*

Rules of Behaviour and Moral Views

Norms are understood as unwritten rules that guide behaviour in every culture. These norms change from culture to culture. Each culture judges values and determines right and wrong. People speak, act, and react, eat, dress, behave according to their own cultures' codes. Therefore, what is appropriate in one culture usually may not be appropriate in another culture.

Each culture has its own moral code and its own culturally defined sins. It judges some acts to be righteous and others to be immoral. (...) Each culture also has its own highest values and primary allegiances, each its own culturally defined goals. one pressures people to make economic success their goal; another assigns top priority to

honour and fame, political power, the good will of the ancestors, or the favour of God.
(Hiebert 2006, 33-34)

Eriksen and Sørheim go deeper in discussing the role of moral views in intercultural situations. They discuss moral in two perspectives: rule conditioned moral and moral based on loyalty. Furthermore, they underline that these two represent what they call universal and particular morals, *universalistisk og partikularistisk moral*. According to them many cultural conflicts may be seen as a result of contrast between these two types of morals. (Eriksen & Sørheim 2007, 252)

Based on these, let us consider the moral views observed and discussed during the field study.

Negotiations

This is a very central terminology in communication studies. People send messages to each other and negotiate about the meaning. That makes communication a process. On the other hand, the Oromo use the term negotiation in all social affairs. In Norway the term is popular in politics and between employee and employer organizations discussing salaries and other formal settings. Hence, negotiation is a term more often used and practised by the Oromo than by the Norwegians. In negotiations, people try to persuade each other of their views. However, how to negotiate, when to negotiate, with whom and what to negotiate, differ from culture to culture. The Oromo, for instance, negotiate about all social issues. The *Gada* system basically encouraged the Oromo to conduct discussions and dialogs. The negotiation based on social matters is called *Jarsummaa*. The term *jarsumma* is derived from the word *Jarsaa*, elder. The reason is that negotiations are always led by elders. From the Norwegian point of view, it is possible to mention the concept *mekling*. However the Norwegian *mekling* differs from the Oromo *Jarsumma*. The former is legally prescribed procedure, where authorities have influence. The latter is based on cultural values without precisely defined procedures. Their similarity is that both try to bring opponents together to settle their matters.

Even if *jarsumma* is used in socially defined situations, the Oromo use the meaning of *jarsumma*, in other aspects of interactions as well. In this type of negotiation, no third person or part is involved. Dahl identifies five types of conflict areas where negotiation usually appears (Dahl 2001, 186). Interest, value, relation, power and inadequate understandings are the main causes.

Having this in mind, let us look at some examples. At the social welfare offices, usually the clients come there to apply for social welfare or financial support. After the application is considered, the social welfare makes a resolution referring to articles in the law. As a Norwegian informant said, the matter that concerns money is a very sensitive area of conflict. When the client is informed about the amount resolved, it is often followed by a discussion. The client argues that the money is not enough to cover all the family's expenses, mentioning different reasons. The social officer often refers to the articles in the law and the directives from the authorities as a base for the resolution. The client, however, shows no attention to what the article says but regard that the social officer has to understand the problem and pay him/her more. The client explains to the officer all what is lacking at his/her home and what the children do not have, in such a way that he/she tries to gain sympathy for the need for more money. This discussion can go on for a long time. The longer this takes, the more frustrated the social worker becomes. Attempts to end the dialogue are often taken as dismissal. In several cases the clients observed use examples and metaphors to stress their meanings. This makes the conversation even longer. An informant said that it is not needed to say it directly, because people have enough common sense. When the desired goal is not met, the client is disappointed. Both the time spent and the way of communicating disappoints the social officer.

From the above illustration, there are some points that are important to consider in evaluating cause and effect in intercultural communication. As seen, the social officers have defined guidelines that regulate their work. They always refer to legal codes. The clients come with attitudes so that the officers can sympathise with their situation and act accordingly. The social officer is communicating on the bases of legal norms, whereas the client approaches the officer with expectations of being sympathized. Sympathizing in this respect refers to cultural values of the client. One can characterize the situation as confrontation between systems and cultural based approaches. This type of confrontation often ends in conflict where each part characterizes each other differently. For the social officer, the behaviour is unacceptable, troublesome, and time wasting. The client characterizes the situation as disrespectful and unfriendly. From this situation, each characterizes one another with inner qualities. This character based inner qualities often result in developing attitudes that affect further interaction.

When we look at cause and effect and social based communication, behaviour is central. The clients are used to negotiate in all areas of interaction. Especially when a person is concerned about benefits, it is socially acceptable to negotiate unlimited. For instance, during trade and business, it is always acceptable to bargain. Either one is selling or buying, it is always enough time to bargain. The seller can demand much more than what the item is worth. The buyer has a rights to give as minimum as he/she wishes to get the item cheaper. In the traditional markets all over, bargaining is a known and an accepted norm. Other cultures look at this as inappropriate, and some may consider it cheating. On the contrary, the other Oromo regards this as a success in trade. The more a person earns in such a way, the more that person is considered wise and clever.

Time consuming, not following regulations and not talking in a direct manner is regarded as inappropriate behaviour by the social officers. It goes against the Norwegian norms especially when it concerns time. The more time is used, the more the social officer is stressed, due to plan for the day. When an officer tries to shorten the conversation, the counterpart considers it as negligence. For the Oromo, time is always coming. For the Norwegian, time is always running out. If thing is not done today, there is time for it the next day. This is the Oromo's approaches to time. The Norwegian acts as appropriate to the social system, whereas the Oromo client regards the interaction as personal, with minimum attendance to regulations. For the Oromo the social officer is a person with high status who is expected to help in many cases regardless the rules and regulations. This has manifested itself in conversations observed where a client said; *however, you can help if you want to...* This is also another important aspect to consider. It demonstrates power relations. A social officer is regarded as one who decides on the fate of his or her client. If the resolution fits the desired goal, the officer is appreciated. On the contrary, if the desire was not achieved the officer is regarded as unconcerned. The same is true on the other side. Rumours about the goodness and the badness of persons go usually quick among people on both categories. This affects communication behaviour and its consequence. Øyvind Dahl in his book, *Møter mellom mennesker, Interkulturell Kommunikasjon* writes the following about conflicts that result in problems:

