

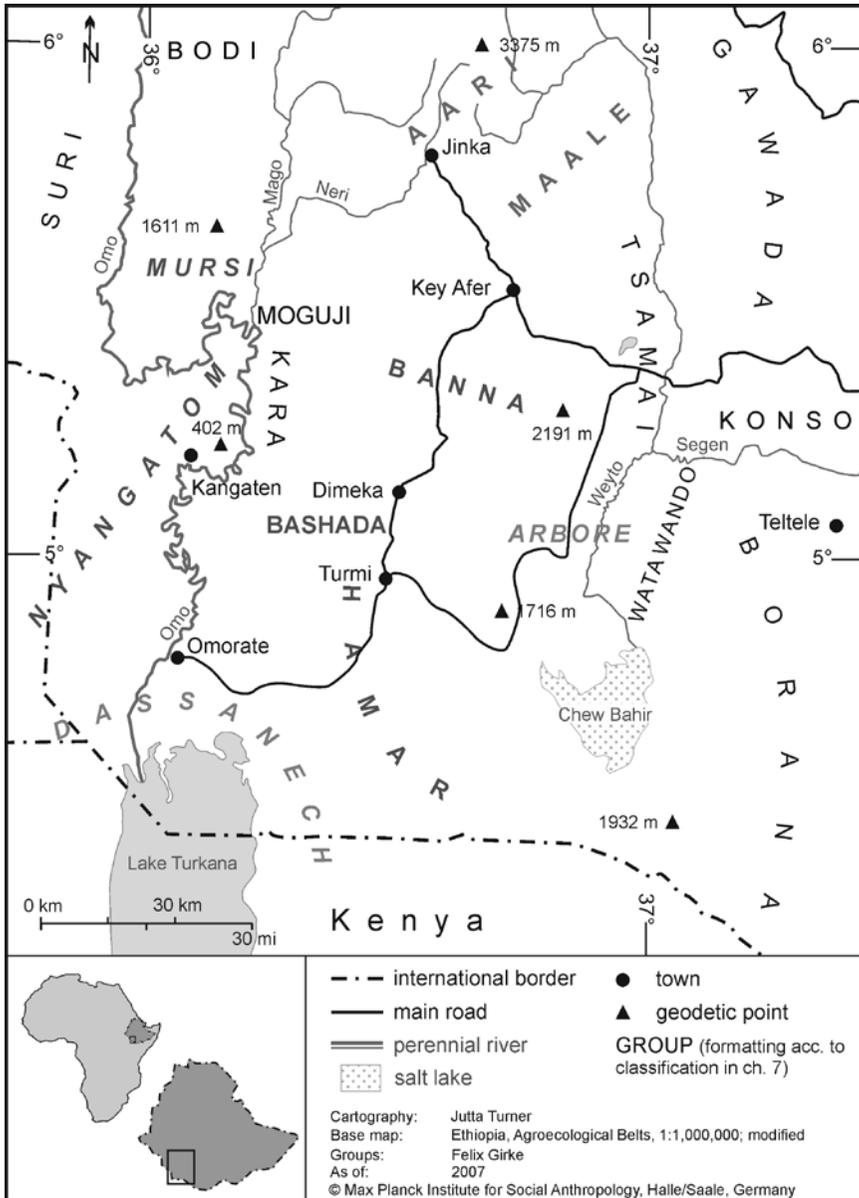
# Introduction

## *How Do They Do It?*

‘How do you do it?’

*‘Aga-ni, aga wossa paxalmamo-xa. (This, this is due to our cleverness.)’*

Looking through the sparse material on the Kara, agropastoralists residing on the banks of the Omo River in southern Ethiopia, their relatively low population stands out. When I first read about them, the estimates ranged between 500 and 2,000, whereas other groups in the greater region had as many as 10,000–30,000 members, or even 60,000 if you included the nearby highlands. These low numbers get more interesting if we consider that over the last few decades, the Kara have been involved in perpetual warfare with their much more numerous western neighbours, the quite expansionist Nyangatom. At the same time, the Kara, in terms of culture and language, are extremely similar to their eastern neighbours, the Hamar, Banna and Bashada. These groups also have population numbers several times greater than those of the Kara. ‘How do they do it?’, I wondered when I first considered a fieldwork project in the South Omo region, ‘how do the Kara manage to sustain themselves as a group, being so few people, and having such fraught relations to their neighbours?’ Specifically, how did it come about that they had been neither already eradicated by the Nyangatom nor assimilated by the Hamar? Judging from the available material, these were two likely eventualities that just did not seem to be occurring. To my fledgling anthropological assumptions, this hinted at extraordinary goings-on. The sparse ethnographic record did not indicate that there was anything remarkable about how the Kara managed their communal boundaries. The historical record is virtually nonexistent. This intrigued me further.



**Map 0.1** Local Groups in the Omo Valley.

In regard to South Omo, many scholars have produced ‘heartland’ studies. This region, one of the most pronounced peripheries of Ethiopia, surely invites such an approach. A ‘mosaic of ethnic groups’ presents itself to the visitor. While all still engage in and depend on cattle and/or small stock husbandry and subsistence cultivation of sorghum and maize, the differences between them

seem apparent and tantalizing: just a three-hour drive along the dirt tracks of the region opens up yet another distinct cultural world with its own depths to plumb and cultural intricacies to unravel.

