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BONDFRIENDSHIP IN THE CULTURAL NEIGHBORHOOD DYADIC TIES AND THEIR PUBLIC APPRECIATION IN SOUTH OMO¹

Felix Girke

Abstract. Bondfriendship, a common and culturally salient practice all over South Omo, should not be reduced to a merely ecologically/economically adaptive strategy of (agro-) pastoralists. A deeper insight is gained by addressing the narratives and imaginations at work when people set out to make friends across ethnic groups and boundaries. A collection of personal stories and accounts from Arbore, Hamar and Kara reveals that the mutuality and complementarity implicit in bondfriendship mirror on an interpersonal level an idealized mode of interaction among the ethnic groups of the region.

Bondfriendship – Tracing an ideal type

Bondfriendship has been a staple topic not only in East African ethnography at large, but also specifically in South Omo scholarship.² Very generally, the term references a voluntarily established and maintained bond between two men and their families, which is made manifest through mutual gifts³ and visits, support and affection.

Leaving this maximally abstracted level, one runs into difficulties: bondfriendship exists in many manifestations, seen across groups and even within a given population, making it daunting to give a less-than-vague definition – not that this has not been attempted, in reductionist economic-ecological approaches. However, to anticipate one of the conclusions of this paper, I claim that bondfriendship in the context of South Omo with the special focus on the relations between Hamar, Kara, and Arbore, is best seen as a multiplex relation, and that the analysis of its discursive life needs to complement the description

- 1 Fieldwork was financed by the SFB 295 (2003-05) and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale (2006-07). I have greatly profited from the comments by Judith Beyer and my colleagues in the Dept. I Research Colloquium at the MPI, especially Mateusz Laszczkowski.
- 2 Sobania's wide-ranging overview, while focusing on more southern regions, repeatedly provides useful connections to the South Omo situation (1980).
- 3 For this paper, I use the definition of "gift" by the Mauss group, as presented by David Graeber: "To give a gift is to transfer something without any immediate return, or guarantee that there will ever be one" (2001: 225). I hope to more fully explore the domain of gift and exchange among the Kara at a later date.

of less discursive practice. My argument is that local narratives about bondpartners are as relevant as observations on ecology and economic interdependence if one wants to understand the social activities springing from bondfriendship.

The problem lies both in translation and the assumption that a convenient concept would map unproblematically onto social constellations (Zeitlyn 1993: 200ff). A look at the way the term of address *bel* is wielded exemplifies the difficulties: for Daasanech, Almagor has described various bondfriend relations established during a man's life, mostly in ritual, coming-of-age contexts (1978; also Carr 1977: 118f). Little Daasanech material has so far been published on inter-group relations (but see Sagawa this volume). Other discussions of bondfriendship focus on examples where the bondfriends belonged to different populations (see Strecker 1976; Lydall and Strecker 1979; Tadesse 1999, 2006; Ayalew 1997; Matsuda 1994, 2003). To add yet another facet, in Kara and other places, cutting the ears of a dancing he-goat or ox for someone will lead to the establishment of a *bel* relation between the cutter and the recipient. Some in-law relations also allow the use of the term *bel* as form of address, and the playful address as *holtsha-bel*, *guita-bel*, or *birre-bel* between young men and girls is common, if one has given sorghum cane, some beads or a banknote at some point. One can address traders in the market as *bel*. In fact, *bel* as term of address can function as a persuasive term of endearment between anyone, with, however, varying plausibility and rhetorical efficacy. What to make of this?

One could parsimoniously assume that *bel* is simply a polysemic term, applied to a host of different social relations, or, that it is a vacuous form of address. However, the data suggest that the term *beltamo* (and the term of reference *bel*) has a primary referent, a salient "ideal type" of bondfriendship,⁴ which is conceptually distinguished from other uses, even if the term of address is the same. This is the second conclusion of the paper, which presents ethnographic material to substantiate this hypothesis.

For a competent actor, it will be deducible from context which type of *beltamo* is meant, and which social claims are expressed by which references. This cultural model has not only descriptive, but also normative aspects, as some practices which are in practice called *beltamo* too are just not quite as "good," or as commendable as others. I see these other uses as allusions to the ideal type which I cast as follows: it is an egalitarian relationship crossing group boundaries, and often enough linguistic ones. The partners are of similar station in life,

4 In fact, "stock-loan" relationships, a true classic of East Africa pastoralist research (for a list, see Spencer 1997: 18, fn 14; or more recent, Broch-Due and Anderson 1999: 7, Waller 1999: 42f), which are often also called "bondfriendships" in the literature, are seemingly of minor importance in South Omo, and they are not what the term *bel* primarily evokes. The Hamar and Kara call these cattle *bankarri-gisha* or *banne-wak* (see Strecker 1976), the Arbore *oht ta dabbarree*.

and give mutual support by providing goods which are hard to come by for the other. They try to meet regularly, and even if they are prevented from traveling, they send greetings and news through intermediaries. The relation involves both families and is inherited by the sons on both sides. The partners are loyal to each other up to the point of defying their own polity in order to protect their *bel*.

This cultural site affords many valued elements – solidarity, amity, thrift, assertion of individuality, creativity, endurance and generosity are just some which make up this field. This makes it attractive as a prototype on which the “smaller,” less spectacular forms of *beltamo*, are variations, which they mirror and evoke. This statement is less to be seen in a developmental way, such that practices have “sprung” from one another, but rather to indicate the ordering of a cognitive domain, seemingly fuzzy, but far from inchoate.⁵ I can address a trader whom I have never met before as “*bel*” just because there is such an aurally strong idealized concept to which I allude.

Other scholars have written about bondfriendship in South Omo with different emphases; instead of giving a separate review of the literature, I am referencing their material here where it is relevant to the discussion at hand. One perspective on bondfriendship that I am in some sense writing *against* is summarized by Sobania (1991: 135), even though he is not its prime proponent:

The gift of a head of stock was not an impulsive action but was rather both given and received as a compliment calculated to extend an individual’s sphere of supportive relationships. Although unable to garner support in political matters or settlement disputes from those friends who lived in neighboring societies, a herdsman’s inter-societal partnerships greatly enlarged his knowledge of the region and his options in the economic sphere.

Such an approach, which focuses exclusively on the economic calculations in establishing bondfriendships, and which sees it as a practice functional primarily for a pastoral livelihood, misses out on the affective qualities and wider social repercussions. In the context of this book, it misses what makes the *beltamo* salient as a site of imagination and moral charter for the inhabitants of South Omo.

5 The common warning of insinuating and then inserting models where none might be, of imposing idealistic structure on what is in fact experiential practice is well taken. However, this must be an empirical, not an *a priori* methodological question, and research supports my claim of the existence of an ideal type as a moral and ideal construct (see Shack 1963: 207).

***Beltamo* and cultural neighborhood**

The cultural and linguistic diversity of South Omo is appreciated not only by the tourists in their landcruisers and the itinerant anthropologists, but also by its inhabitants; many people love traveling the region, and I have found numerous interlocutors highly interested in (and very knowledgeable about) their neighbors' customs, and many individuals are multilingual to a surprising degree. I have spent several nights sitting on a cowhide with growing resignation when my Kara friends, overcome with the pleasure of mastery, switched in the middle of the conversation to the Nyangatom language without any Nyangatom being present, leaving me hanging, so to speak.⁶ The delight in other people(s), in so many ways "just the same, but different," comes out strongly in narratives about bondfriendship, and the travels, exchanges and adventures it involves.

This is what the term "cultural neighborhood" is intended to evoke. This use of "neighborhood" does not fully align with other usages. The contributors to the volume by Konings and Foeken (2006) apply it to the urban context, where a "neighborhood" is an entity, of which a plural is possible, synonymous to an urban quarter. In my approach, "neighborhood" has two main applications: it indicates the spatial fact that culturally different groups live close to each other, with perpetual interaction of individuals, and that they conceive of each other as being relevant, as being people, too. The cultural neighborhood is not an entity but an aspect of a web of relations. In other words, "neighborhood" denotes the mutual awareness of neighboring groups, with all the comparisons and schismogenetic and mimetic moments entailed in confrontations with a known Other. This in some ways is closer to Appadurai's usage (1995: 208ff), who sees the context-generative character of locality and neighborhood. Still, in his terminology "neighborhood" refers to the segmented units which then interact within a wider territory.

The connection to *beltamo*, then, lies in the idea that the amity between *bel* partners, their mutual support and solidarity, provides a schema after which people wish their inter-group relations were patterned as well – while realizing that of course individuals have the easier of it compared to larger, more inert or disparate polities. Conversely, for the individual actor, to engage in *beltamo* is to partake of this highly valued institution, and thus an issue of self- and outside esteem, above and beyond the economic benefits.

