

The Kara-Nyangatom War of 2006-07: Dynamics of Escalating Violence in the Tribal Zone

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Introduction

The Kara, an agropastoralist group living on the banks of the Lower Omo, have a long history of conflict as well as an equally long history of contact and cooperation with the Nyangatom, their western neighbors. The events of what I call the “war”² of 2006-07 between these two sides therefore present only an artificial segment of an ongoing contact situation in South Omo, but indicate the dynamics of the conflict, and the interplay between traditional and state-sponsored modes of mediation. Despite the cut-out character of the time-span chosen, the paper shows how the rules of engagement have been and are continuously changing, as new actors and new resources make their impact felt.

Conflict in the Lower Omo area of southern Ethiopia has been written about before, (especially by Jon Abbink, Uri Almagor, Jan-Åke Alvarsson, Serge Tornay and David Turton), and even conflict between Kara and Nyangatom. The account presented here shifts the discussion which dwelled mostly on events of the 1970s and 1980s into the present, and puts special emphasis on ecology, oral history as political charter, and the concept of the “tribal zone”. The question of ecology is central because while the stakes of the war were precisely access to land and water, the issue was disregarded in the policies and plans NGOs and the local administration developed for the resolution of the conflict. Furthermore, the different stages of the conflict can be correlated with different phases of the natural and agricultural cycle, which sheds light on why fighting was more or less intensive at times, and why interest in peace-making emerged when it did. To look at the various histories which deal with the past relations of Kara and Nyangatom, and which provide frames of reference for the current situation, is central for understanding the language of the conflict, the symbolic gestures made, and the way in which agreements were put. In addition, the events will be discussed as an example of a “war in the tribal zone”: with this term, Ferguson and Whitehead (2000) describe areas at the fringe of empire which are shaped by the dominating power, while not being controlled by it. The war between Kara and Nyangatom might thus look like a merely local issue, but its modalities (such as underlying causes, the resources at stake, and the ways of mediation) were all transformed and complicated by sometimes barely visible influences exerted by the proximity of the Ethiopian state institutions.

I base this paper mainly on observed events and public debates which I attended, and less on de-contextualized interview data. Also, I cannot give a balanced account in the sense of letting the Nyangatom and Kara speak on equal terms; while it would have been valuable to gather data from both sides synchronously, this was impossible for me during this particular

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² The term *shauki* designates a defensive condition which can escalate into generalized *banko* (also “spear”), usually interspersed by *sulla*, small-scale attacks.

research stay, being firmly grounded in the “Kara side”. My objective is not to give an account of the “truths” of the war, or attempt to explain its hidden structure; instead, I present a focused view on the internal goings-on of a community which sees itself under attack. The wider relevance of the paper beyond the field of regional studies lies primarily in the patterns of social dynamics I describe, and in the example of the “tribal zone” still extant in South Omo.

Kara and Nyangatom – The Need for Enemies?

The relationship between the Kara and the Nyangatom is complex, as can be expected between such close neighbors, and impossible to do full justice to here. Accordingly, I will merely highlight a few items, historical and economic relations which merit special attention as they contribute to the salient context of the events of 2006-07.

These relations are not something which connects separate ethnic entities, not something groups “have” or “don’t have”, which is external to them: they are, in so many ways, what defines the groups. The Kara are only Kara vis-à-vis their neighbors, Nyangatom, Moguji, and Hamar³. So even though the external affairs of the Kara have been overshadowed by the growing power of the Nyangatom “at the fringe of the state” (Tornay 1993), the discussion is never only about “inclusion and exclusion” – the Nyangatom matter to the Kara, not only as a threatening Other, but also as a source of cherished cultural elements, as a challenge, as a rewarding engagement. The most visible signs of this are Nyangatom terms which are used in Kara for utensils, for classifying livestock, in song, in naming and other domains. I do not see this as a result of Nyangatom “cultural imperialism” following Kara defeats in the 1970s (Alvarsson⁴ 1989: 33), since the tenor in which the Nyangatom terms are used resonates with nostalgia and fascination. Old men might switch in mid-conversation from speaking Kara to speaking Nyangatom, demonstrating a pleasure of mastery and a fondness of the more guttural, throaty sounds.

It is also important to keep in mind that group relations in the Lower Omo are often at odds with relations between individuals, who cultivate friendships across boundaries irrespective of the larger polities. Bailey’s statement that “[a]nimosity is a feature of the political person, the one engaged in a contest for power, not of the whole person” (Bailey 1998: xi) rings true here; public talk about “the Nyangatom” is very different from behavior towards individual Nyangatom. Such partners, also called “bondfriends”, through their mutual trust and support display the autonomy of the individual as opposed to the coercive dynamics of the group (see Girke 2008), and in an interesting reverse movement are accorded respect for taking such a stand from the very groups they spite. Through such friendships, the Nyangatom have been providers of much sought-after goods such as beads and metal-work, which even today the Kara firmly associate with their western neighbors. So while the Kara fight with the Nyangatom, they see them simultaneously as much more than just “enemies”. Oral history from Kara provides some motifs which illustrate the relations between the two groups.

³ As Kara would be wont to use it, “Hamar” here stands for all “mountain people” (*gemerr-ed*), and in general conversation the distinction between Hamar, Banna (also *atula*) and Bashada (also *banno*) is often glossed over.

