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To cite this article: Felix Girke (2011) Plato on the Omo: reflections on decision-making among the Kara of southern Ethiopia, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5:1, 177-194, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2011.544547](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.544547)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.544547>



Published online: 22 Feb 2011.



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Plato on the Omo: reflections on decision-making among the Kara of southern Ethiopia

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(Received 28 January 2010; final version received 10 July 2010)

The paper presents an ethnographic description of the institutions and processes of decision-making among the Kara of Southern Ethiopia, central among them the council of spokesmen called the *borkotto bitti*. Comparing these practices as well as the Kara's own discussions of them with equivalent practices of their cultural neighbours, the Hamar, reveals the extent and complexity of social imagination in the Lower Omo Valley. The philosopher Plato's treatise on the philosopher-kings of the utopian city ("Republic") offers another foil for the ethnographic data in its dense discussion of the links between decision-making, personal virtue, status, accountability and the common weal, which mirrors the Kara's own reflections. The inevitable contradictions in the political system are accordingly treated not simply from an analytical perspective, but as an actors' problem.

Keywords: Ethiopia; South Omo; Kara; Plato; decision-making

If we bring people who are in perfect physical and mental condition to this lengthy study programme and course of training, and educate them in it, we'll have done nothing wrong even by the strictest standards of moral behaviour, and we'll be preserving the integrity of our community and political system. However, if we introduce people of any other kind to it, we'll not only achieve the opposite results, but we'll also increase the flow of ridicule which pours down on philosophy.¹

The spokesman grows up like the *kuntsale* grass, he emerges from among his age mates, he is the one who knows how to talk, his heart is strong.²

pace introductory textbooks in anthropology, people do not always consider their culture to provide them with the best of all possible worlds . . .³

This paper explores the role of the council of spokesmen known as the *borkotto bitti* in Kara, a polity of around 1400 people on the Lower Omo in southern Ethiopia. While there is a general dearth of reliable historical information on any of the groups of South Omo, especially little has been published on the Kara. Organised in two territorial sections and three major villages, the Kara today occupy the eastern side of the Omo River, and engage in highly efficient subsistence production (sorghum, maize) on its banks. Little integrated into the Ethiopian state, they nevertheless earn much supplementary income through tourism. Their livelihood is threatened by the

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encroachment of a population known as Nyangatom from the west, and more fundamentally by the progress in the construction of major dams upriver which entails the plan to turn Kara country into an industrial irrigation site. Up until now, despite being both culturally and linguistically similar to their much more numerous eastern neighbours, the Hamar, Banna, and Bashada, the Kara have managed to maintain their distinction and political autonomy. In this, the *borkotto bitti* play an important role.

In some early fieldnotes, I compared the *borkotto bitti* to the “philosopher-kings”, the envisioned rulers in Plato’s *Republic*, the Socratic dialogue on an optimally just form of governing the utopian city. Both the philosopher-kings and the *borkotto bitti* are supposed to be the perfect leaders by their very nature, i.e., their cleverness and their virtue. They are self-appointed thinkers who always know what is best for the whole community and always think of the community first. The sophisticated reflections which I encountered in the Kara’s discussion of their *borkotto bitti*, as well as the related issues of decision-making and community, echoed Socrates’ dialogic argument about the ideal community. Later, I contrast the Kara with their culturally close neighbours, the Hamar and Bashada, whose ways of decision-making are just different enough to provide some meaningful insights.

Both comparisons serve the higher purpose of exposing people’s struggles in reconciling social theory and social practice. The Kara constantly need to cope with an incongruence of ideology and experienced reality – as, in fact, is true for most people anywhere, anytime. Do they endure this dissonance, as the common “false consciousness” notion suggests, or do they collude in maintaining the status quo out of rational calculation? The eponymous “reflections”, then, are not just my own: anthropological comparison here meets native debates on the good, i.e., the moral and effective way of institutionalising decision-making, a crucial if often bothersome element of social life. Plato, a philosopher himself, did not face this difficulty.⁴ He has Socrates wonder

whether the outstanding practitioners of philosophy were compelled to take charge of a community at some point in the infinity of past time, or whether they are now being compelled to do so in a foreign land which lies far beyond the limits of our awareness, or whether they will be compelled to do so in the future, we are prepared to insist that the political system we’ve described either did or does or will exist, whenever it is that the Muse of philosophy takes control of a community.⁵

I take this as a cue to highlight not merely that the Kara have been concerned with similar issues as Plato, but rather that no look at a “political system” (and its internal contradictions) is complete without people’s own reflections about it. Thus, even as I am not directly comparing the Kara *borkotto bitti* to Plato’s philosopher-kings, they both inhabit the same conceptual field, and the direct comparison of Kara and Hamar can be helpfully cross-fertilized by Socrates’ utopian ideas. Before getting to these comparisons, I need to illustrate the present-day situation in Kara.

The rise of the committees

The local school, the irrigation site, Mago National Park, the tourist campsite, the national “Safety Net” initiative – between 2006 and 2007, these were just some of the issues the Kara were facing for which they set up committees, locally known as

kompteh. Such a committee usually consisted of six to ten mostly young men, and certain to include somebody with enough schooling to be competent in the national language Amharic and in basic book-keeping. Each of these issues for which there were *kompteh* was, by and large, “contact-induced”, i.e., they emerged only when a branch of the local administration, an NGO, or an entrepreneur had involved the Kara in one of their projects, and demanded reliable spokespersons to deal with instead of facing an ever-changing crowd whenever they needed to disburse information or gain a token of agreement. Not having outright refused cooperation to any of these endeavours, the Kara thus came to experience the necessity of delegating. Participating in meetings and asking people about their activities in the *kompteh*, I was surprised by the routine way in which such demands were being accommodated, sometimes vigorously so: for young men, the *kompteh* provide arenas for the presentation of self, practice of oratory, and acquisition of experience in dealing with office-holders and entrepreneurs. Committee tasks were commonly acknowledged as being moral in that they served the sake of the whole community.⁶ The numerous committee members, then, were involved in negotiations ranging from school attendance of girls to food aid distribution for orphans and the villages’ benefits from hosting tourists, all the while representing and protecting “the interests of the Kara”.⁷

Initially, this rise of the *kompteh* seemed to me as an obviously recent adaptation to change, as people struggled to retain a measure of control over development projects, implementation of policies, and other people wanting to make money in or rather off their land. This assumption was based on my earlier recognition of the difficulties Kara had when faced with questions of decision-making and representation in interaction with non-Kara. For a long time the Kara seemed to me largely and proudly politically acephalous, and I had observed that situations in which somebody had to speak for or represent “the Kara” were always difficult and fraught with social dangers.

