

From: Contemporary Perspectives  
on African Moral Economy  
Dar es Salaam Univ. Press  
2008

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## CHAPTER 11

# The Economy of Affection Unites the Region: Bond-partnership in the Lower Omo Valley, Southwestern Ethiopia

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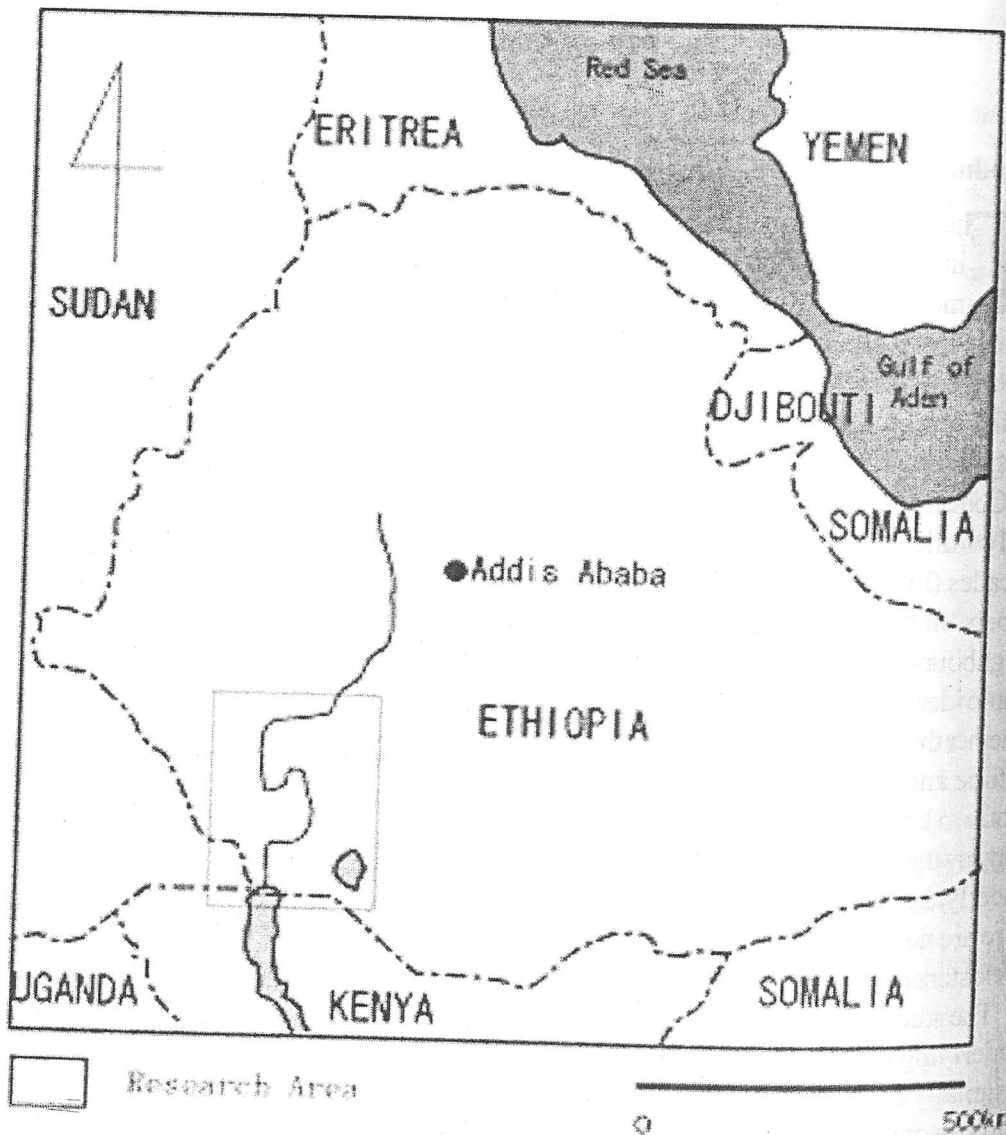
### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to consider the bond-partnership among the peoples in the Lower Omo Valley of Southwestern Ethiopia (see Map 1 & 2), and the moral economy in the context of the ethnographical regional system. In this region, 450,000 people have spent a variety of lives in economic activity, and it is well known that there was an ethnic network extending over the Kenya-Ethiopia border until the nineteenth century. I examined the bond-partnership called *belmo* among the Muguji people in order to clarify the social and economic meaning.

