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Homeland, Boundary, Resource: the collision of place-making projects on the Lower Omo River, Ethiopia¹

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Abstract

The construction of the Gibe III Dam on the Omo River in Ethiopia brings three place-making projects into view: for its agropastoralist inhabitants, the Omo Valley is a homeland constitutive of their identity and the basis of their survival; for the regional administration, the Omo Valley is expected to work as a boundary between feuding groups; and for the distant centre, the Omo Valley is an untapped and untamed resource that is of central importance for the development and electrification of the country. These three projects not only reveal fundamentally different views on people and land, but also clash in that their implementation is incommensurable. It is projected that the damming of the river will finally undermine the subsistence production of the local groups and force them to be dependent on aid. As this final place-making project proceeds, it erases the local people's efforts over the last centuries to retain autonomy and agency by cultivating the Ethiopian frontier, which is the Omo Valley.

¹ These ideas were first presented at the conference *Ethnicisation of Politics and Governance in the Borderlands and the State in the Horn of Africa* at Njoro, Kenya, in July 2009, an event co-organised by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. With inadvertent parallelism, the formal structure, regional focus, and general argument of this text bear similarity to David Turton's draft paper "Wilderness, wasteland or home. Three ways of perceiving the Lower Omo Valley", given at a workshop in Oxford in September 2009, which I also attended, eventually published as Turton (2011). As regards content, the reader will find significant and sufficient differences. The two papers should be taken as complementary comments on current developments. Jon Abbink (2012) added his strong voice to the conversation as well. I thank the Njoro conference participants as well as Jon Abbink and David Turton for comments. Special mention needs to go to Echi Christina Gabbert and Oliver Tappe, who have gone above and beyond their duty as appointed readers to suggest improvements to this paper. For further developments, I refer to the "Lands of the Future Initiative" within Department 'Integration and Conflict' at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

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Imaginary Rivers

The size, shape, and appearance of the Omo River change considerably as it meanders down from the Ethiopian Highlands towards Lake Turkana in Kenya. With the many confluents joining the river proper, the change in topography and altitude and the incredible fluctuation in sheer volume over the seasons (Butzer 1971; Matsuda 1996: 14), it comes as no surprise that the wide and calm Omo Delta bears no obvious similarity to the white water rapids rushing through narrow gorges further upriver – a “converse of fixity (...) always in motion, always flexing”, as has been said of the River Rhine (Western 2004: 80). An old joke has it that it was always very easy to find someone doing a feasibility study for a bridge across the Omo River, but very difficult to find somebody actually building such a bridge; up until today all these plans have come to naught, in part due to the volatility of fluvial dynamics. The Lower Omo, ever since the region came to be within the borders of Greater Ethiopia by Emperor Menelik’s conquest, has been peripheral, hard to get to: malaria-ridden, hot, inhospitable, rugged, rather ‘illegible’ and difficult to govern for the succession of state-bodies from Menelik until today. Still, it provides a habitat and an opportunity for subsistence production for hundreds of thousands of people, and as it is the main input for Lake Turkana (which lies largely in Kenya), its importance crosses national boundaries even. To speak of ‘the Omo River’ (or, any river) as if it were one thing, a unity, an entity, is a shorthand born out of a human cognitive disposition towards continuity and contiguity, today embellished with legal, literary, pragmatic, and ideological aspects.

In the following, I portray three more specific conceptions of the Omo River Valley, existing in synchronic and parallel discursive and experiential universes, all balancing perception and imagination. Even as they clash, they are kept rhetorically separated. These conceptions, as they are propagated, defended, or simply lived, sometimes echo one another, and one can find traces of each in each. Still, as revealed by the place-making projects in which they are put to work, they seem to be quite irreconcilable. This ‘putting them to work’ forms the core of my text, as I trace which conception is voiced or implemented by whom, where, and when, in which larger context, and I offer suggestions as to their interplay and its relevance.

As given away by the title, these three different ways, the three different ‘logics,’ so to speak, to perceive the river, are succinctly summarised as ‘homeland’, ‘boundary’, and ‘resource.’ The Omo River is a ‘homeland’ for a number of local populations along its lower course, some of which have for a long time attracted intense anthropologic attention.³ As I ground my examples in my personal research experience, the focus lies on the Kara and Nyangatom. Both are considered as political bodies (polities) and as populations (people inhabiting an area) who depend predominantly on the

³ South Omo anthropology has strongly contributed to the anthropological corpus and to general theory, as particularly evidenced by the work by David Turton (group and conflict theory, visual anthropology), Jon Abbink (group and conflict theory), Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall (dialogical anthropology, visual anthropology, rhetoric culture theory), Uri Almagor (alliances, age- and generation-sets), Serge Tornay (age- and generation-sets, dialogical anthropology) and Don Donham (economic/marxist anthropology). Japanese scholars have worked on the region as well, and while much of their work is in Japanese, a number of papers have appeared in English as well. At this time, more contributions on various groups and regional dynamics are being offered by a younger generation of scholars, mostly affiliated with the South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) in Jinka (<http://www.uni-mainz.de/Organisationen/SORC/>). The Department ‘Integration and Conflict’ of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale under its Director Günther Schlee stands out as an institution for research in southern Ethiopia, enabling a large number of junior scholars to pursue PhD research and finalise their theses, including me, but also for example Echi C. Gabbert and Fekadu Adugna. My research in and around Kara took place between 2003 and 2008, and included one full-year stay beginning February 2006.

seasonal rise and fall of the Omo River for their livelihood and sense of existential autonomy. As the only major perennial source of water in the region, the Omo River already has great relevance for their pastoral production, but incomparably more so for their subsistence-securing, small-scale natural irrigation riverbank agriculture (i.e., flood-retreat/recessional farming, see Matsuda 1996 for a useful overview). It is also between these two groups, the Kara and the Nyangatom, that the regional administration hoped to establish the Omo River as a territorial and legal boundary. The Lower Omo Valley has been only tentatively pacified, and Kara and Nyangatom have for some decades been locked in a pernicious conflict (see Girke 2008b). This, then, is of central importance for the workings of governance in the militarised “tribal zone” of southwestern Ethiopia, and its spill-overs into Kenya. The perspective popularised by Ferguson and Whitehead (2000: xxiif), which emphasises “a systematic effect in the production of warfare and conflict, as expansive state systems encountered socially distinct and smaller-scale political communities”, is today usefully supplemented by the thorough, comparative and materialist efforts by James C. Scott. In his recent volume focusing on the highland regions of the Southeast Asian mainland (there called “Zomia”), he provides a vocabulary and a toolkit to systematically look at such marginal regions as the Lower Omo as “shatter zones or zones of refuge” (Scott 2009: x). Such ‘shatter zones’ are culturally and linguistically extremely heterogeneous, strikingly so in the case of South Omo, and have not only been shaped and stimulated into conflict by an expanding state, but are actually largely populated by groups which have (in their historical iterations) tried to escape from the oppressive taxation and *corvée* demands of a domination-bent, manpower-seeking centre. Arguably, the Lower Omo is a highly relevant example for such dynamics – as I discuss later, while our historical record is spotty, the evidence points to rather recent such dynamics, which all have to do with topography, climate, and agriculture. From a third vantage point still further away, i.e., the distant national centre, where the electrification of Ethiopia is being planned, the Omo has come to be seen as a ‘resource,’ a potentiality, which can today be tamed and made usable by means of hydroelectric dams. This high modernist technocratic endeavour, then, sees the Omo River as an untapped resource, which will bring the electric light of modernity to power-starved Ethiopia. Aptly, Nina Laurie (2004) reminds us of the “poetry of big dams”, the very male fascination with such mega-projects, which today in many places has fallen away, outweighed by the multitude of disappointing failures and the plight of the affected residents, indigenes, or else. Not so in Ethiopia: that the dam will also allegedly damn the populations of South Omo by stopping the annual flood has caused an international uproar, which again has triggered denial as well as an “anti-imperialist” and quite vociferous backlash from Ethiopia. Carr (2012: 39) holds that criticism of this so-called “Pride of Ethiopia” is “taken to be against national security”. The dam project, then, is as intrinsically related to questions of governance as to hydrology.⁴