With increasing length of fieldwork, however, I learned about the Kara elders known as the *borkotto bitti*, translatable as the “leaders of the headrest” or, more literally, “the first ones of the chair”. As the second English translation felicitously evokes, these men act as indigenous “chair-men”, somehow constituting a *kompteh* responsible for the whole land. They are sovereign thinkers and planners, and their existence is largely unknown to outside actors, who usually work on the assumption – when facing Kara – that they are either dealing with an egalitarian crowd or with largely autonomous individuals.⁸ But are the *borkotto bitti* also a *kompteh* or rather a council? F.G. Bailey has pointed out that there is a clear analytical difference between “council” and “committee”:

[T]he council is superordinate and has sovereignty; the committee has its task and the power it possesses delegated to it from above. But in practice the difference is not so sharp. [...] A second difference is that a committee meets in private, whereas a council may debate before an audience. This difference is clearly likely to affect members’ behaviour towards one another.⁹

This distinction again needs to be understood as the actors’ problem, more so than of the observer: while we should not seek our institutional ideal-types here, and the Kara make no such lexical distinction, they are troubled by the implicit questions of who is accountable to whom, and whether their spokesmen truly speak for the community because they have been delegated this task, or whether their spokesmen

may be seek sovereignty themselves. These are shades of Plato; but before discussing the *borkotto bitti* themselves, both in terms of what they did do and the idealist view of what they should do, I provide an overview of decision-making and representation in Kara.¹⁰ The analysis of the *borkotto bitti* can only proceed from an understanding of this wider context.

Kara decision-making

The individual elder in Kara, a *zonza*, i.e., any married man irrespective of age, has a considerable degree of autonomy in most quotidian and domestic dealings. Much more than, for example, age-set initiation, marriage is the apical point of a man's coming-of-age, as it makes him a part of the *zersi*, the decision-making body of elders detailed below. A large degree of variation is possible in how intensively a man involves himself in public affairs, but to all intents and purposes, he is the smallest political unit.¹¹ Still, many of the decisions, which in principle are within the authority of a single *zonza*, are in fact made within the *moro*, the patriline, usually restricted to a depth of three generations. The *olo*, the clan, consisting of several *moro*, very rarely acts in a corporate fashion.

Beyond kin-groups, the ritual leaders of Kara need to be addressed, the *bitti* (without other qualifiers), who wield spiritual powers and whose blessings are of enormous efficacy for the prosperity and fertility of the entire land, both in war and peace. Each responsible for a certain section of the land, the *bitti* hold central positions in Kara ritual life, but have no particular clout in everyday affairs or politics. *Bittamo*, the hereditary office and its connected duties, do not require much pro-active engagement or dramatic display. Instead of making decisions, *bitti* provide essential and danger-loaded ritual services for the body politic.

In casual use, the title *bitti* also refers to the government-appointed spokesmen of the three Kara administrative units (*kebele*) Labuk, Dus, and Korcho. Each such *bitti* heads a committee of three other salaried men, called *kabin* in Kara (from "cabinet", via Amharic). Most generally, the Kara expect their *kabin* to regularly attend gatherings, to make an effort of satisfying the demands of the district (the "Hamar *woreda*") so as to prevent that "the Kara" gain a bad name, and to do their best to aid their community.¹² The *kabin* with their government-paid *bitti*, then, communicate decisions made by "the Kara" to their liaisons in the administration, and they perform and give speeches at official occasions. Compromised by the fact that they "eat", that they earn money in their position, the *kabin* risk occasionally being berated by both their Kara constituency and the *jumpa* (or *habesha*), i.e., the "highlanders" representing the Ethiopian state. This makes them accountable to the administration as well as suspicious to the Kara, who demand that this sort of *bitti* should be "a slave of the people". Between 2003 and 2008, several *kabin* have been deposed from their positions by their constituencies. But who exactly are these "the people" whose slaves the *kabin* should be?

They are the male elders who make up the *zersi*.¹³ According to Strecker, the term itself refers to "a certain grass that covers the ground like a web",¹⁴ but in a social context it indicates the impromptu gathering of the *zonza*, the elders of a settlement, for the purpose of dealing with a given issue. Whenever a public disturbance occasions it, the male elders present will assemble, adopt "conciliatory behaviour",¹⁵ assess the case, and decide what is to be done. The *zersi* can issue fines, order beatings, and make fairly binding declarations. Existing mostly as a situational



Figure 1. Map of Kara in the Omo Valley.

formation, the *zersi* dissolves back into *zonza* after having issued redress, or more generally, having “fixed the land”. In this way, the *zersi* is a Kara institution of central importance for decision-making, intimately tied to settlement membership and elder status. This ad hoc adjudication of issues is an important factor in how settlements gain coherence as corporate bodies in the first place. Much exchange of information and informal debating occurs at night, as the men sit on the dancing ground and talk amongst each other, but, occasionally, special meetings are called: when an elder walks through a village blowing a small metal trumpet, something has to be attended to. Usually, the *zersi* seek some sort of consensus in

their debates, which does not mean that there are no heated arguments when the *zonza* meet.