Både interessekonflikter og verdi konflikter kan ende opp som relasjonskonflikter, dvs konflikter der relasjonene mellom partene blir spenningsfylte eller til og med brutt. I vårt samfunn er det et ideal å skille mellom person og sak. Vi aksepterer at vi kan være saklig uenige og likevel opprettholde gode personlige relasjoner. (...) Slik er det

ikke alle steder. Relasjonskonflikter medfører mange steder sterke følelser, irrasjonelle reaksjonsformer og sterke forsvars- og angrepsposisjoner. (Dahl 2001, 190)

Private and Public Issues

As seen in the previous chapters, the bases for social systems define how we regard relationships. For the Oromo, social life is a fundamental value that every single member is expected to abide by. Very little is regarded as private matters when it comes to social relations. On the contrary, the Norwegian values stress much about privacy. Most of the private issues are handled by social systems designed by authorities. For example, care for elders is the responsibility of state system whereas Oromo regard it as the responsibility of the families. Many Oromo react negatively when they experience that parents are not cared for by their respective children. An Oromo informant mentioned once that he does not want to be retired in Norway and be placed at home for elder's *gamlehjem*. For him it is as to be considered worthless.

Child care is also regarded as a private matter that does not need involvement of people or system outside family ties. Parents have full responsibility to raise their children according to the values embodied in *saffu*. Involvement by outsiders causes conflict even within the culture. Parents are criticised by the community if their children do not behave as expected. Criticism is shame or what the Oromo call *qaani*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the involvement of child welfare section, in family affairs is thus widely regarded as unfair. One of the norms that contradict the Norwegian norm is how to sanction children. The Oromo consider beating not harmful, but a lesson. As mentioned in chapter four, an informant said: *after we have beaten them, we comfort them by hugging, keeping them close to ourselves, tell them that we love them, and also warn them at the same time not to do mistakes. Usually they don't do the same mistake.* Comparing how Norwegians sanction their children, an informant mentioned that beating children is milder than the way Norwegians “shake” and pull their children when they do wrong. *I feel it is much more painful than beating a child on the hand once or twice.*¹⁹

Norwegians regard talking to children as an appropriate norm. This is a strange experience for

¹⁹ In Oromo: Observation from conversation between a mother and the police officer. Sandnes, .January 28 2009.

some Oromo. An informant mentioned during one of our conversations that Norwegians do speak to children *in the same way they talk to adults. That surprises me. After all do they expect that children understand in the same way as adults? Children are talked to as if they know everything.*²⁰ The Oromo *Saffu* makes distinctions about subjects that are appropriate and inappropriate to talk about in the presence of children. Issues like sex-are never mentioned and never observed by children. Children learn all about sexual questions from each other or elder siblings and friends. According to Barteles, The greatest secret in Oromo family is sexual themes (Bartels 1983, 313). During conversations, children are never involved, except give reply to questions. Children are raised as dependants on parents with specified obligations. But, the Norwegian norm gives rights to children: *Barn oppdras til å ha egen mening, til selvstendighet og til løsrivelse fra sine foreldre i ung alder* (Erikson & Sørheim, 152). This difference in value once caused a sort of conflict between a father and a kindergarten worker. The father was at the kindergarten, to pick up his daughter. The kindergarten worker was a pregnant woman expecting a child in short time. While at the kindergarten, the daughter was very curious about the pregnancy and she has been talking about the baby in the stomach with the pregnant woman. When the father came, the worker was so eager to tell the father how curious his daughter was about the baby in her stomach. She told the father that it was good that the daughter was interested to know about pregnancies. Then she asked the father if it was ok for her to tell his daughter how a woman becomes pregnant. The father asked for pardon, as if he didn't believe what he heard. When she repeated the question, the father replied, *no! no! If this is what you teach children, I will never bring my child here again.*²¹

Another incident related to similar topic was at the adult language course. The lesson was based on equality of rights. The attendants were adults and the teacher was a woman. The topic of the day was family life, rights and obligations. Much of the teaching focused on rights. The theme about equality of men and women regarding sex caused embarrassment among women attendants and laughter among men. The women had hardly raised their voices during the whole lesson. During the lesson the teacher gave clear information that in Norway girls and women have the equal rights as boys and men in sexual affairs. Girls have equal rights to have sexual relations before marriage as the boys do. The Oromo and other

²⁰ In Oromo: Interview informant 7, Bryne, September 19 2008.

²¹ In both Norwegian & Oromo: Observation from conversation between the kinder garden employee and a father, Stavanger, 2006.

attendants too, were quiet when asked by the teacher if there were comments or questions. No one commented or asked any question. The silence was unusual, since during the previous lessons questions and comments were normal. The talk among the Oromo after the class showed discontent about the lesson. Many people were surprised that a woman talked so much and so deep about matters that is never mentioned by a women. Men never talk about these issues open neither. Two informants, husband and wife, said in a different context that they are worried about the fate of their children in this country (informants 10 & 11).

Feelings and Emotions

Humans have different ways of expressing their grief, pain and happiness. Even if much of the feelings are universal, people react differently. The differences are thus culturally conditioned.

