

EXPLORATION IN THE LOWER OMO VALLEY OF SOUTHWESTERN  
ETHIOPIA BETWEEN 1890 AND 1910<sup>1</sup>

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Until very recently our knowledge of the peoples of the lower Omo was almost entirely derived from the reports of a dozen or so travellers, explorers and military adventurers, of various nationalities, who visited the area in rapid succession between approximately 1890 and 1910. The information they provided about local populations was fragmentary and, when considered as a whole, highly confusing. One traveller would report that he had found a certain group living in a flourishing condition in a place where another, passing through a few years later, could find little or no trace of human occupation. Different travellers, furthermore, would frequently use different names to refer to the same group, with the result that the ethnographic maps of the area soon became littered with a confusing variety of ethnic labels. One reason for all this was that these early visitors were not especially interested in the peoples they met, except in so far as they helped or hindered their main objectives which lay in geographical discovery, military campaigning, big game hunting, the triangulation of international borders or, most often, a combination of these. What facts they recorded about local languages and cultures were, for them, a relatively unimportant by-product of these other activities.

Another reason had more to do with the local populations themselves. The lower Omo was, and still is, inhabited by a number of small and culturally distinct groups which, because of their highly diversified economies (based on herding, flood cultivation, shifting cultivation, fishing and hunting) engage in complex seasonal movements and have few, if any, permanent settlements (see map). The twenty-year period spanning the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, furthermore, was an intensely traumatic one for the peoples of the lower Omo, due both to various natural disasters which affected a wide area of East Africa, and to the military impact of Shewan expansion from the north, under the Emperor Menelik II. Whole communities were wiped out or decimated by sleeping sickness and smallpox, while drought, changes in the level of lake Turkana (and therefore of the Omo flood) and animal pandemics led to large-scale and relatively sudden movements of population (Butzer 1971; Almagor 1974; Tornay 1978).

In this paper I provide a chronological outline of this early period of exploration, and comment briefly on its relevance to present day studies. The story must begin a little before 1890, with the arrival, in April 1888, of an expedition led by Samuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel at the northern end of lake Turkana, which they named Rudolf after the then Prussian Crown Prince (von Höhnel 1894; von Höhnel 1938). They did not proceed further north but ‘soon became aware that the country was peopled by a number of different tribes’ (von Höhnel, 1938: 26). Immediately north and east of the Lake were the Reshiat (Dassanetch) and north of them the Buma (Nyangatom), Murle, Kerre (Kara) and Murzu (Mursi), in that order. Apart from the Murle, who have recently been ‘rediscovered’ as a minor Nyangatom section, living

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper first published in Maria Caravaglios (ed.), *L’Africa ai Tempi di Daniele Comboni*, Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Africani, Istituto Italo-Africano e Missionari Comboniani, Rome, 19-21 November, 1981.

on the west bank of the Omo and having a clear common origin with the Murle of the southern Sudan (Tornay, 1978), all of the groups mentioned by von Höhnel are easily identifiable with the present-day inhabitants of the area although, on the map published with his 1938 article, the Kara and Mursi are placed a good deal further south of their present territory. Nothing definite can be read into this about the extent of past migrations, however, because, in locating these people as he did, von Höhnel was relying upon what his Dassanetch informants told him about the order in which the different groups succeeded each other, from south to north, along the Omo, an order which nevertheless remains accurate to this day.

The major purpose of the Teleki-von Höhnel expedition, thanks largely to the latter, was geographical exploration (Fuchs 1938:16). Its great achievement was the 'discovery' of lake Turkana, while the main question they left unanswered was whether the river they found flowing into the northern end of the Lake, the name of which they recorded as Nianam, was in fact the Omo, the lower course of which had not yet been surveyed by Europeans. Von Höhnel thought it was, but the second explorer to visit the area, the American, Arthur Donaldson-Smith, came to a different view of the 'weighty question of the course of the Omo river' (Donaldson Smith 1896:223).

Addressing a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in London in January 1896, he described how he and his party had made the final 'push' to Lake Turkana in July 1895.

On July 4 we found ourselves without guides in such a bushy country, that we were obliged to make five long marches in the bed of a river knee-deep in water the whole time. As our boots were wearing out, we were forced to walk bare-footed; but our spirits ran high - Lake Rudolf was near, and we were to be the first to reach it from the east...a little bit more pushing, and our joy was complete! After more than a year's wandering in all sorts of country, and under most diverse circumstances, we found ourselves at the goal of our ambition. We reached Lake Rudolf on July 14 1895, and camped among the Reshiat, a tribe living at the north-east corner of the lake. The expedition had been a hard one, but we had achieved all we had set out to do and more.