In this factionalism, the *zersi* fit well the model of the “arena council” as outlined by the political anthropologist F.G. Bailey, and later elaborated and criticised by Adam Kuper,¹⁶ as all *zonza* are free to promote their own interests to a certain degree. Total consensus is not required. Sociologically, the *zersi* are an instance of the “community-in-council”, in which the public is essentially identical with its own council. The nature of the *zersi* in practice as well as in linguistic usage is well mirrored by Bloch’s analysis of the *fokon’olona* notion of the Merina from Madagascar. He calls the *fokon’olona* an “ill-defined morally bound community”, and especially a “political unit whose main manifestation is its ability to gather together in a council”.¹⁷ This pithy phrase expresses how the *zersi* briefly gather and disperse, and only exist in the moment of taking action. Bloch also manages to dissolve the conceptual division between the community and “its council” by stating that “[t]he *fokon’olona* is the *fokon’olona* doing something”, and this applies just as well to Kara settlements, truly “ill-defined morally bound communities” which become a little better defined as their respective *zersi* take decisions.

To sum up, neither kinship groups, nor the ritual *bitti* or the government-appointed *bitti* exert strong influence on Kara decision-making. The central site where decisions are sanctioned, then, is the gathering of the *zersi*, whether ad hoc or in some regularity. There, each married man (*zonza*) sits on his chair and has the right to challenge claims which are put forward and suggest alternative positions. But instead of all elders being equal when sitting together, it is during those gatherings that the *borkotto bitti* make themselves felt.

The original committee: the *borkotto bitti*

At some unknown point in Kara history, the *borkotto bitti* have taken on the duty to discern impending problems, to point out transgressions, and to formulate strategies for the population to implement.¹⁸ They concern themselves with both morality and practical needs, and they do this – as a committee would – first among themselves, and only present their final deliberations to the *zersi* when the time is right. The institution is inextricably related to oratory: while not all *borkotto bitti* seek the stage, and while not all are gifted spokesmen, it is one of their stereotypical features to be *delak-ed* (“talk persons”), able to convince the public of their perspicacity. When one *borkotto bitti* speaks, all others (acknowledged as the best and brightest minds of all generations) virtually stand behind him. The *borkotto bitti* regularly preside over fateful issues, and must be considered the real movers and shakers of Kara, or rather, in the terms of Plato’s *Republic*, its guardians:

“Is there a branch of knowledge which some of the inhabitants of the community we’ve just founded have, which enables it to think resourcefully about the whole community, not just some element of it, and about enhancing the whole community’s domestic and foreign policies?” “There certainly is.” “What is it?” I asked. “And which of the citizens have it?” “It is guardianship,” he replied, “and the people who have it are those rulers – the ones we not long ago called guardians in the strict sense of the word.”¹⁹

Most of what I know about the *borkotto bitti* I learned after my hunting-friend Haila, along with four other men, was called upon to join the *borkotto bitti* of the

Nyuwaya section in August 2006.²⁰ I attended the public ceremony during which the names of the new recruits were announced. At this *osh* (a ceremonial public meeting),²¹ a few goats were stabbed and consumed at the *taasa*, the ritual crescent of leaves, behind which all the attendants were sitting on their *borkotto*-stools. Some speakers went on about the state of the land, and one particularly respected *borkotto bitti* proclaimed the names of the five neophytes. Three of them were named as “full members” right away (*atsi*, the “teeth” of a spear), the other two becoming *borkotto bitti* on probation, as it were (*sug-sug*, the spear-shafts).²²

Later that same evening, in a more exclusive setting, the new members hosted the old guard, and were individually and in twos given advice on their duties and their code of conduct. I did not try and record these quiet conversations, and can only present what I was told about them afterwards. As I watched, two other young men were displaying their disgruntlement at not having been chosen. One of them simply mixed and mingled at the evening event, sitting down where people were conducting private talks, and making a nuisance of himself. His dead father had been a famous spokesman, and he – so people whispered – apparently felt he had a hereditary claim to the office. The second malcontent got himself sufficiently drunk to nearly get into a physical confrontation with another elder, and the evening’s solemn atmosphere was somewhat spoilt when threats were yelled and bullets were chambered.

Both reactions go against the cultural ideals embodied by the *borkotto bitti*, so that the two of them actually provided grounds for their non-inclusion among the *borkotto bitti* ex post facto: people who cannot restrain themselves in public, who have no control over their temper, people who literally do not know their place have no place among the select elect. One cannot demand or even expect to be included; the privilege has to be bestowed, and the decision by the *borkotto bitti* must not be and really cannot be contested.

When taking their place among the *borkotto bitti*, then, my friends were primarily impressed by the strict directions on how to comport themselves: first of all, never should one *borkotto bitti* voice his opinion without another one being present. How to interpret this rule? For my friends, it served as a warning not to indulge in flippant and inconsequential acts of speaking, even in an informal setting. Their talk should always be true, never false or – especially – never disputable. To always have two *borkotto bitti* together gives them a chance to back up one another, should the claims of one of them be disputed. To have a *borkotto bitti* lose public debates against non-members would be nearly as bad as infighting among *borkotto bitti*. In that regard, for new members to develop initial inhibitions to freely give their opinion might be helpful – *si tacuisses, philosophus mansisses*. This also leads to a recurrent theme of Kara debates on social order: unity of purpose is effectiveness. I will return to this notion, as it informs most Kara reflections on decision-making, and was equally applied to the *borkotto bitti*. While keeping their mouths guarded, *borkotto bitti* should keep their ears open and be alert to potential problems and troublemakers, i.e., people who agitate, spread rumours or lies, and generally disturb the confidence of the land.