All of these perspectives are partial, and my renderings of them are reductive for the sake of the argument. Still, it is insightful to juxtapose these three competing views of the river. How little communication takes place between the actors holding these views is relevant if one wants to understand the predicaments of ethnicity, development, and the state in these borderlands of

⁴ Carr also asserts that plans to dam the Omo “were initiated at least four decades ago”, and that these plans “have persisted through three major government transitions” (2012: 36); the fixation on “progress” through such mega-projects only is entirely misguided, though, as “these huge and costly projects generally undermine the survival systems of the rural poor” vis-à-vis smaller projects “that can actually meet the needs of the poorest people while bringing lasting benefit to the nation.” (2012: 38)

Ethiopia. Beyond the national scope, it is especially the ‘resource’ perspective, which is informed by international dynamics as the large infrastructural projects aiming to tap the river as a resource involve actors and institutions far beyond Ethiopia, because the Omo River flows into Lake Turkana, which lies nearly fully within Kenya, and Ethiopia wants to sell its electrical surplus abroad. One of the items rearing its head throughout is precisely the question whether the clash of these place-making projects is an Ethiopian issue and should be dealt with within Ethiopia, or whether it does not concern Kenya as much, or even, due to the expected plight of the hapless, ‘indigenous’ populations along the river, the whole world.⁵

In the following three sections, I separately reconstruct the rise, relevance, and respective traction of the three seemingly so incongruent and incommensurable conceptions and how they are voiced, adduced, and contested. Towards the end of the text, the practical and ethical predicament is laid bare, but certainly not resolved.⁶

Homeland

The Omo River is the ecological as well as ideological basis of many peoples’ livelihoods. The Kara, among whom I have been doing field research since 2003, are a prime example, because more than most others their identity rests on their living by the river. The Kara, who today reside on the eastern bank of the river, define their entire way of being, starting with their mythic history, and including their social organisation both in ritual and in material terms, through their occupation of this extremely fertile ecological niche along the river (Matsuda 1996). According to myth, they became who they are when their ancestors reached and occupied the river valley, subduing and integrating the autochthonous population. Subsequently, I want to discuss first the ideological and then the ecological aspects of the Lower Omo as a (completely) social idea, a homeland, before I introduce the dynamic of conflict and governance (in the vein of the “tribal zone” argument) in which the conception of the river as a boundary arises.

Kara are Kara Only on the River

The Omo exerts a determining material influence on the Kara’s present way of life, but it also determines their immaterial past. The Kara are self-admitted late-comers to the river valley (Girke 2008a). According to their own charter myth, a narrative which closely accords with the conventions Kopytoff has established for such stories on the African frontier (1989: 49–52), at some point in the past they followed a red bull down their hill ranges, and discovered the fertile and uncultivated river banks lying to the West. There, they also met the people called the Moguji, a population which both in practical terms and in their cultural conceptions are to the Kara and their neighbours what the various Dorobo groups are to the (agro-) pastoralist groups of Kenya. As in comparable cases on ethnographic record, the legend proclaims that the late-coming, herding, and cultivating Kara managed to trick the first-coming, non-cultivating hunters and fishermen Moguji into signing over their rights to the river banks, an act made visible and final in that the Moguji

⁵ Carr points to the “global significance” of the situation: the potentially catastrophic impacts of the dam might spill over into southern Sudan, as groups struggle over increasingly scarce resources (2012: 4, 228).

⁶ Jon Abbink elaborates “five categories of ‘stakeholders’”, each with their own view on the situation; his conclusions, that these views are incommensurable and that the government position makes compromise impossible, dovetail with mine (2012: 126, 140).

themselves helped to stake out the claims of the various Kara by sinking huge wooden poles into the earth, separating each household's farmland (Girke 2008a; cf. Matsuda 1996: 15).

While this happened in mythical time, some more recent 'purchases' of land (by Kara from Moguji) took place only around two generations ago, and the general principle which was established then is maintained by the dominant 'true Kara' until today: namely that Moguji, while allegedly owners of wide swathes of land, are not eligible to hold proprietary rights to riverbanks or even to arable flood plains within Kara territory.

Summarising the specific ways in which the 'true Kara,' the Moguji, the other ethnic subcategories of Kara, the land and the river hang together today,⁷ the Kara became who they are when their ancestors reached the frontier, which was the Omo River Valley, subduing and integrating the allegedly autochthonous population on both sides of the river. This, more than anything else, provides the material as well as ideological grounds to maintain their separateness from the culturally and linguistically very similar groups up on the eastern ranges: the Hamar, Banna, and Bashada.⁸ It also provides the basis for the Kara self-esteem – in the past, they claim, they had quickly become the masters of the entire Omo Valley, feared and respected, clever in their machinations and ruthless in warfare. This claim is corroborated by narratives from other groups and even by early European travellers who found that the Kara were located quite squarely in the middle of a network of trading routes, very likely successful purveyors of ivory and animal hides, and were influential far beyond what would be suggested by their contemporary numbers (compare Bassi 2009, 2011; Sobania 1980; Strecker 1976; Turton n.d.).

Irrespective of the general claim that all the land 'really' is the land of the *bitti*, the Kara ritual leaders, in most practical matters the riverbanks are owned by individuals in heredity, and can also be bought and sold. Each such transfer requires some ritual investiture, since it is quite firmly held that ownership of land entails a spiritual primacy, but also some responsibility. If an entire patriline would die out in one fell swoop, some more distant relatives would still ritually need to buy the land from the dead people – otherwise, it would inevitably be spoilt and bring nothing but misery, illness, and death to whoever utilised it.

Regarding overall 'wealth', it was explained to me in the context of bridewealth negotiations, ownership of land was actually much more important than large herds – the latter could easily be decimated by illnesses, a pack of hyenas, or raiders. Only land remained in perpetuity. Suitors with land in the family could expect somewhat preferential treatment from their intended in-laws. Having more land than they themselves could properly cultivate would also allow households to keep a higher number of dependents close – these were first and foremost from dispossessed Moguji, but even today individuals from various other, occasionally far-away polities (including Toposa and Turkana) live among the Kara. It is well-established, especially regarding the 1970s, that numerous Nyangatom, Bashada, and Hamar used to flock to the Kara's land in times of need, and be granted lease to cultivate a stretch of land by their respective bondfriends (see Girke 2011). It is also quite striking, when looking at genealogies today, just how many of my age-mates (whom I have sampled best) had grandmothers who were originally from another tribal group, often

⁷ Discussed elsewhere, see Girke (2008a).

⁸ It has often been suggested that this intrinsic identification of the population with the river extends as far as their proper name, which allegedly means "fish" in their own language. This claim is intuitively plausible, as fish-eating is considered despicable by many pastoralist-minded groups, and is perpetuated even by neighbouring groups, whom one might expect to know better: the pronunciation differs between *kara* and *káára* (fish).

Nyangatom and Mursi. Taken together, these examples indicate that the Kara held a central position among their neighbours in the early to mid-twentieth century.