⁴ Even though he spent little time on research on-site, Jan-Åke Alvarsson’s report on the conflicts of South Omo (1989) provides a broad summary of the anthropological discussion, detailed accounts of actual goings-on in the 1980s and before, as well as some insightful commentary.

A Mythical Charter

The Kara report in a story as if found in Kopytoff (1986: 49, 55) how they came to be the dominating power in the Lower Omo. However, two apocalyptic catastrophes, the *tobolo* (a deluge) and the *gind'o* (sleeping sickness), probably towards the end of the 19th century, which wiped out all but a few adults according to oral history, severed the Kara from their earlier past, accounts of which are fragmentary today. As eminent middle-men of the river valley, they were rich and powerful; the stories about their wealth and glory are corroborated by accounts from among the Kara's neighbors (Strecker 1976; Alvarsson 1989: 31, 43, 101; Sobania 2000) as well as by the early explorers like Böttego. What might come as a surprise is the narrative about how they fought the Turkana in the Kibbish area, and finally chased them away. At this time, so the Kara, the Nyangatom were few and poor, and huddled pathetically in a nearby forest. The victorious Kara in their magnanimity called them forth to Kibbish (also *Naqwa*), rubbed fire sticks together, and gave the burning kindling to the Nyangatom, telling them that this was to be their land from now on.

Tornay (1979: 98) tells a more sober story of how the Nyangatom “within living memory” expelled the Turkana from Kibbish. But history is not necessarily about what was, but about how people converse about it. Tornay's suggestion that the peoples of the Lower Omo “have no official historians and no history books. They are not, in other words, totally bound by their past” (1979: 113) thus requires qualification – there are always histories being told which precisely are attempts to rhetorically bind people to a certain charter⁵. It pays to bear in mind that anthropologists, in recording situated, implicated accounts of what has been, now join those voices and become part of ongoing conversations.

The on-stage Kara history maintains that they lost their numerous cattle through some disaster⁶; there are vivid stories of how they fought amongst themselves, and only in this way could be brought low.⁷ In backstage situations, younger Kara confided to me that they had doubts themselves about many specific stories and items of lore.

In conversations about the relations with the Nyangatom, I often encountered an attitude of derision and condescension. “They are our *kaissi*, our slaves”, was said with conviction, and I assumed this to refer to the ancient time of Kara supremacy. Such statements stand in stark contrast to Alvarsson's claim that the Nyangatom had achieved “some type of recognized influence over the Kara” (Alvarsson 1989: 71) after destroying the Kara village of Kundamma⁸

⁵ Here, Tornay casually implies a gap between “them” and “us”. I merely want to point out that the divergence of the accounts from both sides is considerable, even though people on both sides will be aware of their Other's ideology. In the space provided, I cannot do full justice to the complex question of the voices in oral histories.

⁶ Today, there are few Kara who again have sizeable herds of cattle; others do not even own a significant number of small stock. A visitor to Kara might be misled by the massive number of cattle seen grazing between the foothills and the river; these will as a rule belong to Hamar herders who drive them into the lowlands for grazing and water. While these “mountain people” and the Kara have a generally cordial relationship, recently Kara have become more and more irritated by the ever-growing herds which they blame for their country turning into a desert, as well as by the increasing opportunistic thefts by herders. There is a connection of this recent disgruntlement with the war over the Omo river; the Kara now feel hemmed in even by their friends, up to the point that they insinuate that the Hamar would not mind taking over their country for good.

⁷ It is fitting that neither the Ethiopian conquest nor the Italian occupation occasioned particular stories of trauma and terror. The first apparently bypassed Kara, and the few stories of the second which survive tell of running battles and an exile of several seasons in a forest up north, but nothing like the *banda* horror familiar from other parts of southern Ethiopia (e.g., Strecker 1976: 20).

⁸ As so often in South Omo studies, the names of places and even ethnonyms appear in wide array of variation in various publications. Tornay and Alvarsson use “Kurdam”, which seems to me to be the Nyangatom version. Alvarsson (1989: 26) provides a decent overview over alternative ethnic designations which is, however, far from

in 1973 and killing over a hundred people. Trying to reconcile this disjunction, I found that this “serfdom” of the Nyangatom was not an ancestral myth, but referred to the years directly preceding the massacre at Kundamma, when the “Omo Nyangatom” (who supposedly lack cattle) had been allowed by the Kara to settle on the western banks of the Omo, cultivate some fields the Kara were not needing, and in return provided services such as scaring away birds for their hosts (see Tornay 1979: 105; Alvarsson 1989: 50). Thus oral history is made: the situation escalated after thefts and similar trouble, and the Kara (along with the Hamar) proceeded to kill between 80 and 100 Omo Nyangatom in order to get rid of the troublesome neighbors. Even though they in turn suffered the devastating counterattack on Kundamma, the serfdom of the Nyangatom *kaissi* is well-remembered and often referred to: “We killed them, just like that” – the fact that even more Kara were killed in return is completely sidelined. Kara self-esteem and “group face” was restored when they subsequently massacred the inhabitants of two villages of the Nyangatom Ngaric section. Alvarsson (1989: 71), who gathered his data in Nyangatom mostly, assumes that this was more a gesture from powerlessness than a true show of strength: the villages affected were peripheral to the Nyangatom, the Ngaric merely the descendants of the Omo Murle (see Tornay 1978), absorbed in former times. In contrast, the destruction of Kundamma hit a Kara stronghold, fundamentally challenging their position on the Lower Omo.

