

The Ongota language – and two ways of looking at the history of the marginal and hunting-gathering peoples of East Africa

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SOMMARIO

L’articolo tenta una ricostruzione delle origini della più piccola entità etnica dell’Etiopia e una delle più piccole in Africa: gli Ongota. I circa cento membri di questo gruppo etnico vivono in un solo villaggio, Muts’e, sulle rive del fiume Weyt’o, nell’Etiopia sudoccidentale. Gli Ongota sono interessanti sia dal punto di vista etnografico che da quello linguistico. Sono uno dei pochissimi popoli a non aver sviluppato pastorizia e agricoltura tra le numerose popolazioni dell’Etiopia sudoccidentale; un numero limitato di anziani parla una lingua a tutt’oggi non classificata all’interno dei gruppi linguistici dell’area, cuscitico, omotico (entrambi afroasiatici) e nilo-sahariano.

La lingua di comunicazione quotidiana degli Ongota è lo ts’amakko (cuscitico orientale, gruppo Dullay). Il passaggio allo ts’amakko è il risultato degli attuali stretti legami sociali, ma l’analisi comparata del lessico ongota mostra che nella loro storia si sono succeduti periodi di interscambio con altre popolazioni dell’area. Sulla base delle fonti storiche orali è possibile individuare un’affiliazione con i Maale, una popolazione di lingua omotica settentrionale che vive a nord degli Ongota.

Due ipotesi storiche vengono analizzate per rendere conto delle peculiarità degli Ongota e della loro lingua. La prima ipotesi (“top-down”) vede negli Ongota un gruppo originario di cacciatori raccoglitori la cui lingua è l’ultima traccia di un gruppo linguistico scomparso e, quindi, geneticamente isolata. Sulla base del secondo scenario (“bottom-up”) il gruppo Ongota sarebbe invece un gruppo minoritario che per motivi ambientali, come la massiccia presenza della mosca tsetse, avrebbero abbandonato la pastorizia per dedicarsi maggiormente alla caccia e alla pesca.

L’affascinante scenario “top-bottom” non pare in effetti sostenibile, e, sulla base di un’accurata analisi del lessico, si propende piuttosto per una soluzione “bottom-up”, ovvero un’origine degli Ongota in quanto gruppo marginale o fuori casta.

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1. Introduction¹

A great number of marginal communities are found in East Africa, most notably along and in the proximity of the Rift Valley. Almost everywhere, from Ethiopia to Tanzania, one finds specific occupational outcast groups (usually tanners, blacksmiths, experts in traditional medical and magical practices, and so on), as well as hunting and

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the collaboration of Sophia Thubauville (Frobenius Institut, Frankfurt a.M.) who accompanied Graziano Savà on a short survey fieldwork in the Ongota village of Muts’e in August 2007 and kindly allowed the authors to include her map of the Ongota history of movements. We also thank Bonny Sands (Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff) for her comments and corrections to an earlier version of this article. Graziano Savà’s research on Ongota was funded by the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Documentation Programme. The included data on Ts’amakko come from Savà (2005). This publication is the result of a PhD project financed by the CNWS, University of Leiden. Fieldwork was also supported by the Dutch organization WOTRO. Savà is greatly indebted to these institutions for their fundamental support.

gathering communities, to which fishermen and bee-keepers must be added.

It is at least convenient (even if not easy, nor maybe theoretically sound) to draw a separating line between the occupational outcast groups and the hunting and gathering communities on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic affiliation: the former are found by and large *within* a broader ethnic and linguistic community, of which they share typical cultural and socio-political traits; on the other hand, hunting and gathering communities may better be considered separate entities; they are (often geographically, but even more culturally) distinct from the neighboring dominating group – to which, of course, they are tightly connected by a complex net of political obligations and economic interests.

Our interest and our considerations will be strictly limited to the hunting-gathering groups. But even a cursory discussion of all the peoples who fall, one way or another, under this rubric in East Africa seems an impossible task within the limits of a single article. Only a few general traits will be discussed:

- language shift towards the language of a dominating group is widespread: there is evidence (as the present article will detail with regards to a specific group in Southwest Ethiopia) that language shift can even be cyclic;
- ethnic assimilation to a neighboring pastoral community is equally common, although it must not be confused with language shift: a group can either shift its language affiliation without assimilating itself (i.e., without losing its distinctiveness), or retain its language but accept a new ethnic identity.

But it is in regard to the very origin of the hunting-gathering groups that two opposite historical hypotheses have been put forward and still dominate the field.

Broadly speaking, the hunter-gatherers of East Africa have been subject to two radically different models of analysis. The first considers them as “relics” – i.e., as the last remnants, a sort of living testimony, of a pristine way of life of hunting and gathering, submerged elsewhere by pastoralism and agriculture. This approach is all the more strengthened when the group in question is not only ecologically, economically and culturally deviant from the mainstream of the surrounding populations, but also linguistically apart. In this view, hunter-gatherers are supposed to be “cultural survivors” precisely because they are, or are considered to be, “linguistic survivors”. Their origin, is claimed, can be traced following a classical genealogical tree, leading from an original starting point all the way down to present times. We call this a top-down model.