All cultures provide ways for people to express their feelings, whether these be the joy and excitement of entertainment, the sorrow of partings and death, the creative exhibition of tribal artists or philosophers or the awe and fear of gods and spirits.
(Hiebert 2006, 172)

Based on the culturally conditioned expression of feelings, we shall try to see how this affects intercultural communication. Some cultures encourage suppression of feeling while some do not. Tolerance is what covers up the suppression of certain feelings. One informant from the health sector told me that those Oromo women who have been in the hospital for delivery, behaved different compared to others. They don't shout and scream when they have pain. That surprised her and she wondered if it had something to do with the culture. She also added that they did not even ask for pain killers when they had labour pain. Opposed to that, when visiting health care centres, both men and women Oromo patients describe their health problem in very difficult ways. When a Norwegian says "*sterk hodepine*" an Oromo often describes it in a very complicated way. The following is just one example: the pain is *just like a lightning hitting my head, it splits my head in to two as one splits a fire wood into two etc.* Many more expressions are used just to underline that the patient has head ache. The same is true, in describing other health problems like stomach ache, fever, pain all over the body etc. The Oromo, as discussed in previous chapters, often emphasises issues metaphorically. According to my experience from the health service at home, this is a normal way that a patient talks about his/her illness. The Norwegian health personnel are often puzzled when the

complaint is interpreted to them directly. It is dramatic expression, and even some tend to wonder if the patient has really experienced what he/she says. Eriksen and Sørheim write the following understanding this problem: *kulturelt baserte forklaringer på sykdom kan ofte dreie seg om langt mer enn sykdom* (Eriksen & Sørheim 2007, 216). From experience at home, I know that the patient use such metaphors to persuade health workers to pay good attention to their problems and give them most effective medicine.

When it concerns the health service in Norway, many informants have mentioned that they are confused. They are confused about making appointments to meet a doctor. One informant said; *it is strange, we came to a country where one can predict when one is going to be sick and thus make an appointment with a doctor.*²² For an Oromo, a person seeks health care only when and at the time the person is sick. Appointments are not requirements. Even if it is acute, the sick person goes to the care centre with out making appointments. In order to confront this restrictive system, the Oromo ring and explain their complaints in a dramatic way that usually help them get acute appointments. However, after consulting with the doctor, if they are unhappy with the treatment they complain against the entire system. According to experiences from the homeland, a person who comes to health personal must get treatment whatever the complaint is. One can buy whatever type of medicine as one wants.

Friendship is another area regarding feelings. How people show concern about each other in times of illness, grief and joy is different. Therefore, it is a very essential area of concern in intercultural communication. Friendship in Oromo context is evaluated by how a friend shows concern during sickness, sorrows, joy, difficulties etc. In the Oromo culture, when a person is sick, the whole family,²³ neighbours and friends around show “*care*” by visiting the sick. Be it at home, or admitted to hospital, the sick person has to be visited in order to make him or her feel that friends are concerned about him or her. This tradition is very strong also among Oromo in Diaspora. People, especially friends, travel miles to visit each other when it is known that a friend or his or her family member is sick. If a friend or a neighbour never appears to ask the sick, then it is an indication that there is something wrong in the relationship. This tradition, which can be called cultural value, has been a problem with the Norwegian health service. The hospitals have limited visiting hours, and do not allow all the visitors at the same time. Since people sometimes travel long distances just to show concern

²² In Oromo: Interview informant 10, Stavanger, October 23 2008.

²³ The term family includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins etc.

to the patient, they all go to the hospital when they arrive. I have experienced that people have taken leave from their work without pay, just to visit the sick person and the family. When hindered by the hospital regulations, they think it is unfair. The hospital on its part considers this as disrespect for rules.

Another area of conflict regarding sickness is about the concept of care. For an Oromo care is to be around and pay attention to the sick. It does not matter how many, but people are expected to be around. According to the Norwegian, a sick person needs rest, thus may be alone. Let me use one example from a mission field in Ethiopia. It was told to me by the missionaries themselves. A missionary who was popular among the local people got sick. As the tradition, people came to see the sick in numbers and sometimes one after another. The sick person didn't manage all these visits, thus went in to his bedroom and closed the door. However, people tried to contact him through the bedroom window, just to say "*waqaayyoo si hamaru*" Let God make you well again. Here one can see the different meaning behind the actions. For the Oromo constant visit and greetings shows concern whereas for the missionary it was a troublesome situation.

Another sensitive area is when Oromo do not talk about events directly. This especially refers to announcing death in the family. It is never announced directly to family members if one of the members died far from home. Elders go early in the morning to the deceased's family home. Early arrival of these people very often signals that somebody somewhere from the family is dead. Death is never announced directly as death, but in a mild form like the deceased is tired/rested, *nidadhabe/niboqoote*. The Oromo are very careful in announcing events that may cause emotional reactions, events like injuries and death. The common expression by all who come to participate in the mourning is *waqqayyo lubu ha maaru*, Let God save the soul. Grief and mourning is expressed through crying and screaming loud by all who are concerned about the deceased. Norwegian neighbours who have not been informed about this might respond to this with panic, discomfort and call it strange. As this tradition is also very important, Oromo travel distances to visit the affected families and friends to show their concern. The affected family gets visitors daily and is never left alone for a week or two. People come with food and drinks and stay there talking. The intention is to encourage the affected family to move through the grief. Oromo use the phrase *jajabeesuuf*, to encourage them when explaining the reason for being together with the family. Many Norwegian families in neighbourhoods sometimes wonder why so many foreigners are around. As this

tradition is important in the social life of Oromo, sometimes it has caused absence from schools, courses, and work.

The above discussion has revealed how Oromo defines friends and relates to them. Friendship is defined in a different way than Norwegians. Once an Oromo is acquainted to a person, that person is regarded to be known to him or her. After the first acquaintance, Oromo expect that greeting each other and sharing words when meeting another time, as normal and natural. This view is most likely different from how the Norwegian define the two phrases: *å kjenne noen* og *å vite hvem en er*. The former for closer relation while the second is described maybe as no relationship. As Oromo don't make these distinctions like Norwegians do, they expect to greet and be greeted by people they have once been acquainted to. If this expectation is not met, the Oromo wonders if something wrong has happened in their relationship. All Oromo informants mentioned lack of this behaviour as a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, the Norwegian informants are divided about the meaning. Some appreciate the approach as very nice, warm relations, whereas some are very sceptical about mixing their roles with friendship. An informant said that she wants to keep distance from her clients in most cases because she does not know why her clients want to be friendly. The other Norwegian informant mentioned that relationship she experienced was just positive. The following is an extract from what she told me:

In Norway, when it is a wedding, the invited are families and very close friends. It is both strange and at the same time nice to be invited by X, a person who I didn't know well. I know her only from very few times from work situation and then I am invited to her wedding as a close friend. That surprises me very much. Are all Oromo like that?²⁴

The situation which surprises the Oromo the most is interviews and consultations with the police. The police is regarded to be quite different from the police at home. At home police are approached with fear as they normally use forces in interrogations. But in Norway, police is just as any person who does his/her job as any social officer. Many speak in surprise how kind and good the police are. An informant told me that the police are attentive to what they tell them, don't press or threaten them with torture; *they treat us as equal as themselves. I even sometimes felt if I became a boss when he spoke to me in a very polite form, rose up and*

²⁴ In Norwegian: Informant not numbered but conversed with after a wedding party, Bryne, August 2006

*greeted me when I came in.*²⁵ This good attitude among the Oromo could probably be the reason why an Oromo woman during an interview with the police spoke loud and with different body movements that puzzled the police officer. Surprised by this behaviour, the police asked her why she was angry at him. She was puzzled too by the question and said: *no! no! I am not angry. I am just happy that you listen to me and try to help me. There is no reason to be angry I am very happy....*²⁶

This chapter has illustrated how events and situations pose intercultural challenges for both parties. Meanings around sayings and deeds were different, which led to misunderstandings. The discussion presented, hopefully give adequate illustration of why people say what they say and do what they do. If the sayings and the doings are out of context, in this case according to respective cultural norms, they may easily lead to situations where the parties tend to characterize each other both in negative and positive terms. This tendency leads to categorizing each other into certain inner attributes, which Wadel calls *egenskap forklaringer*. He writes the following about the concept:

Den type forklaring av atferd som jeg å betegne forklaring ut fra egenskap, er en type forklaring vi alle har vært borti og som vi bruker mange ganger daglig. Forklaringen kjennetegnes ved at den forklarer atferd ut fra indre egenskap, enten vi nå kaller denne egenskap moral, karakter, personlighet vesen eller natur. (Wadel 1991: 29).

According to Wadel, this inner attribute description takes the form of describing a person from inner qualities.

²⁵ In Oromo: Interview informant 7, Bryne, September 19 2008.

²⁶ In Oromo: Observation from conversation between the Police officer and the woman at the Police station in Stavanger, 2007

Chapter Six

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

After all, don't we already know about our own culture and its beliefs? The answer to this is no, as we have already seen. We know much about our culture, but we are largely unaware of the deep assumptions we make about the nature of reality. We must therefore also study our own world view if we wish to uncover the misunderstandings and ethnocentrism that arises when we serve another culture. (Hilbert 2006, 111)

Communication as discussed earlier is a process that includes the sending and receiving of a message between at least two persons. The concept negotiation about meaning, as used by Øyvind Dahl, is very central term in discussing intercultural communication skills.

Intercultural communication refers to conversation between people who have different cultural backgrounds. In any communication situation, it is obvious that the people engaged try to get their thoughts understood in the same way as they think. Therefore, be it interpersonal or intercultural communication, the aim is to persuade one another. However, how people try to persuade each other is based on their earlier experiences. These experiences differ from culture to culture. For instance, when an Oromo invites a guest to a meal, he or she uses different means to get the guest to eat well. Eating well is evaluated by that the guest leaves leftovers on the plate. Even if a person after having eaten enough says I am satisfied, the Oromo never leave the guest until the signal of satisfaction, leftover, is seen on the plate. The plate is filled the sooner it is empty. An Oromo host shows generosity by supplying food until his or her guest meets this norm. On the other hand, if an Oromo is invited to a meal as a guest, he or she is usually reluctant to accept invitations to eat the served food. The host is expected to repeat the invitation many times to get his guest accept. It also happens that the host has to make a repeated request that the guest must eat the already served food on the table. The generosity of the host is evaluated by how often and how much he or she persuades his or her guest to eat and drink. If this expectation is not met, the invitation is regarded as not from heart. These behaviours are probably regarded as rude in other cultures.

The point here is to emphasize that in communication persons try to persuade others in the same way they are used to without thinking that they may affect the other part differently than assumed. During this fieldwork some attention has been paid to this basic issue. Questions like, are participants aware of their own attitude toward each other in communication? Do

they evaluate their own communicative behaviours when conversing? Are they pre-occupied about what they have heard about each other before they met? etc are used as starting points to assess the need for intercultural skills that may help reduce misunderstandings.

Jandt writes the following discussing approaches relevant to communication in general and to intercultural communication in particular:

Definition of intercultural competence more grounded in communication has tended to stress the development of skills that transform one from monocultural person into multicultural person. The multicultural person is one who respects cultures and has tolerance for differences. (Jandt 2007, 46)

Ethnocentrism is a Barrier for Intercultural Skills

It is natural that people have some sort of measurement to evaluate what is right and wrong. In the study of culture, we have already mentioned that the concept norm fulfills this duty. Behaviors are rewarded and sanctioned in accordance to their peculiar cultures. This is true and important in interpersonal communication when the parties share the same cultural values. The problem arises when the persons who communicate have different cultural backgrounds. A behavior in one culture may be valid in its own territory, whereas it may be regarded as violation in another culture. Therefore how people react to different behaviors may show their intercultural competence. Problems in intercultural communication arise when one tries to judge others from one's own premises. This concept is the basic element in ethnocentrism.