So despite this defeat, the way the Kara present themselves in their charter cannot be disregarded as mere grandstanding and boasting which they performed for an outsider in order to aggrandize themselves – many young Kara are raised on these precise stories, and are nurtured by these very sentiments. The rhetoric is directed inward as much as outward.

Recent Developments in the Tribal Zone

The Karas’ routine in dealing with the steady stream of tourists and their subsequent accumulation of capital, the rise of some young Kara in the district (*woreda*) administration and in the rank and file of NGOs, the expanding *mahaber* trade associations, the young Kara boys who are being trained as athletes in Addis Ababa, even the two Kara who made a career in the Ethiopian armed forces, all these examples bear witness to how the region has been changing, and how the local people have adapted and appropriated offered innovations.

Despite these considerable transformations in terms of education, mobility, participation, monetarisation etc. since the 1970s (which serve as a period of comparison for the discussion at hand), state institutions are still discussed as external agents, even where Kara have achieved positions within them. Struggles over implementation of policies and regulations (such as the ban on hunting) are common, compliance with them is superficial and only as far-reaching as necessary. So while within the borders of the Ethiopian state, the Lower Omo lies in the tribal zone as postulated by Ferguson and Whitehead (2000).

In public debate as well as in private talk, Kara often bemoan their subordinate position within the state structures - “we have become the highlander’s wife” is used not to indicate cooperation and endearment, but a sense of powerlessness and frustration (see Naty 1992: 258). They are aware of the gradient of wealth, infrastructure and power, and despite their abilities to appropriate innovations on their terms, they are aware about their location at the outmost periphery (see also Turton 2002).

Their resilience and cleverness (*pachalmamo*, a common Kara trope) was challenged in 2006 at an unprecedented scale through a specific development brought about by state

exhaustive, especially if one figures in sections of groups which might at times act quite independently.

interference⁹: the *Kuraz Woreda*, formerly shared by Nyangatom and Dassanetch was dissolved, and the establishment of a separate *woreda* for the Nyangatom was set into motion. The justifications I gathered for this administrative measure ranged from “the Nyangatom are so many now, they need it” over “the two are always squabbling, we have to separate them” to “the government needs the support of the Nyangatom because of border issues with Sudan” (cf. Matsuda 2002; Vaughan 2006: 184ff); all of these are equally plausible in the context of Ethiopian ethnic federalism. The establishment of the new *woreda* impacted the Kara through the demarcation process, as the zonal government was bent on conveniently taking the river Omo as the boundary. As an administrator told me: “We have to look where the people live now. West of the Omo, are there any Kara living there?” This argument conveniently leaves out even the recent past – the last permanent Kara settlements on the western bank were abandoned (only around 15 years ago) precisely due to the constant threat from the Nyangatom, who with their superior armament and numbers threatened to overwhelm the Kara. In this way, the Nyangatom expansion and aggression, and the resulting pattern of residence which is still felt as anomalous, was to be retroactively legitimized by the central administration. This proposition was unacceptable to the Kara, who never felt that they had given up the areas in the west (and especially their fields on the western bank) for good. When these news made the round in Kara in April and May, and after the administrator (a Nyangatom himself) had given me oral confirmation of the plans in early June, the Kara were too stunned to even be upset: “If they really do this, there will never be peace”, a young man told me matter-of-factly.

The experience of state intervention aggravating conflicts between the local groups is not a new one: “The Ethiopian conquest of the Lower Omo area (1898-1903) both exacerbated and confused inter-tribal rivalries” (Tornay 1979: 112). Ferguson and Whitehead, in their comprehensive treatment of the “edge of empire”, describe the tribal zone as an area which is transformed by the “intrusive state system” (2000: xii) without said system gaining a monopoly on force. Taking care not to romantically glorify pre-colonial times, they show the dangerous fallacies in assuming that conflict between indigenous groups is due to internal reasons – the classical barbarians needed to be fierce precisely because of their contact with an overwhelmingly strong empire (2000: 11-16). With the implementation of the policy of ethnic federalism, which imposed “top-down” a vision of identity and aligned administration along externally determined “ethnic lines” (cf. Vaughan 2006: 184), group boundaries are becoming enhanced and rigid in the struggle for resources. The traditional ways of negotiating conflict are superseded by much more anomic, unregulated permanent states of crisis.

So it is precisely because “Ethiopian Government administration ... has always been weak in these southwestern lowlands” (Fukui/Turton 1979: 2; cf. Strecker 1976: 30) that the conflicts of the late 20th century have often escalated.

Fighting over and across the Omo, 2006-07

The Omo River has been described as a “life line” for the region (Alvarsson 1989: 80), and this is equally true for the Kara, the Mursi, the Nyangatom, the Dassanetch, the Moguji and Kwegu. With the seasonal fluctuation of the river levels according to rainfall in the higher catchment areas in central Ethiopia, both the river banks and the occasionally inundated flats further inland

⁹ I choose this loaded term because the state apparatus was mobilized by individuals who were recognized as biased stakeholders, much rather than impartial arbitrators.

provide fertile farming grounds. Beyond the importance of the river for agriculture¹⁰, it provides more potential for conflict as the Omo is the only reliable source for watering the herds. In the case of Kara, these are mostly merely domestic herds of small stock. The Nyangatom, though, while no pastoralists in the narrowest sense of the word¹¹, are forced to bring their cattle herds to the Omo river regularly, as they have been cut off from other pastures through the cordoning off of the Ilemi triangle and constant, ongoing fights with the Turkana, and as the Kibbish river waterholes are dangerous and unreliable.