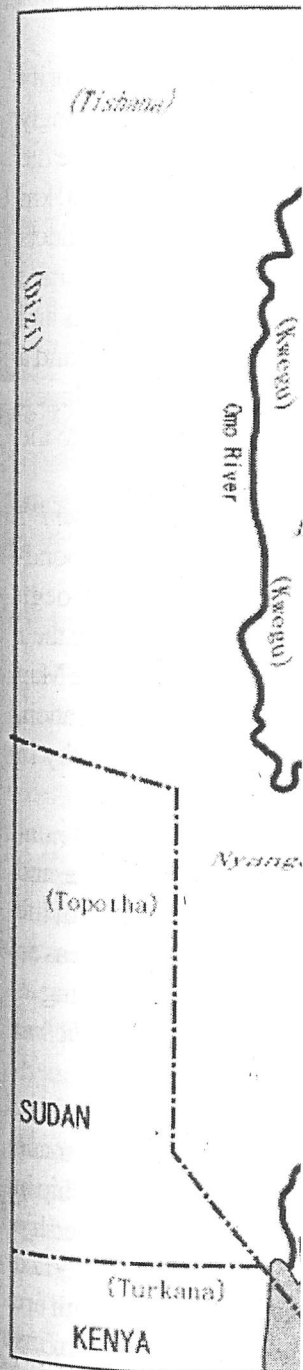
Concerning the academic study on the social relations in the Lower Omo, warfare and conflict have been the main subjects of the study on this region over the last few decades (Fukui & Turton 1979, Fukui & Markakis 1994). I also have written some papers on the conflict between the Muguji (they call themselves Koegu) and the neighbours, in which I tried to show the agony of the inferior minority grouping for the ethnic identity (Matsuda 1991, 1994). However, it still remains an unsettled question whether the conflict might be one dimension of the complex interethnic relations limited in time and space in the total social facts. And we might regard the inside of ethnic group to be homogeneous due to our close focusing on the conflict and the war. We may say that the human behaviour which has been individually and historically formed is underlying the interethnic relationship of this region. It seems that the peoples living here are neither violent nor destructive, but they have been seeking for the peaceful coexistence.

The study of the bond-partnership reveals to us the moral basis of human behaviour underlying the regional network of the Lower Omo area. The moral economy was originally conceptualised by Scott in the social context of south-east Asia, and the purpose of the study was to place the subsistence ethic at the centre of the analysis of peasant politics. In the argument, he tried to examine the farmer's relationships to his neighbours, to elites, and to the state in terms of whether they aid or hinder the farmer in meeting that need (Scott, 1976:5). In his book, "the neighbours" mean the villagers.

On the other hand, focusing on the African farmers, Hyden wrote that the economy of affection "denotes a network of support, communications and interactions among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities, for example, religion" (Hyden, 1983:8). In this chapter, I will consider that the regional community is regarded as the sphere to which such a network reaches.



Map 1. Ethiopia



Map 2. Lower Omo Valley

N.B. 1) Ullalle is ethnic group  
N.B. 2) × indicates Kuchur





### The Muguji, *Belmo*, and the Lower Omo Region

The Muguji (or Koegu, Surmic language speakers, population ca.500) is a minority living in the central part of the Lower Omo plains (Map 2). Although they scatteringly lived in the riverine forest along the Omo River before, now most of them have the houses in two villages, Kuchur and Galgida. Both of them are located nearly 60-80 km far from the nearest market town. They are mainly depending on agricultural products such as sorghum, but fishing, animal husbandry, and honey collecting are also important economic activities. Most of the daily implements, for example housing materials and cooking utensils, are produced by themselves except iron tools like a hatchet and a knife. They have few chances to earn cash money by wage labour near the villages. Therefore their economic system seems to be almost self sufficient or closed to the outside of the region.

Among the Muguji people, close friends call each other "*bel*!" or "*belmo naani*!" (my *belmo*!). Both *bel* in Kara language and *belmo* in Koegu basically mean a bond-partnership between the individuals tied through the gifts of each other. In Koegu *belmo* is used in addressing, so they use *eeda* in referring to a partner. They have their *belmo* not only in the Muguji, but also in the neighbouring eight ethnic groups (see Map 2). They say that it is compared to a kin and sometimes succeeded to the next generation. When they hear the news of their *belmo*'s death, they shoot the gun to the sky in honour of the mourning. To have a *belmo* is told to be good.