Map 1: Settlements of the Kara on the Eastern Bank of the Omo River (as of 2007)

In summary, not only are the riverbanks the basis of the Kara subsistence and property regime, but holding these lands on the banks of the Omo made the Kara great in reputation and influence among the peoples of the Lower Omo. This much seems undisputed. Even as Ethiopian outposts were first established there over one hundred years ago now, the Kara stood autonomously astride both river banks, and (very likely throughout the nineteenth century) absorbed the remnants of several other polities that had lost the necessary size and potency to maintain themselves, the Kara thus increasing their number along with their reputation. As Kopytoff (1989: 42 f.) has pointed out, on the open ranges of the frontier, the political calculus always meant that one had to try to increase the size of one's kin group, as "each labor unit essentially supported himself or herself and produced a slight surplus beyond that. (...) All this explains why, traditionally, African kin groups

had an almost insatiable demand for people and jealously guarded those they already had". The Kara, then, took in immigrants galore who agreed to attach themselves to Kara clans and Kara patriline, and – under a general ethos of equality – were willing to subordinate themselves politically⁹. While oral histories on the specific dynamics vary greatly, the contemporary set-up of Kara encodes such earlier processes.

The historical record, thus, is spotty, and we can safely assume that there would be considerable cultural and linguistic differences between the Kara of today (composite as they are) and whoever lived in what is Kara country today some two or three hundred years ago. So no matter whether the first peoples calling themselves Kara were a direct offshoot of a proto-population of the culturally and linguistically so similar Hamar, Banna, or Bashada living in the eastern hills, as well might be assumed, or whether the Kara had a more complex ethnogenesis (e.g. as suggested by Bassi 2009, 2011), their identity in a strong sense of the term is bound up with their occupation of the riverlands: this is what they live off and what they die for (Girke 2008b). Their sorghum harvest needs to be ritually initialised through the *kaido*, a ritual involving Omo water and no other, and numerous symbolic practices (initiations, for instance) demand the use of the river or its water. To not live by the river is really feasible only for youths; any married adults face difficulties fulfilling their social and ritual duties.

I have not made the phenomenological aspects of life on the Omo a central part of my research, but it is clear that the intimate familiarity with the river itself, the riverine forest, and the savannah beyond, with all their fields and flood plains, the paths and herding grounds, the hunting spots and clay deposits, with the fauna and flora and its sounds and smells are central for how individual Kara conceive of themselves in the world (see Abbink 2012: 130). While especially men love to travel, strikingly few Kara have found it attractive or practical to take up permanent residence elsewhere, and the residents on the river have affective and pragmatic problems coping with these out-migrants.

In analogy to the Mursi (Turton 1979), it is not so much that the Kara made a journey to the Omo River as that this journey made them; it follows that the Kara do not incidentally live by the river, but that it is the 'living by the river' that makes the Kara. To not live by the river would unmake 'the Kara,' which thus need to be understood as a temporal and joint political project, based on choices made in the past, rather than a primordial group with deep continuity and linear historical trajectory. To spin this further, the Kara do not really have a frontier, but they are a frontier: there is no buffer between them and their neighbours, but they are a buffer between the Nilotic speaking populations and the Omotic speaking ones, with their settlements lined up along the river north to south, with no appreciable hinterland. However, if we believe the evidence that the (proto-)Kara came down from the Hamar hill range at some point in order to take up an unimpeded life at the frontier, then it is clear that they have reached the end of the line, and in fact have been rebounding in recent years. In the 1990s, Matsuda (e.g. 1996: 9) still confidently prepared maps showing Kara territory extending far beyond the Omo River to the west, and while the Kara still claim much of that area to be 'theirs', the fact is that they are today largely constrained to live on and cultivate the eastern banks only (see Map 1). Over the last twenty years, most of the western bank has been abandoned and is only opportunistically used, as any permanent settlement in these areas is deemed too dangerous.

⁹ See Schlee (2008: 25–27) for the theoretical argument.

Kara Livelihood on the Lower Omo

The Kara, a group of approximately 1,400 people, today occupy three large and a number of small settlements along a largely straight stretch of the Omo River.¹⁰ As many other populations all over East Africa, they subsist on agro-pastoralist production, and equally treasure both of the culturally explicitly separate activities of herding and farming: “one hand, the goats, the other hand, the fields” was a statement I heard repeatedly – even as animal produce does not greatly contribute to their diet, they are “emotional pastoralists” (see Matsuda 1996: 7–10). Herding cattle rather than merely goats and sheep has been unfeasible for some time, not only is the area feared for the Tse Tse fly, which allegedly poses a constant danger for livestock, but it is well-known that stocks of cattle attract covetous neighbours, both raiders and tax men.¹¹

In addition, as this text is concerned with ecological questions as much as with cultural ones, the goats and sheep herded by the Kara need to be seen as a protein source which (beyond the milk taken for the feeding of infants) is tapped only occasionally, as an internal means of exchange and as an expression of status. Herding is also a proving ground for young boys who are supposed to learn valuable skills over the years they spend watching the family's herds (plus, they are out from underfoot), and also as a way to ideologically remain connected to the regional spirit of pastoralism which shows itself in both everyday activities as well as in ritual and symbolism. The small stock of the Kara play no major role as emergency capital. At any rate, looking only at subsistence, the sorghum produced on the banks of the Omo as well as in some seasonally inundated flood plains is what keeps the Kara alive, and more than that even: as has been emphasised (e.g. Strecker 1976), due to the extreme fertility of the ecological niche occupied by them, the Kara have often been able to trade off some surplus grains to the neighbouring populations, especially the Hamar to the east and Nyangatom to the west.

To illustrate, a little more needs to be said about the practical side of the Kara agriculture. The Omo River is usually at its lowest level in late January, and then, fed by rainfall in the catchment areas much further north, begins its rise. First gradually, and with some variation in the speed of increase, but visibly; later, it will plateau for a while, leaving much room for speculation when the time for farming will come again. Then, again rising, it will submerge a few landmarks, wash over the shelves in the basin and creep up the banks, finally drowning last year's planting sites. Only in July and sometimes August, the full extent of the flooding will become visible, leaving much room to speculation – will it rise as high as last year? Will it rise as high as the year before that? Will it reach the natural channels which allow inundation of some flood plains further inland, and thus significantly increase the potentially usable agricultural area?

After the Omo River has reached its highest level, and slowly starts receding, public interest in these dynamics is hardly waning. The elders still sit on ridges and observe and discuss the water level and the riverbanks. In fact, at this time it becomes especially striking how the Kara way of reckoning time depends on the Omo flood. While it is said that farming begins in a certain month,

¹⁰ My fieldwork took place between 2003 and 2008, with a one-year stay from Feb. 2006 until Feb. 2007. I last visited Kara in late 2012.

¹¹ Reaching Kara between 2003 and 2011, one would likely have encountered large herds of cattle roaming the riverlands and the foothills to the east. These are not Kara cattle, as a rule – they belong to the Hamar, who have long been the closest allies of the Kara, and who use this alliance to exploit the relative lushness of the lowlands to fatten their animals. This practice has recently engendered some unforeseen problems, as some Kara have started to bemoan the detrimental effects so many steps of hard hooves have on their thin soil. How this affects the alliance between Hamar and Kara is tentatively explored elsewhere (see Girke 2008a).

it is in fact the case that farming begins when the river is deemed low enough, and the respective month practically begins then. Regularly, the sorghum seeds are planted in the wet soil of the riverbank earlier in the south than in the north around the settlement of Labuk. The reason usually given for this is that the people of Labuk believe the claims of the Mursi (who live still further upriver) that the Omo will likely rise again after first having receded – so that people rushing to the banks too eagerly and planting too early run the risk of losing their precious seed. People in the south downplay this likelihood and thus literally live in a different month as dictated by their knowledge of the water level dynamics. Labuk is then ‘stuck’ in the previous month. It is relevant that rain-fed agriculture provides only a minor addition to the crops on the riverbank, and is only opportunistically (or desperately) engaged in. The most prominent and ritually marked crop is sorghum, supplemented by maize, squash, cowpeas, and greengrams, and it is especially sorghum and its harvest that is very tightly tied to both each patriline’s livelihood and the ritual practices of the entire country.

