

## Violence Extended into the Middle Omo Valley: A View of Recent Raiding Conflicts in Malo, Southwest Ethiopia

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In 1976, armed attackers hit Malo farmers' settlements in the middle Omo valley, killing over 1000 inhabitants, devastating dwellings and looting cattle. Subsequently, similar attacks have sporadically occurred when state control weakened. Farmers claim that main perpetrators are *golde*, Surmic-speaking agro-pastoralists in the lower Omo valley, who had little link with them before. This paper discusses causes, changing contexts, and consequences of the attacks.

### Introduction

Southwest Ethiopia, large part of which is now administered as the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), is a distinctive area embracing the greatest ethnic diversity in the country. Ethnic conflict has been one of the main themes of anthropological work in this region, particularly in the lower Omo valley, the extreme southwest area approximately corresponding to the current South Omo Zone of the SNNPR. Remote from state control, this lowland area has been home to reciprocal conflicts fought among the agro-pastoralists ever since as well as long before the inclusion into Ethiopian territory at the end of the 19th century. While they have been generally balanced in power due to reciprocal counter-attacks, a gradual territorial shift of overall northward movement has taken place involving changes in arms, tactics, targets, purposes, etc. (e.g., Tornay 1979, 1993; Turton 1994). Several agro-pastoral groups who themselves have been pushed by southern neighbours have frequently raided and gradually encroached upon the neighbouring farmers (Fukui 1979, 1994, 2002, 2005; Todd 1979; Abbink 1993, 1994, 2000a, 2000b).

Next to the lower Omo valley in the northeast but clearly marked by its mountainous topography and higher elevation is the middle Omo valley.<sup>2</sup> The area is densely populated by sedentary farmers who subsist mainly on the cultivation of root and tuber crops such as enset (*Ensete ventricosum*). While numerous kingdoms and chiefdoms flourished and fought for their power with their traditional arms of spears and shields prior to the Ethiopian rule, subsequent local or ethnic conflicts had apparently ceased to exist since the introduction of state control. While state colonizers such as soldiers and administrative officers carried guns to defence themselves and to suppress local peoples' riots, local peoples were strictly kept away from modern arms.

Following the demise of the imperial regime in 1974, most colonizers fled away. Immediately after that, however, parts of the area suffered unprecedented violent attacks, a fact generally overlooked in academic writing. Not only have livestock and

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<sup>2</sup> Here I use the term *middle Omo valley* to refer to the geographical coverage of former North Omo Zone, which in 2000 split into five distinct units: three zones (Dawro, Gamo Gofa, and Wolayta) and two special districts (Basketo and Konta; Vaughan 2006: 193).

other property been stolen, but numerous inhabitants, often women and children, have been mercilessly killed. Subsequently, peripheral settlements along the Omo River at both sides have sporadically met acute raids. Survivors insist that sudden attackers who always come stealthily and armed with guns cannot be local peoples but those agro-pastoralists in the lower Omo valley. Due to the repeated attacks, a number of settlements near the Omo River have been permanently abandoned. Here I give a preliminary report of the cases of violent conflicts encountered and related by the Malo, among whom I have conducted anthropological fieldwork.

### **The Malo in Regional and Historical Settings**

Originating from the country's central highlands, the Omo River penetrates Southwest Ethiopia, finally flowing into Lake Turkana on the Kenyan border. The valley is occupied by a variety of people involving over 20 ethnic groups who speak different languages belonging to the Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic families in the Afro-Asiatic phylum, as well as to the Surmic and Nilotic families in the Nilo-Saharan phylum.

But the riverbank is uninhabited except by those who live on riverbank cultivation and fishing such as the Kara and the Koegu (Matsuda 1997). Donham (1986: 20) pointed out that, in Ethiopia, rivers (and escarpments) form geographical barriers to social intercourse, rather than provide avenues of communication and trade. This holds true with the Omo. The riverbank is the least exploited and the most marginal.

With a population of 40,000, the Malo, one of the Omotic-speaking farmer peoples, occupy a small area at the southern side of the middle Omo valley.<sup>3</sup> In a mountainous land from ca 600 to 3400 metres above sea level, they practice mixed farming by growing diverse crops, including cereals (e.g., tef, barley, and sorghum) and root crops (e.g., enset, taro, and yams) and by raising livestock (Fujimoto 2002).

They border the following groups: the Gofa in the east, the Baskeeto in the south, the Dime and Doola in the west, the Ch'ara in the northwest, the Konta and the Koysa in the north, and the Dawro in the northeast, all of them farmer groups speaking Omotic languages. Until the integration into the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century, these groups formed similar kingdoms reigned by kings (*kaate*) for several centuries. Oral histories suggest that migration between these polities was common (Fujimoto 2006). Thus, the Malo live next door to those groups who share linguistic and cultural traditions.