The root of ethnocentrism is our human tendency to respond to other people's ways by using our own affective assumptions and to reinforce the responses with deep feelings of approval or disapproval. When we are confronted by another culture, our own is called into question. Our defense is to avoid the issue by conducting that our culture is better and other people are less civilized. (Hiebert 2006, 97)

As cultural values are valuable, people are always defensive, wishing to protect these values against any threat. Intercultural communication is a sort of confrontation between persons of different cultures. Therefore people who meet in this condition are always challenged. How to tackle these challenges requires skills. For instance, the Oromo are challenged by the Norwegian values based on personal rights that include family affairs. When the Oromo traditional family value is confronted by the personal based Norwegian values, the Oromo

judge the letter as unfair and inappropriate. The same is true in child affairs. During the conversation made with the Norwegian informants, many mentioned that they talk to their clients in the same way they talk to their Norwegian counterparts. If we consider that language reflects culture, it is also possible to assume that what is communicated is based on cultural values. The more these values are different, the greater is the difficulty to understand each other. Many of my Norwegian informants mentioned that their clients often answer yes to questions that they later realize was not understood. Probably this can be an illustration of failure not to consider the effects of cultural differences in communication. The point here is not to focus on failures, but to mention possible causes of misunderstandings. Considering the communication partner's cultural back-ground, awareness of possible misunderstandings could reduce the probability of misunderstanding. I would like to mention again the incident with the police officer. When puzzled by the nonverbal behavior of his client, the police officer did not give his own final conclusion and leave the case alone. He posed a direct question and asked, "*Why are you angry at me?*" The answer he got was the opposite of what he assumed. This may be mentioned as a great move from ethnocentrism, judging behavior from one's own cultural view. The police officer's assumption, angry, was in fact expression of joy that his client tried to reveal.

Ethnocentrism can also be the main cause for some other problems in intercultural communication. It is because people consider their own cultural values as a central and they make general assumption about others that are different from them. This tendency is universal in every culture. Putting people into groups and characterizing them with certain qualities is a very typical characteristic of stereotyping. Therefore it is important to consider stereotyping as a barrier for acquiring intercultural competence.

Stereotyping

Often when people ask me where I came from, I tell them that I am from Ethiopia. Right after that I usually get comments that Ethiopians are hospitable people. Sometimes I wonder if what they say is to flatter Ethiopians or just to be polite to me. Whatever, I am very sure that this quality is not valid in all cases. In fact there are many who qualify and there are also a lot who do not. At other times, people I introduce myself to as a person from Ethiopia, ask me about the drought and hunger that affected the country. They tend to sympathize with me about the tragedies. Well, I think, it is true that many have been affected, but the great

majority was not. Therefore it was my assumption that Ethiopia is generalized by these people as a drought and hunger stricken country. But different parts of the country are very fertile; so much so that it has been said that Ethiopia could have been a bread basket for Africa. This simple example illustrates how we simply make generalizations and try to understand individuals from that point of view. However, it is also wrong to consider stereotyping as only negative. It is important because it gives a basic assumption about a person, a group, or a nation for further understanding. The danger with stereotyping is when it is used to judge a person from generalized view. Let us consider what Ron and Suzanne Scollon Write on this concept:

Stereotyping is a way of thinking that does not acknowledge internal differences within a group, and does not acknowledge exceptions to its general rules or principles. Ideologies are largely based on stereotypical thinking, or, usually a good bit of accurate cultural observation which underlies stereotypes; it is not the truth of those observations which is the problem. The problem is that stereotypes blind us to other, equally important aspect of a person's character or behavior. Stereotypes limit our understanding of human behavior and of intercultural discourse because they limit our view of human activity to just one or two salient dimensions and consider those to be the whole picture. (Scollon & Scollon 2007, 169)

Cultural Relativism Enhances Intercultural Skills

It is obvious that our cultural codes are somewhat fixed in our minds. They guide our overall behaviour. The norms related to these codes make us evaluate, reward, sanction what we observe and experience. This is true when we interact with people whom we share the same or similar cultural codes, and also with those who we are different from. In regard to the former, the problem of interaction may not be a big issue. The latter demands more attention as it may cause serious problems. These problems can easily lead to conflicts that hinder further co-operation on many vital common issues.

As mentioned, the need for intercultural communication skills during this era of globalization is increased considerably. Therefore, the need to try to understand each other is more and more important. One important field of concern is the concept cultural relativism. This term is a very popular concept in social anthropology as well as in other social studies and politics. Even if the great majority of modern studies are in favour of this concept, one can not ignore that there are also thoughts that consider the view as improper. However, since this thesis does not focus on discussing this particular issue, we leave the matter here and consider the

relevance of cultural relativism. Øyvind Dahl considers cultural relativism important in intercultural communication studies. He writes the following:

Når det gjelder interkulturell kommunikasjon, må det kunne gå an å hevde at en viss kulturel relativistisk holdning er nødvendig for å kunne sette seg inn i 'the native point of view' (...) og forstå den andres verdier og normer, uten at en dermed behøver å være moralsk amøber – uten egne holdninger og etiske retningslinjer. (Dahl 2001, 29)

As we read here, the important aspect we draw from this view is that we have to be able to understand others from their own premises. We listen to them; we hear what they tell us and pay attention to their reasoning. If we do so without judging them from our own values and norms, then we have understood them as they are. One very important concept I like in the study of cultures is “to try to understand why people behave the way they behave”. This is central, because people have reasons for what they do and say. The deeds and the sayings are not equally valid in different cultures. For instance, the Oromo explain their reason about having many children. The Oromo in the homeland reason slightly different from those in the Diaspora. Oromo at homeland want to have many children because the mortality rate among children is high. The more children a family gets, the more is the probability that some will survive. The more children a family has the more secured is the family in old age or during retirement. This includes both financial and daily care. In addition to that, children have duties to perform according to their abilities. The Oromo in Norway have almost the same reason as Oromo at homeland. One informant mentioned that children are supposed to know about their roots and be able to help their needy relatives and their country. In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that the reasoning of the Norwegian informants is that children are pleasures and that children help the continuity of their lineage. The Oromo informants have also reasoned the same but more. We have also seen that the Norwegian family regard a big family as a burden and unnecessary whereas the Oromo consider it as important and a need. One can not judge any of them wrong. Their arguments are based on their respective realities.