Also due to the limited interest of the state in this periphery and the astonishingly late arrival of European explorers in the region – only from 1888 onwards (see Bassi 2011; Girke 2006) – there is little reliable historical material available on any of these populations, whose members are largely illiterate even today, and whose languages are nearly exclusively spoken rather than written (Girke 2018). The for the longest time half-hearted attempts to integrate them into the Ethiopian state proper were quite legitimately sidelined in favour of ever more subtle explorations of culture and internal social organization. Thus, published material on South Omo often focuses on a settlement area where an anthropologist studied the group they had decided upon, working in the one language they learned on site. While most seem aware of the multiple contacts between individuals and corporate groups across the ethnic boundary, few took such dynamics as their focus. With this, I do not only mean anthropological mainstays such as cross-cutting ties (e.g. Schlee 1997), but also linguistic influences, cultural appropriations, mimesis, wilful interdependence and purposive differentiation. But ideally, research programmes founded on the assumption of ethnically separate populations should take stock of how the very people studied are even at the time of research engaged in a constant struggle to negotiate difference and similarity from their neighbours. After all, the most specific thing about any particular ‘culture’ of group A is that it is not the culture of group B. The case of the Kara made it easy to avoid this pitfall. Looking at their settlements, one finds a string of villages hugging the meanders of the eastern side of the Omo River; Kara even looks more like a line than an area. Its frontier character is obvious (see Map 0.2 below). Kara country, small even from the perspective of its inhabitants, touches on the territory of several other groups. It is a node for many pathways of people, objects and ideas. If any group can be said to form the nexus of Cushitic, Omotic and Nilotic influences, the three major language families of the greater region, this would have to be the Kara. Trying to answer ‘how they do it’, I found that in order to understand how the Kara viewed their own way of being Kara, it was of the essence to look at how they perceived and dealt with not only one, but also a number of the other groups in their cultural neighbourhood, and eventually with the Ethiopian state to which they have belonged for a hundred years, but that has remained an other to them.

It was this initial moment of wonder and curiosity that led me to the Kara. While some of the specific interests I pursued in my ethnographic work changed over time, buffeted by the winds of contingency, this original fascination has never waned – especially as I discovered that the question of group size bears great relevance to the Kara themselves. One answer to my inquiries was particularly common: ‘This, this is due to our cleverness.’ To work out the implications

of what the Kara told me and to reconcile this with what I learned from other sources, has kept me in a years-long conversation with numerous Kara, charitable colleagues, uncountable texts and myself. *Paxalmamo*, ‘cleverness’, was a popular reason the Kara were wont to give for their success in various endeavours; this claim proved to be a salient local explanans and a tricky ethnographic explanandum, but relevant on many levels for understanding just ‘how they do it’. This book offers a long-form answer to this question. Ethnic categories, social organization and political groups are its main substantive topics, and rhetoric its methodological inspiration in the analysis of integration and conflict. Both discursive and material dynamics matter in facing the even more fundamental problem of just who the ‘they’ are, which both my initial inquiry and my interlocutors themselves presumed.

### **Rhetoric and *Ädamo***

Rhetoric and *ädamo* are the conceptual attractors around which my discussion will revolve throughout this book. Both terms require initial clarification, in terms of how they came to acquire such prominence in my approach and what work they are expected to do.

The methodological tool that I bring to the fore in the analysis and also in the structure of this book is rhetoric, specifically, a wide notion of rhetoric that transcends the common use, which equates rhetoric with ‘artful speech’ or even ‘intentionally deceptive speech’, as in the dismissive expression ‘mere rhetoric’. This is no arbitrary choice. Since antiquity, the concept of rhetoric has undergone much variation in terms of how broadly or narrowly it was conceived by various schools of philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences (see Meyer 2009). My specific understanding derives from Rhetoric Culture Theory (RCT), a venture first launched in 1998 by Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler.<sup>1</sup> In its most pithy form, RCT posits that just as rhetoric is founded in culture, so culture is founded in rhetoric. This chiasmus serves to say that RCT proceeds from the axiom that while ways of persuasion and figuration (as the classical Western tropes and speech styles) are culture-specific, culture as such emerges, changes and is perpetuated by persuasive and figurative processes. I give an account of my personal initiation into this project and my subsequent involvement with it elsewhere (see Meyer and Girke 2011). Here, suffice it to say that since 2002, I have been thinking, talking, reading and writing about the constitutive role of rhetoric in the social life of culture. This focus has inspired most of my academic work, having become one of the lenses through which I approach ethnography. This book draws mainly on the persuasive aspect of rhetoric in interaction, and illuminates how this is fundamental for understanding ethnicity, conflict and integration.