The exchange value of the goods between *belmo* is not equivalent, but non-equivalent. In some cases, the interval of the reunion reaches ten years OR more, and the relation sometimes ends one-way. The goods are not always the necessities of life (see Table 2). For these reasons, we may say the *belmo* system has no function as an economic trade or transaction. On the other hand, there is no symbolic meaning as Mauss described in his work (Mauss 1968). It would be better to say that the *belmo* has a communicative meaning.

The word *belmo* seems to originate from *bele* in Dassanetch (Cushitic speaking group) in southernmost part of the Lower Omo. According to Almagor, who made anthropological research in the Dassanetch in 1970's, *bele* indicates close friendship in general, but not the institutionalised bond-partnership. He said that the bond-partnership called *lil-metch* played an important role among them to supplement a kin affinity and additional support (Almagor 1978:108). In the Hamar and the Bachada (both are Omotic groups), they have *bel* among them (personal communication). From my experience, the Kara (Omotic) have also *bel* as an important system, and they differentiate it from the economic exchange *shani* (it means shopping or buying) in their social category.

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### Partners and Goo

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From the historical viewpoint, Sobania tried to reconstruct the interethnic network of 19<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Lake Turkana region through collecting oral histories. He wrote that the anthropologists who have studied this area described the intrasocial bond, but not the intersocial one (Sobania 1991:133). In fact, most of the ethnographies of the people in the Lower Omo before 1980's had described culture and society of each ethnic group in details. Even though they were interested in the intersocial relation as a research theme, it was restricted to an ethnic conflict or a war as I mentioned in the introduction.

Sobania pointed out that there was a network of small scale communities which had fuzzy boundaries and adaptive life forms in the region from eastern Lake Turkana to southern Lower Omo plains, however it was destroyed by the prevalence of cattle-pox and the colonial government before the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. We may say that such a network is still partly alive in the Lower Omo region and make it clear through the study on the bond-partnership system, *belmo*.

### Partners and Goods

In 1989 I interviewed 88 adults (62 male, 26 female) about which groups they had the *belmos* in and what kind of goods they gifted each other. In the 88, 64 people lived in Kuchur in the northernmost of the territory, while 24 people lived in Galgida in the southernmost area. Total population of the Muguji was 530 (380 in Kuchur, 150 in Galgida) at that time. All of the 88 were householders aged from 25 to 70 (estimate). Accordingly we may say that the actual tendency is reflected in the data here.

Table 1 tells us that one Muguji had 4-5 *belmos* as an average. It is clear that they had many *belmos* among the Banna (the Muguji call them *Atula*) and the Nyangatom (*Bume*) in number. Among these neighbours the Banna have been especially close to the Muguji till now, however, it is strange that the Nyangatom were enemies for the Muguji before 1989. After the conflict with the Kara in 1989-90, the Nyangatom have been supporting the Muguji. The Kara and the Muguji were united into one ethnic unit *Karo* before 1989, and fought in alliance against the Nyangatom, however, the Muguji were forced to be in a socially inferior position to the Kara. After the fight for the separation in 1989-90, both of them have the independent identity (Matsuda 1994). The *belmo* relationship is thus keeping even under the hostilities.

The Kuchur dwellers have 36 *belmos* in the Mursi and 0 in the Dassanetch, while the Galgida dwellers have 21 in the Dassanetch but 0 in the Mursi. The Galgida dwellers have also a certain number of *belmos* in the Hamar and the Bachada, however, the Kuchur dwellers have only 1 *belmo* in each group. This contrast reveals the geographical difference between two local groups. I have shown some signs of linguistic classification

in Table 1, and as a result, we found no relation about the *belmo* formation with the linguistic closeness.

**Table 1:** *The Muguji's Belmo in the Neighbouring Groups*

<i>Ethnic Groups</i>	<i>Kuchur Dwellers</i>	<i>Galgida Dwellers</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
Banna (O)	69	18	87
Nyangatom (EN)	62	24	86
Kara (O)	41	18	59
Mursi (S)	36	0	36
Ari (O)	18	5	23
Muguji (S)	12	10	22
Dasanetch (C)	0	21	21
Hamar (O)	1	19	20
Bachada (O)	1	9	10
Gomba (O?)	1	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>365</b>

N.B. ( ) show the linguistic classification.