Matsuda's marginal paper on the Muguji *belmo* expresses a similar understanding. His statistics reveal to him that the goods given to and received by Muguji men in bondfriendship were similar, and did not reveal a gradient in

6 There were also cases when people intentionally switched to Nyangatom in order to prevent me from understanding what they were saying. I feel confident in identifying which is which as there are always non-verbal clues and ways to check after the conversation situation.

supply and demand of certain commodities between neighboring groups. He declares, with some sense of wonder, that the actual reason that Moguji engage in *belmo* is not the exchange part, but that they “must keep in touch” (2003: 5) with their neighbors – he specifically sidelines material interests or safety-net thinking here.⁷ In other words, Matsuda proclaims that the Moguji hold sentiment for the cultural mosaic of South Omo: they want to belong. The practice which connects them is bondfriendship.

Still, the qualities of cultural neighborhood are prone to change. In the last part of the text I show how bondfriendship serves as an indicator for the decline of the cultural neighborhood in recent years.

Moral aspects in writing about inter-ethnic relations in South Omo

This paper also has a moral aim, which is to celebrate the social creativity and the will to peace and friendship which permeates the stories of bondfriendship that I have collected. While I understand the interest behind papers which begin like “Particular attention is paid to conflict, because it is among the most important aspects of ethnic group interaction in this region...” (Fukui 1994: 33), I feel it is important and fair to the inhabitants of South Omo⁸ to showcase that there is more to interaction across ethnic boundaries than raiding, theft, and murder.

This stance echoes Strecker, who deplores alienated analyses of conflict which “do not treat warfare as a problem which concerns them as observers as well as the people they observe” (1994: 300), refusing to take violence as a given which (as was suggested by some) “should go on forever” (1994: 308). In his analyses of conflict he takes great care to show **the predicaments of the actors, the tough choices and the dissenting voices. He also offers examples of people from South Omo refusing to join in already ongoing killings and instead honoring the guest right and old relations, and scorning instead of praising killers returning from war.**

7 Matsuda has published on both Kara and Moguji in the 1990s. There is no certainty, but from my knowledge of Kara and Moguji contact relations, the term *belmo* seems a linguistic variation on *beltamo*. I see their kind of bondfriendship as removed from the ideal type, in many ways a patron-client relation. This is relevant for regional studies since the Moguji have in earlier publications been portrayed as being primarily motivated by safety-thinking, and somewhat opportunistic (Gezahegn 1994; Matsuda 1994).

8 Especially considering the stereotypes through which South Omo is presented in TV and non-academic journals: exotic rituals, proud warriors with AK-47s, savage fighting and total isolation.

Data basis

Besides my fieldwork in South Omo between 2003 and 2007, this paper is based on a workshop organized by Prof. Ivo Strecker and myself, held at the South Omo Research Center (SORC), Jinka, Ethiopia from September 24 to October 1, 2004. We had invited and transported guests from Arbore, Hamar and Kara⁹ to Jinka, to discuss with them about bondfriendship and related topics. About 10 hours of discussions were recorded.¹⁰ The workshop did not bring people together who were unknown to one another. For these three groups, it is Hamar which provides the inclusive frame: located in the highland area between the Arbore of the Woyt'o Valley and the Kara of the Lower Omo, Hamar was the *lingua franca* of the workshop, as all participants were familiar with it.¹¹ The Hamar market villages of Turmi and Dimeka are regional centers, and provide an opportunity for members of different populations to meet; both Kara and Arbore travel there. In addition, all three groups are administrated through one *woreda* (district), aptly named Hamar *woreda*. Despite the fact that the Kara consider the Arbore (and the Daasanech) as their ancestral kin, left behind on some migratory detour,¹² unmediated contact, especially *beltamo*, is much rarer today than supposedly in earlier times. Still, there were personal connections between the participants, which were very conducive to the unfolding debate. Everybody was at ease with one another, people from different groups told stories they all knew jointly, and the eagerness for complementing the mutual knowledge was such that often enough, there was no need for the anthropologists to ask questions themselves: Hamar interviewed Arbore, Kara interviewed Hamar. The many cultural similarities among the three groups helped to highlight

9 The list of the participants is included as an appendix.

10 Early results were presented at the 3rd Symposium of the Special Research Centre 295 *Cultural and linguistic contacts. Processes of change in historical conflict areas in North-east Africa/Western Asia*, October 21-24, 2004, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz (Germany). At SORC, such events are known as "workshops," and they are an important feature in the conception of the research center as an inter-cultural forum. Methodologically, such a workshop could be called an "extended focus group interview".

11 At the time of the workshop, my Hamar skills were only sufficient to follow the general course of the discussion. Ivo Strecker provided a simultaneous translation from Hamar to English, which was a great help for understanding details and nuances, as well as for the initial transcription of the recordings of the session. I have worked again on the recorded material after acquiring a better working knowledge of Hamar and have created a more thorough transcript since then.

12 I have confirmation that it is seen similarly by the Daasanech, who say that it is as bad to kill a Kara as it is to kill a Daasanech and equally punishable (pers. comm. Yvan Houtteman, 2006). Whether the Arbore make similar claims *vis-à-vis* the Kara has eluded me.

the rich intricacies of positive relationships and practices of exchange, primarily *beltamo*, but also the local concepts of exchange known as *muda* (exchange expeditions), *yees* (a way to ask for grain specifically) and the *miske* (pleading for an item, asking for something one does not have). Since *beltamo* is the one practice which is influential in shaping cultural neighborhood, these others concepts will not be discussed here. The vigor and verve in which these topics were discussed during the workshop first indicated to me the salience of the discursive life of bondfriendship, and in my discussion I heavily draw on the vivid examples provided to me at that time.

Finding a *bel* and walking the path of bondfriendship

Choke from Hamar opened the workshop with an example of how the “path” of *beltamo* between Hamar and Kara is practiced, cleverly enlisting my own experience. During my first trip to the field in 2003, thanks to advice from Ivo Strecker I had contacted him and asked for help in getting started with my research on Kara.

When you came first, you didn't know people. You just came to the country. [...] You look at people. You just look at people. As you look at them, it is not right for you, because you are not right for them. But later, then you will find your kin, finding kin, I found you. And then we became kin. That's what we call *bel*. Now you Felix, when you came first you didn't know the country. You said “I'll just go to Kara. Now to whom will I go in Kara?” You said “I'll just go to Kara.” You didn't know, is it like this, will you really go to Kara? You said you would go to Arbore and Maale and return, and then you came to me. And when you came, I thought about it, “he is my friend's boy,¹³ he comes from my friend's country.” I said to myself, “I will send him to my kin, to my *bel*” It wouldn't be good just to go to Kara. [...] And you met my father's sister's son, and now, “bring him,” I said to my father's sister's son, “bring this man to my bondfriend, to my *bel*. Don't bring him just anywhere, bring him nowhere else but to Dare's mother.”

This account contains *in nuce* some key topoi of *beltamo* as they were to emerge from the discussions later. Fundamental is Choke's clear integration of *beltamo* in the larger domain of “positive, productive social relations,” *aedamo*, which also can refer to peace, or most simply kinship (as I have casually translated it in the paragraph above) – simply to be related as consanguine or affine would also count as *aedamo*, but the important feature of any *aeda* relation should be the will to maintain a mutually beneficial and satisfying interaction.

13 Choke's “friend” here is my academic “father,” Ivo Strecker.

From Choke's story, a picture of the suffering traveler emerges – arriving in a strange place, for whatever purpose, one is disoriented, exhausted, quite literally pathetic, as someone who is inviting pity, someone who is incomplete. Nanga from Kara once told me how he went to Daasanech, “and for three days,” he said, “I was alone [literally, “an only-person“ a sad phrasing indeed] – until I found a *bel*.” Here, a friend is conceived of not just as someone whom one meets, and with whom one exchanges stories or goods. In *beltamo*, the host provides shelter, allows you to wash yourself and relax after your journey. He is the one who complements you, who provides for you, and who does not demand anything from you. This image is strong – the hardships of the road highlight the deliverance provided. Again Choke explains:

Now when you come with your goats to Kara, and you have no kin, you come on foot, you don't have a donkey, when you go to visit Kara country, to this country where you hope to get grain [...] You have slept in the bush last night, hungry, thirsty, but in the morning you reach Kara. So someone comes to you, and says, “let me buy your goat,” and he buys it. And he makes coffee for you. And he says, “he, he has slept in the bush, and he was killed by hunger;” saying this, they give you food, they put you in a shade, and then you eat. And then you say, “well, I choose this one as my relative.” And thus, having been hosted, this is the beginning of a bondfriendship.¹⁴

The establishment of bondfriendship is here inextricably bound up in the experience of a journey, sometimes driven by hunger, sometimes by the curiosity of youth. This then is the first aspect of the relation to which the “path” metaphor from the Omotic applies.¹⁵ In this context, another trajectory, another “path” became apparent (already hinted at in Choke's first contribution): the genealogical transfer of *beltamo*. Choke's original bondfriend had been Nukunnu, the father of Dare,¹⁶ but upon the death of one of the original partners, widows and sons often carry on the relation. That women themselves establish inter-ethnic *beltamo* did not come up in the discussion at Jinka, nor did I learn of a case dur-

14 I have in some instances of such inserted quotes stuck quite literally to the Hamar version, which might make for some slightly odd phrases here and there. This, I feel, is legitimate in bringing out metaphor and some prosodic features. It does not hinder understanding.