Thus, control of their section of the Omo is a major factor in the Kara presumptions of supremacy and their stories of past grandeur. Since in an average year, five months of work can provide all the staple food necessary to survive the rest of the year, they occupy an extraordinary ecological niche. Kara mythology tells of how they, arriving at the riverbanks, tricked the innocent and naïve Moguji, the “true autochthones” according to legend, into signing away all rights to the land; and up till today, the lands on both banks of the Omo are unambiguously demarcated and clearly assigned to particular owners, be they Kara, Bogudo or Gomba¹². The distribution of these fields is far from even; some individuals hardly have any claim to any section of the riverbank, while others hold so much that they regularly invite other Kara to farm sections of their fields. In good years, it has been common to also allow Hamar or Nyangatom access to fields.

The Timeline

Any attempt to segment the war of 2006-07 as a separable chain of events is fallacious. A look at a timeline of attacks, negotiations, rumors, and meetings still yields some insights into connections and the dynamics of violence.

The relation between Kara and Nyangatom had been on an upswing recently, and both groups had farmed the western banks of the Omo together during the agricultural season which began around September 2005. This did not last long: a young Kara man, whose wife had been killed by Nyangatom in 2003, decided that he needed to get personal revenge. Already after she had been shot by a sniper from across the river, he had traveled upstream with some friends and fired indiscriminately at a village near Kopirye (also *Kopriye*). Even though seven people died, these killings were not satisfactory, as he said. To count as a true killer in Kara, one either has to touch the body of the victim, or bring back any of their belongings: “Gonde dazadei”, it had not really tasted well, he explained to me. During the intervening years, some elder Kara had

¹⁰ Other activities in securing livelihoods are also dependent on the Omo – opportunistic hunting in the riverine forest, apiculture, fishing. While some of these are ideologically tainted, and some ritual prohibitions still obtain (but see Strecker 1976, Alvarsson 1989: 31), they all provide important contributions to nutrition and social satisfaction for the surrounding groups.

¹¹ According to strict definitions, none of the groups in South Omo is pastoralist, as the numbers of livestock per capita and the percentages of dairy products to general nutrition are far too low. Almagor claims that “[t]hrough agriculture plays an important role in their lives, they should be viewed as they view themselves, as pastoralists” (1979: 121; see Turton 2002: 150 on self-perceptions of Mursi and Kwegu). While this helps us to understand symbolism, metaphors and discourse much better, it detracts from our understanding of the current land issues. The discussion gets interesting again when he turns towards the Dassanetch-Amhara relations, their views on agriculture vis-à-vis herding, and issues of taxation (2002: 267 fn.17; Strecker 1976: 49 on the Hamar case).

¹² The Gomba, like the Bogudo, are submerged remnants of earlier groups which have been absorbed by the Kara after *gind’o* and *tobolo*, and no longer exist as politically autonomous entities. All these groups, while nominally Kara, have their own sets of rules regarding ritual matters; it is remarkable, though, that despite the political weakness especially of the Bogudo, none of these two land-owning group has ever been stripped of its holdings. Moguji, however, even around their settlement of Kuchurr, ever since their mythical surrender of the riverbanks to the late-coming Kara (cf. Kopytoff 50, 55), have no tenure of farming lands.

persistently hassled him by insinuating that his revenge was still incomplete. Despite the fact that others had tried to calm him down and had asked him not to collect on his “debt” (the Kara term *bazza* translates quite literally, with all the connotations of payback and outstanding dues), he decided at the worst possible time, namely, just before harvest, to finally put to rest all doubt. He crossed the river, killed two Nyangatom herding boys (of the *sookhol* section¹³), and returned home, bearing their bloody clothes as proof.

This happened some weeks before I reached the Lower Omo in March; I have been unable to ascertain an exact date. Both groups reacted in a predictable way: the Kara immediately returned to the eastern side of the river, and the Nyangatom evacuated the riverbank as well, so that the sorghum, in part already harvested and ready for threshing, was left lying in the fields. There were some tentative negotiations between individual Kara and their personal Nyangatom friends, who had farmed together, on whether the Kara might be allowed to cross and collect some of the grain, but apparently, these all petered out, and the sorghum was eventually recovered by the Nyangatom. The Kara, accordingly, had to make do with the grains they could harvest on the eastern banks. For a while, a tense silence hung over the Omo valley. In April, this silence was broken. I somewhat arbitrarily divide the subsequent time into three segments according to the respective tenor of the conflict. I was present at several of the events listed here, and occasionally facilitated transport.

April - June: Hot war, cold war

On April 7, a shot is fired from the Nyangatom side near one of the hamlets of southern Kara.

On April 12, four Kara snipers ambush a group of Nyangatom who approach the Omo river from the south and, shooting across the river, kill or wound four.