While the Malo were known as belligerent soldiers in the kingdom time, they were forced to settle down and to expand cereal farming to feed colonizers in the imperial time. At that time, the colonizers carried guns to threaten the Malo who were strictly forbidden to obtain them.

After the demise of imperial regime, most of the colonizers fled away from Malo land, some to nearby Gofa towns such as Bulqi and Sawla (Felege Neway), some to Addis Ababa and other cities, some to their original country, but also others to the lower Omo valley in the southwest. The Malo were then virtually freed from the exploitative rule. At this moment, however, they were encountered by large-scale armed attacks. They suffered unprecedented casualties and vast settlement devastation that they now recall as *ola* (war).

<sup>3</sup> Their land is currently included in Malo Koza *Woreda* (District), Gamo Gofa Zone, SNNPR.

I report on the attacks that have occurred in Malo based on the interviews with survivors and then consider them in a wider context. First, I describe the latest conflict, which I nearly encountered in the field.

### Armed Violence in 1999

The latest attack, in my knowledge, broke out in Falaha Koysh administrative village (*k'abale*), northern Malo, on 22 April 1999. I had been there the previous month, interviewing about the past attacks. Hearing about the latest attack, I came back one month later. The following description is based on the interviews that took place then.

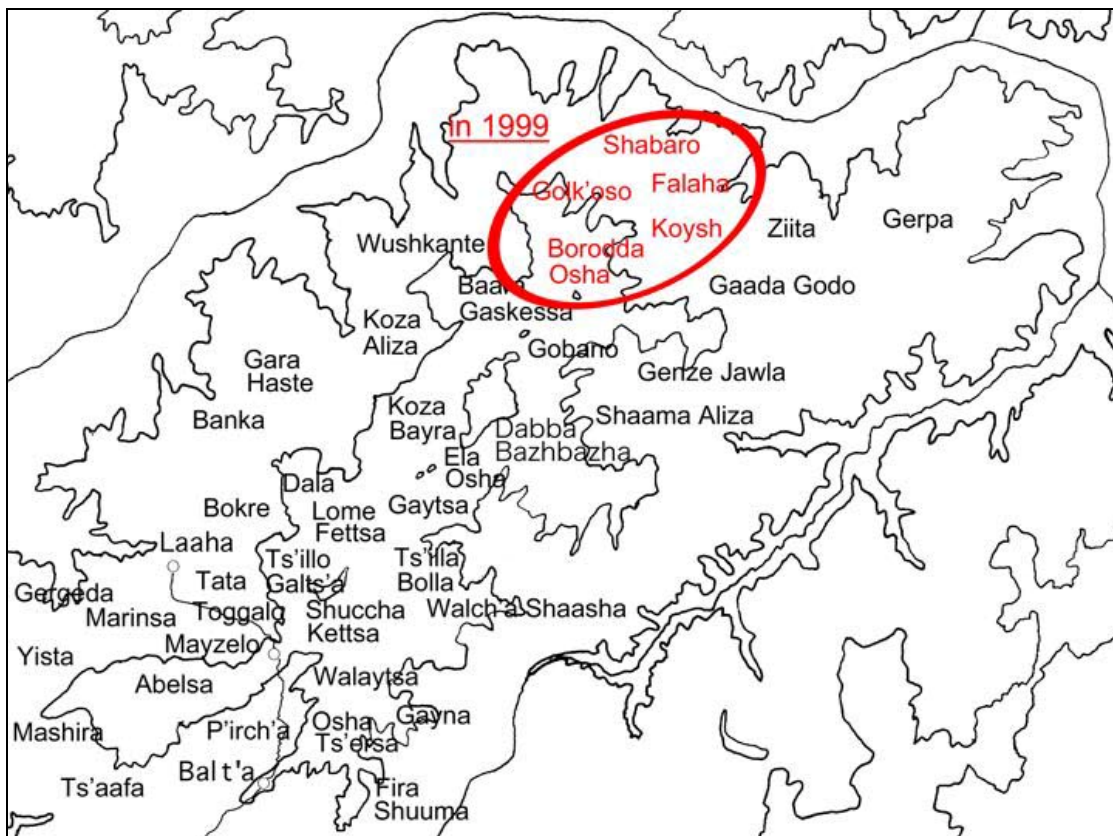


Fig. 1 Location of Malo Settlements Met by Armed Raiding in 1999

At dawn, piercing gunshots awoke the inhabitants of Mella and Shabaro (elevation circa 1300 metres), both marginal settlements of Falaha Koysh *k'abale* located at the distance of three hours' walk from the Omo River. From below (i.e., through the path reaching the Omo River), raiders appeared first in Mella (located to the north) and then in Shabaro (to the south). Almost all of the first raiders carried automatic weapons. Without entering individual homes, they advanced straight into the adjacent Falaha settlements over the small ridge. Most of the inhabitants of Mella and Shabaro panicked and barely escaped; they took nothing with them and hid themselves in remote thickets.