15 The word for “road, path” is *goyti* (Hamar) and *guy* (Kara), and it is regularly used in reference to the idea and practice of *beltamo*. The “path” metaphor is also used by Tadesse (2006: 293) in reference to Arbore and their neighbors; it is not clear whether the metaphor is his or theirs.

16 The list of participants in the appendix indicates alternative names, teknonyms and others.

ing my fieldwork,¹⁷ but their importance in sustaining both ongoing friendships and the memories of past events cannot be overstated. As they are in charge of the daily affairs, it is they who cater for a guest, it is their diligence and effort which afford hospitality. This works in the negative, too. I heard of a man whose wife was an alcoholic – he could not seriously engage in bondfriendship, as he could not properly host a guest.

In becoming a legacy, *beltamo* is sustained through narratives and often-told anecdotes; this allows children to be familiar with a long-established relation long before they themselves could be expected to travel. This goes along with emotional attachment – it is common for children to address their father's close *bel* as father himself.¹⁸ Over the years, some *bel*, especially after long and satisfying relations, receive a part of the bridewealth when their partner's daughters get married. In turn, they might help out with livestock for such central events. Indeed, some typical inter-ethnic bondfriendships can be iconic elements of intra-ethnic weddings, as when the Hamar *bel* supplies the honey for the wedding of the daughters of the Arbore *bel*.¹⁹ In fact, during the workshop, there were several instances when Arbore participants highlighted the role of *beltamo* in the central ritual of marriage:

I and my younger brother both married our wives with honey from Hamar. I have married twice, and both of my wives had daughters who I then married away with honey from my *bel* in Hamar²⁰ (Boya Arato).

17 I would see it less as a problem of “participation of women in rituals set aside for men,” as Shack has it for the Gurage (1963: 202), but rather as indicative of a more general model of gendered agency.

18 *Bel* are said to be not marriageable (compare Thubauville this volume). This can only rarely be a practical issue, but the notion highlights the closeness of the relation.

19 Arbore were ritually prohibited from making honey barrels. This prohibition was ritually lifted in the 1990s (pers. comm. Gabbert, 2009). Towards me, the continuing importance of the honey provided by Hamar was proclaimed – “we would just have more!”

20 I first suspected that Hamar honey would have a spiritual component, so that only honey from Hamar would be seen as sufficient; this was refuted. For tobacco there is such a connection: “Tobacco can be bought from Konso or Ts’amakko, and we can even grow it ourselves, but in order to pacify the spirits of the dead we need the tobacco from Hamar, we do all the rituals related to the dead with the tobacco from Hamar. [...] it has to come from Hamar, that is what the *bel* is for” (Horra Surra). Also for coffee, people might stress its provenience: when blessing, or recalling the olden days, reference is only made to Aari coffee, as coffee used to be prepared from proper beans from the Aari hills before the coffee trade in Ethiopia came under state control; coffee beans simply do not reach many parts of South Omo anymore.

Such a conjunction of lineages across group boundaries in the ideal type of *beltamo* can also be strengthened by further transactions – Boto Gali from Arbore confirmed that he would receive a part of the bridewealth for the daughters of his Daasanech *bel*, once they got married.

Before families can entwine in such a way, though, the initial visit has to be “confirmed” by a mirroring act, which displays interest in a continued relation, and serves to affirm mutual sincerity. If the initial host truly wants to establish a close bond, he should soon go and visit his partner and allow him to provide shelter and to present him with items. Tsasi Aike from Hamar illustrated this in a tale about how his grandfather established *beltamo* with a Kara:

... [the wife of a Kara man] was called Natten, and she came up to the Hamar mountains and gave her name to [a certain girl]. They slaughtered a cow for her – and later they [the Hamar man and his wife and others] went down to Kara, they all went down to Kara, and then they returned with donkeys loaded with grain, and with this, we were *bel*, we were relatives.²¹

Yet another feature (discussed more fully later) of *beltamo* can be gleaned from this short statement – the confirming act (another path) is not only indicative of sincerity, but it is also a publicly validating act, a performance, which says much more than words ever could.²² The *beltamo* can be established without elaborate ritual – it is an emergent covenant between two autonomous individuals, and while the acceptance of the other is supposedly confirmed verbally after the propitiatory invitation, no ritual sealing takes place.²³ The strength of the bond derives from its long and conscientious practice.

- 21 It is common that *beltamo* goes along with naming – many namesakes can be found among bond-related families. A child will not only receive a bondfriend’s name, but can in fact take on the names the *bel* has accumulated in his lifetime – goat names, dancing ox names, killer names and teknonyms. Being asked to name a child (or demanding the privilege) is one of many acts which affirm a *beltamo*, instrumental in maintaining the conviction of mutual interest and affect. See also Sobania (1991: 134f).
- 22 An obvious comparison is the Trobriand *yotile*, rendered by Malinowski as “the clinching gift” (1922: 98; see also Mauss 1990: 26), fertile in that it shows the differences between the establishment of a *kula* relation and *beltamo*: a starting gift, i.e. being hosted and presented with items, does in no way “irrevocably commit” (Mauss) the recipient to reciprocate. If the clinching visit is not made, *beltamo* simply will not come about – but the consequences are no more severe than in other wasted opportunities.
- 23 In nearby settings, such as Maale, it seems that ceremonial activities are indeed essential in the establishment of *belli* (pers. comm. Thubauville, July 2007), perhaps more like the case of the *kula* partners (see fn 22). This is not required in the relationships cultivated in Arbore, Hamar and Kara.

The aspect of sincerity came up again in the discussion of how many bondfriends the workshop participants had in a given location. Typically, the goal is to have bondfriends in as many places as possible, but if the relationship is to maintain its intimacy, and thus its strength, the impression of only casual attention must be avoided. This is also why young men might speak of a true *bel* as opposed to others. This refers to a partner they had acquired on their own, not someone whom they have inherited from their father, and whom they share with their siblings. Especially for second- or third-born sons, the father's *bel*, even as they are still remembered and respected, will lose importance when supplanted by true *bel*:

Of my body, there are no *bel*. Of my father, there is Choke. The *bel* of the fathers – those never get lost (Dare Nukunnu, a first son).

Looking at who has bondfriends where, patterns emerge. Oita Gadi from Kara, who is in his early 30s, stated that “I am young, so I don’t have a *bel* in Daasanech.” Kara men who are in their 50s today and older used to travel to Daasanech very casually, be it only for a weekend of dancing, and many are still conversant in the language. In recent times, however, relations have soured somewhat (see below), and a new *beltamo* between the two groups is rarely established.

In a similar vein, Horra Surra declared that he was also lacking the wide array of bondfriends expected of somebody with his age and experience: “I have only one *bel* because I was involved with the modern world.” Spoken with an inkling of regret, this indicated that bondfriendship is tied up with subsistence production and a predictable lifestyle.²⁴ If one spends time in cities, or abroad even, one might still be a valuable partner, but, as Horra indicated, it becomes difficult to establish the level of continuity and reliability on which *beltamo* is based – provided one is even interested. He in fact has many contacts all over the region, but felt uncomfortable to label them as *bel* in the context of our discussion of how *beltamo* should be lived.