Undeterred by reports of 'hostile natives' to the north, and the debilitating effects of malaria from which he and most of his men were now suffering, Donaldson Smith set out a few days later 'with 29 rifles and a few donkeys' to explore the course of the Nianam. Like von Höhnel, he had assumed this was in fact the same river as the Omo, but, on reaching the junction of the Omo and the Mago, about 100km. north of the Lake, he mistook the Mago, a tributary of the Omo, for the main river and thereby came to the mistaken conclusion that the Nianam and the Omo were in fact different rivers (Imperato 1998:117).

Even as his audience was urging him to return as soon as possible to Africa to settle, once and for all, the burning question of the course of the Omo, another traveller, Arthur Neumann, had set up camp just south of the Omo-Mago junction, amongst the Kara (Neumann 1898), Chapter XIII). He had come, like Donaldson Smith, from the south, having set out from Mombassa almost two years earlier. He reported both Reshiat (Dassanetch) and Bumi (Nyangatom) living on the northern shore of the Lake. He was mainly interested in elephant hunting and did not proceed further north after reaching the Kara. On his withdrawal from the scene, the stage was set for the

entrance of the undisputed giant among explorers of the Omo Valley, Vittorio Bottego.

Coming from the northeast, Bottego reached the Omo on 23 July 1896 and, sticking doggedly to the left bank, followed the river to Lake Turkana (Vannutelli and Citerni 1899). Contact between the expedition and people living along the Omo was limited to say the least. First contact was with the 'Bodà', who had stolen 10 of the expedition's cattle by 25 July, while the 'Bacia' remained 'deaf to very summons' ('sordi a ogni richiamo') and appeared to be literally speechless at the sight of the expedition members ('impassibile come colti de stupidità inerte'). These were clearly the Bodi and Kwegu respectively, the names reported by Vannutelli and Citerni having originated, no doubt, from the expedition's Dime guides. Further south, in present day Mursiland, they reported the existence of two supposedly distinct groups, the 'Tdamoo' in the north and the Tdama' in the south. The Tdama were certainly the ancestors of the present Mursi, who use the name Tamai of themselves on ritual occasions and who are called Dama today by the Bodi. It is interesting to note that there appears to have been a greater concentration of people in southern Mursiland at this time than in the north, which is the reverse of the situation today. This fits well with Mursi oral history, according to which they have pushed northwards against the Bodi since the early years of the last century (Turton 1979; Turton 1988; Turton 1991).

It is worth asking what was the condition of the Mursi and their neighbours at the time of Bottego's visit. The 1890s was a disastrous period in East Africa generally, including the lower Omo Valley. Epidemic diseases, especially rinderpest, human sleeping sickness and smallpox, decimated people and cattle throughout the region. The southwards expansion of the Shewan kingdom under the Emperor Menelik II added to the turmoil in the lower Omo. Bottego, and the other travellers and explorers who passed through the area in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century found the remnants of a once large population, surviving at the Omo on cultivation and herding and engaged in a desperate attempt to rebuild their herds. What did the Bottego expedition make of the Mursi? For Vannutelli and Citerni, they represented the epitome of the European stereotype of the savage:

Living in a country until now unknown to the white man and to most of the surrounding blacks, it is easy to understand why their way of life is so close to that of animals ['tanto prossimi alle bestie']. (320).....This savage tribe has detestable tendencies and bestial habits ['tendenze detestabili e abitudini bestiali']. (323)

As for the Mursi view of the Bottego expedition, the first group of outsiders who came through Mursiland, following a route identical to that of Bottego, are remembered as the '*kuchumba* ruminya koroi', the '*kuchumba* with dark clothes'. *Kuchumba* is a term used today for highland Ethiopians – essentially the descendants of those who came south in the 1890s as part of the Ethiopian expansion, under Menelik. The '*kuchumba* ruminya koroi' could therefore have been the Bottego expedition, the great majority of the members of which were presumably highland Ethiopians. They are remembered as having brought glass necklace beads to use in trade, and the Mursi view this as the purpose for which they came.