To join the select elect, then, had another drawback, as my friends quickly realised: “Not everybody speaks freely in front of *borkotto bitti* anymore. Now if we are quiet and just sit and listen when our age-mates are discussing, they will not see us as [trustworthy] equals anymore.” They feared that friendships with their most important social peers would be damaged and endangered, reason enough not to display any pride of having been chosen. Even without such presumptions, some

ambiguity crept into everyday affairs. After my friends had been made *borkotto bitti*, I became sensitised to the actions of people I knew to be members as well. For a time, whenever a *borkotto bitti* came to specifically talk to my hunting-friend Haila, I was wondering whether this was just a social call (as it appeared), or whether it was some sort of test, or even served to remind him of his new status. In conversations with Haila it turned out that he himself had also occasionally wondered the same thing: for example, after a meeting, both of us came away with the distinct impression that an influential elder (also a *borkotto bitti*) had been talking expressly to or even at Haila. Other elders were coming by our house more often, even some who had never come over for coffee before. The feeling that there was more to such innocuous encounters than met the eye was not quickly dispelled. This uncertainty is systemic: how is anybody to know whether a *borkotto bitti* is ever off-duty, so to speak, how can one be sure that an innocent conversation with one of them was just that, and not a test of how competent and committed one really is?

This has obvious practical effects, which point towards an apt sociological type: in Bailey's terminology, the *borkotto bitti* are the "elite council" for and of their *zersi*. They are horizontally divided from the larger public, as not everybody is quite good enough to join, and this puts them in structural opposition to the *zersi*. While on the face of it advisory, the influence of the *borkotto bitti* on decision-making is often considerable, as is often true for elite councils.²³

For this to work, then, it is necessary that the autonomy of the assembled *zonza* is not directly curtailed; they need to be able to at least pretend that they are free men with a free voice. This collusive moment reframes Black's remark that "anthropological emphasis is almost always brought to bear upon the supposedly egalitarian features of such societies, so that the precise nature of the ascendancy exercised by individuals and the extent of their coercive potential invariably receive scant attention".²⁴ It is not only anthropologists who cherish egalitarian presumptions. The Kara themselves have to reconcile their demands for individual autonomy with their own acknowledgments that centrifugal tendencies disrupt their collective agency. This "saving lie"²⁵ requires the *borkotto bitti* to reliably deliver plausible interpretations of the situation, as well as feasible plans for the *zersi* to embrace. The assembled *zonza*, in turn, need to be able to rely on both the morality and the cleverness of the *borkotto bitti* without reservation.²⁶ The *borkotto bitti* have to be role models, categorically, exhibiting a moral standard anyone would aspire to in addition to striving to display perspicacity.

But not only in their purported individual behaviour do the *borkotto bitti* set themselves apart from the rest of the population. A *borkotto bitti* council acts like a hermetic cell, assuming the right and claiming the capability to say what is right and what is wrong, which is especially striking in the moment of recruitment of new members. The *borkotto bitti* cannot easily be held accountable by non-members, since the latter simply do not have the qualification to judge the *borkotto bitti*'s actions – if they were qualified, they certainly would be members. To return to the earlier point about my disgruntled age-mates: that they claimed their eligibility proved their non-eligibility, and also showed that they did not have the required faith in the competence of the *borkotto bitti*.

Beyond this ideal, self-reinforcing model, the claims of the *borkotto bitti* on how certain situations should be defined, and what action needs to be taken, are hard to assail in practice. The institution as such, allegedly based on virtue and cleverness, is largely immune to criticism. As long as they manage to close ranks, the *borkotto bitti*

can maintain their persuasive power. They must leave no openings, acknowledge no rivals, and allow no alternatives, so that no challenges against the united bloc of skilled speakers and respected elders can even emerge. Members who flout the above-given rule of always acting in concert quickly fall from grace, first being warned, then temporarily excluded, finally barred – as they need to, lest they demean and besmirch the office as such, a pattern Kuper sees as typical for such elite councils.²⁷

Thus, recruitment is central: the *borkotto bitti* perpetuate their institution by regularly recruiting young men who show promise in their cleverness and their character, especially for a composed, responsible manner. Is it an unexpected side-effect that by integrating people who are already considered to be both clever and upright, by co-opting charisma, as it were, any potential competition is pre-empted? Or is it part of a deliberate strategy? This question leads back to the earlier statement that if the dominion of the *borkotto bitti* is to be challenged, then it has to be from within. Outside, there simply is no eligible challenger, unless some candidates – when called upon – would dare the unthinkable and refuse the call.²⁸

In summary, in this section I have traced how the *borkotto bitti* influence gatherings of the *zersi* and how they recruit their new members. These procedures also revealed something about Kara views on unity and effectiveness; I explore this further in the next section.

Challenges to unity, threats to decisiveness?

Kara tend to view internal strains as intrinsically bad in regard to agency: if one wants to achieve something, anything, unity takes priority over group size. I suggest that this notion has achieved ideological status in Kara, in that it is sufficiently palpable and plausible to trigger as well as justify and explain action. Smaller, tighter groups are preferable to large, inherently diffuse crowds: if there are too many people, opinions, or distractions, Kara expect the centrifugal tendencies to disperse any power, drive, and unity of purpose and direction a group might have had. A brief linguistic example illustrates this.

I often listened to accounts about groups of people who set out to do something or other, but then the individuals making up the group either got distracted or found something to disagree over. A typical way of ending these stories was by unceremoniously saying “Zerr! [speaker shrugs, spreads their fingers and moves apart the palms] Lalmo.” *Zerr* belongs to the ideophones, which form “a large class of words” in the Hamar language cluster, and which serve to “sum up a state of affairs”, in the case of *zerr* a state of being scattered.²⁹ For the sound image, think of somebody tossing a bundle of thin wooden sticks to the ground. *Lalmo* is the noun-form of *lalma*, “to be thwarted, confounded, foiled”. It is a common one-word statement, and denotes failure. This idiomatic utterance evokes well an initially resolute group of men dissolving into ineffectuality as each goes his own way, and entails a significant statement on the ontology of groups and on their agency (i.e., their capacity to act), a Kara understanding of how people in corporation, be it institutionalised or ad hoc, can achieve their aims. Whoever wants to achieve something in the social world needs to close ranks and not waver when implementing their decisions. A group which is undecided, in that sense, is not even one, an understanding which explicitly underlies the training of new *borkotto bitti* candidates.³⁰ This reveals a high degree of reflection when Kara proclaim that the *borkotto bitti* safeguard the unity of the whole body politic, by preventing the

centrifugal tendencies which people know inhere in the unfocused gatherings of the *zersi*.