Riverbank cultivation requires no artificial fertilisation, as the river itself leaves rich deposits of fertile soil year after year, and in an average year in terms of rainfall and flooding, households (which by and large act as productive units in Kara land) can feed themselves well. This kind of agriculture, in addition (and I will get back to this later), brings with it some months of leisure, as between March and July there is really not much work necessary to sustain subsistence if the February harvest was adequate. Then, people will move back to the main villages from the smaller, temporary sites along the river to which they had dispersed for farming, and this is the time of much ritual and other socially reproductive activity. Such dynamics are well-known, and already Evans-Pritchard (e.g. 1940: 95) provided evocative impressions of how the social life of the Nuer became livelier in the dry season as they move closer to together for horticulture. A striking difference to his description is that the Kara’s riverbank cultivation takes place in their dry season, and it is the wet season during which they return to their villages. Their noticeable disinterest in what officially would be considered productive labour during the months after the harvest does not sit well with administrators, largely members of Ethiopian highland society, who try to turn the Kara (as well as the other lowland groups along the Omo) into more productive citizens and taxpayers by urging them to engage in irrigation agriculture and to invest labour in road-building etc. during these months of seeming idleness.

By our best reckoning, this is precisely what frontier groups such as the Kara have been fleeing from. In fact, this flight from political centres, from proto-states or ambitious chiefdoms even, might be what gives them their specific characteristics. For the African case, the dynamics of the boundary have been comparatively and comprehensively outlined by Igor Kopytoff in his volume on “The African frontier” (1989), and many Africanist scholars are familiar with Ernest Gellner’s work on the Berber and their relations to Arabs (1969), which also highlights how people choose to live outside of settled centres and adapt themselves to such conditions in terms of ecology and ideology. The recent book by James C. Scott, “The art of not being governed” (2009), significantly adds to this trend – of paying attention to marginal populations precisely not in terms of the dominant centre, but systemically, including the view from below – by taking the way of life of “tribal groups” outside or at the edge of the state seriously as a result of choice, not of cultural backwardness, as all modernist narratives have it. John Markakis has recently stated that the

lowland/highland divide constitutes one of the “last frontiers” for Ethiopia (2011), literally as well as metaphorically.

This ecological prime location along the Omo River has had other masters before the Kara, and over the last decades, the Kara have very strongly felt the push of the much more numerous Nyangatom. The last big massacres between these polities took place in the late 1970s, but some small-scale warfare and ecological encroachment continue unabatedly.

Boundary

The 1970s saw an increase in warfare on the Lower Omo: as I trace elsewhere (Girke 2008b), especially the Kara and the Nyangatom got too close to one another for comfort. Especially when large numbers of Nyangatom reached Kara, first volunteering to work in exchange for food or land leases, and then failed to disappear again, effectively overstaying their welcome, escalation ensued. In one such incident, a large number of destitute and hungry Nyangatom were killed in Kara country. This led to the largest violent invasion by the Nyangatom the Kara had ever faced, with the effect that the village of Kundama was razed to the ground in an orchestrated attack. The Kara, in turn, destroyed Nyangatom settlements downriver, and through this mutually assured retaliation, some sort of balance was restored (Alvarsson 1989; Tornay 1979; Girke 2008b).

Still, these events were in some way the beginning of the end – the Nyangatom and the Kara were at odds, and along with the not well-understood increase in the Nyangatom population since the 1970s, the Kara settlements on the western bank of the Omo became less and less defensible, until after some further aggravating incidents in the early 1990s, they were abandoned for good. Even today, police response to warfare and raiding in the Omo Valley is slow, often taking days to occur; in previous decades, official capacities – and possibly interest – to intervene in the events were even lower. Since the 1970s, then, low-level violence has been endemic between the groups; however, whereas before large-scale attacks on entire villages were regular occurrences, today opportunistic sniping is the most typical form of inter-group violence.¹² This sniping, of course, takes place right across the Omo River – men, hiding in the bushes on either side, would take potshots, most often at women going to fetch water, and rarely do Kara risk crossing over to the western bank these days.¹³ How this sort of low-intensity warfare disrupts everyday life is not difficult to imagine.

Occasions for this are rarely lacking. Ever since I first came to Kara in 2003, there were a number of cases when either individuals or small groups decided that lives had to be taken for some specific reason: as is common for such tribal polities, an act of deadly violence committed by a recognised member of one such group against any member of any other such group will *ceteris paribus* lead to a state of warfare between the two polities as a whole, and a tit-for-tat escalation. Such a state of war has to be ritually resolved eventually. However, this will often take months,

¹² This is related to the rise of automatic weapons as well. Whereas it has often been claimed that the introduction of the AK47 and its ilk has led to an escalation of violence, in the case of Kara and Nyangatom the increasing availability of these weapons has very visibly gone along with a decrease in wholesale slaughter. The obvious reason often given for this was that now, a single man with a gun could stop an entire assault force, so that the influence of tactical considerations on the success of a raid was greatly reduced.

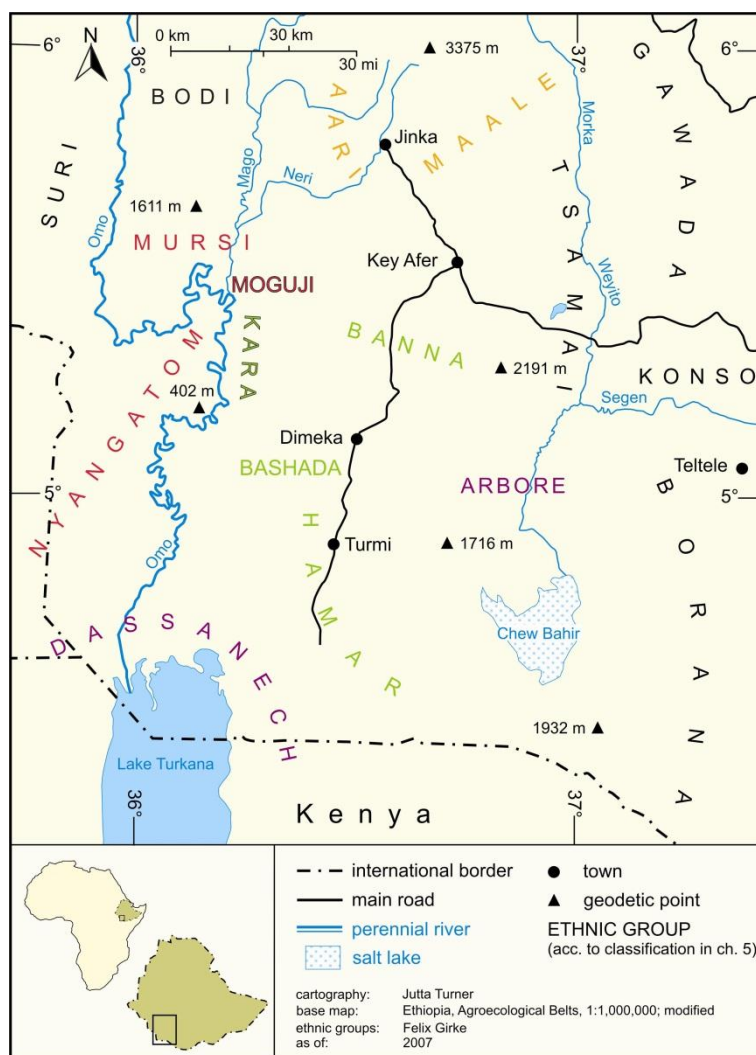
¹³ In early 2007, a man in whom all of Kara saw potential for eventual greatness, Kornan Nakwa Batum, was shot in the back and killed in an ambush by Nyangatom on the western bank while drinking coffee with some Moguji trading partners. The backstory and this drama’s subsequent impact has been well reproduced by Neil Shea in a text for *National Geographic* (2010).