The first raiders hurried into the main Falaha settlements (roughly 1400 metres) within an hour. Some of them remained there, but others went south. The latter, passing through Koysh (1800 metres), finally arrived at the centre of highland Borodda administrative village (2800 metres) before noon. Having heard gunshots, local farmers

and officials in both villages had all fled into remote forests and concealed themselves with their livestock and other property.

The first raiders, about 150 strong, found nothing to ransack in Borodda and returned to Shabaro and Mella on the route different from that they had come. They and others all gathered in Shabaro and Mella in late afternoon and then descended to the Omo riverbank before dark. According to one survivor in Shabaro who witnessed the raiders from afar, the total number of them amounted to about 500.

The inhabitants who had escaped from these settlements kept themselves concealed in deep forests about a week for fear that they might encounter the raiders; those who had failed to run away had been mercilessly killed in their houses, in enset plots, or on the paths. The victims were two adult men and six adult women, including one pregnant woman, and their nine children, all of them in Mella, Shabaro, and Falaha. When the survivors returned home, they found more damage. Every bit of property had been ransacked in Mella and Shabaro, while nothing had been taken in Koysh and Borodda. In the former settlements, all of the livestock, cash, and purchased commodities such as clothes, shoes, radios, flashlights, umbrellas, pens, soap, salt and condiments, hoes, sickles, agricultural tools, and even pots had been stolen. There had never been such a thorough looting. In Falaha, some escaped with their livestock, but others who had left alone found their livestock stolen. Informants in Mella claimed that the later raiders had included numerous women. Returning to the riverbank after the raid, men herded livestock carrying rifles, and women wore and carried as many things as possible.

It was commonly claimed that the perpetrators were *golde*. *Golde* (*golda*, or *goldiya*) is an Omotic designation of Surmic-speaking lowland agro-pastoralists, particularly the Bod'i who live in the lower Omo valley west of the Dime land.<sup>4</sup> But some even claimed that the raiders were not only *golde* but also central highlanders they simply call *amaara* by representing the Amhara. They had heard some raiders addressing others loudly in Amharic. They had also witnessed some, although not many, who looked and dressed like *amaara*. Although it is difficult to confirm these statements, it is sure that the raid was staged under a meticulously planned design of routes, targets, armaments, and role allotments.

The day before, a similar attack had been attempted, presumably by the identical or fellow raiders, but it had been repelled by the local inhabitants of Wushkante, another lowland settlement near the Omo river which is located on another ridge and about one day's walk distant from the raided settlements. Unfortunately, news of this attempted attack had not yet reached the settlements.

As mentioned, this was not the first to have occurred. I collected information about the past attacks prior to it. I next summarise them.

## Violence Prior to 1999

### *Contact During the Imperial Period*

Although the Omotic term *golde* (*golda*) is not new,<sup>5</sup> direct contact between the Malo (and other Omotic-speaking farmer groups) and the Surmic-speaking agro-pastoralists seemed minimal. Elders, however, remember slight contacts with *golde* in the imperial

<sup>4</sup> Those called *golde* by Omotic speakers call themselves *me'en*. They are divided into seven subgroups: Chirim, Mela, Nyomoni, Gabiyo, K'asha, Bokol, and Baiti, of which Chirim and Mela are usually designated *Bod'i* by outsiders (Fukui 1979: 149). They have a generic and derogative designation *su* for Omotic-speaking farmers in the middle Omo valley, excluding the Ch'ara.

<sup>5</sup> The term *golda* is found in European travelers' accounts dating back to the late 19th century (Abbadie 1890; Borelli 1890).

time. Young *golde* men occasionally appeared in weekly markets at Banka, then an Amhara-settled town in northwestern Malo, but were more commonly encountered at markets in Dimeland. Although the Malo were rarely victimised, Doola farmers living between the Malo and Dime lands such as Kotani, later depopulated and now abandoned, suffered cattle thefts by *golde*. It was like that. When the keeper of the communal cattle, normally a farmer or his boy, was herding roughly 100 cattle, several *golde* men would suddenly come with firearms and take the cattle. They would rarely shoot at or injure the cattle keeper or attack or even enter farmers' settlements. Although the Malo now regard *golde* as entirely merciless, brutal murderers, and greedy ransackers, older people remember *golde* as originally not being so violent as they are now.