Bottego reached the junction of the Omo and Mago (which Donaldson Smith had mistaken for the 'Nianam' and Bottego called Usno) on 11 August. Finding the river

too high to cross, the expedition had to make a detour up its right bank before finding a suitable crossing place and continuing their journey southwards. They reported finding another group living east of the Mago, the Tumuru, a name which is virtually identical to the present Mursi name for the Bodi. It is reasonable to suppose that these were Donaldson Smith's Mela, whom he had met in the Mago valley a year earlier, Mela being the present name of a Bodi subgroup, living on the east side of the Omo. Having regained the Omo, the expedition reached the principal centre of the Kara on 26 August.

It is with a palpable sense of relief that Vannutelli and Citerni report the friendly way in which they were received here, a response which they were undoubtedly corrected in attributing to the fact that the Kara were used to trading with outsiders – 'aliquanto abituata agli scambi' (1899, p. 328). This was thanks to their strategic position on the route from the Bako range, via the Mago Valley, to Lake Turkana. Their main item of trade at the time of Bottego's visit was ivory, most of which they apparently obtained from the 'Murzu' (Mursi). From here the expedition made a detour to the Lake Stefanie region, before returning to the Omo, moving south along the west side of Lake Turkana and then turning back towards the Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands via the River Maurizio Sacchi (Kibish). Unaware of the Italian army's recent defeat by Menelik's forces at the battle of Adowa, Bottego was killed by Ethiopian patriots as he attempted to make his way across the Maji range into the Nile Valley (Imperato, 1998, p. 153). Despite its unfortunate end, this was by far the most ambitious, systematic and successful of the expeditions which visited the Omo during this period. It was the only one to follow the entire lower course of the river, producing in the process a map which remained the most accurate available until nearly a hundred years later.

Four months after Bottego left Lake Turkana, there arrived on the scene a twenty year old Englishman, H.S.H. Cavendish who, coming from Somalia, reached the mouth of the Omo on 22 March 1897. He seems to have spent only two weeks in the area, during which time he visited the 'Murle' and 'Murutu'. The account of his journey, which he read to the Royal Geographical Society in January 1898 is confusing and not very informative about the local populations. It does, however, shed an interesting light on the national competitiveness which lay behind the exploration of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as much as it lay behind the exploration of space in the twentieth.

Cavendish admitted that he had formed the idea of travelling to the Lake Turkana area because, 'as no Englishman had yet attempted exploration in that part of Africa, it was high time for British travellers to bestir themselves in the matter' (Cavendish 1898). His audience was highly receptive to these sentiments, despite the fact that the scientific results of his expedition were clearly negligible. Thus, Major Lugard commented that Cavendish's journey was,

....the more remarkable and the more pleasing to us because he is the first Englishman to have traversed that country – his predecessors, one of whom we welcomed here, were Dr Donaldson Smith and Signor Bottego, the Italian explorer. They have done excellent work, but they are not of our nationality....that country is undeniably British and therefore everyone of our nationality has a primary right to get into it.

Later that evening, Dr Bowlder Sharpe, of the British Museum, deplored the fact that the British Government, unlike that of other European nations, was content to leave

the collection of scientific specimens to well-meaning but incompetent amateurs like Cavendish.

.....since his return he has been so busy that he has not been able to give us the time necessary to help in getting his collection in order. It occupies one side of our whale-room, and only Mr Cavendish himself can sort this enormous mass of skulls and skins and bones and limbs. It is a national disgrace to England that all our great natural history expeditions depend upon private enterprise, and that our government does absolutely nothing in the matter. There is no country that has interests in Africa like ours. We see little principalities annexed by the Germans, and larger ones by the French, and at once a naturalist is sent to work out the fauna. No sooner was Uganda taken possession of and occupied by England than German naturalists over-ran it, and now our naturalists can only send us what has been already described by the Germans. This is an absolute disgrace to a country like England. (Cavendish, 1898 p. 395).

Despite Major Lugard's conviction that the area visited by Cavendish was 'undeniably British', it was about to be annexed, not by a rival European power, but by the Ethiopian Emperor, Menelik II. Cavendish was in fact the last European traveller to visit the lower Omo before it came under the control of Menelik, who sent two military expeditions to the Omo delta, one coming from the west (Maji) side of the valley in early 1898 and the other from the east (Bako) side a year later. The first was led by Ras Wolda Giyorgis (Bulatovitch 1900), who had recently completed the conquest of Kafa and become the first Ethiopian governor of Maji (Garretson 1980). The second was led by a Russian mercenary-adventurer, N. de Leontieff (de Leontieff 1900).