A related basis of my approach is the theoretical and methodological work of F.G. Bailey, an under-studied but highly stimulating and prolific political

anthropologist. Reading his numerous publications (see Girke 2002), I absorbed his attention on the rules of interaction, the practice of practice, and of how people managed to achieve their goals in this world, often within the rules of the arena, but also by strategically changing the very ‘game’ everybody thought they were playing. His take on ‘the definition of the situation’ as the methodologically central site of analysis best encapsulates this stance:

The phrase *defining the situation* presupposes a plurality of structures in competition with one another and assumes an adversarial encounter in which one person tries to foist his or her definition onto another and so stabilize their relationship. *Foist* suggests the nature of the encounter: it is not simple *homo homini lupus*. Its mode of persuasion is somewhat less than naked force; ego and alter already have enough in common to let them communicate; so there is at least a modicum of civility. But neither is the encounter necessarily sweet reason; *foist* retains a sufficient whiff of nastiness to make clear that defining a situation is not an occasion when both parties want only the ‘truth’ (even if they say so); they have axes to grind. When someone successfully ‘defines the situation’ for me, I agree, like it or not, whether I believe what has been said or not, to behave in accordance with whatever conventions the definition stipulates. That agreement structures the situation. (Bailey 2003: 135, emphases in original)

When I embarked on my journeys to Kara, this was the perspective from which I looked at social life, and such was the vocabulary through which I thought about the dynamics of interaction. This focus on claims and attempts to define a situation had the effect that much of my data are not words spoken to me, but words spoken by other people to other people outside of an interview-like situation.

But how relevant are ‘mere’ words? A central problem in the study of rhetoric is that the link from words, i.e. public claims, to subsequent social action (or even putative inner states) is regularly tenuous. There is no epistemological shame in admitting that one is bound by this problem; so are the actors we are dealing with. People neither have perfect information, nor do they always act in their own best interests. Instead, they sway themselves and others through well-placed arguments, and know they might end up with unforeseen consequences. When trying to understand their choices and actions, one could certainly do worse than humbly accepting that much interpretation is guesswork, impossible to positively verify, and hence to make that shortcoming a strength. Rhetoric incorporates this very human uncertainty, which we always try to overcome in interaction, without ever being able to ensure complete success. It also provides the tools to categorize and differentiate genres of speech, among which ethnicized talk is

particularly prominent in and around Kara. People speak ‘ethnically’, they have special ways to talk about ethnic groups and categories. If we accept that people can speak ethnically or not, and interpret situations ethnically or not, it follows that ethnicity is never a given. People can rhetorically define situations in terms of ethnicity – or not (compare Girke forthcoming.a). Close attention to situated speech helps us in tracing the cultural models underlying any struggles over defining situations in terms of ethnicity.

Whereas rhetoric provides me with an analytic vocabulary in which to formulate some answers to ‘How do they do it?’, allowing me to elaborate aspects of this guiding question further, I use the Kara term *ädamo* as a placeholder for certain Kara ideas about being Kara. I came across the term *ädamo* during my second stay in Kara in 2004, when discussing the social practice of bondfriendship (*beltamo*); bondfriendship, a voluntary bond established between two adult men and their respective households, often crossing ethnic boundaries, is a site of unquestioning solidarity, mutuality and even support in times of war between the two groups to which the bondfriends belong (see Girke 2011, forthcoming.b). *Beltamo*, it was explained to me, was a kind of *ädamo*, which in turn is etymologically an abstraction of ‘kin’ (*äda*) and links up to ‘social person’ (*edi*). *Ädamo*, then, is how *äda* act, the ways of *äda*, as it were – and vice versa; acts of *ädamo*, behaviour in the mode of kinship, just might make *äda* where there were strangers before. *Ädamo* entails both privileges and duties, and always demands a subjugation of individual interests to some larger social formation, from the dyad of *beltamo* to the imagined entirety of Kara and even beyond. In later chapters I address the abstracted and yet affective idea here called the ‘cultural neighbourhood’ that encompasses much of South Omo, which serves as an attentive audience to such creative efforts at crossing ethnic divides.

Learning about *ädamo* alongside the more technical formulas of kinship alerted me to the ways in which people actively and reflexively shaped their social worlds, instead of mechanically falling back on their seemingly natural ties of kinship for support, amity and intimacy. In turn, this semantic usage reveals that while in most instances *äda* refers to consanguinal and affinal ‘kin’, and would be translated and explained as such if prompted, the Kara routinely subsume other individuals of personal relevance to ego under this category.

During subsequent stays in Kara, I continued to look for other ways in which *ädamo* was constituted, for how, as it were, the Kara ‘did’ social relations. I found that explicit behavioural norms that were ordained by kinship principles still had to be negotiated, performed and often came to be transformed. Where no template was pre-given, people sought out ways to establish new bonds, proudly embracing the commitments entailed. In the wake of this recognition, I was struck by what I call (in Chapter 2) the Kara’s ‘proclivity towards differentiation’; the in absolute terms very small body politic is crisscrossed by an overwhelming number of divisions of ethnic, descent-based, settlement-oriented,