As the size of a family is affected by the number of children, Oromo families are larger than the average Norwegian nuclear families. As new to the country, culture, language, and the whole social system, the challenge is great for Oromo families. As mentioned, the new values confront the traditional values and thus cause confusion. At one occasion, a social officer asked a family who lived in an apartment why they did not have plants inside their sitting room. Both the husband and the wife asked why? The officer replied it is nice to have some

green plants in the house. The couple answered that in their country people grow plants outside, not inside. Probably this answer seems somewhat impolite or negligent, but the truth is that the great majority are not used to it. There are several examples to cite, but let it be enough for the time being.

The importance of cultural relativism in intercultural communication is mainly to make people aware of differences without making final judgment about their counterparts. As communication is negotiation of meanings, the knowledge of each other's premises is important to make communication effective. The same is true when it concerns the parties this thesis focuses on. Most of the characterization each part made about each other has the tendency of not considering the concept cultural relativism. The Oromo complain that some of their issues are not evaluated correct without much emphasis on the cultural and systemic values included in the Norwegian legal codes. Some Norwegian public officers sometimes do not realize that their communicative partners may have different cultural back grounds.

Having skills of cultural relativism can also help avoiding development of negative attitudes. *...the knowledge and motives with which individuals approach social encounters as influencing how they act and react and hence the patterns of communication which result. Attitudes held are another highly significant personal characteristic* (Hargie, Saunders & Dickson 1994, 24).

From the different observations and conversations made with informants, it is possible to make some remarks on this issue. The Oromo regard their Norwegian counterparts as powerful, therefore, they tend to approach them defensively. Their defensive mechanism is mostly withdrawal or/ and making short conversation, ending by yes and no. The importance of cultural relativism is not to claim that all behaviours are appropriate in all situations. On the contrary it is a view that underlines that cultures are valid in their respective areas and they have to be understood from that perspective.

In our context, the situation seems to be different. The problem of misunderstanding is not related basically on a personal level, but mainly on the system. The public officers are obliged to carry out their work based on given guidelines and regulations. Most of these regulations are not easily understood by their clients. A public worker may talk about social welfare without considering that this concept might be difficult to be understood by the counterpart.

As the client has no mental picture of the concept, no understanding usually occurs. It is always through interpreters that public officers communicate with their clients. But the responsibility of what to say and how to say it lies on the persons who communicate. The Interpreter's duty is to repeat the content of what the parties say to each other in their respective languages. Therefore, communication through interpreter is as valid as if the persons speak to each other directly. It is the duty and the responsibility of the parties to find out whether the parties have understood each other or not. Thus, even if the ideas to be communicated are system-based, one can not deny that the communicative skills of the responsible person are essential. Based on this let us consider personal traits relevant in intercultural communication.

Personality Strength

To acquire intercultural communication skills, the roles of personality play an important part. Jandt writes the following components of personality that must be considered vital:

The main personal traits that affect intercultural communication are self concept, self-disclosure, self-monitoring, and social relaxation. Self-concept refers to the way in which a person views the self. Self-disclosure refers to willingness of individuals to openly and appropriately reveal information about themselves to their counterparts. Self-monitoring refer to using social comparison information to control and modify your self-presentation and expressive behaviour. Social relaxation is the ability to reveal little anxiety in communication. Effective communicators must know themselves well and, through their self-awareness, initiate positive attitudes. Individuals must express a friendly personality to be competent in intercultural communication. (Jandt 2007, 46)

From observation and conversations that were conducted, it was possible to see the strength and the weakness related to these traits. It is very difficult to make proper evaluative assessments among the Oromo informants on this issue as they are all ordinary people without specific qualification on communication studies. Therefore, illustrations used here refer mainly to Norwegian informants.

Self-concept

This specific trait mainly revealed itself among Oromo informants. They regarded themselves as dependant on the decision made by the social officers. The social officer is understood as a

decisive person who determines their fate, especially when it concerns financial and other personal benefits. Therefore, the officers are addressed as superior and powerful personalities. From the conversations made, it is also possible to understand that when the expectations are not met, the Oromo show regress in relation, show reluctance in further communication and even express that they have become beggars.

On the other hand, the Norwegian informants, as observed and conversed with, talk to their Oromo clients in the same way as they do with a native Norwegian client. Even if the roles as officer and client remain the same, the Norwegian clients may not have the same degree of feelings as superior and inferior in their relation as probably the Oromo clients do. Among the informants, it was only the police officer who explained that he was always aware of the fear his clients have to meeting a police man. Therefore, he always tried to tackle this barrier in all possible ways.

Self-disclosure

This is a very vital concept in establishing trust between people who meet in a communication situation. Usually people meet with some pre-defined assumptions about each other. These assumptions may be based on rumours or earlier experience from similar situations.

Assumptions could be both positive and negative. If these assumptions have some expectations of behaviour, they can influence the communication processes. This concept is the same as what Cato Wadel refers to as explanation based on inner qualities, *egenskap forklaring*. It is often mentioned about qualities of officers and clients from the relation they had with other clients and officers respectively. Rumours go among officers as well as among clients about each other. This tendency cultivates *egenskap forklaring* that is purely based on pre-defined out come.

Self-disclosure strengthens Cato Wadel's favourite concept, relational explanation, *relasjonalt forklaring*. This concept refers to evaluation based on interaction and underlines relativity. The police officer, for instance, explained that he never wears uniform while interviewing people. During the interviews, the clients get the necessary information about their rights and obligations related to their case. This has always created confidence, trust and eagerness in communication. The Oromo informants have commented very positive about their

communicative relation with the police. The example mentioned about the woman who showed her joy by body movement and loud voice is a good illustration to mention.

Self –disclosure also includes being open about puzzling situations. The police man, for instance was quick to find out the meaning of the body movement and the loud voice, as he was puzzled by it. Another informant also told that openness is her basic and most important strategy to help her perform her duty effectively. She told that she answers questions and tells about herself without being asked. She meant that this has contributed to achieve trust from key persons who help her understand values and norms that in turn help her carry out her duty easier²⁷.