These and other Ethiopian incursions, coupled with drought and various human and animal diseases, reduced the area to a state of crisis which lasted for at least the next ten years and is well reflected in the accounts of subsequent travellers. H.H.Austin, coming from East Africa in late 1898, made an abortive trip, north from lake Turkana, to obtain food supplies, only to find 'the people starving and suffering from small-pox, as they had lately been raided and their country devastated. We were unable to obtain a particle of food and had to beat a hasty retreat' (Austin 1899). A year later, Donaldson Smith made a second journey to Lake Turkana, which he reached on 10 December 1899, having started from Berbera in Somalia. He found the people living north of the Lake reeling from the combined effects of disease and 'Abyssinian raids'. The Mursi, on the other hand, whom he contacted from the west bank of the Omo in the south of their present territory ('near the point where that stream makes an acute angle as it bends from north to east around the Mela (sic.) hills', appeared to be unaffected by the turmoil to the south.

The Mursu, whom we found on the banks of the Omo, had escaped the raids of the Abyssinians, and were in a most flourishing condition. After we had shot a couple of hippos for them they became most friendly, and brought us much food, consisting of durrha, or sorghum, lentils, beans, maize and dried tamarinds. I bought a small tusk or two from them at first to start trade; but when I discovered a long line of ebony-like forms bearing about a ton of ivory upon their shoulders to my camp, I had to cry a halt, as it was impossible for me to transport more ivory than I had with me. (Donaldson Smith 1900)

Hemmed in by the Mago and Omo Rivers, the Mursi were indeed by-passed, throughout this period, by military expeditions and explorers alike (with the notable

exception of Bottego), as they were for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by government administrators, missionaries and other outsiders.

In 1901 Austin made a second and disastrous journey to the lower Omo, leading a survey expedition from Southern Sudan along the Pibor, Akobo and Kibish rivers (Wellby 1900; Austin 1902); Imperato, 1998, pp. 231-240). Finding it impossible to obtain food from any of the lower Omo peoples, including the Mursi (whose riverbank crop was two months from maturity at the time), he was forced to beat another and much more arduous retreat southwards, killing pack animals for food as he went and losing many of his men in the process (Imperato, loc. cit.). Meanwhile, in March 1900, M.S. Wellby arrived at the northern end of Lake Turkana, having travelled from Addis Ababa. His party was made up of highland Ethiopians, whose 'natural bent for shooting and stealing' (of which Wellby took a decidedly benign view) did little to encourage peaceful contact with the local people, of whom we learn virtually nothing (Wellby, 1900).

Another traveller who started from Addis Ababa was the Frenchman, Robert du Bourg de Bozas, who arrived at the Omo-Mago junction at the beginning of June 1902 (du Bourg de Bozas 1903). As he travelled south along the Omo from there, his party was assumed to be an Ethiopian military expedition by the locals who abandoned their settlements at its approach. Du Bourg de Bozas describes the Kara as 'la Tribu la plus puissante des bords de l'Omo' and notes that they 'entretiennent des relations commerciales avec l'Abyssinie par Bako'. About 6 km north of the Lake, two of his men were killed by local people, at which he organized an expedition 'pour punir le meurtre de nos hommes'. It seems that both du Bourg de Bozas and Wellby were professional adventurers and it may not be entirely surprising therefore, that, when the accounts of their journeys were published, du Bourg de Bozas' in *La Géographie* and Wellby's in the *Geographical Journal*, each was accompanied by an editorial expression of regret at their recent deaths.

The continuing absence of an effective local administration in the area, several years after it had come under the nominal control of the Emperor Menelik, made it a pressing concern of the British government to establish, by treaty, the frontier between its East African colonies and Menelik's domains. In order to obtain the information necessary to negotiate such a treaty, an army surveyor, Philip Maud, was dispatched to the area, via Aden, Djibouti and Addis Ababa, at the end of 1902. Maud surveyed the area between Lakes Stefanie and Turkana in May 1903. He made no attempt to travel north, up the Omo valley.