A good example of this approach is Nurse’s (1986) reconstruction of the past history of the Dahalo, a group of about 300 people living along the coastal forest strip of Northern Kenya, not far from Lamu: traces of Dahalo presence (in the form of possible loans) are traced by Nurse as far as the Central Kenya Highlands. The contrary hypothesis, i.e., that many of them were loanwords *into* Dahalo (while a majority of putative Dahalo loans were probably the product of casual resemblance) was not taken into consideration. The result is a fascinating, but unproven historical reconstruction where the hunter-gatherers of today are the last representatives of prehistoric groups assimilated by advancing pastoral and agricultural peoples, like the tips of sunken islands. It seems to us that in this and many other cases a top-down model, at least in its extreme form, cannot be applied successfully, and a different line of analysis is needed.

The second approach has the hunter-gatherers as marginal groups, and often as former pastoralists who were forced to adopt a despised way of subsistence after having lost their cattle as a result of war or epidemics. Such a view receives further support by the observation that the marginal, outcast groups of East Africa are constantly renewed and enriched through the influx of genetic (and very possibly linguistic) material coming from neighboring peoples: individuals, either men, women or children, may and often are cast off of their group for a number of reasons, mainly having to do with the infringement of group solidarity and codes (Stiles 1988). There is no single starting point, and a genealogical tree is ill-suited to represent the genesis of these groups. This model of analysis can be called “bottom-up”.

The two models suit different interests and methodologies, and are largely irreducible to each other. On the other hand, it is well possible to imagine the models as extreme points along a continuum, with extreme and moderate cases. We can imagine, e.g., that the group would be reinforced with population inflow and that the language would be reinforced with linguistic material.

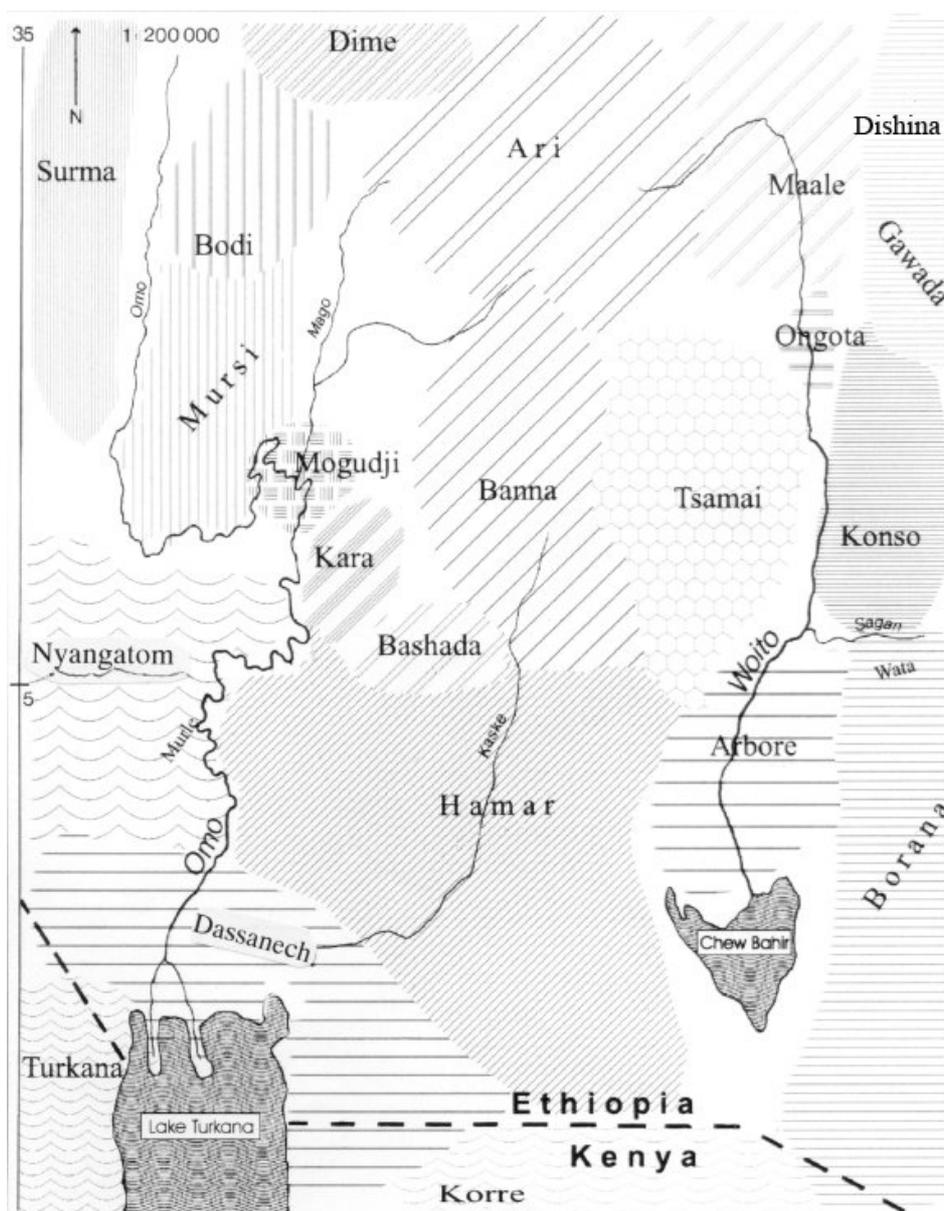
In this article, it is argued that a bottom-up model may better account for the ethnic and linguistic history of the Ongota. As detailed below, the Ongota have largely replaced their ancestral language with the Cushitic language of their pastoral neighbors, the Ts’amakko, while a bare handful of elders still speak the Ongota language, which is so different from neighboring Cushitic and Omotic languages that it has so far resisted classification. In another radical example of top-down approach, Fleming (2006) claimed that Ongota represents a separate branch of the Afroasiatic phylum – therefore dating back thousands of years. This hypothesis may be matched at the ethnographic level with the (completely unwarranted) suggestion, found in a travel report from 1896 (Donaldson Smith 1896), that the Ongota are the remnants of an archaic pygmy population of hunter-gatherers.