The extent to which the proclivities to autonomous action are perceived as a threat can be illustrated. An age-mate and I had been talking about the ongoing fighting between Kara and their western neighbours, the Nyangatom, over control of the Omo River. Recently, the Kara had learnt that the river itself might become the new official boundary between their district and the Nyangatom district. Even as this presented a considerable threat to the Kara livelihood, my friend lamented, some Kara were still putting individual self-interest first. But, as he said, if bullets would start flying, “that’s over and done with”:

Then everybody will listen to the *zersi*, as was the case in the past. Today, the land is spoilt, everybody is only thinking of themselves, and goes about their own private business. Some people even gave the Nyangatom fields to cultivate, without consulting with the *zersi* beforehand. For that, they ought to have been beaten. The same with goats – if one wants to sell goats to Hamar or Nyangatom, this should also only happen with the consent from the *zersi*. In earlier times people used to say that the father of the goats is only the father by way of saying – the true owner are the *zersi*. Also bullets and rifles should only ever leave the land with permission – so when a Hamar comes and asks you for bullets, you should tell him, “Wait a few days, I have to check, come back later.” The *zersi* then would fix a price, for example, one should sell to the Hamar for 10 birr only. So if one comes and asks you for a discount, again you consult with the *zersi*, and maybe they will say, “alright, we might require some good will from the Hamar in the near future, so reduce the price a little”, and then you sell for 7 or 8 birr.

But the Kara are weak now, withered. You know that the Nyangatom used to sell bullets to us for as little as 3 or 4 birr. When they started charging 5 birr at some point, and the Kara refused to accept that, the Nyangatom realised our vulnerability: you cannot load your gun with money. If they sell no bullets to us, then all our money is just leaves. So they, like one, raised the price to 10 birr, and they don’t even give the slightest discount. So even though they are so many, they act united, and this shows that they have become clever.

Or consider the Hamar – you probably have not heard about this one. Recently, one of their *borkotto bitti*³¹ somewhere up in the mountains told them to relocate all the cattle, from everywhere, to the area downhill of Kizo. And the herders, even though they knew nothing of the reasons, just said “alright”, and prepared to do it. . . . Even they, although they are so many, jointly obey the one voice who speaks from up there.

I want to direct attention to one specific point: “the land is spoilt”. He depicts the community as anomic today, as people pursue their own economic (or other) advantage. This disposition is wont to harm all Kara by showing outsiders just how divided the Kara are: and divisions are ruthlessly exploited, as by the clever Nyangatom who presented a united front and made the Kara pay through their nose for the bullets. After the Nyangatom first raised the price of bullets to 5 birr, many Kara had been upset and refused to pay, assuming that the Nyangatom would reduce the price again eventually. One very important *borkotto bitti* had berated the others for their pettiness and greed, which revealed lacking resolve, and with the later turn of events, his foresight was proven very right indeed.

In another disconcerting development, the Kara now fail in closing ranks and in putting the good of the community before their individual interests. The narrative alleges that their neighbours, namely Nyangatom and Hamar, do manage to act in concert despite their much greater numbers. This strikes at the heart of Kara self-perception, which is grounded in claims of cleverness and the claim that precisely because they are so few, they need to be ruthless, close and decisive: it is these

capabilities, they assert, which have sustained them so long in the face constant pressure.

The universal tension between individual autonomy and subordination to the moral community thus finds contemporary expression in Kara: while autonomy is cherished, and the individual *zonza's* capacity to act with utter disregard of others' opinions is admired,³² this directly contradicts the explicit Kara ideology emphasising both the morality and expediency of concerted action, which the *borkotto bitti* are supposed to facilitate.

The example illustrates how in Kara, small numbers are conceptually related to decisiveness and agency in general, and how the *borkotto bitti* are the institutionalised epitome of this general principle. Simultaneously, though, critical voices can be heard which name the *borkotto bitti* as part of the problem, the very general problem of the land being "spoilt", and not as part of the solution: recently, petty jealousies between *borkotto bitti* had caused great trouble.

Around the year 2000, the Nyuwaya section *borkotto bitti* had convened to install some new candidates, and simply not invited three other respected elders, all long-time members. These ostracised ones furiously demanded restitution of the earlier state of affairs, seeing themselves wronged. When they were refused, they set up their own *borkotto bitti* group, and themselves selected a group of other young men to join them. Soon, the entire section split into two increasingly aggressive factions. At some point, the people from Labuk and the Nyuwaria section of Dus stepped in to mediate and prevent imminent bloodshed. They blamed the old *borkotto bitti* who had transgressed first by excluding the other members in such an underhanded way, and made them all reassemble in their old formation, to jointly appoint new members. The internal disagreements from within the *borkotto bitti*, several of whom had apparently forgotten about the common weal, had set the country ablaze.

I learned of this divisive potential late in my fieldwork. As they were giving me this account, my age-mates (precisely the ones who had been inducted into the *borkotto bitti* before) loudly declared: "*Ke shide! Kalun, kalun!* - It [the institution] should be left behind, fully, completely!" They also held that today, the institution of *borkotto bitti* had become hypertrophic, grown to the point of inefficiency. There were too many members already, and yet more were being inducted. "If no-one is left to administer, what's the point?", one of them exclaimed. When listing all the *borkotto bitti* of Dus, somebody wryly remarked that of the Nyikuamong age-set (men of about 50–55 years), only one person had not been included so far, a man known for his particularly quiet manner. This over-representation was an obvious sign that the selection of members was no longer based on virtues of cleverness and propriety, if in fact it ever had been. The critics implied that for the *borkotto bitti*, the upkeep of their elite status had become their primary goal: it seemed more like a social club than a council of the best and the brightest.

According to my interlocutors, who had recently experienced this, there were dangers in elevating individuals over their friends and age-mates, as this induced both arrogance here and embitterment there. In this arena, the Kara views on unity and decisiveness as elaborated above are under constant tension, as they entail flouting other, egalitarian norms, and the in principle consensual nature of decision-making. All these reflections let the *borkotto bitti* appear as a liability more than an asset.