On the contrary, another informant explained about her frustrations regarding relation with her clients. Non verbal behaviour was what frustrated her most. She told the following:

Some behave so strange that they talk out loud, move the whole body, and speak Irrelevantly etc. Sometimes I wonder if it is a psychological problem. If you show a little bit of concern, it happens that they want to come closer as a friend. It happens that they want to give you a hug even at work. This makes it difficult. I don't want my role as an officer be mixed with private relations²⁸.

From these illustrations we can easily see who gains favourable situations for effective communication situations. Self-disclosure, however, does not advocate offering one- self for the benefit of the other part. It is a concept that a skilled person utilizes to construct confidence and trust between oneself and a communicative partner. To be open also may help parties to find common values that can be a fundamental asset in communication.

Self-monitoring and Social Relaxation

As these two concepts have some similar features, I preferred to look at them together. Intercultural communication skills require behavioural flexibility in addition to social and management skills. As relationship is of basic importance in intercultural communication, it is wise to be aware of that there are no universal rules that govern relationships. This means that

²⁷ In Norwegian: Interview informant 2, Bryne, October 16 2008.

²⁸ In Norwegian: Interview informant 3, Bryne, September 24 2008.

everyone who communicates must use all possibilities to find ways to cope with particular situations. To do so, skills in self-monitoring and social relaxations are important.

As some informants mentioned, their relationship with their clients have helped them develop basic skills in communication. An informant said that by realizing and utilizing social skills, she has gained trust and confidence in her key clients who in turn helped her maintain good relations with other clients. When asked what strategy she used, she said that she tried to leave aside her assumptions, pre- knowledge about the person, and concentrate on listening what they tell her. She posed questions sometimes here and there in her conversations. She gets all needed information and she knows that her clients are satisfied. Often this strategy helped well.

Another informant told that by being attentive without making spontaneous reactions, one can do an effective job. The informant had a client who behaved strange compared to his earlier experience. As the communication between the informant and the client went through interpreter, the informant realized that the client often answered before the interpreter was ready interpreting. After some observations, the informant asked the client friendly if she understood some Norwegian. The response was no. Being patient, the informant waited and posed the same question a little bit later. The client smiled and answered that was right. She knew some Swedish since she had lived in Sweden. By being patient and tolerant, said the informant, he could disclose a case which otherwise could have caused a lot of energy, time and resources.

In another event, a case was observed where the public officer was engaged in emotionally conditioned conversation. The case was about financial matters for a family represented by a father/husband. As usual, the client tried to explain in his own way about the financial difficulties the family had and tried all he could to get more support. The conversation consumed time and the officer began to be nervous. Gradually the situation became intense as the parties began to talk about each rather than the issue. The duty of the interpreter was as normal to interpret what the parties said to each other. When the discussion grew hotter and hotter, the officer began to speak about “you” in plural form, *dere*, including the interpreter. The interpreter tried to correct the officer that she had to address her communicative partner and not include the interpreter as part in the heated communication. She managed to address the reminding, but the situation fell back again to the same. At the end the interpreter resigned as the officer did not manage to talk to her partner without considering the interpreter as a

supporter of her client. This example illustrates that emotionally uncontrolled behaviour as well as not respecting the role of an interpreter, results in undesirable situation.

In order to achieve good skills in intercultural communication, the above discussed elements are very important. Overcoming ethnocentrism is a very essential challenge. Once this challenge is overcome, developing cultural relativism can be easily achieved. Hence, transition from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism needs efforts and determination. Once this is achieved prejudices and stereotypes are tackled better.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural issues, as discussed in this thesis, have always been the concern of both private and public sectors on national and global levels. Both need to acquire basic intercultural knowledge in order to effectively communicate about the values of their operations among the diverse peoples and nations of the globe. The idea that globalization includes all means that it helps bring the whole world closer if not together. Schirato and Web, (2006, 9) mention *the importance of technological, economic, and political changes* as concepts related to globalization. Technological devices have contributed so that people now send messages to each other quicker than ever. It has also made people travel easily from one end of the world to the other end in a matter of hours. Regarding the economic aspect, production and products have become both local and global at the same time. Parts of many products are produced in different parts of the world and assembled in another part. This has contributed to close relations between producers and managements across the globe. The products are produced in such a way that they fit local markets. As the advances in technology and economic aspects become more global, local politics are forced to cope with these developments. This has contributed to closer relations among sovereign national states. Each state needed new social, economical and political structures that fitted the new global challenges.

The aim of this thesis, as discussed in chapter one, is to focus on a very small portion of the global challenges that Norway faces in accommodating Oromo refugees. The basic area of concern is the political aspect that helps integration of this minority group. Integration requires knowledge about the group to be integrated. To acquire such a knowledge, no better means is available than effective communication with the concerned. Effective communication requires skills especially when one communicates with a person from another culture. It is due to this that this work focused on the theme of intercultural communication. In order to make effective and scientific study on this subject, qualitative method with participant observation as a base is utilized. As this method requires a direct involvement of the researcher, I was challenged by different encounters. The challenges were how to relate my profession, identity and roles to work independently. It is due to my profession as an interpreter that I came to realize the importance of intercultural communication as a theme for my thesis. Since I have lots of experience from the field, I was afraid that I would be biased in my work. But, after reading and considering Cato Wadel's book, *Feltarbeid i egen kultur*, I

was encouraged and motivated to make this independent work. The second challenge was the identity question. My being Oromo and immigrant in Norway, makes me share similar status as that of my Oromo informants. I considered this as a challenge. However, the same book of Wadel under the concept *å være sosiolog på seg selv*, made it possible that I could confront this challenge as well. Finding and establishing roles have not been very difficult since I made good use of my profession. In addition to observation of communication processes, I participated in conversations in natural settings utilizing my role as an interpreter. The unstructured interviews conducted made it possible both to confirm and to correct what was observed.