The Ongota are still fairly unknown – a “new entry” in the world of hunter-gatherer communities – and the problems surrounding their language and past history are very complex indeed. The following sections will present in more detail the Ongota and the ethnolinguistic evidence pointing to their origin.

2. The Ongota

The Ongota (mainly known locally as Birale) are a small population of about 100 living in Southwest Ethiopia, in the village of Muts’e along the Weyt’o River (some 35 minutes walking distance from the bridge along the road leading from Konso to the Omo Valley).² The village is within the territory of the Ts’amakko (or Tsamai), who speak one of the Dullay varieties of East Cushitic (Savà 2005). Other neighboring populations are the Gawwada and other Dullay-speaking groups to the East, the Maale to the North, and the Arbore to the South (see Map 1. below). All their neighbors speak East Cushitic languages, except for the Maale, whose language is North Omotic. Additional groups in contact are the Hamar, the Banna (both groups being South Omotic speakers), the Konso and the Boraana (East Cushitic speakers).

² The Weyt’o river of Southwest Ethiopia (locally called *Dullay*, *Dullayho*, etc.) is of course not to be confused with the now extinct Weyto language, spoken by hippopotamus hunters in the Lake Tana. It was probably a Cushitic language (Dimmendaal 1989), later superseded by an occupation jargon based upon Amharic.



Map 1. The Ongota and the neighbouring peoples mentioned in the text
(adapted with changes from: www.southethiopiaresearch.org)

The Ongota are known in the area for their linguistic and ethnographic uniqueness. Their traditional language, called *ʔiifa ʔongota*³, is different from any other in the area, and it is still unclassified, although many proposals have been put forward.

Ongota is also very endangered, since the community speaks Ts'amakko for everyday communication. This is also the language taught to children. About ten elders still have a knowledge of the Ongota traditional language (Fleming et al 1992/92, Savà and Tosco 2000, and Fleming 2006).

Today the Ongota are socially dominated by the Ts'amakko. The influence is so strong that it is hardly possible to find any Ongota cultural trait not derived from the

³ The transcription of Ongota adopted in the present paper uses the standard International Phonetic Alphabet. The only exceptions are: <j> = /ɕʝ/, <c> = /tʃ/ and <š> = /ʃ/.

Ts'amakko. The two groups actually intermarry and the Ongota take part in the weekly Ts'amakko market in Weyt'o town.

However, the Ongota can be described ethnographically as the only hunter-gatherers in an area characterized largely by pastoralism and agriculture. They practice fishing, hunting, collecting wild plants, as well as apiculture; however, these non-agropastoralist activities are not peculiar to the Ongota in South-West Ethiopia: most of the surrounding people hunt, collect some plant and produce honey, and, as is well known, hardly any community survives by eating exclusively wild animals and plants, and it is no surprise that the Ongota essentially live on cultivated maize and vegetables and keep some chickens, goats and sheep. They are also good producers of bananas, which together with honey are marketable goods. Fishing is the only practice that the Ongota do not share with neighboring peoples; actually, Ongota are the only group for which fish is not a taboo food.

This does not necessarily mean that the Ongota were originally hunter-gatherers and have absorbed alternative forms of food production. Alternatively, they might have had a pastoralist past and for some reason gave up animal husbandry. There are some indications supporting this view. Savà and Thubauville (2010) have found out that older Ongota women have no special knowledge of wild plants⁴. This may help proving that the Ongota are not originally hunter-gatherers. According to Melesse Getu (1997), and as confirmed by the Ongota themselves to Savà and Thubauville in 2007, a massive presence of the tse-tse fly (the biological vector of *trypanosomiasis*) along the Weyt'o River prevents Ongota from breeding cows. For this reason the only domestic animals the Ongota breed are goats and sheep, beside chickens. This may either suggest that the Ongota were earlier pastoralists forced to give up cattle-keeping, or, to the opposite, the incomplete acculturation of an hunter-gatherer group. The whole story, it will be suggested, is much more complex.

Still according to Melesse Getu (1997), the presence of firearms in the forest of the Weyt'o river valley and desertification resulted in drastic impoverishment of fauna and flora. Moreover, fish has decreased during the last years – the main reason being the building of a dam which serves the irrigation system of a large cotton farm near the village of Weyt'o and through which little fish can pass. This means that environmental conditions might have posed the Ongota serious problems if their life was mainly based on hunting and gathering.

The solution to our dilemma – where do the Ongota come from? and what have they been in the past? – might come from the analysis of ethnographic and linguistic data, to which we turn in the following sections.

3. Internal evidence: The myth of the Ongota origins

The Ongota have a traditional myth on their origins. This has been recorded, but not published, by Savà and Tosco (2000 and 2006). The storyteller was Mole Sagane, the former chief of the community. Until his death in January 2008 he was a respected and charismatic elder and one of the last few speakers of the Ongota language.