#### *Violence in 1976*

Things completely changed following the demise of the imperial regime. On 9 March 1976, the northern Malo settlements of Wushkante were suddenly attacked. Almost all of the cattle and other livestock were stolen; hundreds of local inhabitants, including women and children, were indiscriminately killed; and local dwellings were totally devastated by fire. The next day, raiders appeared in Shaale, Dala, and Koza, and others attacked a number of Banka Gara Haste settlements. They all went back to the Omo River on the day.

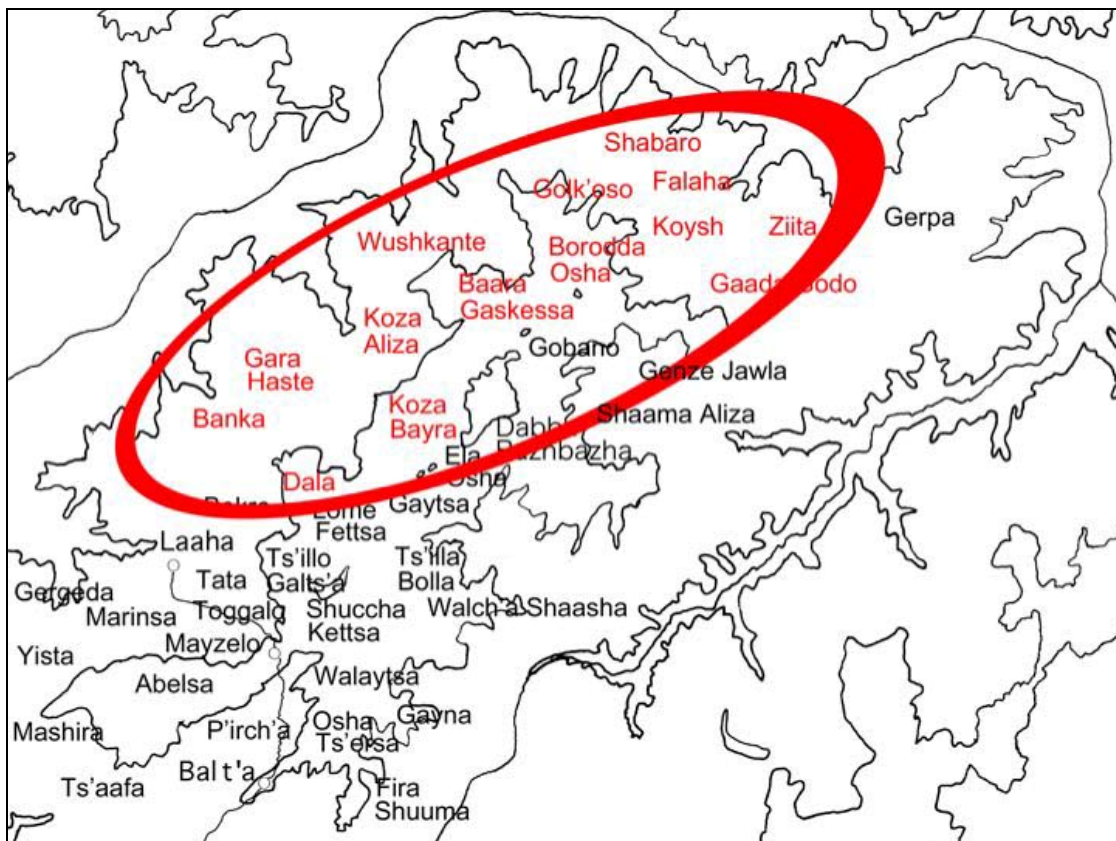


Fig. 2 Coverage and Distribution of Malo Settlements Met by Attacks in 1976

At this time, their fellows raided Mella, Shabaro, Golk'oso, Falaha, Koysh, Borodda, Ziita, and Gada, almost all of the northeastern Malo settlements both in the lowlands and the highlands. Local inhabitants had never seen such attacks before, and most of them had never even seen *golde*. They did not understand what was happening. A number of men, instead of escaping into remote thickets, tried to protect their dwellings with spears and shields (their traditional arms) against the attackers who were armed with guns and machetes; in consequence, that brought about an unprecedented number of casualties. No Malo farmers had any firearms, but the former Amhara landholders who had remained there had some and fought with them. Although the extent of the damage is difficult to estimate, at least more than 1000 or as many as several thousand Malo farmers were killed in one week. It was a massacre the likes of which the Malo had never experienced.