ritual or interest-directed dimensions. These provide resources for factionalism and could well be taken as a standing challenge to the constant invocations of *ädamo* – alternatively, they provide plenty of illustration why such an ideology as *ädamo* is so badly needed in Kara. All these divisions provided at times a basis for inclusion or exclusion, for escalation or mediation. To focus on these ways of differentiation also suggested the methods of research; the way these social categories were connected in any real sense only ever emerged in interaction, in the larger and smaller dramas of everyday life. My insight into the workings of these categories, how they were opposed to one another and in which way people invoked them to frame, justify and explain their own and others' actions thus only grew by attending to and participating in social action. The plausibility rules for cultural arguments emerged there, notable precedents were established and relevant historical accounts invoked. In such context-rich moments, it became apparent that these numerous social categories were not hierarchically ordered; how should one weigh an affiliation to a settlement against clan membership or membership in an age-set? In observed practice, all these did the same work, in providing grounds on which people persuaded themselves and others to follow a suggested definition of the situation. This is just as true for the ethnic categories within the Kara body politic, and nearly as true for the relation between the Kara and their various neighbours in the South Omo region.

When I turned my eye on arenas where ethnic categories met, I found that they were related in distinctly different ways. In short, ethnic differences were different from one another. A related to B differently than to C, and again differently than B did to C; both the structural models and the social ways of expressing and negotiating them (viz. speaking about them) were markedly dissimilar. While it was usually clear what could be usefully translated as an ethnic category, the activation of these categories was not very orderly. Some only mattered in specific contexts, some seemed to be argued along 'primordialist' lines, others were more clearly 'constructivist',<sup>2</sup> some afforded a certain kind of interpersonal relations and some precluded them. Sometimes opposed categories of people had an ethnic component, which turned out to be only rarely invoked, as the interaction between members from both sides of the divide usually seemed more plausibly guided by another, nonethnic difference. Finally, all of these ethnic relations suggested a formal model guiding the hierarchy and opposition of groups and categories, hinging on ritual and taboo, land ownership and especially the capacity of collective action. These different ways of conceptualizing ethnic group relations are explored in the ethnographic chapters.

The focus of my analysis is on how the Kara discuss, contest, apply, perform and transform social categories, and *ädamo* is an inevitable element in these negotiations: as an oppressive harmony ideology to rebel against, or as a refuge from factionalism, or a rhetorical weapon to coerce others to fall into line. Following

on from the last paragraphs, attention to rhetorical action enables insight into people's attempts to make others accept their definitions of the situations, and reveals the different ways in which ethnicity is conversationally and discursively upheld. This approach will unfold over the course of this book, as I turn to the various ways in which belonging and mutuality are created and sustained. *Ādamo* itself is difficult to define due to the polysemic plasticity of its application, and this is precisely why I have to approach it in a tangential manner: Kara ways of inclusion and exclusion shift and change, and words might not mean in one context what they mean in another. *Ādamo* is a social claim people make about how the world ought to be; thus, it has an ideological and political aspect. Even as *ādamo* generally evokes mutuality, it will come as no surprise that relations of domination are sustained in its name. This sort of ambiguity leaves room for rhetorical manipulation, for strategic ways of establishing closeness and distance, for declaring differences significant in one context while gainsaying them elsewhere, for displaying affection and demanding reciprocity.

My interest in *ādamo* also points to the problem of translation. *Ādamo*, by its very nature, requires contextualization when used, and other Kara terms that I learned to use and apply over my fieldwork are similarly complex. As a rule, whenever I introduce a Kara term, I aim at what Michael Herzfeld has called a 'shorthand referentiality', which educates the reader 'into the significance of the term by "seeing" it used in a set of diagnostic contexts, after which its appearance in the text is routinized and assumed to be semantically stable' (Herzfeld 2003: 113). Such use expresses the tentativeness of my understanding. It also reflects my main methodological insight that all these terms, as I encountered them, always stood in their own specific context. They were used as elements of rhetorical claims and were often left intentionally ambiguous.

This ambiguity should not become a source of frustration, not for the fieldworker, not for the reader – ambiguity is a central and, one could argue, necessary and beneficent element of face-to-face interaction.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Tyler goes as far as calling literalness 'odious' (1978: 396), and with good reason. Political positions in communities such as that of Kara are prone to rapid change, alliances are often fleeting, and ambiguity helps people to find compromises, backpedal or simply to forgive, forget and move on. In analysis, this role of ambiguity needs to be appreciated, and any attempts to smoothen it out, to achieve perfect translations, are misguided, as the reality is as fuzzy as its rhetorical expression.

All social action can be looked at in terms of its rhetorical aspects. Even a maximally utilitarian action pursued by the most formidable *homo oeconomicus* or *homo politicus* needs to be successfully communicated in order to become social; thus, it becomes subject to rhetorical analysis. My attention to persuasion, then, is intended to demonstrate the potential of the rhetorical approach for the study of interaction across ethnic and other social boundaries.