because, as people told me, if one makes peace too quickly, before the war has sufficiently hurt both sides, the peace will not last: personal grievance has to eventually give in to collective exhaustion. Thus, relations between the groups are often tense, even if personal friendships and kin-relations continue to cross-cut the tribal lines. The violence, of course, is not self-serving, even though many NGOs and government representatives claim this to be the case: some sections of the Nyangatom¹⁴ have in recent years moved closer and closer to the river itself, and whereas in former times they would have contacted their kinsfolk or personal bondfriends among the Kara and asked for permission to farm a given stretch of the river, today they often simply occupy the western river banks and begin to clear them without requesting permission first. This careless or even provocative attitude indicates general erosion of what has been called the “cultural neighbourhood” of South Omo (see Gabbert and Thubauville 2011): in principle, the Kara know and appreciate Nyangatom and their culture a great deal, and there are many close personal relations among individuals. It is with regret that the Kara acknowledge that a general amity between the populations is unlikely to be maintained for long.

This is what the Kara were confronted with over the last few years. Having first evacuated their settlements on the western bank as a temporary, prudent measure, they found that it became less and less likely that they would one day have the military wherewithal to halt and reverse the factual occupation of the opposite shore by the Nyangatom. This hurts, for several reasons, some material, some more emotional. First, this development has cut the Kara’s available cultivation area by half. This has not yet triggered any real disasters, as up until today the Kara managed to get by with what they could harvest on the eastern bank; however, it introduces a very strongly felt element of inflexibility for the population as a whole, and whole clans of Kara, whose fields are on the other side of the river, are worried that they might become perpetual clients. To have to ask permission to clear and plant fields from other Kara, while simultaneously being forced to watch the Nyangatom on the other side cultivate “my fathers’ land” is considered very demeaning by the people affected.

Today, the Kara’s position along the Omo has become very tenuous. What the Kara at first saw as a more or less prudent, temporary redeployment, giving up their permanent settlements on the western bank in order to not split their forces and be caught with their back to the river, has in effect led to displacement. The Omo River has now been declared a permanent boundary by the regional administration, for which the river is an evident natural and thus legitimate division between the two groups.

¹⁴ The population known as Nyangatom has been growing and pushing outward from the Kibbish area at the border of the Ilemi triangle (see Mburu 2003), blocked from access to their pastures of old by the international border and its enforcement by Kenyan troops. This puts pressure on the inter-group relations on the Ethiopian side, as over the last decades, Nyangatom have also been fighting with Dassanech, Hamar, Mursi, Suri, and especially Turkana.



Map 2: Ethnic Groups on the Omo River

Governance in the Tribal Zone

“Do you know the difference between Kara and Nyangatom?”, I was asked by a member of a negotiation and reconciliation team sent to Kara by the regional administration. I surely did not, so he explained to me that “the Kara are farmers, the Nyangatom are pastoralists”. This, then, was the baseline argument for the official stance that there really were no grounds for conflict. As the administrator declared, and as was repeated by Nyangatom during peace conferences throughout 2006/07, they (as “pastoralists”) had no interests in the fields of the Kara, only in access to the river to water their cattle: they were not, accordingly, encroaching. This imaginary, in turn, was used to undermine the position of the Kara – nobody was taking anything away from them, so they themselves had no grounds for claiming grievance: their efforts to militarily resist the Nyangatom were basically declared acts of aggression, and unreasonable. The facts speak a different language: for a long time already, the people known as the “Omo Nyangatom” have been cultivating further downstream, in an area where they often clashed with Hamar (Tornay 1979: 105; Alvarsson 1989: 50). And although some sections of Nyangatom depend much more heavily on agriculture than others, all have to be understood as agro-pastoralists who will make use of any farmland they can get access to; peaceful relations with the Kara are in fact hampered by ecological encroachment, so

that we today encounter “an uncomfortable juxtaposition, the mere co-existence of different ethnic groups” (Schlee 2008: 12) without each comfortably occupying its own niche (see Mutie 2003 for a similar case). A recent diploma thesis indicates how strongly the Nyangatom have become entrenched in what was fairly recently Kara territory (Pfitzner 2010), and how matter-of-factly they farm the Omo riverbanks today. Still, the official imaginary is difficult to refute, even as it is well-known that there are, in East Africa, not so many “pure pastoralists”. However, far more NGOs active in South Omo work on pastoralism rather than agro-pastoralism, and to speak of “these nomads” (often used as a synonym for ‘pastoralist’, or in fact for ‘lowlander’) is a common trope in the Ethiopian discourse as it flows down from the highland centre. The Kara counternarratives are having a hard time gaining public recognition, also due to the fact that the Nyangatom were recently awarded their own *woreda* (district), whereas before they had been administratively and unhappily clustered with the Dassanech: Nyangatom are much more numerous than the Kara, and seem to have been successful at politicking at the regional or zonal level.

To summarise: for decades, the Kara have felt the demographic expansion of the Nyangatom, the arguably militarily strongest force in the South Omo region, and in the face of this threat, have retreated across the river in order to take up a defensible position. They try to maintain their hold of the riverbanks while hoping that the physical obstacle of the river will slow or stop large-scale attacks as occurred in the 1970s. The constant tit-for-tat between the two polities and the low-level attrition over the years have not reversed the Nyangatom encroachment, but have visibly slowed it down and made their occupation of the riverbanks both uncomfortable and insecure. However, during the time of my fieldwork in 2006/07, the zonal government came into the position of having to demarcate Nyangatom territory for the newly established district, and in a grand application of the state logics of legibility (Scott 1998), they identified the Omo River itself as the fitting boundary, as an administrator explained to me: “Even though Kara used to live on the western bank, we cannot look at all the things of the past. In the past, even the Dassanech were living in this area. We can only look at where people are now living, and what languages they speak.” (see also Girke 2008b) This was the gist of the administrator’s statement; he also referred to the establishment of the Oromiya National State of Ethiopia as a paradigmatic case, as in his view its borders had simply been drawn on a case-by-case basis, and all settlements of people speaking the Oromifa language had been included. While it has been difficult to procure definite information whether any sort of official demarcation eventually did happen between the Hamar and the Nyangatom *woreda*, what it entailed, or whether certain concessions were made to the Kara, recent documents tellingly show these two superimposed, even blurring into one: blue, the river, and dotted, the district.¹⁵

This place-making of the Omo as a boundary draws on several sources, and I can make no definite statement to which degree this demarcation (which grants the Nyangatom a power discursive and possibly practical claim to lands which they had been militarily fighting to obtain) was a result of bureaucratic lack of imagination, of caring governance, or Nyangatom political skill, as all three elements can be identified in the process. First, the river is an intuitive border for map-minded officials; in fact, not drawing a boundary along a river where there is one is surely an offense to efficiency and planning, and introduces needless complications. One can imagine the

¹⁵ See the map in Pfitzner (2010: 32) as well as the recent maps of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development showing “agricultural investment areas” (see below, fn. 20).

difficulties of trying to register parts of the western bank as parts of the Hamar *woreda*, without having a bridge or a ferry to easily access this part from the East, where the *woreda* centers lie – it goes against all bureaucratic logic. As Scott has it, one has to comprehend “legibility as a central problem in statecraft” (1998: 2), which quite inevitably requires “abridged maps (...) [which] did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society depicted, nor were they intended to (...) Rather, they were maps that, when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade” (1998: 3). To draw the line where the river is, then, is not to misrepresent a ‘reality’. It is a move that, at least in the long run, simplified reality, as one of its direct effects was that the Kara lost the opportunity to claim, as they had done until then, that they were defending their own territory. They do not any longer: Nyangatom farming the western bank now do so legally. This administrative decision now can be (and certainly is, on the ground) interpreted in all sorts of directions, but the thrust of this place-making project is that a clear line has been drawn, and that the messy to-and-fro across the river has been delegitimised and thus, will eventually be, eliminated.