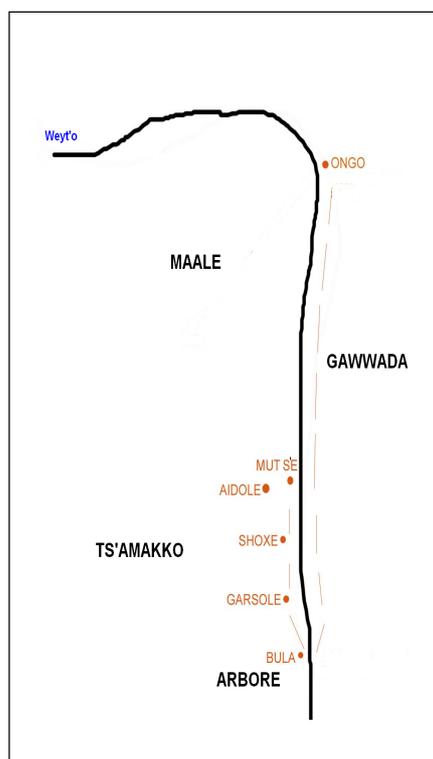
The story tells that the original Ongota group was living in the Maale area. They were killing and stealing cattle using sticks with poisoned tip. Apparently, they already were composed of different sections, each one going back to a different people, ranging, for

⁴ Bonny Sands (p.c.) informs us that a similar situation obtains among the Hadza in Tanzania, and suggests a population bottleneck around 110 years ago which may have caused the loss of some specialized knowledge.

example, from the North Omotic Maale to the South Omotic Banna, to the East Cushitic Boraana and Dihina (the latter one of the Dullay-speaking groups).

They were eventually chased away by the Maale and forced to move southwards along the Weyt'o River. The people started walking along the riverbed and eventually found their way blocked by a large boulder. The people asked the wisest men of each clan how to break it apart. All of them tried their divinations, but to no avail. Since the wise men failed, someone suggested trying with a small boy. They chose one, blessed him and gave him a rhino's horn. The boy touched the boulder with the horn and it immediately split apart. The Weyt'o river could flow southwards and the Ongota could move on. The Ongota followed the river till its end (the Weyt'o river runs dry somewhere to the South of the Ongota settlement in semidesert areas), where they met the Arbore people. After staying there for some time, they were again forced to move, this time northwards, till they settled in the general area where they are found nowadays.

The following map, created by Sophia Thubauville, reconstructs the movement of the Ongota from the Maale area to their present location. Only the places that could be localized with the help of Maale and Ongota people are shown.



Map 2. The movements of the Ongota along the Weyt'o River, according to the Ongota myth of the origins (by Sophia Thubauville)

It is interesting to note that the wise men of each section – i.e., of the different peoples – fail to split the boulder; a child does – one could interpret this as the symbolic expression of a new ethnic identity. Only the Ongota could set the river free, not the original peoples as represented in the tribal sections. The myth, centered, as it is, on the Weyt'o, may be seen as the Ongota version of the hunter-gatherer topophilia: it certainly symbolizes the strong symbiotic link between the Ongota and the river.

While the pastoralists exploit the land beyond the riverbanks, it is the Ongota who really live around and from the river: from it the Ongota get their identity. From the myth one can see that the Ongota consider themselves a mixture of people coming from surrounding communities. Each Ongota clan retraces its origin from one population, except one which claims four separate connections:

Clan	Origin
<i>baritta</i>	Boraana
<i>ozbikko</i>	Arbore
<i>ʃamaddo</i>	Gawwada
<i>reegakko</i>	Dishina
<i>hizmakko</i>	Maale, Gabo, Hamar and Boraana

It is important to remember that a claimed multiethnic origin is not at all unknown in the area. Further to the West, along the lower course of the Omo, the Dhaasanac have a partially similar story, although the bulk of the Dhaasanac claim to derive from the south and to have submerged a local population of fishermen (Tosco 2007, following and elaborating Sobania 1980). If further research will show that the multiethnic origin has actually an ideological basis in the area, it will be possible to analyze this part of the Ongota myth of the origins as an adaptation of their history to a pattern common among the neighboring pastoralist peoples. This adaptation is also evident from the names of the clans, which are found among the Ts'amakko and the Gawwada (and possibly other groups, although relevant data are missing in this regard).

We have seen that the myth embraces two aspects of the origins of the Ongota: their geographic origin, which is claimed to be strictly local, centered around the Weyt'o River, and their ethnic composition, which is reported as multiethnic from the very beginning. The local geographic origin of the Ongota is compatible with a top-down model (the Ongota as the pristine inhabitants of the area), while the multiethnic origin points to the bottom-up approach. Of course, even the plurality of ethnic origins does not exclude a priori the existence of an original, nuclear group of hunter-gatherers, and the strength of the myth as a proof is further weakened by its not uncommon character. Still, at least two points seem to be clear and cannot be dismissed: the Ongota themselves do *not* consider themselves as the first inhabitants of the area and do *not* see themselves as original hunter-gatherers.

4. External evidence: Ancient contacts with the Maale

The Maale are highland pastoralists, living to the North of the Ts'amakko and the Ongota in an area ranging in altitude from about 1,000 to 2,800 meters above sea level (Azeb Amha 2001: 1). The Ongota myth of origin shows that they used to live among the Maale. Other pieces of information confirm this early relation: the Ongota reported to Savà and Thubauville (2006) that they moved a lot in their (recent?) history. They still remember the names of about 30 settlements they settled and abandoned. The first are located north of their present location, towards the Maale highlands. The present one, Muts'e, is on the Weyt'o river. Before Muts'e the Ongota were living in Aydolle, which is the village visited in 1991 by a few members of the team who authored

Fleming et al (1992). The place lies just some hundred meters from Muts'e towards the forest. A few abandoned huts can still be recognized.