So while Horra was reluctant to apply the term *bel* to these other exchange partners, hosts and friends, compared to the idealized bondfriends he ought to have, the term is in fact used – at the other end of the spectrum – for a relation which is not as mutual and egalitarian as the ideal type developed earlier: it is the trader who works under the guise of *beltamo*. Such references were clearly

24 Thubauville (pers. comm., July 2007) is aware of people in Maale who are, in Horra’s sense “involved with the modern world,” and yet said to have many bondfriends. Maale bondfriendship has been little described; my interpretation is that these cases might represent a type of bondfriendship which is more at the patron-client end of the spectrum of *beltamo* conceptions, valorized by a strong ritual element.

framed as this not being the “real thing.”²⁵ Arriving in a place such as Arbore, a trader will seek out somebody with a reputation of competence and reliability. This local man will provide the trader with a measure of safety and comfort, show him around, introduce him to others, and facilitate his negotiations or provide the desired items himself – likely honey and cattle. The trader himself lives in the city (*katama*), and ventures out into the periphery to acquire goods at cheap prices. As another example which deviates from the ideal type, urban residents (for example in the zonal capital of Jinka) sometimes have *bel* (also *jala*) from Aari who provide them with fresh produce, often against money. This is better classified as a patron-client relation, unequal, yet with equal terms of address for both partners. Recalling the criteria for the ideal type outlined earlier, one notices the loss of multiplicity, of the aspects of the relation other than hospitality and transaction, and sees the instrumentality only. But instrumentality is there in good *beltamo* too: in stories recalled during the workshop, of positive, even iconic relations, there were cases where the Arbore bondfriend facilitated his Daasanech partner’s attempt to buy a gun; indeed, if one only classifies the relationship by looking at how people *de facto* instrumentalize *beltamo*, the trader does not serve as a foil to the ideal type. Another distinguishing feature is needed.²⁶ I suggest that this lies in the ever-growing commitment, in the lived-out mutuality, which goes beyond isolated interaction (see also Ayalew 1997: 155). The path is not only the one which one travels to get somewhere; it is also the path which connects two individuals’ lives (and their families again). It is also a path connected to other paths, in the sense that others can use your path to branch out from this and establish their own partnerships, as it happened with myself and Dare from Kara, which “forked off” from the path between Ivo Strecker and Choke. An example from the workshop illustrates this:

There was another Daasanech visiting in Arbore, and he met me. And when he returned to Daasanech, he told his friend “I have met quite an interesting fellow, there is a good fellow,” so he said, and the other one said to him, “*Banzo* [I beg you!], I want him to be my bondfriend. So when you go next time to Arbore, bring him with you to me in Daasanech.” He then led me to Daasanech, and I came and already brought a jacket and some cloth for the *bel* whom I had not seen yet.

25 Some participants at the workshop somewhat exaggeratedly stated that “this is the *beltamo* found today,” as I will discuss later, the transformations occurring in South Omo are closely linked in narrative to the practice of bondfriendship in particular and inter-group relations in general.

26 The distinction suggested by Wolf (1966) between emotional and instrumental friendship is not helpful, as the vantage point from which to determine such categories has been lost in the past 40 years. The power of *beltamo* lies in the interplay of claim of affection and the denial of instrumentality.

Such cross-connections, building on trust and reputation of friends and friends of friends, play a role in many cases where people walk the path of *beltamo*.

An important aspect of *beltamo* visible in the transcriptions of the Jinka discussion was ostentation. I use “ostentation” in the sense of an intentional display, which however does not need to be boastful or flamboyant. Consider this excerpt:

Makhulo [a well-known Daasanech] had heard that I was in Daasanech, and he said, “bring him to me;” he had heard that I was a great spokesman. He slaughtered a big female goat which had not yet given birth. “Now we don’t talk, we just eat. Tomorrow, we will talk. Now, just eat.” And then later in the morning, Makhulo’s wife prepared coffee, and then, having brought the coffee bowls, Makhulo said, “let’s be *bel*” (Boya Arato).

Two instances of ostentation stand out here:²⁷ casually postponing all talk for a day, and slaughtering a productive animal where a he-goat would have been quite adequate. Boya here received advance credit – Makhulo invited him, showed his respect for his reputation by being generous (the goat) and civilized (the deferral of talk), and thus gave both parties time to familiarize themselves with the other, and to establish their partnership without undue haste in the morning – giving the entire settlement ample opportunity to observe and discuss the events. In addition to such a general demonstration of virtue, the motif of the individual asserting themselves against the own group comes to the fore. Making kin of enemies? Expending resources on strangers without immediate returns? It is a feat to excel at a bondfriendship across group boundaries, and it is a challenge out of individual free will, without social coercion, without economic necessity. Tadesse names the attraction inherent in the “exotic” (2006: 290) as one of the key motivations in bondfriendship, and in linking oneself to the attractive Other some aura will rub off; but I think the term misses the tenor of the relation. I suggest that there is a more relevant dialectic between the individual and his/her group at work here. Bondfriendship is performed for an audience, and this ostentation, a specific form of performance and persuasion, lies at the center of the practice.

27 The real ostentation lies in that Boya Arato gives a display for the workshop participants, just as Makhulo was giving a display for his audience in Daasanech – evidence of how the extra-diegetic elements of narrative feed from and back into the story told. I thank Judith Beyer for pointing out this doubling.

Objects on the paths of *beltamo*

This story of Boya and Makhulo, as well the others preceding it, shows how the objects which travel on the path of bondfriendship are also constitutive of its discursive life. So it is the goats, the cattle, the sorghum, the clay pots, the cloth, the metal tools, the beads, the honey, the salty soil, the tobacco, the butter, the bullets and rifles to which I turn now. All these items find quotidian and some of them ritual use, and they are often more readily available in one place than in another. *Beltamo* is used to balance such imbalance, as, for example, in the semi-mystical time when the Kara had just lost their cattle:

In the olden days, very very olden days, the Kara didn't have the tsetse fly, and were rich in animals. Then the fly came, and it destroyed their cattle. And they had only the grain left, and the Kara *bel* gave the grain, and he received goats from the Hamar. Now the tsetse fly has gone away, and the Kara are now getting more cattle and small stock again, so one exchanges what is needed (Choke Bajje).

In Choke's account, the relation between Kara and Hamar changes, from a more asymmetrical one, with the Kara desperate for livestock, to a more symmetrical one, in which both partners in principle have both stock and sorghum, but where one might have contingent needs at any time.

Some asymmetry however seems the rule: the various relations between individuals from different groups have certain prototypical forms in what is given by whom to whom. I will give only a brief overview here; a lot of this is covered in texts by other authors. Ayalew sums up the typical relation between Arbore and Borana (1997: 147), as well as Hamar and Arbore:

The principal occasion when an Arbore needs the support of his Hamar bond-friend is at the time of his marriage. Bridewealth in Arbore consists of the provision of tobacco and honey in addition to cattle and small-stock. For the tobacco and honey the first person he approaches is his Hamar bond-friend (1997: 156).

Beltamo grows from the need of an individual. Accordingly, an at least initial asymmetry is likely: the path of *beltamo* is opened through the visit of the one lacking something, who brings goods, such as a goat, hoping to get, most commonly, sorghum in return. The *bel* he finds is encouraged to pay a return visit, without bearing goods, and, as was said, he may then "carry away whatever he wants." Of course, it does not work this way, as a visitor is well-advised to bring at least "a little something." Recurrent injections of gifts are helpful in maintaining the amity not only with the *bel*, but also with his eminently important wife: "We send each other small items all the time." This is not "balanced reciprocity," but is held to be "open reciprocity" as phrased by Graeber (2001: 220): "it implies a relation of permanent mutual commitment." The accounts need not be diligently balanced, as they are supposedly never closed. People

were realistic in what they expected of their partners, and would not unreasonably insist on their requests.²⁸

People also know about the paths of the various items; so while usually a *bel* will make the journey to acquire some commodities for their immediate needs, which then travel on this very short path, there are also more indirect trajectories:

Now, my Kara bondfriend has kin in Nyangatom, in a different country. I go to my *bel* and ask him, "go to your other bondfriend, and ask for a bell," or for special beads, or something which I know exists in Nyangatom, and bring it, and I'll come to receive it from you. So the Kara goes to Nyangatom, and says, "I have a *bel* in Hamar, who wants a bell, you know, a cow-bell from Nyangatom because your cow-bells are so good." So the Nyangatom says, "well yes, you have a bondfriend in Hamar? Go to him and tell him about my need for cloth" (Tsasi Aike).

Then the connection expands – the Hamar knows that the best cloth comes from Konso, and so contacts his Arbore *bel* to obtain one from his bondfriend there. The Hamar then gives honey to the Arbore for the cloth, brings a goat to the Kara for grain and passes on the cloth, which then is exchanged for a bell with the Nyangatom. People are aware of the potential of this network of commodities and trust, and will approach their bondfriends, asking them to activate their ties (see also Tadesse 2006: 302). In "the olden days," this network extended well beyond South Omo, as even Turkana used to be involved, receiving pots and cloth,²⁹ and providing metalwork and colored ochres.

28 In this regard, my material differs from Tadesse's, who claims that "only the well-off can afford interpersonal friendships across groups as it requires an occasional exchange of gifts and assistance" (2006: 304). At no point was *beltamo* discussed as a hardship; the narratives highlighted the legitimate demands of partners. The wealth of an individual was not mentioned in being a factor in the selection of *bel*, much rather cleverness, reputation, and virtuous behavior. In case a visit to a *bel* turned out to be fruitless, in most instances people expressed an understanding for the other's hardships as well.