It is no sociological news (Barth 2000) that a clear boundary can make better neighbours and that boundaries do not need to entail unequivocal distinctions – consider the boundary between land and sea, as it is shifted by the tides, and the fence which helps interaction across it. However, this is not what plays out here – the claim that the Nyangatom were only interested in water and not in fields, along with the drawing of the new boundary, worked against a flexible notion of boundary, or even borderland, or buffer zones, or any other such modification of the basic notion of a dividing line. What has sprung up on, in, and on top of the Omo River is a line that serves to separate, a boundary claimed and made; it is a separation which is at once seemingly natural, a physical obstacle, and a social deterrent. This quite transcendent boundary-character of a river such as the Omo and its intuitively grasped boundaryness, as seen from the perspective of a state, is of course (at least in the short run) fallacious and dangerous. For the Kara, who lived on the river as a whole – as a productive ecological entity – any plausible boundary would have been located somewhere along the (less productive) adjacent savannah on either side. This line, as it was drawn, does not successfully separate or create a buffer between the two conflict parties, the Kara and Nyangatom: they are more tightly entangled than ever. The separation as such aggravates their conflict, as some Kara have lost all their land-holdings; and with an impending sense of doom, many Kara are aware that the fruit of their decades-long struggle, the maintenance of the basis of their autonomy at the edge of the empire, has been snatched away from them.

Resource

On a map of the Omo Valley I once saw a bracketed comment next to the name “Cherre” (meaning Kara): “not usable”.¹⁶ The “Cherre” were not the intended addressees of this map, thus it is no surprise that people living there and ‘using’ the land in their own way does not enter into attempts to make the topography legible and see where it can be integrated into larger economic planning. Thus, “not usable” was for a long time correct, as much of the Lower Omo Valley was not usable

¹⁶ While I cannot identify that map at this time, the point made stands even without this one piece of apt illustration: all over the world, it is common that land not used in a way amenable to the nationalist project is considered either “empty” or “unused” (e.g. see Posey 1996: 123ff for the case of the Kayapó in Amazonia). Carr shares that the entire Ethiopian/Kenyan transborder region was seen as a “wasteland” (2012: 67) and treated accordingly.

for state purposes. There was neither sufficient infrastructural capacity for transportation, i.e. roads and bridges, nor was the rainfall sufficient for non-irrigated farming. Irrigation was not an option on a large scale, because the Omo River, with its seasonal fluctuation and its occasional floods, provided none of the necessary conditions to establish worthwhile irrigation farms that could produce an extractable surplus of cash crops. Even at the small irrigation site (*irrsha*), which was set up for Kara interested in crop diversification and farming throughout the year on the peninsula west of Dus village (see Map 1), the little pump was sometimes submerged by the rising waters, as people were unable to pull it up to the top of the riverbanks in time.¹⁷

Official perspectives, then, have been portraying the Omo Valley as an unproductive, insecure, irritating part of the country. This is despite the growing tourism industry, as the region itself hardly benefits from whatever money is made by tour operators. The main irritant is the perennial river, with very thinly settled land around it, which refused integration into the national economy due to its material intractability and the “pastoralist” people’s lack of interest to submit to labour regimes, which would keep them busy over the whole year and enable them to produce a surplus (which in turn would lend itself to appropriation by others).

Only recently has it become imaginable and feasible to finally overcome the frustrating statement of “not usable”.¹⁸ Further upriver, large hydroelectric dams are being built and large portions of land along the river are allocated to commercial farms. The Gibe I Dam with the additional power station Gibe II is already in operation, even as Gibe II was put out of commission by a collapsing access tunnel in 2010. Now, the Gibe III Dam is under construction, which will be the largest such plant in Africa, with an intended power output of 1870 MW and a height of 243m. The official website provides basic information on the project and in strong words asserts its viability,¹⁹ even as a number of INGOs and concerned individuals (including, most famously, the palaeontologist Richard Leakey) are in stiff opposition to the project. Critics claim it has been poorly designed, was improperly awarded to constructors, came with an insufficient downstream impact assessment, and will produce a “broad range of negative effects, some of which would be catastrophic to both the environment and the indigenous communities living downstream” (Leakey 2009).²⁰ The “Friends of Lake Turkana”, based in Kenya and headed by Goldman Environmental Prize-winner Ikal Angelei, have consistently tied the planned dam to catastrophic impacts on the water level of the Kenyan Lake Turkana, with corresponding damages to the resident population and their livelihood,

¹⁷ This site was set up and maintained by EPARDA (Ethiopian Pastoralist Research and Development Association). There have been other attempts to establish irrigation schemes both at Kangaten in Nyangatom territory, as well as in Dassanech. Their history has not been written yet; but see Carr (2012) for some basic data.

¹⁸ Oliver Tappe points out that there is – for Southeast Asia – already a corpus on the “resource frontier” (e.g. Barney 2009). While pertinent, this notion and this parallel cannot be further explored here.

¹⁹ See <http://www.gibe3.com.et/> (access date 2013/05/16).

²⁰ For the critical views, the NGO “International Rivers” provides much information and has collected a number of official and independent reports (see <http://www.internationalrivers.org/more?tid=647&type=documents> for an overview, access date 2010/06/12), and the African Resources Working Group (ARWG, a group of scholars preferring to remain anonymous) has compiled “A commentary on the environmental, socioeconomic and human rights impacts of the proposed Gibe III hydrodam in the Lower Omo River Basin of southwest Ethiopia” (see <http://www.arwg-gibe.org/>, access date 2013/05/16). Particularly worthwhile is the recent report by Claudia Carr (2012), which provides sufficient technical, legal, and economic data to make its point convincingly, and Sean Avery’s (2012) hydrological study, which very plausibly and soberly outlines the disastrous outcomes the dam and the irrigation projects will have on the larger region. Finally, the INGO International Rivers, which has long attended the question of the dam, has released a final report on the impact of Gibe III (http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/attached-files/impact_of_gibe_3_final_0.pdf, access date 2013/11/05).

and have campaigned to raise awareness of the issues both internationally as well as in Kenya.²¹ With some effect:

“So extreme is the controversy that in December 2008, a Kenyan Member of Parliament Ekuwe Ethuro, who represents Turkana central population, recommended his government threaten war on Ethiopia for starting Gibe III dam constructions on Omo River. Ekuwe asked why Kenya is not using Egypt’s policy of putting pressure on Ethiopia by threatening to go to war if Ethiopia uses the water resources.”²²

Ethiopian statements adhered to “the usual denial mode” (Abbink 2012: 132). The to-and-fro between proponents and opponents of Gibe III has by now become too unwieldy to discuss here, as reports conflict on even rather basic technical facts, so that there seems to be no point on which proponents and opponents agree, and especially since the debate has been mired in morally-charged accusations. These range from corruption charges and state brutality, on the one hand, to ‘neo-colonialist meddling’ and the trope of white activists or anthropologists wanting to keep Africans poor and in the dark so that their field of study or engagement does not disappear, on the other. This battle is fought via all sorts of media, but most bitterly in online forums.²³ To understand what is, in fact, going on it needs to be appreciated that for Ethiopia, the question of its own waters and their use by other countries has been an extremely touchy subject throughout history. The prime case here is the Nile and the relation to Egypt, a debate which has some historical continuity over centuries, as Egypt depends on waters originating in Ethiopia, which due to the vicissitudes of the terrain Ethiopia herself could not make similar use of until today. Still, the imaginary that Ethiopia might one day simply ‘turn off’ the Nile waters is already centuries old and fundamentally informs the discussion on the Omo, especially since during colonial times coercive treaties were signed preventing Ethiopia from reducing the Nile flow for her own purposes. This makes quite clear why Ethiopians are not happy with outsiders telling them how to use their rivers.²⁴ Now, for the Omo, the debate begins anew and seems in many ways to follow the course of the debate on the Nile.