People now understand that it was the first in a series of raids perpetrated by *golde*, but they think that it was not initiated by *golde*, but primarily plotted as revenge by the Amhara, who had lost their status as landowners and officials and had fled to the lower Omo valley out of fear of imprisonment and punishment by Malo farmers after the imperial demise. People believe that such a large-scale and thorough attack was not familiar with *golde*, but with Amhara and other highlanders. Survivors witnessed former Amhara landowners among the attackers.<sup>6</sup>

After this terrible incident, food and clothes were distributed as emergency aid by the government and the evangelical missionary church, though no livestock returned to them. Dozens of peripheral settlements near the Omo River were soon permanently abandoned.

### Violence in Late 1980s

For the next decade, there was no obvious violent conflict in the land. However, in 1988, Abba near Banka, a once densely populated but then frontier settlement in northern Malo, was suddenly attacked. No other settlement was attacked. Sixty to seventy *golde* came to attack Abba. The next year, several small Doola settlements between Malo and Dime were raided and later abandoned. Malo farmers became anxious about the increasing risk of being attacked again.

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<sup>6</sup> Fukui (2002), who was staying in Bod'i land at that time, was informed that former Amhara landowners supplied 200 *golde* gunmen with five bullets each and guided the route. Six chiefs of seven *me'en* subgroups, excluding the Bokol, joined the attacks. He noted that they had attacked Konta settlements to the north of Malo the year before.



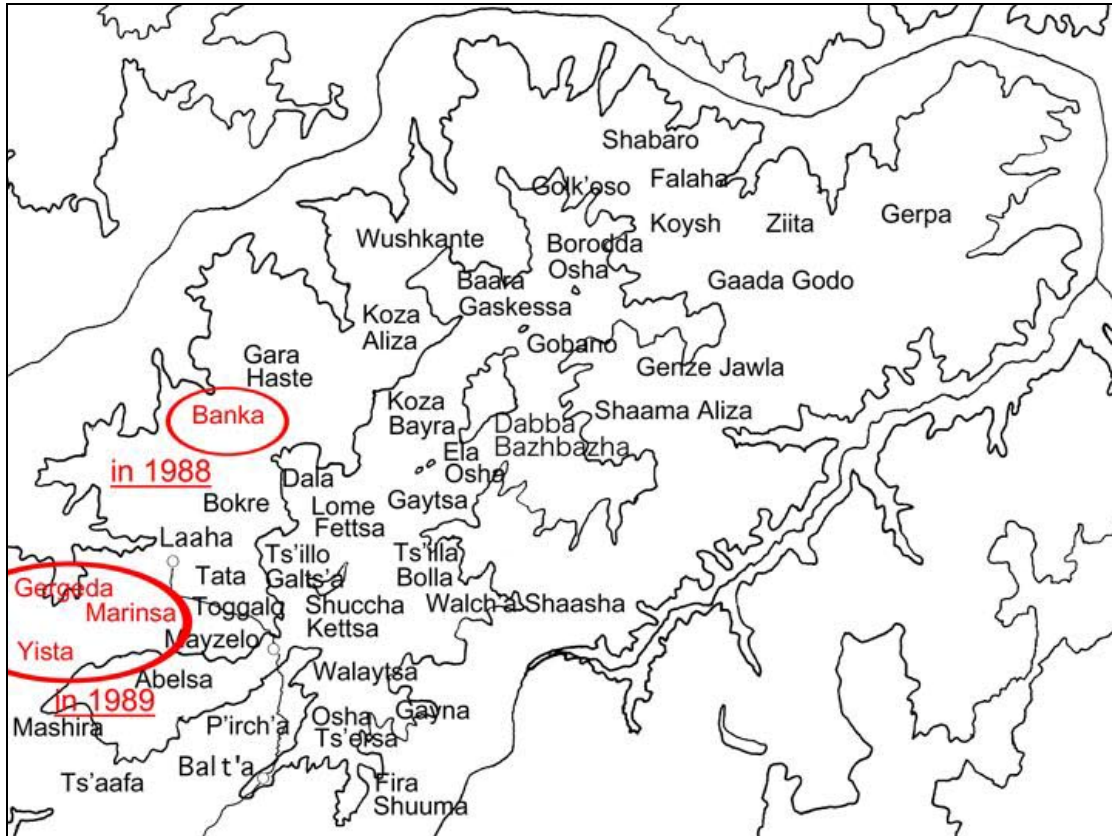


Fig. 3 Location of Malo and Doola Settlements Met by Attacks in Late 1980s

### Violence in Early 1990s

The next one occurred on 18 June 1991, only a month and a half after the collapse of the Derg regime. The route and area of attack were different from those in 1976. Raiders first appeared in Banka. The locals instantly understood what was happening; putting up no resistance, they escaped into the thickets. Nonetheless, 190 farmers were killed. The raiders included some *golde* women and boys, who took away several local girls. At that time, only one old gun called *shurkte* was kept by a local official. The next day the perpetrators looted the district capital Laaha, which were totally unguarded by police due to the recent political upheaval.<sup>7</sup>