29 The Kara became middlemen in many of these exchanges, both due to their geographical location, but also for their ability to stay on good terms with most of their neighbors most of the time. Their central position in the webs of relations in South Omo was obvious even to a short-term visitor, the explorer Stigand, who calls them "purveyors or middlemen" (1969 [1910]: 237). However, as Sobania makes clear, "[e]ven the Arbore and Kara, who were in the most advantageous positions to dominate these networks, do not appear to have developed a specialized class of traders. Instead, trade was carried out merely as an extension of herding and agricultural labors" (1991: 128f). This confirms bondfriendship as being a practice practiced between egalitarian partners.

In a weird example of an extremely asymmetrical bondfriendship, Atsha Arti from Kara narrated how Mursi came to his place, claiming or demanding bondfriendship, and to whom he then gave things to carry home:

He comes to us on foot. His place, I don't reach it. He comes, and it is far! It is not feasible for me. [...] I gave him a knife, I gave him a pot, I gave him brass bracelets (Atsha Arti).

He himself does not visit Mursi, and has only at one point received a single cowhide. Interestingly, the other elders present at the workshop nodded their heads in approval. "It is well," they said, "he will slowly benefit from this." They were in appreciation of his patience and his good will towards the unrequited guests; these virtues, it was suggested, would lead to some reward eventually.

Unlike such initially tentative relations, with rather contingent offerings, in *beltamo* with a long history, some transferred objects eventually come to embody the relation:

They are asking for me in Nyangatom; I hear the grandson of Loteng want me to come. And I see the milk-containers, I see the *warra warra* dancing bells, all this I see which we have from this bondfriend, I see all this and I want to go. [...] the older brother of Baldambe, he received a cow whose offspring are still alive, and everybody remembers [the *bel*] (Tsasi Aike).

These objects are physical and metonymical manifestations of the *beltamo*, much more than they are wealth that has been acquired. While of course the offspring of the original cow is valuable in material terms, the livestock-oriented Hamar always categorize calves along the lines of their ancestry, and cannot *not* remember descent from a bondfriend's gift.³⁰ Thus, all these animals call out to Tsasi to continue the relation, as they speak of the affective richness that comes with visitors, journeys, hospitality and the gift. This has a parallel in the sentiment which acknowledges the needs of members of other groups, and one's ability and even obligation to help out:³¹

The Moguji have difficulties to get *aizi* [skins for women's skirts] and butter and *zere* [red ochre] (Haila Nukunnu).

30 Broch-Due (1999: 73), in a picturesque description, highlights how cattle embody a "whole history of transactions that frame Turkana lives," and that the importance of these memories can hardly be overstated. All this echoes Herskovits' often misrepresented claims about the East African cattle complex.

31 In Graeber (2001: 230f) this is echoed in the discussion of the "primitive communism" of the Iroquois (by way of Mauss), where the larger polity (there: the League, here: the groups of South Omo) have an "agreement to treat others' perceived needs and interests as matters of significance in and of themselves".

This [relation between a Hamar family and an Arbore family] is a real *mulda* [lineage]. We in Hamar know all about it, we know that we have to help them get their children married, and they need our honey for that (Choke Bajje).

Patterns are established, according to the seasonal timetable or the recurring rituals and their material requirements. The Hamar who come to Kara for grain after the harvest in the Omo Valley belong to Kara, just as it is part of living as a Kara to cultivate relations with Nyangatom, despite the intermittent warfare between the groups. Everyone needs grains occasionally, but some other things are perpetually sought after. Certain items might be available in one place and not another because, for example, “the rain falls only on one horn of the bull,” as the Hamar say. This can be seasonal variation in sorghum availability, as the Hamar practice rain-fed cultivation, and the lowland-dwelling Arbore and Kara mostly riverbank- and flood retreat-cultivation, or the simple facts that cattle do not fare so well in the forest belt of the Omo, that clay for much-desired pots is rare in places, or that salt deposits are few and far between. Some groups work metals, others do not, but still need spears and bells, hoes and machetes. The tobacco is better in the mountains than along the river. The “new beads” come from the Ethiopian centers, the “old beads” still from Turkana. From the conversations in Jinka, a notion of intersubjectivity, of mutuality emerged: knowing the pangs of one’s own needs, one feels with the neighbors who are plagued by their needs, and one gains satisfaction in facilitating marriages, rituals, or just the good life as it is conceived of. These sentiments are tightly connected to both objects and regular cycles in the well-known lifeworld of the region.

Some of these assumptions are inaccurate, as ideas outlive their basis: Kara have regained some cattle and especially small-stock, but people will still talk about them as the ones who lost it all to the sleeping sickness. But even such stereotypes about the own Other are important elements of inter-group relations: in that they evoke certain themes, and create certain moods, they complement the lived experience of cultural contact.³² The cultural neighborhood is enacted and recreated in such anecdotes about the neighbors and their needs, some derogatory, some commendatory. These notions derive from the journeys people make to their partners, and are a central to narratives about the cultural neighborhood. Mastery of these stereotypes varies, but their discussion is usually picked up eagerly as others contribute well-known commonplaces, which never get old.³³

32 Many intermittent visitors to the area (tourist guides, NGO workers) pick up some of these quite implausible stereotypes, and happily propagate them, not realizing their specific cultural uses and contexts. Probably the most pervasive stereotype, and for economical and political reasons the most pernicious one, is the assumption that all the populations in South Omo are “pastoralist.”

33 During my very first evening in Kara I witnessed some Kara and the Hamar who had escorted me to the Omo River imitating Arbore prosody. Nobody actually knew

In the olden days, it was very difficult for the Nyangatom to get any cloth, so they would sleep naked by the fire (Choke Bajje).

They slaughtered the ox, and we were surprised to see that they did not take off the skin, they cut it, but they cook it inside the skin! (Tsasi Aike).

The Moguji eat the fish, so they don't want the goats for meat, they simply want the skins of the goats for dresses [...] In the morning, when the Moguji wakes up, he doesn't go to his field, he goes towards the river and disappears into the water. And the only other way in which he moves is when he is in the forest and disappears up in the trees to get honey (Choke Bajje).

These examples show how talking about stereotypes is connected to bondfriend-practice, in that they bring alive how other's livelihoods, and thus their needs and capabilities, are imagined.

The dialectic of the personal and the social in the practice of *beltamo*

To cultivate one bondfriend per neighboring group is seen as prudent. This is pragmatic: this one person, well-selected, can provide what is needed, goods, shelter, news; several might, when harvest in their area fails, prove too much of a burden. However, these are assumptions. One thing I have witnessed during fieldwork was evidence of little jealousies: "What did you just call your little son? I have given him *my* name when he was still in his mother's womb!" A Kara man had invited two *bel* to name his last-born son, hoping to secure two potential godfathers for the child. But beyond the embarrassments caused by such attempts to create more kin than one can do justice to, there is also the fact that no *beltamo* takes place in a vacuum.

As it grows, one will not leave a *bel* relationship, and the *zersi* [the population]³⁴ know that *aine* ["what's his name"] and *aine* are *bel*, and they don't leave being *bel* (Choke Bajje).

This indicates the public awareness of *beltamo*, and even more, its public character: the way one handles one's bondfriends is perceived, discussed, judged, and will contribute to one's reputation within one's own community as well. Ayaluw calls this a "moral code" (1997: 156) which makes people help their *bel* – it is important to realize that this is not a merely private affair. The social field of

much Arbore language, but everybody was very familiar with the intonation and rhythm, and this familiarity bred hilarity.

34 This term, occurring both in Hamar and Kara, indicates various degrees of the public, applicable to situationally assembled male elders, to entire populations, and de-personalized public opinion.

both partners is involved, and having several bondfriends might cast doubts on one's sincerity.

We all know how his father and Maya Banko were good bondfriends together (Choke Bajje).

The consistency with which the participants from Hamar turned out to be well-informed about the bondfriendships reported by the Arbore indicates that the public interest taken in stories of *beltamo* is considerable.

"His bondfriendship, it is extremely hot." With this metaphorical expression, Horra Surra indicated public approval, admiration even, of a relation well-lived. Such public recognition is a factor in the analysis of why people enter bondfriendships, and why they choose to maintain them. I suggest that being seen as a good bondfriend is for many people as important as being seen as a good kinsman, because the underlying fact that the bondfriend was chosen highlights the agency of the participants, their will and ability to shape and extend their social world. This is distinct from maintaining the relations which have come about naturally, or collectively. Both friendship and kinship – however defined – require effort, as they need to be cultivated and performed well. A *bel* relation, however, is the personal achievement of the bondpartners. As I will discuss in the next section, there is also the motif of the *bel* jointly defying the *zersi* (see fn 34) in a spectacular, truly ostentatious display of individual will and autonomy.