**Figure 0.1** The initiates of the Ologuita age-set are driven through Dus (October 2004). Photograph by Felix Girke.

## In the Company of Age-Mates and Bondfriends

I encountered the work of *ädamo* through my own integration into Kara webs of social relations. It is inevitable that any stranger in a given place will be somehow categorized, classified and assigned certain roles along with behavioural expectations and demands, even if they are minimal and exclusionary. This happens in cultural ways, particular to a certain time and place – for example, Kara between 2003 and 2012. Thus, when I now recount my personal ‘arrival story’, the narrative of how I arrived in my fieldsite, it is not just because it is textually proper to start off a fieldwork-based book with some such authorizing account. Instead, my experiences of ‘getting there’ and subsequently ‘being there’ are presented with an eye on methodology; it was the way in which I was persistently being classified in, by and for Kara and other audiences that led me on the path to discover how Kara establish *ädamo*. In other words: how the Kara rhetorically set up and maintain normatively loaded and affectively powerful social relations was a key personal experience throughout my fieldwork.

More than just incidentally, this section serves to establish my position in Kara – where my allegiances lay, what sorts of relationships I engaged in, what demands I was under, and which choices made by myself and others shaped this configuration. As the sections below as well as the later chapters will illustrate more fully, even if one attempts to not take sides, it might well be that one is eventually taken by a side.

I started off from the South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC)<sup>4</sup> in the regional capital of Jinka in August 2003, seeking out Choke Bajje, an elder from Hamar and a close friend to my erstwhile teacher Ivo Strecker. He, Strecker had suggested, could and would love to introduce me to the Kara, whose territory lay not too far away from his homestead. The formidable Choke, who has brokered not only my but also several other anthropologists' access to their study sites, quickly offered to introduce me to his *bel*, his bondfriend in Kara. While Nukunu, the man with whom he had initially established the bond, had since died, there was still the latter's family. One of the sons, Choke intimated, was around my age. Soon after, guided by a sister-son of Choke, I made my way down from the Hamar mountains into the lowlands of the Omo River.<sup>5</sup> It took us some time to discover a track that led to Chelläte, the settlement where the family of Choke's *bel* was to be found. When we did arrive, most adults had gone down to the nearby river to clear the banks of last year's growths. Only later in the afternoon did I finally meet Haila, the son of Nukunu.

While we had no language in common at the time, this did not stand in the way of getting to know each other. Quite surprisingly, there was not much to be debated regarding my wish to work in Kara: people were familiar with (and seemed slightly in awe of) Ivo Strecker and his decades-long work in Hamar, as well as the longlasting friendships he and his wife Jean Lydall had established there. Through his sister-son, Choke had sent word that just as Ivo had studied the Hamar language and culture, so had I come to do the same in Kara. As he vouched for me, I travelled the path of bondfriendship, and that was sufficient for Haila, his mother and his brothers to support my work and to host me.<sup>6</sup>

This first day marked not only the beginning of my affiliation with Haila's core family, then consisting of his mother Mudo, and his brothers Mulla, Nakwa and Nukunu; I also 'began belonging' to the settlement Chelläte, a small assemblage of huts, established for convenient access to the riverbank fields, the site of the main Kara subsistence activity of flood-retreat cultivation (see Matsuda (1996) for details). In these early days, I had no real appreciation of what other categories I was gradually being inducted into: my understanding of Kara social life grew in parallel to the growing number of people I got to know, and who then proceeded to offer relationships to me (compare Girke 2018). Wider exposure meant wider integration. When I got to know Haila's mother-brothers, they addressed me as 'sister-son'; when I met Haila's classificatory grand-daughters, they eventually displayed the joking behaviour to me that was appropriate to the role. With growing cultural and linguistic competence, I reciprocated, and most people who stood in any sort of kin relation to Haila eventually included me in their relationship as if I were his insignificantly younger brother. Initially, this was only manifested in terms of address, but over the weeks and months and years of my various visits to Kara, the interaction with many people became more personal, multifaceted and often cordial.<sup>7</sup> Acting 'as if' we were kin (*äda*), people

extended amity and the appropriate role behaviour to me, in the spirit of *ädamo*. Had I become their *äda* now?

But back to the early days again: on the fourth day of my stay in Kara, a group of Haila's friends jointly approached me, and even as it took me some time to get the message, they announced that they were of the Nyiramalai age-set and that I would belong to this group as well. Again, it started with the term of address, *hariya*, used among age-mates and their wives. Suddenly, a number of men began calling me 'age-mate'; some of their wives picked it up too, as wives of age-mates use the same term of address towards their husbands' peers. In a few cases, even their children joined in and called me *abba*, 'my father', as is appropriate towards the father's age-mate. Now, I obviously had not gone through the age-set initiation phase with the other Nyiramalai some ten years earlier. I had not alongside them pestered the elders for permission to debate on the public square with the other adults. I had not offered goats to the elders for them to grant 'us' the right to sit on an adult's headrest in public. I had not been whipped alongside the other Nyiramalai for our insolence. Neither had I shared with them the tedious chore of goat-herding, also the source of many valuable skills I had never acquired, nor had I joined the hunting trips of their youth, journeying far into the Mago River valley to the North. Still, since that day, many of the Nyiramalai were true to the initial offer extended to me by this first group.<sup>8</sup> Up until today, the Nyiramalai form my main peer group, my foremost interlocutors, guides and advisers, and my closest friends in Kara. Had I become their age-mate then?