A Maale tradition about the Ongota was collected by Sophia Thubauville in November 2007. Contrary to the Ongota myth of origin, the Maale say that the Ongota were once part of the Maale. To the Northeast of the Maale territory there is also a place called Ongot. Maale people still go and dance there to celebrate a good harvest. There is a good memory of the Ongota, and the Maale are proud to know that an offspring of their community can be found somewhere along the Weyt'o River.

We also owe a few interesting pieces of information to the American traveler Arthur Donaldson Smith, who visited South-West Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century. The following excerpts of his report are relevant to our discussion:

'We came to a large and warlike tribe called the Arbore, inhabiting half of the valley above Lake Stephanie [...]'

[talking about the people that they heard of] They were Burle, Dume, Mali, Borali in succession towards the north, and then the Bunno, Dime, Ario, and Amar to the west (Donaldson Smith 1896: 224).

'*Dume, Mali and Borali are pygmies*. The Dume conquered the Burle eight years before.' [emphasis ours]

Several populations listed by Donaldson Smith in the preceding quotes and elsewhere can still be found in South-West Ethiopia. Not so with the Burle, Dume and Borali, although Fleming et al (1992) propose to connect the name Borali to Birale, which, as anticipated, is the ethnic name presently given to the Ongota by neighbouring populations. This would imply, once again, that according to Donaldson Smith the Ongota were living North of the Maale area (referred to by him as "Mali").

5. The Ongota as a marginal group

We believe that the present assimilation of the Ongota to the Ts'amakko and the early affiliation to the Maale are just the two most recent episodes in a long history of Ongota subordinate relations with dominant populations of the area. From each dominant group the Ongota have assimilated cultural traits and linguistic elements.

Similarly, the Boni of the Kenya-Somali border (Tosco 1994) have preserved, with due changes, the South Somali dialect of their previous "masters," the Garre – even though they are politically dominated today by the Oromo. The ethnonym Boni, an adaptation of Somali *boon* 'hunters', nowadays widely used in Kenya (Heine 1977), is matched by a parallel denomination as *Waata* among the Oromo and as *Aweer ~ Aweera* in the group itself; all these terms simply mean "hunters". All these ethnonyms indicate that, at least since the split from the Somali, one is confronted with an occupational group which is *also* a separate ethno-linguistic entity.

Just south of the Boni, the Dahalo speak a Cushitic language (either of the Southern or the Eastern branch) but a very limited portion of the vocabulary (approximately 50 words) contains four click phonemes: voiced vs. voiceless nasal, and with or without labio-velarization (cf. Maddieson, Spajić, Sands and Ladefoged 1993 for a phonetic analysis of Dahalo), and this may be interpreted as a very old lexical layer: obviously, the very presence of a phonological clicks in an otherwise orthodox Afroasiatic language may suggest that we are dealing here with the "original" layer, and the only surviving evidence of what was once a Khoisan language (and notwithstanding the fact

that the very existence of Khoisan as a genetically valid group is today more and more rejected; cf. Güldemann and Voßen 2000). In its turn, this would also be the northernmost relic of the original Khoisan-speaking population of East Africa, prior to the advent in the area of food-production (Tosco 1991, 1992). The extreme top-down model expressed by Nurse (1986) and briefly discussed in Section 1. above seems to follow naturally from such an interpretation.⁵

All these cases indicate that change of linguistic and ethnic affiliation seems instead quite common in the area, for hunter-gatherers and pastoralists alike (cf. Tosco 1998 for an analysis of such changes in terms of the catastrophe theory).

Coming back to the Ongota, it can be argued that, as seen in Section 4., the Maale consider the Ongota to have been “a part” of their people, which could lend support to the hypothesis that they were actually pastoral peoples driven for unknown reasons to hunting and gathering. An outcast group is still “part of a people,” which in this part of East Africa means being bound by ritual and legal obligations and economic interests, and not by a putative common ethnic origin or linguistic behavior (cf. again Tosco 1998). Similarly, occupational minorities of Ethiopia are still part of an “ethnic group” while being heavily marginalized: indeed, cultural assimilation and subordination to a dominant group distinguish the social history of the outcast groups all over Southern Ethiopia (cf. Freeman and Pankhurst 2001), and possibly beyond because the largely unknown outcast groups found among the Somali seem to share a similar history. All these groups are characterized by their skill in handcraft and the power of manipulating clay, iron and hide give them supernatural attributes. For this reason they are very useful, but despised and feared at the same time. Marriage with an outcast person, for example, is forbidden or at the very least frowned upon. The Ongota are not specialized in any handcraft, but there is at least some indication that in the past they might have been attributed magical powers. During their stay in the South Omo area in 1973 Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker heard

‘[...] some interesting news of people called the Birale who live on the east of the Birale mountain, close to the river. The Tsamai refer to them as *hajje*⁶ and consider them to be powerful magicians’ (Lydall and Strecker 1979: 111).

Since they do not keep big herds of cattle and have a strange traditional language of their own, the Ongota are looked upon in scorn by the neighboring pastoralist groups (Savà and Tosco 2000: 65). On the other hand, they are allowed to intermarry with the Ts’amakko and the Gawwada. In the context of these ambiguous social relations with their neighbors, the Ongota will most probably decide to abandon for good their status of a socially despised group by starting keeping cattle and becoming *bona fide* pastoralists. They eventually might be accepted as a new Ts’amakko clan, thus completing the assimilation process.