Peace-making through *beltamo*

The conciliatory power of some *bel*-relationships is no secret, and some instances have been heavily quoted (Lydall and Strecker 1979: 105). During the workshop, Tsasi Aike told of an example of Hamar-Nyangatom peace-making through his grandfather, who in reconciling the two groups became the bondfriend of a Nyangatom spokesman. Consider the metaphor used here – a spear was wielded in blessing the water of the Omo River and the pasture land:

We who have looked for friendship, for kinship, have used the spear to split the water, to create a path for those who have good intentions. Others should not be able to cross the river, the spear shall then turn over and spill them into the water (Tsasi Aike, quoting Loteng and Berimba).

This very peace-making then came to be identified by the names and reputations of the two spokesmen, their personal reputations giving the peace-meeting a resounding strength, and in turn, their status increased for such a spectacular act of becoming *bel*. This relation (mentioned above) has endured up to today. While the *beltamo* in this case helped the land to find peace, *bel* have also made a smaller but still ostentatious point in simply refusing to join war:

There was a state of war between the Arbore and Borana; so I sent word to my *bel* in Borana to come to the Karmet (Wata Wando) with his donkey and his sacks, and the Karmet then led the donkey to Arbore. I filled the sacks with grain, and also added another donkey, and sent it all back (Boto Gali).

Horra Surra told another story full of subterfuge and cunning: a Hamar travelled by night to Arbore, not lighting fires; then the Arbore hid him in his house, where they were secretly drinking milk and eating. After a few days, the guest was led back home without other Arbore being any the wiser. Both partners defied the *zersi* (see fn 34), which are at war, and decided that their *beltamo* was more important than killing and revenge.

In other, even more dramatic cases, war broke out while guests were being hosted in a given location, and some men won distinction by refusing to massacre the guests, and instead shielding them with their own bodies against the angry mob. These instances, as they were recounted during the workshop, were celebrations of the individual refusing to go along with the chaos engendered by the *zersi*, and these displays of commitment only increased their reputation, abroad as well as at home.

But there are also cases which show *beltamo* being spoilt, neglected, or brutally cut off; I will turn to these in the following section.

Outside interference and mishandling of the *beltamo*

[...] and everybody remembers him, Maen [from Daasanech], who also gave his name to the oldest son of this older brother of Baldambe. [...] [The Hamar] Maen's younger brother was later taken by some other Hamar to Daasanech to raid some cattle and kill people, and he vanished there, Maen's younger brother. [...]

Argo [also of this family] goes and sneaks into Daasanech land and kills Daasanech individually, takes their rifles and returns home safely, again and again and again. At least three rifles has he brought back, saying this was "the tribute they have to pay for killing my brother." But on his trips he has led five or maybe six other Hamar to their death, as he invites them to go on the raid with him, and they will all be killed, only he returns safely. The people with whom he goes all perish. And this is all because Maen's younger brother died, and he had to die in this way, because his older brother bears the name of a bondfriend, so he should not attack the people with whom his family has such a bondfriendship (Tsasi Aike).

The tragic events of the many lives wasted are blamed on Maen's younger brother and his relative Argo, who recklessly disregard the memories of their own family of how Hamar and Daasanech can live as friends. This a spectacular story, where spoiling *beltamo* brings about a curse, drives home the point of how bondfriendship conjoins partners, and how it comes to act as a guiding model for the relations between groups.

It does occur that a visiting bondfriend is killed by members of his host's group. During the workshop, two cases were mentioned. In the first one, some

participants were discussing the story of a guest in Daasanech who was not protected by his bondfriend, but instead was surrendered to the *zersi* who killed him. The Hamar and Arbore present used this as an opportunity to emphasize how taboo it is for them to allow anything to befall their guests, and to highlight that “in Daasanech, some will save you, some will kill you; one cannot trust them.” This was revealed as stereotyping-in-progress when a little later Boya Arato recounted how his first Hamar bondfriend had been killed by another Arbore while resting in a shade in the fields. This spoiled the relations between all of Hamar and Arbore for quite some time, and the killer was cast out and had to live alone in the bush until finally the police caught up with him. Violations of the *beltamo* covenant were presented as causing very far-reaching repercussions for the perpetrator.

An example of mere neglect was also mentioned. Choke had seen it down in Kara, where a woman refused to take care of her husband’s visiting *bel*:

The wife doesn’t give him a cowhide, he sits there on his stool and is thirsty. The wife [...] she sticks her nose up in the air and doesn’t give him anything. [...] Then the husband, who has been sitting in the shade somewhere comes and says “What is this? Why don’t you give my *bel* a cowhide?” “I don’t care about your *bel*. He didn’t bring me a goat skin! He didn’t bring me butter! He didn’t bring me any coffee! He stinks, I don’t want him!” And then the husband beat her, so that she ran off to her parents’ place (Choke Bajje).

So in refusing to fulfill her duties as a hostess, but especially in demanding things from the exhausted traveler, the wife transgressed against decency and the spirit of *beltamo*, and the situation was only saved by a neighbor who invited the guest over to his place, hosted him and provided for him. While the Hamar then returned home, telling that the bondfriendship might have ceased, the wife down in Kara was berated by her family, especially her elder brother, who asked “is it good to leave him empty, even though he came empty-handed?” Here, the duties of the wife are emphasized, but her power comes out, too – without her cooperation, the husband is quite helpless, his household being rendered inoperative. The entire settlement in Kara took offense at the wife’s behavior, scolding her for being selfish and neglecting a relation as valued as any.

It was also mentioned that the host might lie to his guest, saying that the harvest was bad, that he himself had too little grain to give away. Turning back empty-handed, the visitor was asked at home what his *bel* had given to him, and had to admit with some degree of embarrassment that he had received nothing. When he then learns through rumors that his former bondfriend indeed had had a good harvest, he would decide without any drama (as in the situation above) to let the *beltamo* fade away.

So, your relation doesn’t taste well anymore. So, you don’t go to him anymore. So, your *beltamo* [...] you don’t reach it anymore (Oita Gadi).

Some notorious disruptions occurred through third parties. The Aari who used to come all the way to Kara in order to acquire the salty soil *muutsi* were, probably in the 1960s and 1970s, repeatedly waylaid by Banna and Bashada men, who robbed and killed them. Choke was witness to one such attempt. When returning with a newly acquired gun from Kako (between Banna, Aari and Maale), he met some Aari driving goats and donkeys home, which they had acquired from their bondfriends in Hamar.

I saw the Aari, and I also saw some Banna who were running after them. [...] When I saw the Banna, I took my rifle. And the Aari came, and stuck very close to me, and I just kept looking at the Banna. They, they stopped when they saw me, and I said now to the Aari that they should greet them, and then be on their way. I then met the others. I looked at them. Some were bringing their herding sticks, others were carrying stones in order to throw, or just to hit the Aari with them, in order to take away the goats. The Aari were also carrying honey! [...] "Hey, friends, where are you going?" "Ah, you became their good fortune. They survived, they got away because of you." And they returned together with me. [...] Before, Aari would come to their *bel* in Hamar and bring him hoe blades, other metal tools, and coffee, they would bring donkeys laden with goods, one for their bondfriends, and the rest they would sell in Hamar. Now it is spoilt! (Choke Bajje).

The recent increase in traffic by Isuzu trucks in principle allows people to bypass this dangerous territory, but in effect only traders make their way to Hamar now, and hardly anybody travels to Kara at all anymore, as the road is too unreliable for commercial traffic. One core cause for the increase in such incidents is the increasing availability of semi- and fully automatic rifles, which allow even a single person to stop or kill a larger group. This occurs at all borders between groups, in the worst case in what is called *kantsi* killings by the Kara, instigatory plots which mislead others to the true identities of the killers (see Gezahegn 1994: 117f). Many wars and revenge raids in South Omo have been caused by third parties slipping unseen into another's territory and killing visitors there, making it appear as if they had been betrayed by their hosts. Out of fear of exactly such actions, Hamar have warned Arbore returning home from Daasanech not to drive large herds through their territory, because some raiders could easily follow them, hiding their tracks in this way, and enter Hamar country undiscovered.