A little later, some Kara women who stealthily creep down the river bank at night to fetch water come under fire after the sloshing water inside a jerry-can alerts watchers in the dark. They scatter and escape. Some Kara youths return shots and injure one Nyangatom.

On the night of May 1, the Kara ritual leaders lay out protective arcs of selected plants across a few symbolic paths, shielding the country from invasion.

On May 1, while the Kara are celebrating a wedding in the central village Dus, shots are heard from the waterline, as Nyangatom fire at Hamar cattle drinking from the river. The government-appointed leader of the *Dus-kebele* is nearly hit, several heads of cattle are lost. The entire male population of Dus rushes to the riverine forest at the Kalime fields, and shots are traded back and forth for the better part of an hour. Apparently, there are no casualties on either side. The *kebele*-leader drives to the safari camp Murule at Naumur and transmits the news to the *woreda* officials by radio.

On May 2, a car arrives from the *woreda*, carrying the head of police and some minor officials, in which the Kara protest against being left alone in this fight. They are admonished to remain calm and not act in revenge.

On May 6, there is a night-time war dance in Kara, through which the young people demand to be given permission to fight a more proactive war. The war dance leads to the donation of eight goats by various elders, which are to be slaughtered at a proper *osh*, a war council.

On May 8, the *osh* is held at Dus. Representatives from the different parts of Kara country participate, as well as numerous Hamar who – after the incident with the cattle – display

¹³ Tornay gives the name of this section as “Ngisakol” (1979: 100). The Kara pronunciation differs from this transcription. Over the last years, the name *sookhol* has been used to metonymically evoke all negative aspects ascribed to the Nyangatom in Kara.

considerable eagerness to take revenge. The spokesmen of the Kara assent to the demands and encourage the young warriors to go out and kill.

On May 14, a Kara lying in ambush shoots a solitary Nyangatom through the chest who descends the riverbank on the other side; he is assumed to be a scout, doing reconnaissance for a later attack. Weeks later the information arrives that the bullet has pierced a lung.

On May 19, around 40 young Kara assemble and move south, planning to cross the Omo river and to exterminate a herding camp of the Nyangatom. This band is beset by bad omens, and while they are waiting for a more favorable divination, a respected elder is sent from Dus to catch up with them and eventually convinces their leaders to desist. Despite grumblings of the young fighters, the group, robbed of its heads, disperses.

On June 7, a group of Kara from the southernmost village waylays a truck bound for Nyangatom territory, turn it back towards Kara and unload 100 sacks of coffee husks. The owner, a Nyangatom trader, is abandoned at the Murule safari camp. He later claims to have had a large amount of cash stolen as well.

Late June - Early October: Under the shade tree

On June 26, police arrive in Kara in order to transport some Kara negotiators to a peace meeting in Omorate (Dassanetch territory). They also discuss the return of the coffee, but cave in to the Kara refusal, thus acknowledging the claim that the coffee had been taken as restitution for the loss of the sorghum harvest earlier this year.

After a preliminary debate among numerous elders under a big shade tree in Dus on June 27, the Kara and Nyangatom emissaries meet at Omorate on June 29 and 30. Mutual provocations and resentment dominate the event.

On July 8, a second round of meetings begins in Turmi (Hamar territory), which turns out somewhat more conciliatory. There, it is agreed that the required ritual for the establishment of peace has to be held either at Dus or at Kibbish, the center of Nyangatom land (cf. Abbink 2000). In the subsequent weeks, the Kara wait for news and for a date to be fixed; eventually, some elders returning from Turmi inform the community that a date has been set. The long period of waiting is fraught with rumors and informal debates about the projected course of events.

On August 31, the long-expected cars arrive, after transportation had been funded by the Selam-C project of the Pact Ethiopia NGO. In an arduous journey, the negotiators travel to Kibbish, where talks are held on September 1. The ritual sealing the peace is performed on September 2. One focal point of the meeting was the announcement by government representatives to from now on collect 80 heads of cattle and 40 heads of small stock as compensation for any homicide. Around the middle of September, several Nyangatom call for their Kara friends, asking permission to farm on the western bank. The Kara respond reluctantly and ultimately decline.

On October 1, two Nyangatom visit their Kara bond-friend at the irrigation site of Kundamma, drink beer with their host and bring a few bullets to trade away.

On October 2, a delegation from the (Ngu-)Kumama section of the Nyangatom reaches the south of Kara, where they are amiably hosted. The elders from both sides hold a joint *osh*, and affirm future cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

October – January: Peace in our time?

On October 6, word spreads in Kara that the Nyangatom have demanded blanket assent by the Kara to their demands to farm the western bank of the river. Without permission being given, Nyangatom arrive at the river in numbers, establish themselves and begin clearing the land.

On November 18, Kara fire two bullets into the air at Kundamma after guns were exchanged; shortly afterwards, Nyangatom demand satisfaction since supposedly the bullets had injured some cattle. This is quickly recognized as a insubstantial provocation.

In the following weeks, many Kara express annoyance upon seeing their fields being occupied by the Nyangatom. This is exacerbated as the Kara are firmly warned by some Nyangatom to no longer cross the river to collect salty soil and salt-bearing bushes from the Lokulan area across from Kundamma.