Comparing Hamar and Kara ideals and practice

Kara ideals as well as practice of decision-making do not exist, and have never existed, in a secluded conceptual space. The Kara themselves often engage in comparison, and do perceive how their neighbours have institutionalised decision-making, and how corporate unity is traded off against individuals' autonomy in other places. For an insightful comparison, I now turn to the Kara's regional "significant others", the Hamar and Bashada, to work out some differences and parallels. While somewhat more pastoral than the predominantly horticultural Kara, these groups are most similar to the Kara in terms of language and culture, and all are in perennial contact. Drawing on the existing Hamar and Bashada scholarship, my argument focuses on the relationship between the public (there: *zarsi*) and appointed spokesmen (there: *ayo*). In general, many of the cultural institutions of Kara and those whom they call "the mountain people" (Hamar, Bashada, also Banna) can be usefully compared: even as they are rarely identical, one usually finds an equivalent practice. Their languages are mutually intelligible, but significantly different, so that Kara and "mountain people" often engage in comparison between them themselves, asserting and denying their differences as well as their similarities for situational or strategic purposes.

The most relevant statements on the office of the *ayo* spokesmen are found in the work of Eppe (Bashada) and Strecker (Hamar).³³ As befits the more dispersed settlements of these mountain dwellers, rather than large, village-based councils of *borkotto bitti* establishing themselves, here, small hamlets select individual spokesmen. This recruitment has been captured well by Baldambe, the old Hamar friend and teacher of Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker:

If the *bitta* dies his son will become a *bitta*. The spokesman is the heart. If the spokesman dies his son will not necessarily become a spokesman. The spokesman grows up like the *kuntsale* grass, he emerges from among his age mates he is the one who knows how to talk, his heart is strong.³⁴ So-and-so is a spokesman, let him become a spokesman. If the father is the *bitta* his son will become a *bitta* even if he is stupid. If the father is a *jilo* his eldest son will become *jilo* even if he is stupid. If a *gudili* dies and his son is stupid he will not become a *gudili*. Looking for one who is bright and has *barjo* the people consult the sandal oracle and select their *gudili*. "This one is intelligent, his word is full, let him become a *gudili*." In this way the office of spokesman and *gudili* are the same, for the stupid child does not carry it on.³⁵

So in a way similar to Kara, Hamar spokesmen are chosen for cleverness, virtue and courage, to wit, for their moral capacities, and descent does not grant any privileged access to the office. The name *ayo* itself points to the expectations people have of the incumbents: it comes "from *aya*, 'to do', in which case it could be translated as 'do-er'", "[s]o the '*ayo*' are the ones who get things done, they are leaders, and they lead especially by what they say".³⁶

These spokesmen, then, speak in larger arenas on behalf of their settlements, or negotiate with administrators when required.³⁷ Ivo Strecker's description of how the Hamar *zarsi* come together to deal with an issue is similar to the Kara model – up to a point:

When the usual routine of Hamar herding, farming, hunting, gathering etc., is threatened by sickness, drought, internal or external conflict etc., the political process sets into motion. First responses happen on an individual level. People ponder quietly

over the seriousness of the affair and individually look for signs in nature, clouds, stars, sounds of animals and children etc., which help them to interpret what is happening.³⁸

While Kara make few references to signs in nature, the description of how the individual spokesman sees threats looming long before they become acute is very similar. Strecker continues, stating that “[o]nce a problem has reached such a proportion that public decisions have become necessary, the married men (*donza*) of a locality are called to a public meeting (*osh*)”. Here, the Kara procedure diverges. Before even informing the *zersi*, the *borkotto bitti* would contrive to meet, share their views, and already begin formulating measures. When an *osh* would eventually be called, the *zersi* should generally follow the suggestions voiced by the *borkotto bitti*. A central statement by Epple presents the maximal contrast to what I have presented so far: “[T]he *ayo* cannot make any decision without the consent of the community”.³⁹ My contrasting claim is that the *borkotto bitti* of Kara strategically try and keep the community in a state where it routinely complies with the courses of action suggested by the *borkotto bitti*.

The comparison is instructive, as despite their many similarities, the village-dwelling Kara practise a very different sociality as compared to the hamlet-dwelling Hamar. Many of the latter’s homesteads are even solitary one-family settlements, or small clusters of friends and relations, whereas in Kara contact is highly regular, inevitably multiplex, and people meet their age-mates, in-laws, fellow clan-members, or hunting friends every day.⁴⁰ It is difficult to set oneself apart. Having gotten used to social life in Kara, upon entering Hamar homesteads I was often struck by the prominent platform just beyond the doorway on the right-hand side: the *geddi*. It is elevated, and often held up and made more imposing by a row of wooden poles sunk around it into the ground. On this, and again on his *borkotto* stool, there sits the elder (*donza*), the master of all he surveys, his head high above all others who have entered his domain. A community in which men routinely use the *geddi* will deal differently with authority and decision-making from one in which most men come face to face day after day, and in which age-set solidarity is particularly strong. In all of Kara I only ever saw two *geddi*, more haphazardly than regularly used; being hosted there, with the *zonza* of the house sitting markedly apart from his visitors, had a very different tenor from other Kara homesteads, where people mixed and mingled much more easily.

Ivo Strecker has consistently highlighted the tension between the individual *donza* and the *zarsi* in Hamar. Office holders such as the *jilo*, *bitta*, *gudili* and the *ayo* mentioned above are “jealously watched by the *donza* who, each in his own independent way, shape the politics of Hamar every-day life”.⁴¹ From his description, Hamar decision-making emerges as

the exact opposite of centralized politics. The former begin with a multitude of wills which come to a consensus while the latter begin with a single will which imposes itself on a multitude of others. [...] There is no single will which imposes itself on others, but rather many different wills which first and then move towards each other, find consensus and act together. Such agreement never lasts, because things change, new problems arise and the political process is set into motion again. Egalitarian political discourse converges from difference of view to consensus.