For my argument, it is central that with the Gibe III Dam, the Omo Valley has become a resource, which can be first tamed and then tapped by the Ethiopian developmental state. It is a declared goal of the dam to reduce downstream flooding, which takes on a catastrophic character in the official discourse rather than being seen as a boon of fertility – the greater the flood on the Omo, the larger the potentially arable land, and the greater the choice where to farm and whom to invite to farm alongside oneself. This misunderstanding is revealing in that the undercurrent of the river as wild and dangerous and not usable for human livelihood comes through quite strongly (see

²¹ See <http://www.friendsoflaketurkana.org/> and <http://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/ikal-angelei> (access date 2013/05/16).

²² See <http://www.addisfortune.com/Vol%209%20No%20463%20Archive/agenda.htm> (cached; access date 2013/05/16). The debate in Kenya is less heated today, but public opinion is still embattled.

²³ Nothing illustrates this better than juxtaposing one of the online campaigns against the dam (see <http://www.stopgibe3.org/>, access date 2013/05/16) with the subsequent online campaign against the campaign against the dam (see <http://www.petitiononline.com/GibeIII/petition.html>, access date 2013/05/16). The campaign against the dam has collected 20,756 signatures at this point, the campaign against the campaign 676.

²⁴ For comprehensive approaches, see Erlich (2002: 1-10) for a historical overview, and Godana (1985: 32-36) on some of the drama between the two countries over the question what right Egypt has on the Nile waters which come to 84-86% from Ethiopia. Further reading on aspects of the issue: Cascão (2009), Debay (2008), Flintan/Imeru (2002), Kendie (1999), Stroh (2006), Swain (1997), Waterbury/Whittington (1998), and Yacob/Imeru (2005); in recent months, there have been numerous developments to further complicate the matter, and impossible to pursue here. It is striking that few of the legal-minded texts on water-rights explicitly address rights of subnational groups; water-rights are mostly thought trans- or internationally. This methodological nationalism bears revision.

Getaneh n.d.: 5). Simply put, it is false that “large unregulated floods results in severe damages to the downstream communities” or that “[t]he annual crop production in the region only lasts for three to six months of consumption while the remaining is dependent on food aid”²⁵, but both claims lend themselves well to the depiction of the Lower Omo as unproductive and unsustainable, side-lining the realities of the centuries-long subsistence production in the region. In fact, in a clever turn of terms, the current ‘natural’ state of the Omo is blamed for the on-going conflicts in the region, which would allegedly not be exacerbated but eased by the Gibe III Dam:

Q: Could the project exacerbate ethnic conflicts in the region?

A: No, because the main cause of conflicts is water scarcity, and hence when the Gibe III dam will be operational, the excessive floods will be regulated and a controlled flooding for adequate recession agriculture and grazing will be released in a manner that will revive the flow to stable condition. The current state of frequent drought due to prolonged dry season and excessive floods during wet seasons exacerbates the ethnic conflicts in the region. (Source: <http://www.gibe3.com.et/issues.html>)

Upon the taming follows the tapping: with the establishment of the river’s body and its waters as a resource, the entire Omo Valley has suddenly become usable as large-scale irrigation would become possible following the dam. This is a true transformation of useless land into usable area for agriculture, as seen by the state, evidenced by maps provided by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development that show how virtually the entire valley has been staked out as “Agricultural investment areas.” Two of these maps are especially interesting for the case at hand, namely the ones for “Gnagnatom” [sic] and “Karo” [sic], offering 71,473 ha and 16,292 ha respectively to prospective investors, all of them, as the document states, “Irrigable with trans boundary Omo river.”²⁶ Both these maps show the river as the boundary between the respective districts (*woreda*), but rather than exacerbate the problems caused by viewing the river as a boundary (as above), this twist actually has little effect on the Kara and Nyangatom: this drawn-up boundary is now very much only the boundary between their administrative districts. What it does demarcate is not anymore the land they were fighting over, but something zoned for industrial, irrigated agriculture: “Land suitability for high value crops mainly: cotton, sesame, ground nut, soya bean, oil palm cultivation, sugar cane, fruit crops” (ibid.). There is some duplicity here, that – for one – the uplifting of unproductive peripheral populations is proclaimed, and yet at the same time the habitat of these populations is expropriated and offered to international investors. This duplicity is the final clash site of the place-making projects. Eyesus Kebede, according to Bloomberg news agency “an agricultural-investment coordinator in the ministry” for agriculture, told their reporter that “There is ample amount of land which is not cultivated yet.” The news feature, which focuses on Ethiopia’s efforts to earn/attract foreign investment, goes on stating that “Eyesus said the land in South Omo was ‘empty’ and that the government had taken environmental

²⁵ See <http://www.gibe3.com.et/issues.html> (access date 2013/05/16). Carr discusses this at length, giving data for regular floods, oral history accounts, and geographical aspects of the entire flood issue. In brief, she calls the official version – especially on the flood of August 2006 – a fabrication, as “[d]issenting views were not tolerated” (2012: 109). Despite claims of the government, no “catastrophic losses” occurred, even as a homogenisation of media and NGO reports was achieved (2012: 74, 109–115). I was in Ethiopia at the time, reaching the Lower Omo late that month, and remember well the bemusement of local people in the face of this propaganda effort.

²⁶ Two other maps show “Debub Ari” (South Ari) and “Nebremus”, an area covering territory occupied today by both Dassanech and Nyangatom (compare Map 2). The plans are available at <http://www.eap.gov.et/Investment-Opportunities/SNNP-Regional-State.asp> (access date 2013/05/16).

and social considerations into account when allocating land for investors.”²⁷ Abbink (2012: 129) emphasises that it is a common discursive tactic of states to “redefine and move local people to detach them from the land so as to make it a ‘free resource’”.

The Ethiopian plan for electrification, irrigation, and development side-lines the notion that there could be something such as a ‘homeland’, i.e. a place so relevant for a group’s identity so as to be inextricable from it. In times of Gibe III, the Kara need to be Ethiopians, and not Kara: “(...) the subjects and citizens of developing countries are seen as entities whose political agency and identity are to be neutralized or overcome in a technocratic discourse of developmentalism that allows no counter-voice” (Abbink 2012: 125). Even if the worst predictions of the dam critics do not come true, with the agricultural investment coming to the Omo, the political project and the ethnic identity “Kara” are coming to an end. Their subsistence and autonomous livelihood made impossible, it is not very clear what will be their eventual trajectory, but studies of other PAP (“Project-Affected People”, McDowell 1996) caught in dam-induced development are pessimistic in tone as regards both their access to the benefits created by the dam and their subsequent political participation and agency in their eventual future: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness (or even, aptly, “placelessness”), marginalisation, increased morbidity, food insecurity, lost access to common property, and social disarticulation are the most likely consequences which often converge in the wake of such projects (Cernea 1996: 21f). Thayer Scudder (e.g. 1996: 65ff), who has worked extensively on the topic, provides haunting analyses of the typically disastrous, sometimes ethnocidal results of dam construction on “downstream communities”. He flat out states that the promised beneficial effects of a controlled release of water from the reservoir to compensate for the natural flood have in most instances failed to materialise (1996: 65, 67), but this is precisely the only mitigating measure that was promised to the downstream communities and districts (see EEPKO 2009: 159–162; Carr 2012: 84, 115–117).