Beltamo and the great transformation of cultural neighborhood

Inter-ethnic bondfriendship is changing. This is certainly not surprising. In case of a drought, the Ethiopian state agencies in cooperation with NGOs increasingly try to provide for the needs of the population – and the USAID wheat sacks,

delivered to one's doorstep, certainly obviate the apparent need for extensive and exhausting journeys to one's *bel*.³⁵ Daasanech can buy aluminum pots in Omorate,³⁶ salt can be bought in the markets, and trips by car or truck to the zonal capital of Jinka to acquire metal tools are accessible for basically everyone at a low cost. Most of the Kara who went to Kuchur (a Moguji village near the Omo-Mago confluence) during 2006 were looking for cheap bullets – *beltamo* took on the aspect of a black market here, as bullets are one of the few essential items the trade of which has not been encouraged by the authorities.

One might now deplore the dissolution of interdependences between the groups of South Omo, as in a very Polanyian move the approach of the state sweeps away relations of mutuality (and, indeed, self-sufficiency). And in fact, many of my interlocutors did just that. Galappo Birane talked wistfully of his youth, when he, as a young boy, was taken along by some adult men on a trip to Banna. Having arrived in a hamlet, the whole group was soon taken by their Banna host along to his *bel* in Ts'amakko, where they were hosted for several days, before returning, loaded with gifts. Atsha Arti often told me about his youth (in the 1970s) when the young Kara regularly walked to Daasanech "in order to dance with the girls, and those girls, they always wanted to 'play.'" This is not done anymore; hardly any young man speaks or even understands Daasanech anymore. Something occurred which spoiled the relations with the Daasanech, so that these casual journeys were no longer feasible: the appearance of the *duriye* (Amharic for trouble-maker). The following report reveals a little bit about how Kara conceive this threat to *beltamo* and, indeed, cultural neighborhood:

FG: "MN, people have often told me about the time when you went to Daasanech with some other Kara, some years ago, to buy bullets or something else, but then the whole trip became spoilt. Tell me about it."

MN: "That was about eight years ago [he would have been around 19, 20 years old at the time]. So I had just stabbed my *seli* [age-set initiation step], I think. Many people told you about it? Who? Anyway, we were 29 people of different age-sets. We all assembled and went to Daasanech, and we all brought a lot of money to buy bullets and guns. Some people over 1.000 Birr, others even 3.000 or 4.000. Some had guns with them, so when we reached Omorate, we deposited them at the police station. Then we went into town, to start looking for bullets and information about guns. Some people bought bullets, for 2 Birr a piece, even right then, upon arriving.

35 See also Tadesse (2006: 305, fn 9). These free deliveries in times of supposed need have the effect that the local market for sorghum is obsolete, even if for example the Kara have produced a surplus. Many USAID supplies, marked "not for sale," end up in shops.

36 Compare Sobania (1991: 127): "Two necessities of life, coffee and clay pots, also had to be obtained by trade [...]. The Dassanetch held these vessels in high esteem but due to a lack of clay locally they were unable to make them for themselves."

Not in town, but meeting with people outside, in the bush. At night, we all slept together in one place, whose owner liked Kara; except for some of the older ones, who had *aeda* in the vicinity. The next day, we went downriver to the villages. In one village we were accosted, and told to assemble; and to sit down. Then, the head of the settlement started talking, and kept talking and haranguing us: “The Kara used to bring us pots, and trade them for our beads, and you what have you come for? Where are your pots?” He kept going and going, so eventually we gave them some money ‘to drink coffee’ [as a bribe]. I also contributed 11 Birr. Then, I and four others, we decided that we were fed up, and returned towards Omorate. Others went to various places, also in small groups. We then met some Daasanech on the road, who said that they had bullets. I didn’t like the looks of them; I thought that they might be thieves, so I didn’t buy from them. Others bought, and then we went on. Some *duriye* came to us, wearing the *bordi* Ihaddiq uniform [striped camouflage uniform of the Ethiopian army], and said that they would report us to the police if we didn’t give them 200 Birr – so we all gave 40, 40, 40, 40, except for one who refused [...] and we talked to them for a long time, that this should be enough for them. Reaching Omorate, we didn’t enter the town, but went along the water, to wash ourselves. Then a Daasanech woman told us that some Kara had been led away by the police. That had been NN and some others, who had been followed while they were in town, and six people were then arrested and put up in the police station. Others had even greater problems: two were shot at by Daasanech, who then took 300 Birr from them. Some also had to run away, as they had been threatened, had been stolen from, and so several were even in hiding, hungry, thirsty, stung by mosquitoes in the bush. The five of us then went into the bush to hide as well, and saw on the way two policemen coming, walking toward us, but we just didn’t look at them and kept walking into the denser forest. Then we waited, and hid our bullets. We sent two of us out to buy some bread, and waited for them to return. When they brought some food, they went again, as they had heard about a gun which was for sale. So they didn’t come back, not even in the morning, so we then also went back towards the town, covering our tracks as we went, so people couldn’t find our bullets. Meeting up with other Kara, some said ‘oh, let’s just pack up and go home;’ but then the older ones stopped us, saying, ‘your guns are still in the police station, and some of our people as well – you are not going anywhere.’ So we assembled in the *tabiya* [Amharic: police station] for negotiations, and all of us contributed some money to buy food and drinks for the policemen, who then finally said, ‘alright, wait Saturday, Sunday, and on Monday, we your folks can leave’ [the arrest had been for bullet trading]. When we were free to go then, people said that they knew one place where they had bought [but not yet collected] seven guns and some bullets. So seven of us, all young ones together with one older one, who spoke a little Daasanech, went off. We had agreed to later meet not in town, but at the road to Dus. We then reached the village, and our Daasanech host opened up the crates, gave us the guns and the bullets, and we immediately loaded the magazine, and even put a bullet in the chamber of each gun. Our host was protecting us – his three sons were sleeping on all sides of us, and we were using our guns as headrests, and had wrapped bullets and money in our clothes and blankets.

So we didn't get any sleep; and outside, some other Daasanech were begging our host to let them in so they could rob us. Then, at sunrise, we went off, all with safeties off, and we didn't go in a cluster, but spread out. Finally we met the others, and we all went off towards *worama* [a seasonal lake]; on the way we were saying, 'oh, we hope we meet some Daasanech so we can pay back their treachery.' Some of us just fired bullets into the air, or shot at crocodiles, out of rage and anger. When we reached Kortcho, and the people there heard our bullets, they all assembled and we told them all that had happened. They already had heard a rumor that all of us had been arrested with our guns. In the end, talking about revenge, people said 'no, it is *kaiss* [taboo] to kill a Daasanech, so let us just leave it at that and avoid the issue by not going there anymore'" (Interview with MN on the notorious journey to Daasanech, January 2007, Gorrente/ Kara; protocol from memory and hand-written notes).

This is reminiscent of Choke's story about the Banna above, and the tale of the abrupt end of the Kara-Aari *beltamo*.³⁷ It also corresponds to my impressions from Kara – actual visits take place less often than people would like. How to interpret Mulla's story? I have talked to other Kara who gave similar renderings of the events; I had no contact to any of the Daasanech involved for their version of the events. Thus, I will analyze the narrative not as a statement of facts, but as a moral tale about cultural neighborhood and its decline. The argument that cultural practices are always changing misses the point – stories on *beltamo* and cultural neighborhood dramatize recent changes, and deny any earlier crisis. A notable motif MN develops is the opposition between the good, even exemplary Daasanech host the young men find, and the *duriye*, significantly always young, here associated with police or military, assuming an authority to meddle which should not be theirs. The *duriye* are associated with the idleness of the city, and often with schooling, contact to administrative structures, NGO work, or tourism business. The charge is the one of anomy, of a lack of decency – decency, which people were and still are longing for in the interaction of Kara and Daasanech. The most interesting point in the account, for me, is the Daasanech's lament about the Kara being the anomic ones, who basically come to Daasanech under the umbrella of kinship and friendship, but who do nothing to maintain and strengthen these pillars: "Where are our pots," he is asking, regardless of whether he really needed pots – but that is because pots are not only pots, but indicative of much more. The point stands: the young Kara came to his land for expediency, for buying bullets,³⁸ not for morality, and it is this

37 See Stigand (1969 [1910]: 236, 242) as an early witness of this famous relation. He calls the Aari "Bako". Even today, when I head for Kara from the town of Jinka, I am approached regularly by an old Aari woman, who quite emphatically asks me to bring some *muutsi*, salty soil, for her cattle.

38 Bullets are not valued as iconic of the cultural neighborhood; in fact, it stands to argue that much rather they are iconic of its deterioration. Here lies the irony of the story, and, indeed, the larger situation.

alleged opportunism which to him indicates erosion of the ancestral relations. For him, they are the *duriye*. What becomes obvious is that there are some prevalent ideas about the good life, and they can become strong legitimating factors in negotiation of relations.