This vantage point shows what the *borkotto bitti* are set to achieve, what a herculean task this committee has set upon itself: they try and feel out an eventual consensus,

and invest rhetorical efforts (helped by the pre-stabilised authority of their office) to make the *zersi* accept the offered suggestions. When Strecker furthermore proclaims that “[i]f there is any axiom which characterises Hamar social life then it is the rejection of [institutional] authority”, this is essentially true for Kara as well; already children are constantly encouraged to assert themselves against impositions. But living together as they do, Kara have accepted constraints on each individual’s autonomy and thus the anarchic tendencies of the polity by allowing the *borkotto bitti* to exist. Not that this is unimaginable for Hamar. Ivo Strecker has also identified in Hamar a sense of longing for an (imagined?) past in which they lived much more like the Kara do now:

I can see how Lokaribuk and Choke would like to be “real” men who have effective control over public affairs. But the reality of Hamar social life makes this impossible. . . . Was Hamar social organization more disciplined [two or three generations ago] than it is today? Were the settlements really more compact and larger then? Did powerful age-sets exist? And did the seasonal meetings at the various territorial gathering points (*boaka*) result in greater social uniformity and solidarity? Or are these fragments of history which reach us today projections and images that were never actually realised?⁴²

This juxtaposition raises the question of historical connections between Hamar and Kara. Did the latter split off at some point to establish a new frontier, in the typical African pattern described by Kopytoff?⁴³ Are the *borkotto bitti* a survival from earlier times, are they a part of a Utopian project, or simply an adaptation to a new environment? Without engaging in conjectural history, it is clear how settlement structure (dispersed vs. close-knit) and socially agreed upon constraints on anarchic tendencies (situational vs. institutional) might have facilitated one another.

From an anthropological point of view, this parallels E. Leach’s description of the Kachin *gumsa* and *gumlao* models of political organisation are relevant. Both these “theories of government”⁴⁴ are the participants’ models, and the oscillation between them derives not from some natural equilibrium, but through the actions of people who are frustrated with their political situations, with either hierarchy or the lack thereof. This, then, is a profitable view to consider the Hamar–Kara comparison: even lacking historical data, we see how the dispersed, anarchic organisation of Hamar has some appeal to Kara who are fed up with their aloof *borkotto bitti*, just as individual Hamar elders wish for a position of influence and authority.

Conclusion: Plato on the Omo?

When dealing with the problem of decision-making in the face of grave necessities, Kara are torn between assertions of individuality and demands for unity. Abstractly speaking, the *borkotto bitti* are a solution to this problem, as in principle their actions and the way this body is formed address both sides of this predicament. The link to Plato serves to show the parallels in the reflections on how to organise a polity.⁴⁵ Both the Kara and Plato have decided to put trust in a council of a few leaders, “guardians”, who through their rare set of abilities are uniquely qualified to both make decisions and to deserve the trust of “the masses”:

So when a community is founded on natural principles, the wisdom it has as a whole is due to the smallest grouping and section within it and to the knowledge possessed by this group, which is the authoritative and ruling section of the community.⁴⁶

In both models, though, the hardest task falls on the masses: to acknowledge their alleged inferiority in terms of cleverness and virtue. In Kara, this is where stress and tension arise, as people both resent their own non-inclusion and point to failures of the *borkotto bitti* themselves in upholding morality and unity.

What kinds of obligations derive from cleverness, superior foresight and skill in oratory? What can communities demand from individuals, both in terms of the moral duty to take on an office, and the equally moral duty to accept their place lower in the hierarchy? Kara regularly argue that it is better for the whole if some few are decisive, and the rest will stand with them. This legitimises the existence of the *borkotto bitti*, along with the assumptions about the capabilities of these office holders, who are a priori both clever and of good character. In the face of the egalitarian ethos and the proclivities for differentiation evident in Kara, and the current hypertrophy of the institution, this constellation cannot remain free from tensions.

Considering the challenges the Kara face today, as evidenced by the numerous *kompteh* with which I began this article, the last word on the *borkotto bitti* has not yet been spoken – neither by anthropologists, nor the Kara. It remains open how the Kara will deal with the contradictions inherent in their decision-making processes; but this question will not be decided by unseen forces, but by people’s sophisticated reflections on their community and their individual positions in it.

Notes

1. Plato, *Republic*, 270.
2. Lydall and Strecker, *Baldambe*, 125, 212.
3. Kopytoff, *African Frontier*, 66.
4. Here, I wilfully disregard the fragmentary reports of Plato’s attempts to implement his idea of a state run by philosophers at Syracuse in Sicily (Rosen, *Plato’s Republic*, 9; Waterfield, “Introduction,” xiv).
5. Plato, *Republic*, 222f.
6. As a confirmation of this hypothesis *ex negativo*, in several instances committee members were harangued for not fulfilling their duties, mostly as they were privileging one subgroup of Kara over another.
7. Compare Richards, “The Nature,” 9.
8. The *borkotto bitti* go unmentioned in the first study of the Kara (Gezahegn, “The Karo”).
9. Bailey, “Decisions by Consensus,” 20.
10. The totality of people calling themselves “Kara” comprises the ethnic majority, whom I call the “true Kara”, as well as in increasing ritual distance the Bogudo, the Gomba, and the Moguji as the four ethnic categories which are recognised as being “of the land”, as well as a number of immigrant Nyangatom-Kara. For each of these categories, different ritual rules apply. I am writing here primarily in reference to the “true Kara”, as the *borkotto bitti* are mostly “true Kara”.
11. See Strecker, “Political Discourse” and Strecker, “Do the Hamar Have a Concept of Honor?” on the Hamar *donza*.
12. These three principles were never espoused as such, but for each, I have heard people complain about the failure of one of the *kabin* to act accordingly, and I induced the “principle” accordingly.
13. See Strecker, *Traditional Life*, and Epple, “Ritual und Rollendifferenzierung,” 250, for the Hamar and Bashada *zarsi* respectively.
14. Strecker, *Traditional Life*, 59, and “Political Discourse.”
15. Richards, “The Nature,” 3.
16. Bailey, “Decisions by Consensus,” and Kuper, “Council Structure.”
17. Bloch, “Decision-Making,” 44f. Further references refer to the same argument.