6. Why Ongota is different

As mentioned in Section 2., the traditional language of the Ongota, *ʔiifa ʔongota*, is different from all the other languages in the area, which belong to the Cushitic and

⁵ Incidentally (and ironically) the very name “Dahalo” is considered derogatory by the group itself; the only native alternative seems to be *guho gʷittso* “little people” (Tosco 1991): certainly not what you would expect for an original and widespread population.

⁶ *Hajje* in Ts’amakko is the plural form of the noun *hajo*, which means a person with magical powers.

Omotic subgroupings of Afroasiatic and, more far apart, from the Surmic subgrouping of Nilo-Saharan. From the morphological point of view, the language is strikingly different. It shows an uncommonly poor and isolating morphology: gender and number have no formal expression on nouns; there are no person and tense verbal suffixes; expression of tense is based on tonal accent change. Moreover, the relatively few grammatical elements have forms not attested in the area: morphological exponents, such as deictic suffixes, determiner suffixes, adjectival endings and most verbal derivation extensions. Also items belonging to other word classes, such as pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, clitics and postpositions cannot be etymologically linked to any neighboring group.

One of the most interesting distinctive morphological features is the absence of verb inflection, which is so characteristic of neighboring Cushitic and Omotic languages. The subject is only indexed by preverbal pronominal clitics. Tense is expressed by placing the tonal accent on the rightmost syllable of the verb, in which case the tense is past, or in the preceding one, in order to express non-past tense. The non-past position of the accent in monosyllabic verbs is on the pronominal clitic, as shown in the following example:

<i>cata</i>	<i>ka = cák</i>	vs.	<i>cata</i>	<i>ká = cak</i>
meat	I = eat.PAST		meat	I = eat.NON-PAST

The closest parallel is possibly found in Hamar, a South Omotic language spoken not far from Ongota to the West. Verbs in Hamar are not inflected for the person of the subject, which is indexed by means of preverbal clitics (Cupi, Petrollino, Savà and Tosco 2013). On the other hand, Hamar has a complex system of aspect and tense suffixes, many of which probably derived from old copulas or auxiliaries.

Considering the area in which it is spoken and the typology of the neighboring languages, one would also expect Ongota to have a rich nominal morphology. Instead, the language does not show any trace of the complex Cushitic and Omotic system of number and gender. For example, in Ts'amakko a basic noun can be derived for singulative and plurative by means of derivational suffixes: from the noun *kar-o* "dog" one can obtain *kar-itto* "one male dog", *kar-itte* "one female dog" and *kar-re* "dogs". Ongota operates with a simple singular/plural opposition. Plurality, moreover, is either lexicalized (for instance: *ayma* "woman"/ *aaka* "women") or expressed by the word *bad'd'e* "many" following the noun (*kara bad'd'e* "fishes").

There is no published work devoted to comparative Ongota morphosyntax. Some notes are found in Blažek (1991, 2001 and 2005), Savà and Tosco (2003), and Fleming (2006). Blažek finds similarities in the pronominal series between Ongota and some Nilo-Saharan languages, while Savà and Tosco adopt the more conservative view that Ongota is an East Cushitic language of the Dullay subgroup on the basis of some tone accent similarities in verbs. One should also mention that Aklilu Yilma (p.c.) sees in Ongota's poor morphology an indication that the language is a creolized pidgin. He supports this view with the local legend of the multiethnic origin of the Ongota discussed in Section 3.

Most of the Ongota comparative studies have focused on lexicon. This is characterized by a mass of Ts'amakko loanwords that entered the Ongota as recorded from its last speakers. Among them one could also find words from other Dullay varieties.

According to Fleming (2006), however, for the Ts'amakko-like words belonging to some core and cultural lexicon the direction of borrowing could have been the opposite – from Ongota into Ts'amakko.

According to Blažek (2005), the contribution of Ts'amakko to the Ongota lexicon consists of 295 lexemes, while parallels with neighbouring Cushitic (such as Oromo and other East Cushitic languages) and Omotic (such as Hamar and other South and North Omotic languages) amounts to only about 15 entries each. Blažek considers each classified group of words as a lexical stratum. In his opinion, the oldest has Nilo-Saharan origin; he himself had isolated the similarities with Nilo-Saharan languages in an older paper published later (Blažek 2007).

There have been of course other attempts at Ongota classification by lexical comparison: Bender (1994) lists Ongota as “unclassifiable” since, according to lexicostatistic techniques, it shares less than 5% with any other language. However, he later defined Ongota as “hybridized Cushitic” (p.c.). On his part, Ehret (p.c., 2002), on the basis of unpublished comparative work, favors a South Omotic affiliation.

In order to explain the uniqueness of Ongota, the top-down model suggests that the Ongota language is genetically a linguistic isolate spoken by a hunter-gatherer group. This is, in its essence, the boldest attempt at classification so far: Fleming (2006) proposed that Ongota is Afroasiatic, although *a separate branch* of it, on a par with Cushitic, Berber, Semitic, etc.

Our idea, instead, is that Ongota's complex history of domination by different groups got reflected in the language, with different superimposed strata. The linguistic import of the constant influx, of different individuals, families and maybe whole sections, resulted in a language that is very deviant from any other language in the area. The following section will provide some evidence to this effect.