Around December 24, a school teacher assigned to Dus decides that the increasing tensions are bound to lead to more fighting, and organize a hasty meeting at Kundamma, which then takes place on December 27 and 28. Grievances are voiced on both sides, and despite some further provocations, mutual assurances of peace are finally issued. The Nyangatom invite some Kara to cross the river the next day and together they feast on a sacrificed oxen.

In the middle of January, a young Kara administrative clerk who had come to visit, fires some shots as a gesture of mourning when entering his father's brother's camp on the riverbank. Within minutes, armed men come rushing from the nearby village, ready to defend their land, thinking the shots signals of an attack.

This summary indicates not only the various actors and their plans, but also the varying degrees of intensity which characterized the period.

Ecological Backdrop

It is a simple matter and highly insightful to correlate the timing of the stages outlined above and especially the timing of the peace conferences with the ecological and agricultural cycle dictated by the rise and the fall of the Omo waters. "Hami Karassa wakitum", the fields are the cattle of the Kara – Kara livelihood, as well as that of all other groups living on the Omo, depends on riverbank cultivation for secure subsistence (see Matsuda 1996). Briefly, the Omo river rises from around January, were it is at its lowest, in irregular intervals up until around August, when it can even spill over the banks, and pools can be found surprisingly far inland. This period from February to August is the time of plenty, the time after the harvest. People leave their small hamlets close to their farms, and slowly return to the larger villages. Major rituals such as weddings are held, there is time for leisure and maintenance, travel, invitations, and trade. The youths, dispersed for a long time due to the hard work in the field, celebrate their reunion in dancing and playing – the "social rhythms based on oecological [sic] changes" described by Evans-Pritchard (1939: 192) are clearly in evidence here.

As the river level starts receding, carefully observed and untiringly discussed every morning by the elders sitting in the sunrise on a cliff, one by one families start to head off to the sections of the river they have decided to farm this year. The small hamlets are getting repopulated, and as soon as the inundated flats and steep banks are becoming accessible, slash and burn cultivation begins. As the grain ripens, often as not the last year's stores are slowly used up, and the sweet sorghum cane and the opportunistically harvested maize provided welcome food especially for the children.

Looking at the suggested stage model of the war, a correlation becomes apparent: The time after harvest, the fat, leisurely lived time, was when tempers were most heated, when a raid was planned and nearly executed, when shots were fired, and many men were willing to fight. The second stage "under the shade tree" corresponds to the end of this time of plenty, and marks the onset of the return to the fields. Finally, the last stage, of an uneasy, worried peace, was a period where the boon of harvest was taking shape but could still be spoilt; Kara and Nyangatom

saw each other every day across the river, and the final, consolidating peace conference in Kundamma took place mere weeks before harvest. This was the time when the river was so low in places that it might even be crossed on foot by an enterprising posse; as the Kara and Nyangatom were depleting their stores, both desired an additional assurance of truce for the last few days necessary to gather up the grain, and to abandon the exposed fields and return into the more easily defensible villages. This is no abstract pattern gleaned through anthropological analysis; in Kara the discussion of river levels, warfare and farming often went together as people are highly aware of the connections. Thus, the thrust of the argument lies not in the simple “discovery” of this correlation, but in its consequences.

While plausible in the example of 2006-07, the model is not strong enough to predict individual behavior – as it had not been in early 2006, when the Kara widower crossed the river at the most inopportune time possible and killed his fill. Analysis of the communal resolution of the conflict, however, needs to take these ecological aspects into account (see also Tornay 1979: 97). In some way, the conflict of 2006-07 supports the hypothesis postulated by Alvarsson (1989): “Starvation and peace or food and war?” is the question he dares to ask, and using data from the 1970s and 1980s, he makes a strong argument that aggression between the groups of the Lower Omo was in fact highest when there was precisely no food insecurity. This is a direct challenge to simple economic-ecological models which are based on the assumption that scarcity provokes conflict (1989: 16f, 73f), and he suggests that “cultural motives” for warfare such as pride (in times of plenty) are salient factors in the escalation and prolongation of conflicts, whereas hunger can drive warring groups to the shade tree visibly quicker (1989: 107). His numbers reflect a perspective over several years, indicating that in the fattest years violence peaked, whereas the data from 2006-07 encourages the application of the same hypothesis over the different stages of a single year.

Causes and Triggers Considered

The issue of the individual who triggered the war was not an issue for the Kara themselves; even though people were ready to condemn him for his trespass, resignation won the day - “you cannot fix a broken clay pot” was an oft-repeated phrase. Accordingly, there were no official sanctions on the killer, even if some of his close friends expressed their displeasure by not attending the ceremony in which he was decorated with a killer’s name. But as push came to shove, other members of the political body showed commitment to the situation he had caused as if they themselves had been responsible, just as the Nyangatom would hold any Kara liable for the trespass of one individual¹⁴. The demands by the police for surrendering him were thus openly scorned – ever since a Kara who was handed over to the police in the 1990s for murder mysteriously disappeared from his arrest cell (in Nyangatom territory, no less), there has been little faith in the legal system, and the state is not reliably enforcing its rules at this point. In this sense, the Kara upheld the individual’s right to make his own decisions, even against the group’s obvious interests, and at considerable opportunity costs. But while Kara and Nyangatom accept the individual’s action as in some way binding for the group, their communities are hardly able to constrain such actions to accord with the group’s will. So even with war triggered by an individual, peace can only be re-established communally, and not through police action, be it prison sentences or blood money.