O = Omotic EN = Eastern Nilotic S = Surma C = Cushitic

O = The language is dead, but the people speak Kara.

Then, let us examine the goods of gift which the *belmos* mutually make. The results are presented in Table 2. I also collected these data on the groups to which the gifts givers were belonging as well as the goods of gift, however, as space is limited, I did not show the groups' names in the table. In the analysis below, I add some information on these groups from which the gifts were made.

We may say that sorghum is the most frequent gift which the Muguji made (see category-d). They gift some sorghum with the *belmo* in the Banna, the Nyangatom, the Mursi, the Hamar, and the Bachada, while only the Banna and the Dassanetch give the sorghum to the Muguji. The sorghum is the main crop in the region in general, but the groups relatively depending on the pastoral way of life would not produce the sorghum. The Banna living in the highland mountainous area and the Dassanetch in the lower Omo delta have the different season for harvesting with the Muguji who cultivate on the river bank. In short the different condition of environment and way of life bring about the flow of sorghum. We should notice, however, that the gift of sorghum is not a constant transaction but an urgent support in the poor cropping season.

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**Table 2:** *The Goods v*  
The goods they gift

a. Products outsi
Iron tool, axe etc
Cotton cloth
Coffee husk
Bead
Bullet
Shirt
Fishhook
Sandals
b. Products insi
Honey
Unglazed pot
Calabash bowl
Salty Dirt
Whip (hippo hi
Giraffe's Tail
c. Products ins
Goat or sheep
Butter
Cowhide
Goatskin
Cattle
Red clay
Donkey
d. Products in
Sorghum
Bracelet
Maize
Sorghum por
Tobacco
Cash Note
Cartridge ca
Stool
Anklet
e. No gift <sup>3)</sup>

N.B. 1) The n

2) "The

3) "No g

**Table 2:** *The Goods which the Muguji Exchanged*

The goods they gifted / The goods they were gifted

	<i>Kuchur dwellers</i> 64 men	<i>Galgida dwellers</i> 24 men	<i>TOTAL</i>
a. Products outside of the region <sup>2)</sup>			
Iron tool, axe etc.	27 / 5	14 / 3	41 / 8
Cotton cloth	10 / 19	8 / 5	18 / 24
Coffee husk	6 / 18	0 / 5	6 / 23
Bead	3 / 2	1 / 0	4 / 2
Bullet	1 / 8	1 / 3	2 / 11
Shirt	2 / 1	0 / 0	2 / 1
Fishhook	1 / 0	0 / 0	1 / 0
Sandals	0 / 1	0 / 0	0 / 1
b. Products inside; peculiarity of the Muguji			
Honey	52 / 3	10 / 10	62 / 13
Unglazed pot	9 / 5	33 / 0	42 / 5
Calabash bowl	17 / 0	3 / 1	20 / 1
Salty Dirt	0 / 0	5 / 0	5 / 0
Whip (hippo hide)	1 / 0	0 / 0	1 / 0
Giraffe's Tail	1 / 0	0 / 0	1 / 0
c. Products inside; non-peculiarity of the Muguji			
Goat or sheep	9 / 67	9 / 42	18 / 109
Butter	0 / 18	1 / 6	1 / 24
Cowhide	0 / 30	0 / 0	0 / 30
Goatskin	0 / 3	0 / 0	0 / 3
Cattle	0 / 1	0 / 1	0 / 2
Red clay	0 / 0	0 / 2	0 / 2
Donkey	0 / 0	0 / 2	0 / 2
d. Products inside; widely existing in the region <sup>2)</sup>			
Sorghum	112 / 41	53 / 23	165 / 64
Bracelet	2 / 1	0 / 0	2 / 1
Maize	2 / 0	0 / 0	2 / 0
Sorghum porridge	2 / 0	0 / 0	2 / 0
Tobacco	1 / 8	0 / 1	1 / 9
Cash Note	1 / 2	0 / 1	1 / 3
Cartridge case	1 / 0	0 / 0	1 / 0
Stool	0 / 0	1 / 1	1 / 1
Anklet	0 / 1	0 / 0	0 / 1
e. No gift <sup>3)</sup>	18 / 37	12 / 17	30 / 54

N.B. 1) The number shows the frequency of gift.

2) "The region" means the Lower Omo Valley.

3) "No gift" means the cases in which the gift was one-way.