7. Tapping into the Ongota lexicon

The uncertainty on the genetic status of Ongota tells us that the classification of Ongota is a very hard, maybe unfeasible, task. All the proposed hypotheses are very interesting, but do not provide definite evidence, and all the attempts share the methodological pitfall of not being based on a reconstruction of Ongota. Many similarities and relevant etymologies, therefore, look very impressionistic and may be put into question (see Savà and Tosco 2007 for a critical appraisal of the reconstructions in Fleming 2006).

Savà and Thubauville (2010) have tried to classify a corpus of Ongota lexemes trying to spot the linguistic traces of contact between the Ongota and the groups that they most likely met during their journeys. Their corpus consists of a selection of about 700 Ongota lexical items, much larger than the one used by Blažek (2005). The words come from Savà and Tosco (2000) with some integration from Fleming *et al.* (1992/93). In order to accept a borrowing Savà and Thubauville (2010) required a particularly high and unquestionable level of similarity. Whenever possible, the comparisons were checked against Blažek (2005) and Fleming (2006).

7.1. Ts'amakko borrowings

About 200 words in the recorded Ongota vocabulary are evident Ts'amakko borrowings. There are also cases of loanwords shared by other Dullay dialects, but it

seems safer to consider all of them borrowed into Ongota through the intermediacy of Ts'amakko – also on the basis of the fact that there are no cases of Dullay lexemes in Ongota *not* shared by Ts'amakko.

Many of these loans appear unchanged in Ongota, while others show some degree of phonological and morphological adaptation.

Examples of the former, which seem to point to a late borrowing phase (and complete bilingualism at the societal level, are *ge?* 'to belch,' *gufa?* 'to cough,' *kol* 'to come back,' *malal* 'to be tired,' *palde* 'iron arrow,' *sarba* 'calf,' and many others.

Limited changes in the phonological make-up of Ts'amakko loans in Ongota include vowel length reduction (as in *bositte* from Ts'amakko *boositte* 'hair of chest'), vowel height change (as in *gunture* from Ts'amakko *gontore* 'eland,' or *merja* from *mirja* 'kudu'), dental assimilation of glottal stop (as in *moqotte* from *muq'o?te* 'frog,' or *oršatte* from *orša?te* 'rhinoceros'), and nasal change (as in *kunkumitte* from *kumkumitte* 'cheek').

In quite a few words, final /a/ replaces the Ts'amakko gender affixes -o (M) and -e (F); a few examples are *baara* from *baaro* 'armpit' and *irgaša* from *irgašo* 'axe,' as well as *qola* from *qole* 'cattle' and *kurruba* from *kurrube* 'crow.'

Irregular cases of consonant alternation are also found, as in *talaña* from *salañ* 'four,' or *luqqa* from *lukkale* 'chicken,' as well as various irregular internal changes, as in *gawarsa* from *gawarakko* 'bateleur (*Theratopius ecaudatus*)' and *sayra* from *sawro* 'dik-dik.'

More serious changes involve the word shape of Ts'amakko loans in which the singulative affixes are lost: Ongota final -a replaces the masculine singulative suffixes -ko, -akko and -atto (as in *karawa* from *karawo* 'colobus monkey,' or *damša* from *damšo* 'giraffe'), while the singulative affix is dropped without replacement in *bor* from *bor-ko* 'stomach'; the feminine singulative suffix -te is similarly dropped in *ħalo* from *ħaal-te* 'calabash cup' (with final -o in Ongota). Even more important, because they may hint at a previous phase of incomplete bilingualism and a more limited knowledge of Ts'amakko, are rare cases such as *wuyyam* 'to call' from Ts'amakko *wuyy-am* 'to be called' (regularly derived from *wuyy* 'to call').

7.2. Non-Ts'amakko borrowings from neighboring languages, lookalikes and apparent isolates

Only 40 items are considered as borrowings from neighboring languages and language groups other than Ts'amakko. Among those with the highest level of similarity with the geographically closest languages we find:⁷

Ongota	Hamar (South Omotic)	gloss
<i>buusa</i>	<i>busa</i>	'belly'
<i>adab</i>	<i>atab</i>	'tongue'
<i>laba</i>	<i>laba</i>	'wide'
<i>ooma</i>	<i>oom</i>	'bow'
<i>gaʃ</i>	<i>gaʃ</i>	'bite'

⁷ The transcription of the different languages follows the sources.

Ongota	Aari (South Omotic)	gloss
<i>goola</i>	<i>goola</i>	‘local beer’
<i>wanna</i>	<i>waanna</i>	‘good’

Ongota	Maale (North Omotic)	gloss
<i>naʔa</i>	<i>naʔi</i>	‘child’
<i>baliti</i>	<i>baliti</i>	‘forehead’
<i>toiti</i>	<i>toiti</i>	‘eldest son’

(more tentative for the geographical and semantic distance is the connection of Ongota *šub* ‘to kill’ with, e.g., Dizi *šubo*, Nayi *šubo*, Sheko *šub*, Koyra *šúpe*, all meaning ‘to die,’ or with Bench *çup/çuk* ‘to slaughter’)

Ongota	Borana (East Cushitic)	gloss
<i>arba</i>	<i>arba</i>	‘elephant’
<i>gaara</i>	<i>gara</i>	‘mountain’
<i>meela</i>	<i>miila</i>	‘leg’
<i>olla</i>	<i>olla</i>	‘village’