In less than one year, *golde* appeared in the northeastern Malo settlements of Shabaro/Mella, Falaha, Koysh, and Golk'oso. More than 70 inhabitants were killed in Shabaro/Mella and Falaha. In Mella, 18 dwellings, about half of all dwellings there, were burned to the ground.

In 1993, raiders appeared in Wushkante and stole more than 200 cattle while inflicting no human casualties. They attempted to attack Banka Gara Haste the next day, but were repelled; by this time, local officials and some residents had been given about 30 rifles by the district government for self-defence.

<sup>7</sup> According to Fukui (2005), about 160 people, most of them young men from Bod'i (Mela and Chirim), joined the party. According to Malo informants, just before the attack in Malo, Koysha settlements, including Borodda and Okashe north of the Omo River, were heavily attacked, and at least 100 inhabitants were killed, the incident Fukui (2005) assumes to have taken place on 16 April 1991.

This information was collected in northern Malo settlements, but later confirmed by the district government office in Laaha. The office estimates that more than 300 people were killed and over 1000 cattle and 700 sheep and goats were stolen during the attacks in early 1990s.

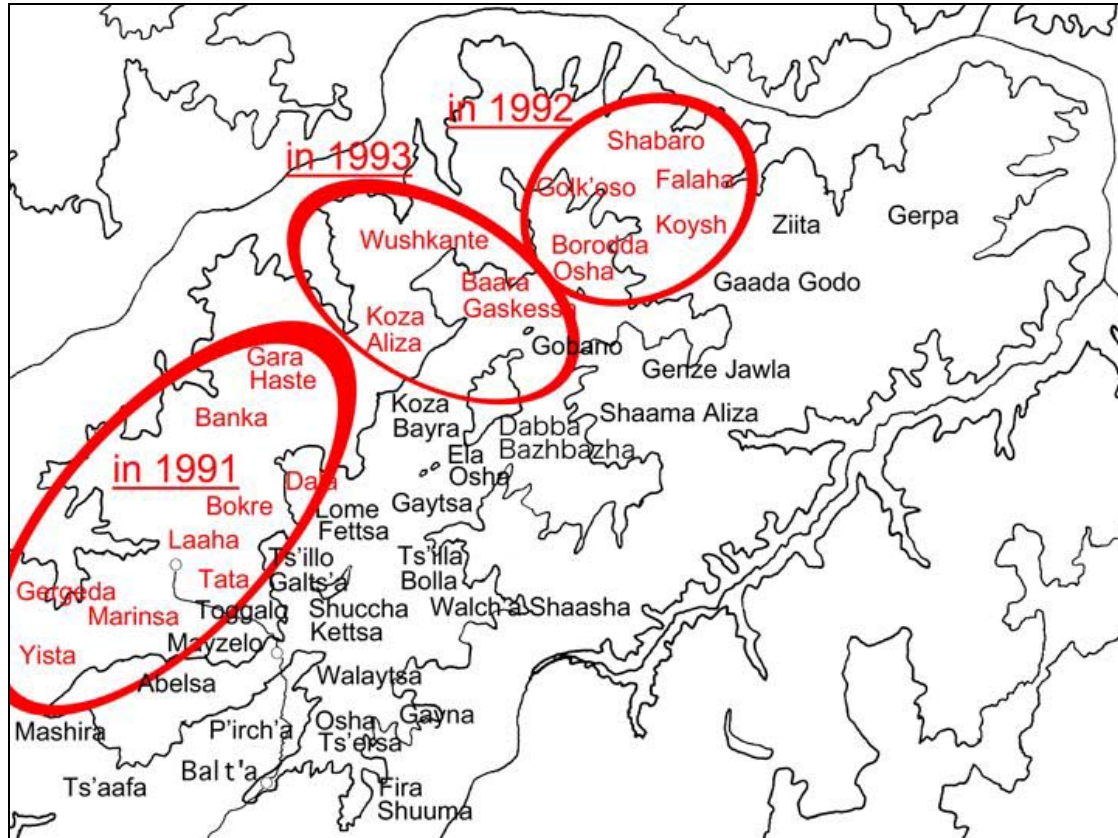


Fig. 4 Location of Malo and Doola Settlements Met by Attacks in Early 1990s

## Discussion

### *Emergence of Deadly Link between Groups with Minimal Contact*

Because the groups had no territorial contact or direct trade route, the links between the Malo (and other mountain farmers) in the middle Omo valley and *golde* (the Bod'i and other lowland agro-pastoralists) in the lower Omo valley had been rare until the end of imperial era. Though the latter stole some cattle from the former, they were basically not brutal.