I could extend the list of social categories into which I became integrated in precisely this way by listing settlement sections, clan and, eventually, after his marriage, Haila's affines. Members of all these categories extended the offer of a dedicated relationship to me and consistently acted out their parts. 'How much of this was carnival?' is an obvious question here. My answer is methodological: as long as I was willing to act 'as if' I took a given role or category-membership seriously, people acted 'as if' I belonged. An 'as if'-relation is not tangibly different from an 'as'-relation – whether somebody is 'truly' somebody else's age-mate only ever matters in the moment of contestation. As long as people choose not to press the issue, to not challenge this established definition of the situation, namely that I ought to belong, the point remained moot. That my integration was hardly arbitrary is illustrated by the awareness that I could not switch paradigmatically: my clan, Gorsbolo, is 'my clan', as I belong to it at least in a way that precludes belonging to any other clan at all, ever. The categories in which I found myself were exclusive vis-à-vis the several other similar ones, and to break the emerging pattern would clearly have entailed great social costs for all people involved.

The point I want to make using my arrival in Kara as an example is that if one looks at social relations in terms of interaction, their performative qualities are evident. Age-mates are age-mates as long as they agree that they want to treat



**Figure 0.2** Both spears and gun are often left outside a dwelling when their owners gather within (December 2006). Photograph by Felix Girke.

each other as such. The Kara thus demonstrated to me, in a bodily and striking manner, how social relations emerge from will and performance, and that even while I could never quite match the intimate familiarity that might exist between any given Kara, to consistently act ‘as if I belonged was a practically and emotionally sufficient basis for interaction. The Kara and I persuaded one another that it would be desirable, for a number of reasons, if we all defined the situation in a way that integrated me into social life in these dimensions. Until somebody underwent the effort of counteracting this tacit agreement, there existed a shared basis for interaction. Young men of junior age-grades deferred to me; I let older men order me about. To talk about ‘fictive kinship’ here obscures the methodological point that all interaction is based in principle on such agreements, such semi-stabilized definitions of the situation that sometimes don the guise of perpetuity. The illustrative example, which takes us back to the start of this section, is bondfriendship (*beltamo*), the ethnic boundary-crossing bond that establishes solidarity through war and peace, and in the name of which people have turned against their own politics in support of the bondfriend. *Beltamo* – under various names – is practised and celebrated all over South Omo, and to cultivate a range of successful, enduring bondfriendships, to create one’s own significant others in a variety of places rather than just accepting what one is locally born to, is a mark of social mastery (Girke 2011).

I ‘came of age’ in Kara as I grew more competent in seeing social life unfold, recognizing it as a dynamic arena, where even ‘natural’ categories came to be contested on various grounds. It is hardly decided *a priori* whether A will aid his brother B or support his age-mate C with whom his brother B has a fight. The categories of being Kara were situationally invoked to justify action or to persuade people towards action. Which category would come to be decisive was often an open question; the benefits of the choices eventually made were in many cases hardly evident. I made these experiences alongside my Nyiramalai age-mates, especially and foremost through Haila, who, even as he knows little about the circumstances of my European life, knows me, with my likes and dislikes, my moods and thoughts, perfectly well. The same is true of his wife Worssa, whom I also have known since 2003. The fact that we got along as well as we did ever since was perceived and appreciated by other Kara. I stuck with him and his family, he was committed to me and my project, and we became friends – these factors made my stay in Kara possible and feasible. When his first son was born, he was named after me. Looking back, it is hard to imagine how it would be possible to do in-depth research with the Kara without travelling the path of bondfriendship. As a cautionary gesture, Granovetter has pointed out that in such a social constellation:

The local phenomenon is cohesion ... An analyst studying such a group by participant observation might never see the extent of fragmentation ... In the nature of participant observation, one is likely to get caught up in a fairly restricted circle; a few useful contacts are acquired and relied on for introduction to others. (1973: 1374)