¹⁴ For a well-phrased analogy from another part of the world, see Rafael (1967: 311). However, despite the seeming automatism in the rules of engagement, over the year it became apparent that there were appreciable differences between sections both on the Kara side and the Nyangatom side in how firmly they committed to fighting the war.

The assumption on the side of the NGO representatives who facilitated the peace meeting at Kibbish was that the regional conflicts derive solely from revenge killings (and cattle raids), and that to implement the policy of blood money would be a strong discouragement to hot-headed pastoralist warrior youths. To work from this assumption means turning a blind eye to issues of demographics and ecology, and blaming only the savage nature of the *shankilla*, the “blacks” of southern Ethiopia, for any conflict.

Additionally, the proclamation of this policy indicates a considerable lack of historical awareness of its proponents. The peoples of the Lower Omo have been familiar with the concept of livestock fines for homicide for a long time, and had already learned that it was neither reliably enforced, nor conducive to peace, as already Tornay reported: “In August [1972] the Ethiopian police drove 86 skinny cattle to Kibbish as compensation from the Dassanetch [for an earlier killing], a response which was, of course, received ironically by the Nyangatom.” (1979: 104) This shows not only that the concept of a blood price was no revolutionary innovation for South Omo, but also that people have learned not to rely on the administration’s capabilities (or willingness) to actually enforce the rule to any appreciable degree. During the Kibbish meeting, a Kara spokesman also took such an ironical stance as he demanded that the originally suggested 80 heads of cattle were not enough, and that 40 heads of small stock should be added on top – the irony being that one would be hard pressed to collect 80 heads of cattle from all of Kara in total already. The Nyangatom and Kara present shared the joke, while the NGO delegation saw it as a positive reception of their policy. So while indeed the fighting of 2006 was triggered by a “revenge killing”, the ecological and demographical pressures along the Omo mean that whatever the sanction on killing, violent friction will likely keep occurring until the pressure is relieved in some way – which was not acknowledged by the facilitators of the Kibbish meeting. Was the peace ritually sealed in Kibbish, then, a “stranger’s peace” (Fukui/Turton 1979: 12), which was bound not to last long? Government representatives as well as NGO workers did not believe so – in fact, they argued that they had merely facilitated the intentions the local people had held themselves, working “bottom up”. They failed to take into approach that while true ritual leaders of Kara and Nyangatom had gone through the correct motions, the events never lost aspects of charade. When NGOs are staffed with highland Ethiopians who often have no liking neither for their posting nor for their “client” populations, and when they are accompanied by government officials, it is inevitable that both Kara and Nyangatom will prudently do what is expected of them. Nobody wants the blame for doubting the peace be shifted on their shoulders – while government control lacks finesse, it can be heavy-handed. In the end, the Kara had to be satisfied to go home from Kibbish with the hope that they could at least start cultivation before new fighting would occur.

“It is too early to make peace now. It has not hurt enough yet, neither us nor the Nyangatom. Let it go on, let some more people die, so that everybody feels the pain. If we make peace then, it can last.”

(Kara man of the Nyiramaley age-set)

Outlook

As I have indicated above, the parameters of conflict over and across the Omo river have changed from the time when Tornay and Almagor were discussing issues of warfare and expansion. Even if in 1979 Fukui and Turton were able to state that “territorial expansion is not the expressed motive of such wars”, but merely their consequence (1979: 10), such attitudes have decisively shifted today. Also Tornay’s finding that “[t]erritorial conquest, in fact, is a characteristic of sedentary peoples... For nomads or semi-nomads, gaining access to a place is more important than occupying it” (1979: 115) has to be reconciled with the reality on the ground: if for example the Nyangatom are becoming more interested in settling on the Omo (instead of merely accessing it seasonally for watering and pasture) by displacing other populations, they will have to be thought of as a sedentarizing population. The events of 2006-07 suggest that while Tornay talked about the “Omo Nyangatom” as a small group of “poor” folk (1979: 98, 105), today a much larger section of the Nyangatom is in need of farming land. It is no longer the case that “[a]lthough the prize of war is access to localized resources, this seems to be ‘forgotten’ by the antagonists” (1979: 114); it is the administration and NGOs who are forgetting it.

A visible sign of the changing times, and during 2006-07 (and likely well into the future) the most problematic stimulant to conflict, was the attempt to formally demarcate the boundaries between Nyangatom and Kara under the aegis of the regional government and the newly-established *woreda*. I do not have the data to allow me to fully analyze the events around the establishment of the new Nyangatom *woreda*; most relevant, though, seems the change in demographics. While the Kara have sustained their population, the Nyangatom numbers are staggering. In 1979, Tornay speaks of about 5000 individuals, and sees them in crisis, as the constant state of war had cost them “400 to 500 people every five years” (1979: 111). But then, texts from the 1990s put their number at around 13,000 (Tornay 1993: 152), and I was told by Nyangatom officials that in a recent census they had surpassed 33,000. This number might be skewed as there is often an advantage to be found in terms of fund allotment and NGO help if one can claim a larger population. But rumors have it that many of today’s Nyangatom were or still are Sudanese Toposa¹⁵. If this is the case, the Nyangatom demographics are readily explained, as well as the awesome pressure they exert on all their neighbors.