When the imperial regime collapsed in 1974, the Amhara settlers lost their status as landowners and officials and some of them fled into the lower Omo valley, where lowland agro-pastoralists lived and state control had never fully arrived.<sup>8</sup> There, the

<sup>8</sup> Amhara retreat into the lowlands at this time was not their first. Local Amhara concealed themselves in the riverine forests and waged guerrilla war against the Italian rule (1936–1941), although the reality was rather some raiding of peripheral settlements on both riversides (Malo and Konta/Koysha). Probably some Amhara reached the lower Omo valley and made contact with the agro-pastoralists at that time. When they returned after the Italian period, they maintained these relations. Fleming (1994: 451) noted that, "one large Amhara landowner in Malo is widely accused by Dime Amhara of selling guns and bullets to Bodis in exchange for ivory and leopard skins."



Amhara presumably plotted a war of retaliation and encouraged the agro-pastoralists to join them by providing them with bullets. This was completely different from the anti-Italian guerrilla war where the Amhara had fought by themselves. For the Bod'i, to join the attacks was beneficial because they had just stopped raiding neighbouring Dime farmers and had also been pushed back by their southern neighbours, the Mursi, in the early 1970s. Therefore, initiated by refugee Amharas full of vengeful feelings and familiar with local topography, the attacks were in substance carried out by the agro-pastoralists longing for territorial resources.

The attacks were totally one sided because there was a clear imbalance of power between the attackers and the attacked. While the attackers carried guns and machetes, the attacked were void of these arms. As a result, the attacks initiated by localised Amhara made a deadly link between the Malo (and other farmers) and the *golde* agro-pastoralists who pass through the most marginal Omo riverbank.

#### *Patterns of Occurrence of Violent Attacks*

After the first attacks in mid-1970s, nothing happened for more than a decade, but attacks resumed in late 1980s. There is a pattern to their occurrence. Most of the incidents occurred in the political interregnums of the Ethiopian state, that is, soon after the collapse of the imperial and Derg regimes in 1974 and 1991, respectively. In these periods, state power was practically nonexistent because nearly no policemen guarded the land and no soldiers rushed to suppress violence. Modern arms were abundantly supplied to the lowland raiders by traders who had obtained them from disbanded ex-soldiers and ex-policemen. In these political interregnums, violent attacks intensified not only in the middle Omo valley, but also in the lower Omo valley (Turton 1994).

To be added, nearly all of the attacks broke out during the season locally called *assura*, that is, from approximately March to May when the Omo River is at its lowest and is easiest to cross and ford. From December to May, local farmers in peripheral settlements are sensitive to night bonfire in the Omo riverbank which tell the coming of *golde* scouts. The seasonality of the attacks is partly related to the lowland subsistence economy where that season is the hungry season (cf. Abbink 2000b).

Another point is that the attackers who carried guns and machetes raided the farmers with no arms. Furthermore, different from reciprocal ethnic conflicts in the lower Omo valley, the attacked farmers have gotten no means or opportunities to counter-attack for retaliation.

#### *Changes of Violent Attacks in Style and Aim*

Whereas the attacks have been staged in deliberate manners, they seem to have undergone noticeable changes in style and aim.

In the first attack in 1976, innumerable inhabitants, likely exceeding 1000, were killed. In the more recent attacks of the 1990s, the casualties were much less. This decrease may be largely due to the fact that farmers have learned how to escape. However, the number of stolen cattle and other livestock did not decrease. Likewise, many dwellings were devastated by fire in the first attacks. In the latest attacks, however, there was no burning. However, the range of looted property has grown. In the latest attack, nearly every property, including local products such as pots and agricultural tools, was looted. It is claimed that *golde* women served as porters. The Malo think of the first attacks as a kind of war (*ola*) but of the later ones simply as robberies (*bonk'e*).

Another to mention is that, more recent attempted attacks have been repelled by local inhabitants. The current regional regime allows an increased number of firearms and hatchets to be registered for self-defence purposes in the marginal settlements raided before.

These changes may be summarised as follows. In the first raids, the attackers may have tried to subordinate the Malo for future expansion by doing as much damage as possible, as they had done with the neighbouring Dime in early 1970s. Later, however, they narrowed the aims to looting because they became to face growing local resistance.