Several scholars in the social sciences mention that culture and language are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin. Culture manifests itself in different ways, through how we communicate our ideas, experiences and views. In order to have a better understanding of a communication partner, one needs to know the partner's cultural values. As Øyvind Dahl mentions, effective communication depends on the difference and the similarities between the cultural filters of the parties. Understanding the importance of Oromo cultural filter, chapter three makes some brief discussions on Oromo cultural values. The concept *saffu* is the basic element in discussing behaviours and roles that this thesis tries to deal with. However, it is important to underline that the scope of this thesis does not allow me to deal with all cultural aspects of the Oromo people. The purpose of including political issues is, as mentioned in the introduction and chapter three, to make the reader know the situation of the Oromo informants included in this thesis and the Oromo people in general. In addition to that, I consider that political experiences have influence on peoples' views and behaviour. To have a general knowledge of an individual's cultural backgrounds help understanding the concerned. *Social systems are composed by communications. And these communications you can not understand by examining the individual. That would be the same as trying to understand chess by examining the pieces* (Dahl, Jensen & Nynås 2006, 74).

In chapter four, concepts like understanding and misunderstanding are presented and discussed. These concepts are central and important part of this thesis. Øyvind Dhal's figure on page 33 illustrates the combination of both the process and semiotics theories about communication. It underlines the importance of cultural filters for both a sender and a receiver of a message. It also illustrates the influence of both verbal and non verbal signs in communication, and that they are culturally conditioned. It is on this bases that the chapter

tries to focus on cultural values and norms in general and of the Oromo in particular. Due to the limitation and relation to the issue concerned in this thesis, themes are reduced to family matters. The chapter tries to refer to some basic cultural values like the concept *saffu* in discussing events used as arguments. World views are referred to in order to show how reality is defined by both parties. Reality is defined according to how each party has experienced events ... *hvis nordmenn anklager innvandrere for å bare ta hensyn til sin egen familie, kan det godt være at innvandrerne selv anser dette for å være et positivt trekk, som vitner om ansvarsfølelse og lojalitet* (Eriksen, & Sørheim 2006, 57)

Another important issue raised in this chapter is about how each part regards each other. The Oromo informants, for instance, claim that they are subordinates and thus accept whatever the officers say. This has contributed to passive communication and finally withdrawal from communication relations. Eriksen and Sørheim mention that *maktforskjeller ligger nemlig under de fleste situasjoner der innvandrere kommuniserer med nordmenn, og nesten alltid er det nordmannen som har mest makt* (ibid, 123).

Religion and moral issues are important areas of concern in intercultural communication. Many regard religiosity as part of their total life whereas some do not. What is considered morally valid is sometimes included in some religious views. Therefore, chapter five tries to make some assessments around these issues together. If we define religion as a belief in a supernatural being, we come to understand that most societies have religion. Most Oromo, for instance, as mentioned in the chapter, have three main religions: Christianity, Islam and the traditional religion known as *waqqeeffana*. The Oromo in most cases expect that all people have one or another religion. Any one who despises their belief is regarded as offending them and their religiosity. The Oromo in many cases tend to find relations between events and their belief. This is illustrated how an informant described her coming to Norway as the will of her God. The same is true when an informant described the wealth of Norway as a blessing from God. This chapter uses these illustrations not to emphasize the importance of religion, but to underline its effect in communicating views.

Moral views are related to cultural norms. What one culture considers normal and usual behaviour, the other can evaluate it unacceptable and vague. Hiebert writes that: *The fact that different cultures have different standards of morality creates many cross-cultural misunderstandings* (Hiebert 2006, 47). Based on that, the chapter tries to draw attention to

some cultural norms like negotiations, issues considered private and public, expression of feelings and taboos. All these elements exist in every culture, but how and when they are practiced differ from culture to culture. The Oromo, for instance, have different understanding of time and appointments compared to the Norwegian culture. The former regard time as “it is coming” whereas the latter believes that “it is running”.

In order to reduce misunderstandings and to enhance understanding, skills in communication are important. In our case more attention has been paid to intercultural competence. From the field study, some communication barriers caused by lack of intercultural competence were observed. Important elements of intercultural communication skills are presented and briefly discussed in chapter six. This chapter focuses on illustrating some events and conversation made with informants about how inefficiency in intercultural competence makes communication difficult. Concepts like ethnocentrism and stereotyping are mentioned as elements that produce prejudices in interaction. On the contrary, cultural relativism is presented in order to strengthen knowledge about understanding others from their own point of view. Understanding that acquiring intercultural competence demands personal strength, the thesis refers to some personality traits as mentioned by Fred E Jandt. Some of these elements are discussed in relation to the field work conducted. However, I want to note that the purpose of this chapter is not to point at mistakes, but rather to help understand how problems in communication arise and thereby find ways to tackle it. No ready made solutions are available to confront each and every intercultural challenge. It is very important to note that the challenges faced in intercultural encounters are complex. Eriksen and Sørheim for instance, write the following dilemma: *Bør samfunnet likevel gi minoriteter rettigheter som gruppe heller enn som enkelt personer? Av og til kan det være gode argumenter for å gjøre det, men man risikerer at en leder gruppe på den måten får stor makt over enkelt personer, som mister statens beskyttelse* (ibid 116).

The issues raised in this thesis are related mainly to similar events. For instance, the Oromo informants mentioned that they wanted to solve their cases in their own ways. The Oromo cases are traditionally solved by negotiations led by elders. Social values are preferred to personal rights in such negotiations. This contradicts with the individual based social system of Norway. However, despite differences, generally there is always room for similarities. All people have needs that make them share the same values. If we focus more on our similarities than our differences, it is likely that we can communicate better.

First we need to keep in mind that cultures are not totally different from each other there are fundamental similarities underlying all cultures because they are in the common humanity and shared experiences of people. All people have bodies that functioning the same ways. Experience birth, life and death; joy and sadness and pain; drives fears and needs. All create categories, languages, and cultures. (Hiebert 2006, 218)

Finally, even if this thesis focused on misunderstandings and conflicts, it is also important to mention that all the Oromo informants are very thankful to the Norwegian authorities and Norwegian people in general. They mentioned that they live in peace without fear for their own and their families' lives. They get what they need and their children get education on equal bases as any native Norwegian. Most informants have asked me to mention their gratitude to the Norwegian people and authorities in my writing.

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