What about the balance evoked in Turton’s and Tornay’s text now? “Wotichip amidi!” was a recurring statement in Kara: “We are squeezed in!” Nearly twenty years ago, Alvarsson perceptively pointed out the basic characteristic of the “tribal zone” was in place - that while there had been little “direct” transformation of the area through the Ethiopian state, conflicts were already aggravated through the “lack of territory for expansion” (1989: 85), which became felt precisely in times of population and herd-size growth (see Almagor 1979: 128 for the Dassanetch perspective).

This heightened sense of crowding, to use a behaviorist metaphor, is manifested in the dissolution of buffer zones which Kara and Nyangatom patterns of cultivation and herding had let emerge. That the “encroachment” by the Nyangatom on the Kara’s territory (Tornay 1979: 114) received official sanction subsequent to the establishment of the new *woreda* is an indication that there was no appreciation of the benefits both groups received from not having a boundary guaranteed by the armed forces of the state apparatus. The definition of the Omo River as the boundary has pushed the Kara literally with their backs against the wall. As a pernicious side-effect, this policy decision might have rendered mediation and negotiation obsolete,

¹⁵ Toposa and Nyangatom have largely amiable relations and are considered perpetual allies (Tornay 2001: 40); both belong to the group of “central Paraniotes” (2001: 9), and are linguistically and culturally similar.

depriving the Kara spokesmen of their capacity to influence the future of their people substantially: the coming years will show whether Nyangatom, backed by the zonal government, will even bother to communicate, or whether they will simply insist in their demands, uncompromising and proud (cf. Turton 2003 for the Aari-Mursi example, and Abbink 2000 for a caustic analysis of the Suri-Dizi case).

Instead of equitable agreements, places were thus simply appropriated, and even unwitting dunces were used in order to cement a claim: the “Nyangatom” episode of the BBC show “Tribe” (screened in 2005) showed the Nyangatom spokesman Eyjem on the top of the hill Lokulan. He visualized the predicaments of his people. Pointing in all directions, Eyjem declared that everywhere there were enemies, from the Mursi over the Kara to the Dassanetch (with the lone exception of the Toposa in the west). To do this standing on Lokulan (an extremely photogenic location) is a powerful move, considering that even for Tornay (1979: 103), the area around the hot springs of the hill Lokulan was clearly Kara territory. But with the permanent Kara settlements on the western bank terminated, the issue became open to competing definitions of the situation. In 2006, access to Lokulan, with its salt deposits and the salty herbs growing around its base, was a highly divisive issue of the entire peace process, especially during stage three (as discussed above). The irony of the situation, that the BBC team was actually exploited by the Nyangatom who thus managed to naturalize their claim to the area in front of millions of viewers, was lost on the BBC and its adventuring show host Bruce Parry¹⁶.

Alvarsson starts his report on the “Aspects of Armed Conflict in South Omo” with a surprised remark: traditional conflicts between “small ethno-linguistic groups, interrupted decades ago by a Pax Britannica or other similar phenomena in the surrounding areas, [have] persisted in the Lower Omo” (1989: 13). He ends it by stating that in case the conclusions of Turton on the nature of the “uncentralized political system”, which is based on mutual respect depending on displays of autonomy, group agency and aggression are correct, end to bloodshed can only be attained by precisely such an outsider’s peace, enforced through violence and occupation (1989: 87, 104). This he terms the road to “cultural extinction” and “the end of these people as ‘free pastoralists’” (1989: 107); and while he falls prey to the romantic stereotype, his statement drives home the point that in the “tribal zone” all interventions are fraught with danger.

South Omo conflict studies present a severe challenge to development discourse and practice, as well as to assumptions of casual modernization, and the biased or underinformed measures of integrating these marginal areas into the Ethiopian state. The data from the 20th century shows that while scarcity and hunger have aggravated some situations, it was in times of plenty that groups acted out their expansionist tendencies most harshly – indeed, already Alvarsson states that the mere fact that white people (the missionaries from the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission/SPCM) had settled near Kibbish, and had begun to support the local population on a permanent basis, had helped trigger feelings of superiority among the Nyangatom (1989: 101).

Further developments are difficult to predict. One remedy to the ongoing warfare was suggested by the provincial administration: that on the western bank of the Omo a joint *kebele*, managed by Kara and Nyangatom, should be established. By being common stakeholders, it was argued, this could become the germ of a new era of cooperation and peace¹⁷. But then, how to persuade the Kara that it would be safe for them to settle among Nyangatom, some of whom could be Toposa from the Sudan, who would not even see neighbors in the Kara, and would not

¹⁶ See *Anthropology Today* 21 (2), 22 (2-3) for discussions of this series.

¹⁷ Tornay makes a similar suggestion in pointing out some cultivable areas which the Nyangatom could clear jointly with Hamar or Kara (1993: 153); however, no such project, as is wont, is likely to last when the first shot is fired.

have individual friends among them? How to assure them that once a quarrel broke out, they would not be massacred before they had a chance to reach the other side of the river? As seen in the discussion of blood money, simple solutions are bound to fail.

Post Scriptum

On March 17, 2007, a month after I had left my field site, Kornan Naqwa from Kara was shot dead from ambush by a Nyangatom, while drinking coffee in the homestead of a friend on the western bank of the Omo River.

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