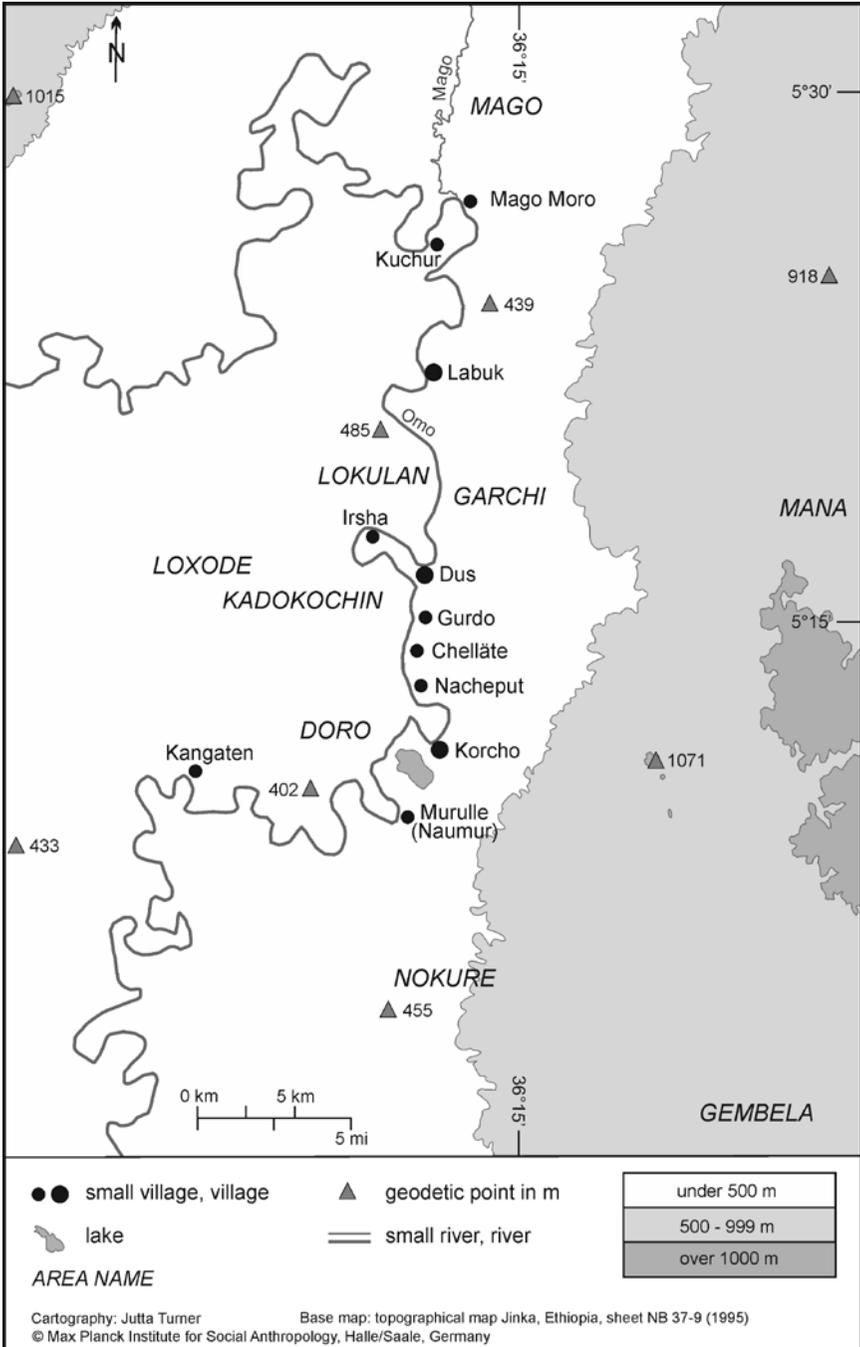
He was right in that the friends of my friends became my friends too, but his general statement does not address the emerging counteracting social dynamics. Other Kara saw what was happening – that I stayed in the village Chellâte, that I was with Haila’s family and the Gorsbolo clan, and that I belonged to the Nyiramalai age-set – and some of them acted to influence this state, for example, by striking up individual friendships with me. While there certainly was such a ‘fairly restricted circle’ for me, this was purposive and beneficial for my integration, and did not prevent me from realizing the ‘extent of fragmentation’, as I show in Chapter 2. Throughout this book, then, it should be kept in mind which categories of being Kara were applied to me: a young man, unmarried at a time when most of his age-mates had already become elders with children, a Nyiramalai of the Gorsbolo clan, who belonged to the settlers at Chellâte and who sat on the Nyuwaya dancing ground for the evening chats of the men. Other categories of me ‘not being Kara’ of course never quite ceased to matter.

As indicated above, the Kara population is also ethnically divided, with ritual differences, marked commensality taboos and restrictions on intermarriage

between members of certain categories. I fit none of the established categories, so I became a person not subject to ethnically marked interaction – people felt no need to invent commensality taboos with a *parang* or *ferenj*, a European. However, through Haila, I was strongly associated with the ‘true Kara’, an ethnic subsection who are both the numerical majority and politically as well as ritually dominant. Most of my closest friends were also true Kara, and it is still difficult now to assess what impact this had on my role in the field. I will illustrate throughout this book that true Kara are the local master narrators, the ones who define the foundations of Kara sociality as a whole and who can make the strongest statements on what is and what is not according to *ädamo*. My greater familiarity with their perspective compared to that of other ethnic categories of Kara allows me to explore the dynamics of ethnicity and other social categories as they appear to a true Kara, an approach also justified by the sheer social dominance of this perspective.<sup>9</sup> In writing on and indeed in putting a name to the covert category ‘true Kara’, which goes unmarked in the local vernacular, I seek to make this hegemonic moment, this usually invisible ‘prerogative of interpretation’<sup>10</sup> of the true Kara more legible.