Simultaneously, the processes engendered by the conceptualisation of the river as a resource not only sweep away the experience and practice of ‘homeland’, they also dissolve the ‘boundary’, because nothing remains that needs to be bounded, except for administrative structures with contingent populations, populations who will soon lose all control over the riverbanks they have been struggling over for so long, which – without the annual flood – will lose their value anyway. Already in 2008, the purchase and sale of riverbank plots declined among the Kara: “It is just going to be soil, not a field – why should I buy it?” said one man to another, who had approached him to finalise an agreement, which had long been discussed.

It was again James C. Scott who argued that “the most tragic episodes of state-initiated social engineering originate in a pernicious combination of four elements”, which he goes on to list. First comes “the administrative ordering of nature and society – the transformative state simplification”, supplemented by “high-modernist ideology (...) a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of self-confidence about scientific and technical progress”, both exacerbated by “an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring these high-modernist designs into being”, and finally “a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans” (Scott 1998: 4f). These elements can all be found in the attempts to push through the Gibe III Dam against all outside advice and outrage, and the belief that it is in fact possible to implement such mega-projects with total control over the eventual outcomes. As Joanna Pfaff-

²⁷ See <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601116&sid=aJEzbUEy4xTE> (access date 2013/05/16).

Czarnecka (2007: 429) has stated with appropriate bluntness in the context of dam-building in India and Nepal, “the world audience may be too optimistic regarding current potentials to realize human rights”. Gibe III was to be finished in 2012, and will likely be delayed until at least 2014,²⁸ but the writing is on the wall. Last year, the first farm sprang up in central Kara, and large tracts of savannah are being cleared of all vegetation for a second, larger installation in the south, while Kara daily life and agriculture continues, but it is confined to the riverbanks. Regarding water use, erosion, and access, the years 2014–2016 will be the touchstone for the ecological future of the valley and its Kara, Nyangatom, and Mursi inhabitants.²⁹

Conclusion: the culmination of place-making on the Lower Omo

“Undoubtedly, the world view of the state builders will prevail, and the Mursi world is destined for extinction. This would be a matter of regret for many reasons, but it is not a feeling one could reasonably expect Ethiopian nationalists to share.” (Markakis 2011: 358)

I bring my own biases into this issue. Having done research with the Kara, having literally cultivated those troubled riverbank fields with and among my friends and hosts, I was appalled by the so suddenly increasing insecurity of their livelihood and their similarly increasing danger of violence and potential displacement. The bare soil where once was living savannah in the southern part of Kara is downright frightful. This, however, is somewhat beside the point of this text. That point being: place-making projects are all built on underlying assumptions about people and their ways in the world. Even when we grant (purely for the sake of argument) that all three place-making projects discussed here were not strategically duplicitous, i.e. the Kara did not invent their history with the intention to cover up the fact that the first-comers (the Moguji) did use the fields and did cultivate sorghum since before the Kara’s arrival; that the river was suggested as a boundary out of a sincere belief that it would stop the perpetual bloodshed, and not because the administration aimed at bureaucratically handing to the Nyangatom what they could not attain by the power of their rifles; and that the dam is truly intended to uplift the millions of Ethiopians having to cope with a partial or even complete lack of electricity, and is not a giant scheme to benefit mostly officials and contractors (compare Alvares and Billorey 1987); even then, they all carry implications about the relationship between the land and the people who are only very few steps removed from the situation, literally, on the ground.

In an ironic twist, the dam project, far upriver from the lands of the Kara and Nyangatom, might succeed where successive administrations have failed, where the conquest remained incomplete, and where policemen still fear to tread: by depriving the agro-pastoralists of South Omo of their means of subsistence and eroding the basis of their identity, the dam just might successfully subdue the obstinately autonomous polities alongside the river it aims to tame, also making the people more amenable to hands-on governance and the “undisputed hegemony” (Abbink 2012: 128) that was elusive for so long. That it does so by eroding the basis of all community and agency – namely

²⁸ According to a report on [newbusinessethiopia.com](http://newbusinessethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=975%3Aethiopia-gibe-iii-hydropower-completion-likely-to-delay-&catid=38%3Agovernment&Itemid=38) at http://newbusinessethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=975%3Aethiopia-gibe-iii-hydropower-completion-likely-to-delay-&catid=38%3Agovernment&Itemid=38 (accessed 2013/05/23).

²⁹ I have no information how this affects the pastoralist practices of the Kara (and the Hamar). There have been no reports of violence from either side; an unknown number of Kara have sought employment at the farms. The Kara are not involved in the planning process and have no knowledge of future developments.

the subsistence basis – and threatening to turn both groups into “social disarticulated” people practically guarantees considerable suffering and destitution.

The other irony is that the mythic Kara also saw the river as an untapped potential, not adequately exploited by the hunting and gathering Moguji, and just as the Kara denounced the mythic Moguji as unable to utilise the river, so does the contemporary national discourse denounce the Kara as well as all other populations along the Omo River as basically deprived and incompetent to maintain their livelihood (Getaneh n.d.: 5), whereas the precise opposite is the case. Refusing outside interference, the nationalist supporters of the dam are themselves reproducing a ‘homeland’ argument by tying the use of the river waters to the Ethiopian identity itself.

I already referred to Scott’s discussion of populations who chose to live at the edge or outside of the state, by placing themselves in inaccessible and ‘unproductive’ places, and who even – as by his claims – adopted social structures which were intentionally intractable to direct or even indirect rule. The Kara were not even much affected by the early Ethiopian imperial policy of sending out *neftenya* settler-soldiers in a variant of internal colonialism (compare Scott 2009: 12), as the lands by the Omo were known for being malarial and the people too wild to submit to serfdom (Girke 2008a). The Nyangatom themselves are trying to escape from another crowded place, the triangle between Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and have now pushed up to the banks of the Omo River as far as they can (Carr 2012: 162). Now, as Gellner put it, such marginal tribalism is not a throwback, or some splinter population left behind by the development of the centre, instead it “knows what it rejects” (1969, quoted in Scott 2009: 30). This choice will no longer be offered (see Abbink 2012: 133); this option of rejection has disappeared. Today, the valley has become the site where everybody’s flight ends, as all previous place-making projects at this African frontier dwindle into insignificance, overruled and overshadowed by the mighty reservoir wall of Gibe III. In this shadow, it seems that turning agro-pastoralists into dependent workers is a central element of the Ethiopian fast track to development, and that some people might consider unskilled wage labour on sugar or cotton plantations without any legal or social securities as “more developed” than subsistence farming. Creating this sort of dependence, however, demands the acknowledgement of one’s obligations towards these populations. There is no evidence that such a sense of responsibility towards the marginalised groups on the Omo is inscribed in current policies and will be implemented in any palpable way beyond paternalistic subjection to yet further transformation schemes such as resettlement. If that turns out to be true, not only will the Kara and other “fugitive” people be proven right in their ultimately only passingly successful attempt to escape from the callous centre: Ethiopia, by focusing on high modernist imaginaries and short-sighted top-down transformation, will be destroying what should be cherished by Ethiopians themselves – the diversity of livelihood, the self-reliance of its people, the variations in culture and community, local ecological knowledge, and particularly the possibility of a mutual political culture, which affords everybody a voice and the opportunity to participate on their own terms in processes that so fundamentally transform their lives.

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