Ongota	Konso (East Cushitic)	gloss
<i>aama</i>	<i>ama</i>	‘breast’
<i>armata</i>	<i>armayta</i>	‘mucus’

In other cases the similarity is with other members of the Konsoid group, such as *romini* ‘red,’ which finds connection in Bussa *rooma* and Diraasha *room/êr-roma*. According to Blažek (2005), there are also borrowings from South Cushitic languages. Three of them are particularly interesting:

Ongota	gloss	Dahalo	Iraqw	Burunge	gloss	Kw’adza	gloss
<i>c’aʃaw</i>	‘water’	<i>tl’ááʃa</i>			‘river, lake’	<i>caʔamuko</i>	‘small streambed’
<i>q’umo</i>	‘container’		<i>qumi</i>		‘travelling gourd’		
<i>c’aʃa</i>	‘stone’		<i>tl’aʃa-nu</i>	<i>tl’aʃu</i>	‘stone’	<i>tlayiko</i> , pl.	‘stone’
						<i>tlayaʔo</i>	

It is not likely that the Ongota borrowed words from languages spoken as far away as Tanzania. If not just the product of casual resemblance, one could use the difficult classificatory position of Dahalo (which could actually be East Cushitic, as argued for by Tosco 2000) in order to speculate that Ongota borrowed them from (or shared them with?) an unknown and geographically closer East Cushitic language.

Lookalikes between unrelated languages can always be found and they can easily get in the way of language comparison; thus, we find at least a couple of similarities with different Nilo–Saharan languages:

Ongota	Mimi	North Mao	Kanuri	gloss
<i>maara</i>	<i>maar</i>	<i>meri</i>		‘boy’
<i>itima</i>			<i>timi</i>	‘tooth’

Justifying the presence of these resemblances as due to anything other than sheer similarity is very difficult since the languages are spoken as far away as Nigeria. Also accepting Blažek’s (2005) idea that Ongota is originally a Nilo–Saharan language does not make matters much easier, since the languages belong to different Nilo–Saharan subgroups. Moreover, Nilo–Saharan sub-grouping, and the very existence of Nilo–Saharan as a linguistic family, are of course a debated matter.

Still, the vast majority of the items taken into consideration by Savà and Thubauville resist classification, and this does suggest an ancient hunter-gatherer group with a yet unknown linguistic affiliation. Some examples of these apparently unaffiliated words include: *axaco* ‘sun,’ *binta* ‘wild animal,’ *cak* ‘to eat,’ *dabaša* ‘baboon,’ *fa?* ‘to add,’ *howwa* ‘ear,’ *miša* ‘name,’ *na?* ‘to give,’ *noqot* ‘to look at,’ *tip* ‘to die,’ *xa?* ‘to do.’

8. Conclusions

The Ongota myths of origin and the traditions of their Northern neighbors, the Maale, may be summarized as follows:

- the Ongota are the descendants of different peoples – or better, of various sections of peoples – who joined together. The Ongota clan names are in effect the same, apparently, as those found all over the area;
- the Ongota lived originally to the north of their present location, in the territory of the Maale (an Ometo-speaking – i.e., North Omotic – group);
- the Ongota were engaged in stealing cattle at the expenses of the Maale;
- the Ongota forced their way (or were forced to move) southwards along the Weyt’o river and have lived in close association with it since then;
- Ongota women do not have any special knowledge of wild plant collection;
- the Ongota cannot keep cattle due to the presence of the tse-tse fly in the area.

The Ongota are presently assimilating to the Ts’amakko pastoralists. While the Ongota language is apparently in a terminal state (and is reported as ‘nearly extinct’ by Ethnologue), the Ongota are also hardly distinguishable from their pastoral neighbors from a cultural point of view. No reliable data on the Ongota economy are available, but economic assimilation to the Ts’amakko has so far been hampered by the lack of cattle, or, in other words, of “hard currency”.

The Ongota language, like any other language, reflects the contact history of its speakers. We abstain from expressing a final opinion on its classification; certainly, continuous influence from different languages has resulted in a very divergent language with an unusual isolating character and a unique lexicon. The presence of a good number of Ts’amakko loanwords shows a particularly strong and maybe quite

ancient relation with the people speaking this language. We assume that the same happened with other groups to which the Ongota were affiliated.

The presence of a fairly substantial number of unclassified words (as seen in 7.2.) yields plausibility to the possibility of an original hunter-gatherer group which came in contact with a number of different peoples and languages, to the point of radically changing its language affiliation. This would make the Ongota resemble a bit both the Dahalo and the Boni of Kenya: just like the Dahalo, the Ongota would have preserved a tiny lexical layer of their original language, and just like the Boni they would have shifted their language to that of their dominating language group (the present one – the Ts'amakko – in the case of the Ongota; a former one – Southern Somali Garre – in the case of the Boni). Nothing among the meager available data seems to force such an analysis, and just like for all the other hunter-gatherer groups it is close to impossible to detect the full range of the prehistoric contacts. Weighting the pros and cons of competing hypotheses, the simplest (albeit maybe least fascinating) one remains to project the present state of affairs in the past and to conclude that the Ongota are *not* a remnant hunter-gatherer population. The real difference between the Ongota and the pastoralists in the area is the absence of cattle rather than the alleged hunter-gathering life-style of the Ongota, who were originally an outcast community which has been wandering in the area around the Weyt'o river and affiliating itself in the course of time to different dominant pastoralist groups.

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