As for the goat and sheep, the Muguji is just an acceptor, particularly from the Nyangatom, the Kara, the Hamar, and the Dassanetch (see category-c). The other pastoral products like butter and hide are also gifted from the Banna and the Mursi. Cattle culture complex is underlying the society of all the people in the region, in which the Muguji have a few goat and sheep, and no cattle. Therefore the pastoral products are important for the Muguji to keep the cultural value because these are symbolic items for the pastoral way of life.

The honey is the special goods for the Muguji (see category-b), particularly the Kuchur dwellers. They say that honey is a gift by God (*Bariyo*), and a proper gift to the *belmo*. Moreover, it is the only item in their products for them to be able to change to cash money because the highland Ethiopians in the local town have a custom to drink honey wine. So the honey is often gifted to each other among not only *belmos* in the different groups but also the Muguji people.

The iron tools and coffee are products from outside of the region, specifically the market town or the highland. However, Table 2 indicates that the Muguji gift them more frequently to the *belmos* in the neighbourhood than being gifted. The most likely explanation is that the Muguji play a role as an inter-mediator for those goods in the low land area, the Lower Omo region.

### Some Features of the *Belmo* System

We shall now look more carefully into the features of the *belmo* of the Muguji. The first important point is that the exchange system through the *belmo* surely reflects the difference of the economic or subsistence system in each group, however, a barter trade is not the purpose. The people say that to ask for reciprocal goods is not good. The *belmo*'s gift stands on their voluntary mind. At least, from the Muguji side, they do not depend on the *belmo* in terms of the daily needs in the poor crop season.

Secondly, let us examine further the cultural space and political space that illustrates the point that we have been considering. The Lower Omo region is a part of the area where 'East Africa cattle culture complex' (Herskovits 1926) is dominating the society and culture. Whether they raise cattle or not, the peoples' life is regulated by the nomadic sense of value which is brewed from the membership to stay and live continuously in the region. Because the Muguji have actually no cattle except the deposits to the intimate group, the Banna, they must keep in touch with the pastoral neighbours through the *belmo* to connect with pastoralistic culture.

Thirdly, we found that the gifted goods and the behaviour itself have no religious or magical meaning. Some anthropological text book might be disappointed at this case. If the religious mind is not the staple incentive to inspire the exchange as Mauss wrote

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### Conclusion

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(1968), what is the power for the *belmo* to gift back some goods? Why do they make gifts to each other although most of the goods have no urgent use value nor symbolic value? This is the important point to study the *belmo* system. I suggest that the uncertainty or the mutability drives the mind to make them gift to the bond-partner. The mutability is the sense which all the things are changing. The custom of begging is ordinarily seen in the daily life, particularly between the *belmos*. It is difficult for anybody to reject the begging of the goods. The ownership of things seems to be quite ambiguous and fuzzy. Moreover, the people of the region feel the vague sense of uncertainty for the future which is originated from both the environmental and the social conditions. Various elements of the nature have an influence on the life in the semi-arid savanna, and the interethnic conflict and the political instability brought from the outside world are unpredictable for the people here. Perhaps it is right to say that the Muguji would insure or cover against the uncertainty by strengthening the human network. In order to make or keep a *belmo* relationship and extend the network, they must give up a fixation on goods and give something to the partner. They seem to have the philosophy which we may call fatalism or reductionism. They know that all the things will leave from their hands someday in either event, and will return to themselves in another form.

### Conclusion

It is desirable here to summarise the main points that have been made in the preceding sections. In the Lower Omo Valley, people are spending their lives depending on various types of subsistence economy. Among them some people in the southern half of the area have close relationship with the bond-partners beyond the ethnic boundary as well as in their groups. The Muguji, one of such groups, call his/her bond *belmo*, which is compared to a kin and sometimes succeeded to their children. The *belmos* are tied through the gift making, however, we may not call it the market exchange. It means that most of the goods for the gift are not daily necessities nor religious items. In fact some kinds of goods are important in time of need, but the others are not highly valuable for the material life of the Muguji. And some goods are indispensable for their spiritual life which is common among the people living in the pastoral way of life in the East African savanna. Similar institutions are known to some groups of the area.

I have been examining in this chapter the moral basis of economy beyond the village level. The human network which ties the region is promoted not only by the reciprocal mechanism but also by the sense of mutability which has been historically and politically forming in the periphery.

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