#### *Social and Environmental Consequences of Violent Attacks*

Following the repeated attacks, a large number of inhabitants have migrated and numerous settlements and fields near the Omo River have been permanently abandoned (Fig. 5), though the process of depopulation there seems to have already started in Italian period. Farmers now regard the riverbank as unsafe and often set fire to the vegetation to keep a clear sight of it. A series of violent attacks have not only changed the lives of inhabitants but also transformed local landscape and environmental uses.

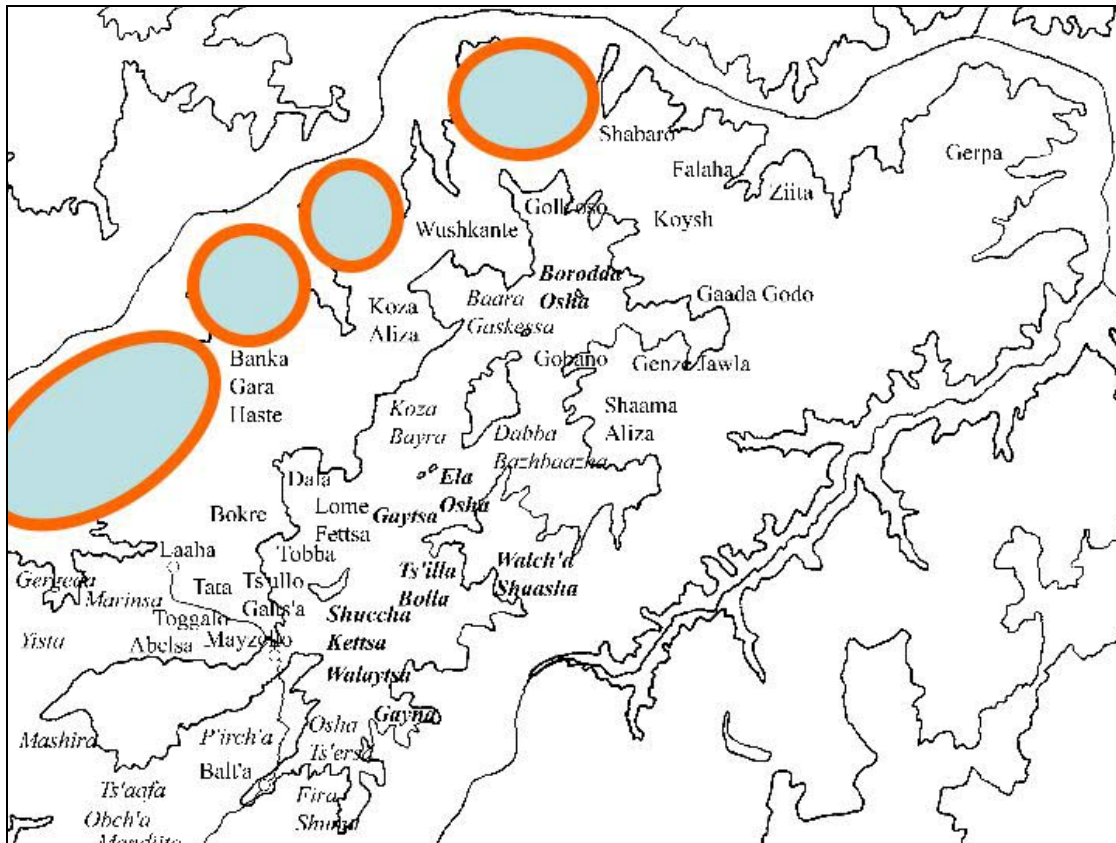


Fig. 5 Location and Coverage of Permanently Abandoned Settlements in Malo

## Conclusion

While there was little contact between the Malo in the middle Omo valley and the agro-pastoralists in the lower Omo during the imperial time, the first attacks in 1976 designed by ex-landlord Amharas formed a deadly link between them. Because the farmers had no way to get modern arms, subsequent attacks mostly staged in the political interregnums were one sided and received no counter-attacks.

While the human casualty remarkably decreased between the attacks, the looting of livestock and other property seems to have intensified and enlarged. Although there is still an obvious imbalance of power between the farmers and the agro-pastoralists, local farmers have gradually repelled the raiding attempts by defending themselves under the current regime. Especially since 1999, when the regional government ordered the agro-pastoralists to disarm and sanctioned with military force those who disobeyed, no obvious attacks have taken place.

In 2005, however, scouts reappeared in the riverbank. Farmers living near the river are once again on the alert. Although they have some arms, they understand that *golde* will come to raid them again if the state power retreats. They still live on the verge of violent attacks.

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