18. Given how late the Omo Valley was explored by record-keeping travellers (see Girke, "Respect and Humiliation"), we have exceedingly little information about times as recent as the mid-nineteenth century. The Kara themselves are not particularly concerned with keeping a linear record of time, and even genealogical memory is rather shallow. Still, it is striking that in several historical narratives which I have recorded (for example, the destruction of the Garchi, see below as well as Girke, "The *Ádamo*"), *borkotto bitti* feature as the main actors, which of course might reflect current prejudices as much as historical fact, considering that other scholars (e.g., Bassi, pers. comm.) have recorded versions of this very story which emphasised an individual leader.
19. Plato, *Republic*, 134.
20. There are three separate *borkotto bitti* bodies, one for Labuk, and one each for the Nyuwaya and Nyiuwariya sections of Dus. I discuss these sections (*ball* in Kara, i.e. "dancing/meeting ground") in Girke, "The *Ádamo*."
21. See Strecker, "Hamer Speech."
22. The "spear" refers to the ritual spear which is wielded by speakers during the *osh*, as they walk up and down the *taasa* and talk. *Yihr*-men, that is the spiritually most valued elders whose first son has already gotten married, no longer wield the spear while speaking. They are also denied participation in warfare, or even long-distance travel.
23. Bailey, *Decisions by Consensus*; Kuper, "Council Structure," 14.
24. Black, "Tyranny," 614.
25. Bailey, *Saving Lie*.
26. The Kara both cherish displays of cleverness (*paxalmamo*) in internal arenas as well as highlight it as one of the diacritical features which sets them apart from (and above) their neighbours. See Girke, "The *Ádamo*."
27. Kuper, "Council Structure," 19.
28. In this regard it will be interesting to observe whether at some point in the future any of the young Kara men who have found employment with the administration will be called upon to join. Most of them certainly are acknowledged as clever and adept in their ways of dealing with the government, and in learning English and Amharic, but at the same time they seem to be trusted less to consistently act for the greater good of "the Kara", i.e., there is some doubt as to their character and moral worthiness. Thus, inviting any of them to join the *borkotto bitti* must be a well-considered action.
29. Lydall, "Hamär Dialect." See also Lydall, "Having Fun" and Tedlock, "Ideophone."
30. In my PhD thesis (Girke, "The *Ádamo*"), drawing on earlier work by David Turton and others, I discuss how the polities of South Omo are caught in what I call the "Wheel of Autonomy." This refers to a systemic relationship to their respective neighbours which requires them to constantly reassert their difference from others by visible exerting their agency if they want to retain their autonomy; the ultimate danger here is the dissolution of the polity. There are some striking instances around (for example the Gomba, Bogudo, Murle; see also Tornay, "Omo-Murle Enigma").
31. As I develop further below, while the Hamar do not have *borkotto bitti* per se, YN's comparison or translation of Hamar and Kara institutions is highly suggestive.
32. See Girke, "Bondfriendship."
33. Epple, "Ritual und Rollendifferenzierung," 51; Strecker, *Traditional Life*, 60.
34. *Kuntsale* is the name of the dwarf papyrus, which sports long, slender stalks that stick out above the surrounding vegetation. This notion complements the image of the spokesmen as tall grass which towers over lesser vegetation, i.e., the *zarsi*-grass (Strecker, "Political Discourse"). Whereas today's Kara spokesmen get some opportunity for honing their oratory in the aforementioned *kompteh*, Strecker pointed out that for the Hamar it was their cattle camps which served as "a sort of school for public speaking" (Lydall and Strecker, *Baldambe*, 250). Kara men rarely spend much time in cattle camps, due both to the relative paucity of cattle as well as the proximity of pasture.
35. Lydall and Strecker, *Baldambe*, 125. The Hamar *bitta* is in many ways the equivalent of the Kara *bitti*. Lydall and Strecker give the etymology of *bitta*, the parallel Hamar office, as "the first": the Hamar *bitta* was the first to enter the land and to call people from all the surrounding areas to become his subjects (*ibid.*).
36. Lydall and Strecker, *Baldambe*, 203; Strecker, "Political Discourse."

37. When *borkotto bitti* speak for the Kara, this is usually not done in terms of their being *borkotto bitti*; instead, they are cast as “influential elders”. The whole *borkotto bitti* institution and its central role in Kara decision-making is kept away from outsiders’ attention, with tactics reminiscent of how the Dassanech protected their “bulls”, the leaders of the senior age-set and both political and spiritual guardians of the country, from the administration’s prying eyes (Almagor, “Institutionalizing a Fringe Periphery,” 107). In the 1970s, the Dassanech had instead selected “leaders for the foreigners” (*kansitch okumba*, Almagor, “Year of the Emperor,” 1; similar to the Kara *kabin* of today), who could act as a cordon sanitaire between outsiders and the Bulls. Otherwise, they were especially tasked with estimating people’s herd sizes for taxation, a duty so undesirable that the position of *kansitch okumba* became hereditary (Almagor, “Institutionalizing a Fringe Periphery,” 103f).
38. Strecker, “Political Discourse.”
39. Epple, “Ritual und Rollendifferenzierung,” 51.
40. The frequency and range of interaction is different and somewhat more restricted during the farming season from August/September to January/February, as people leave the permanent settlements and set up camp at their fields along the river.
41. Strecker, “Do the Hamar Have a Concept of Honor?” The subsequent quotes are from the same source.
42. Lydall and Strecker, *Work Journal*, 254f.
43. Kopytoff, *African Frontier*.
44. Leach, *Political Systems*, 197.
45. Cartledge points out many recent cross-fertilizations between the study of the classics and contemporary anthropology (Cartledge, “Greeks and Anthropology”).
46. Plato, *Republic*, 135.

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