Looking at the narrative motif of *duriye*, which reveals anomy creeping in to social arenas which were and are valued precisely because there were not only economical benefits, but a creative margin, because there was some “play,” I refrain from suggesting that the decline of bondfriendship is only due to the easy access to certain items in the markets. Instead, one needs to look at the larger picture of the Ethiopian reality, at the practice of Ethnic Federalism (which, as some suggest, has similar effects as classical divide and rule practices), at the proliferation of guns, and at the mechanisms of policy, bureaucracy and administration, both at the governmental and the nongovernmental level. The administrative boundaries between *woreda* (administrative districts) have contributed in segregating the inhabitants of South Omo from one another,³⁹ in strengthening the sense of a group being the ruler of their domain, of their turf, where one can deal with outsiders with impunity.

The bondfriend who still cultivates his relationships, who still travels, who still keeps channels of communication open – he should be considered the cultural hero of South Omo, not merely a clever broker of economic assets. The interdependence of ethnic groups, which is expressed and celebrated in the *beltamo*, is giving way to a much less colorful situation, one where governmentality is the new agency, and where people grow distrustful of boundaries – today, ethnic boundaries are also administrative boundaries, and everybody knows that for example the police of a given district is biased, partial towards the locals, and harsh on innocent visitors. This makes it difficult to sustain the

39 Sobania points out the conditions which facilitated the emergence of wide-ranging bondfriendships: “However, among the many societies at the north end of Lake Turkana in the last century, the lack of administrative boundaries between them, their proximity, and the similarity, as much as the diversity, of their economic adaptations made possible, just as it did trade, the formation of bond partnerships that cut across societal boundaries and linked neighboring herdsman” (1991: 133). He becomes even more outspoken a little later, worth quoting at length: “The artificial boundaries which governments so adamantly promulgated brought to a halt the peaceful means of contact and exchange which had for so long bred familiarity between societies. [...] By limiting societies to bounded regions, and thereby creating in each increased need for greater self-reliance, the colonial authorities heightened the ethnic consciousness of each society. [...] The notion never emerged in the first quarter of this century that the limitations and restrictions which were being imposed on these pastoralists might in the long term have a detrimental effect both on their well-being and the environment in which they lived” (1991: 139f). This is still true of some policies implemented in South Omo in the early 21st century.

ideal of a bondfriendship with mutual visits, recurrent injections of commodities and memories, and an emergent joint life history; eating and drinking together, sharing the fruits of what Stephen Gudeman calls “the base,” and the other activities that are a prime example of productive consumption (see also Sobania 1991: 131).

These listed elements of a positive *beltamo* distinguish the ideal type from others, be it providing a trader with a safe base or a more clear-cut patron-client relationship: the consistent display of mutuality, or (as in the case of the Mursi visits to Kara) at least the plausible claim of mutuality, of reliability, of continuity. Spanning the generations, bondfriendships engender levels of trust not achieved in the variants to *beltamo*. Beyond involving the exchange of items (no matter how delayed or how balanced), they require the willingness to put faith in someone, to endure a long, arduous journey, to visibly commit oneself to a degree which is not a feature of a uniplex relationship. The image, of the familiar stranger who has come a long way purely out of trust in one’s hospitality, is strong. The trader, who might be a Konso or a generic *gal*, a *jumpa*, an Amhara,⁴⁰ he is an outsider, and his lack of commitment to the lifestyle which is constitutive of *beltamo*, his lack of interest in sustaining cultural neighborhood, is obvious to all. So while he might eventually become the model of the modern bondfriend, the demise of the idealized *bel* is even now regretted.

In assessing its importance for intergroup-relations, is it helpful to classify *beltamo* as a kind of cross-cutting tie? Schlee provides a minimal definition of such ties in that they “involve a group boundary across which they cut,” and distinguishes between dyadic ties between individuals and group affiliations (1997: 577). Such ties are often said to be mitigating factors in conflicts (see Thubauville and Sagawa this volume), as they inhibit or regulate violence – according to this approach, individuals who find themselves caught between loyalties quite understandably want neither side to suffer. Some of the examples above support this model in that the bondfriends were protecting each other. However, this is where the similarity ends. Even a *bel* who appreciates the cultural neighborhood does not belong to several groups, as is suggested for

40 These terms, along with *habesha*, are used in various contexts by Hamar, Arbore, Kara in reference to their Ethiopian Other, the stereotyped Highlander, first encountered in number during the Conquest, and since then experienced as a more or less interfering, more or less distant ruler (see Lydall this volume). *Gal* is the most directly expressive term of these, as it can also be used to refer to “enemy” as a generic; the terms *jumpa*, *koshumba*, *kushumba* are today taken by Hamar and Kara as referring to either the spears/bayonets or the ferocity of the invaders of the Amhara conquest, but as these terms occur in similar form also among Mursi and Daasanach, their etymology has to be considered ambiguous. In light of the Conquest, it is not surprising that non-Ethiopians are often awarded more social credit than the dominating Highlander.

cross-cutting ties; he is exclusively affiliated with one. Many individuals who would guard the bondfriend with their own life (see Strecker 1994: 307) will have killed other members of their bondfriend's group. So even though bondfriendships between individuals have facilitated negotiations, the reliability with which the *beltamo* as a cross-cutting tie has influenced the dynamics of violence of the conflicts in South Omo remains difficult to assess. Despite this difficulty of establishing clear positive correlations between *beltamo* and limits to violence in conflict, the spirit of *beltamo* as an icon of cultural neighborhood, where the individual can achieve distinction within their own and the other group by personally cutting across boundaries, remains an admirable feature of the South Omo inter-group relations.

Just like age-mates, bondfriends are equals; this breaks the pattern of the dyadic relations structured through the gerontocratic or even generational principle obtaining across the region. Even though *bel* partners were brought together through their differences, and while the gifts they make differentiate them just as they connect them, their roles are not opposed, not complementary as they are with juniors or elders or cognates, but symmetrical and any intimation of dominance is excluded from the bond (cf. Paine 1969: 507). This provides a relief for the individual, who for once is not required to constantly assert himself. A bondfriend from another group, who cannot be a rival in one's quotidian struggles, with whom there is nothing to vie about in "the realm of normal pressures exerted by blood and affinal ties" (Shack 1963: 205, also 201f), thus has tremendous significance. Even if the larger polities never permanently achieve this sort of amity, individuals can prove their personal virtues in achieving (or rather, displaying) equality. Matsuda fails to find the utilitarian core of the irritatingly contingent exchanges between Moguji and their bondfriends, but finds something else:

I have come to the conclusion that the regional power inspires the people here to exchange goods [with] each other. With in [sic] a region, they try to keep not only peaceful relations with their neighbors, but also they unfold their sustainable life in dynamism of interethnic relationship. [...] The sense is a kind of membership to live here (2003: 5).

This is the connection of *beltamo* and cultural neighborhood – as the only seemingly dyadic *beltamo* comes to generate context, expanding from an egalitarian connection of individuals and small groups to a supra-individual, supra-group discourse and practice characterized by presumed inter-dependence. Seen this way, bondfriendship becomes a micro-manifestation and a mirror of cultural neighborhood, of a regional awareness in which affective regard for the peculiarities and differences of the different groups which belong to the "South Omo horizon" can prevail.

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Appendix

Workshop participants

For each Ethiopian participant, the first entry below gives one of this individual's given names followed by a given name of his/her father. Names in brackets indicate alternative forms of address which were also used during the workshop and can be found in the transcript.

From **Arbore**:

Horra Surra, a male elder	(Iyya Arkulo, "Father of Arkulo")
Ello Oda, a male elder	(Iyya Tarri, "Father of Tarri")
Boya Arato, a male elder	(Maxulo Bela, "Bondfriend of Maxulo")
Boto Gali, a male elder	(Iyya Sirba, Father of Sirba)
Nyiro Galcha, a widow	(Ege Hatto, Mother of Hatto) Tofu Alle, a widow

From **Hamar**:

Choke Bajje, a male elder	(Kairambe, a name attained upon initiation)
Tsasi Aike, a male elder	(Kalumbe, a name attained upon initiation)
Ivo Aike, a male elder	(Moggo, i.e. addressed by Ivo Strecker as a namesake)

From **Kara**:

Atsha Arti, a male elder	(Chardumbe, a name attained upon initiation)
Oita Gadi, a male elder	(Lobukke, a goat name)
Haila Nukunnu, a young man	(Dare, alternative given name)
Worssa Birane, a young woman	

Anthropologists/focus of fieldwork:

Felix Girke/Kara	(Loxopill, a goat name)
Ivo Strecker/Hamar	(Theoimba, "Father of Theo")
Echi Christina Gabbert/Arbore	(Ege Baro, "Mother of Baro")

Due to the semi-public nature of the workshop, and to the subject matter discussed, anonymization was deemed unnecessary and in fact inappropriate, as it would obscure expertise and the proud willingness of the participants to share their knowledge.