From the rocky isolated hill east of the north end of Rudolf, I was able to complete the survey as far as necessary to the north-west. North of the Lake, as far as Mount Nakua, stretched a green marshy plain flooded in many places, through which the Omo River winds its way. From here I turned to the shore of Lake Rudolf. (Maud 1904) p. 574)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> He also turned to an orgy of big game hunting, securing, in four days, 'a very varied bag, consisting of a good elephant, with tusks weighing over 80 lbs. each, a fine kudu, a giraffe, a zebra, a rhino, a splendid oryx, and two good lions' (loc. cit.).

As a result of Maud's work, a treaty was concluded between the British and Menelik in 1907, defining the boundary in general terms and providing for its detailed delimitation at a later date. This task was achieved by another army surveyor, C.W. Gwynn in 1909 (Gwynn 1911). Reaching the northern end of Lake Turkana in February (where he found an Ethiopian post), he followed the left bank of the Omo northwards to Kerre (Kara), which he describes as a 'considerable village' (p. 125). Here his party divided, one group going north to Bako and the other, led by Gwynn himself, crossing the Omo to continue his delimitation work along the Kibish River, the route taken 13 years earlier by Bottego. Having passed several deserted villages he eventually made contact with the Surma (Chai) and 'established friendly relations with them, though they were timid and constantly on the look-out for parties of Abyssinian marauders' (p. 127). Gwynn returned to Addis Ababa via Maji and Jimma.

The successful completion of the delimitation of the border between Ethiopia and British East Africa effectively marks the end of this twenty year period of exploration, which opened with the 'discovery' of Lake Turkana in 1888. For the sake of completeness, however, mention must be made of one more visitor to the lower Omo, C.H. Stigand, who traveled up the east bank of the Omo from Lake Turkana in 1909, hard on the heels of Gwynn (Stigand 1910). At Kerre (Kara) he found an Ethiopian military post and much trading and bartering of traders from Bako with grain to exchange for salt. The Kara were middle men in this trade, the salt originating from west of the Omo. Perhaps the most interesting information we learn from Stigand is that human sleeping sickness had appeared in the region a year earlier, since this provides an external means of dating the outbreak of an epidemic which, according to both Mursi and Nyangatom accounts, wiped out whole communities along the river (Tornay, 1978, p. 63). Stigand made his way north, up the Mago Valley to Bako, confessing himself disappointed that this route was no longer 'new ground' since it had been followed a few months earlier by part of the Abyssinia Border Commission (i.e. Gwynn's expedition, which had divided at Kara).

When professional linguists and anthropologists began to take stock of the languages and cultures of the lower Omo, later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were faced with what one of them called a 'linguistic no-man's land' (Bryan 1945), littered with a bewildering variety of ethnic labels. It might equally have been likened to a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of which were too ill-defined to be fitted together with any degree of certainty. Various attempts were made to make sense of this confusion (Biassutti 1905; Conti Rossini 1913, 1928, 1937; Grottanelli 1941; Cerulli 1956), none of them particularly successful. A number of increasingly systematic descriptions of the peoples and languages of the lower Omo began to emerge about 30 years after the first flurry of exploration had died away (Marchetti 1939; Chomio 1941; Rizzeto 1941; Ricci 1943; Ricci 1945); (Haberland 1952; Haberland 1966), but these all resulted from fairly brief visits. It was not until the 1960s and early 1970s that the intensive field study of particular groups by anthropologists, linguists and historians began the process of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together into a more satisfactory picture.

It might well be asked, therefore, what remains of interest in the early period of exploration with which this paper has been concerned. There are two answers. First, these early accounts are of interest because of what they tell us about the explorers

and travelers themselves and about the European society to which they brought back their tales of discovery and adventure. This was the end of an era in the European exploration of Africa and our explorers' accounts, delivered in the august surroundings of learned societies in various European capitals, give us an insight into the scientifically respectable ethnocentrism of the time.

Second, their accounts are of great interest because of the particular direction in which research amongst the peoples of the lower Omo began to take in the 1980s. It became increasingly clear, once the intensive study of particular groups had begun, that the evident linguistic and cultural diversity of the area could best be understood by focusing on relations between the units which make up this diversity, seeing them not as isolated units but as parts of an overall pattern, or as variations on a common theme. This led various writers – not just on the lower Omo but on the Sudan-Ethiopia border area in general – to turn their attention to processes of ethnic group formation, to the relationship between a people's own view of their past and their current social organization and to the relationship between oral history and what 'actually happened' in the past. The accounts of early travelers and explorers, although poor and fragmentary, assume great importance in this context, since they provide us with our earliest external historical evidence of the long term processes that underlie present-day social realities.

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