### **Group Size and Community**

Imagine 1,400 people living in small hamlets on a narrow strip of land about 20 km long and maybe 5 km wide. These 1,400 people are united in that they share a great many institutions, such as clans that only exist here, ritual leaders who have spiritual power only within this territory, a joint system of landholding and any number of other arrangements. All of these arrangements have in common that they are only relevant for these 1,400 people. Outside this territory, there is hardly anybody who even speaks their language. While this presentation sounds overly dramatic, this all applies to the Kara. To be Kara today means to know all other Kara; some more intimately, some less, but still – there is nobody who is considered a Kara who is not known to every competent adult. Such a spectacular lack of anonymity has significant effects on social life. As of 2005–6, the official population count of Kara was a total of 1,401 individuals. These numbers stated that 1,086 of these lived in and between the settlements of (central) Dus and (southern) Korcho, and the other 315 in the northern section centred around the village Labuk (see Map 0.2). This is, by and large, it. The diaspora population of Kara could at the time be counted off using fingers and toes: two men had joined the Ethiopian army for good; three young men were being trained as short track athletes in Addis Ababa; a small but growing number of male youths were attending colleges throughout Ethiopia; a few more people had taken up employment and residence in the nearby market villages Turmi and Dimeka, as well as the regional centre Jinka. A growing number of boys and girls were seasonally attending school in these places as well. It is noteworthy that the



Map 0.2 Settlements of Kara.

number Schlee gives for the minimal population of a viable, sustainable group in northern Kenya or southern Ethiopia is 20,000 (2004: 97), which makes it a striking feature of South Omo, at the western edge of the area he indicates, that populations of around 20,000 already constitute major players among the ethnic groups – and the Kara even more of an outlier.<sup>11</sup>

The small population size is not an element external to the Kara that could be disconnected from who they are; they have become who they are precisely because of this – and not unawares either. Hence, it is worthwhile to point out some consequences this had for my research with and among them. I group these considerations into four blocks, discussing the issues of intimacy (and anonymity), sample size, frontier and heartland, and conflict resolution in turn.

First, then, how did this intimacy of everyday life in Kara affect my research? Relationships between individuals were multiplex because each performed different roles and held different statuses vis-à-vis others. People who sat down together to chat in Kara were always well acquainted and aware of each other's social backgrounds and life histories. Accordingly, many conversations were hard to follow, as they could be elliptic and allusive without violating any conversational maxims vis-à-vis another Kara proper. I, Kara *manqué*, often struggled to deduce which particular 'Lale' of the five or six men called Lale whom I knew was meant – if not someone else entirely. In addition to ritually acquired names, nicknames or honorary names, most people of both genders had several given names as well. Metonymical constructions were common, teknonymy only being one of them, as people could be referred to by way of the location of their fields, their age-set, their in-laws or even a specific, indexical relation to someone present (e.g. 'his hunting-friend'). Conversations assumed precisely this shared knowledge, as there normally are no strangers whom one would have to accommodate by providing more context, so this was both an aesthetic and efficient mode of communication. For me, it created difficulties that were only slowly overcome and, even at the height of my familiarity with Kara, they still resurfaced again and again in certain conversational domains.

Consequently, there were few natural occasions when somebody talked extensively about their own life. Beyond the familiarity engendered through quotidian interaction, which renders dense autobiographies moot, to talk too much about oneself displays just a little too much pride. My attempts at comprehensive biographical interviews led to mediocre results, as I rarely managed to make such conversation a meaningful genre in this face-to-face community. People assume that everybody who was around when they were children will be around forever until death takes them; that there is nobody in-group whom one will know just for a limited period and then never see again; that there is no chance that any event that transpired in one's social life can ever be forgotten (compare Colson 1974: 5). This constitutes how life is lived in Kara. To somehow approximate this familiarity, participant observation was the royal road. 'Hanging around'

and ‘bringing up a topic’ (Helander 2003: 30f) as well as ‘ero-epic conversations’ (Girtler 1995: 219ff), many of which were recorded, were my main methods. Through such merely partially structured interaction, I slowly acquired linguistic and contextual competence, and also came across a great deal of my ethnographic data. Ethel Albert’s suggestion that ‘[i]t is ... probably a good general rule of method that learning the cultural modes of speech behavior is part of procuring reliable data’ (1964: 53) expresses well my initially intuitive and later more deliberate mode of language acquisition and fieldwork, also manifested in the decision to not use the aid of a translator.

This radically mutual knowledge as it is shared among the Kara has direct consequences on the ‘worthy anthropological usage ... to obfuscate sources’ (Boon 2001: 125). In their attempts to protect their interlocutors from unwanted publicity, embarrassment, intrusion and potential retribution, anthropologists anonymize individuals, research settings and even their own names (see the discussion in van der Geest (2003)). This is a major topic in anthropology today, and I do not want to go into the legal or even the philosophical issues at stake here, but merely point out the practical difficulties for my particular case: barring an intentional distortion of cases and persons in my text, an adult Kara would stand a good chance of identifying the individuals in the situations that I describe and the speakers of the utterances that I quote, no matter how cleverly anonymized. Even outside of Kara, my main interlocutors are well-known; some of them even feature in a short movie I made together with the Berlin-based filmmaker and anthropologist Steffen Köhn (Girke and Köhn 2007). I also feel that there is merit in the demand that interlocutors who possess expert knowledge deserve recognition, let alone praise for their willingness to share it with a researcher. Acknowledging that this must be always a balancing act, balancing the need to protect interlocutors (or people featuring in descriptions or stories) with the wish to praise and commend their cooperation and knowledge, I have assessed risks and thus anonymized (or rather pseudonymized) selectively.

Second, such small discourse communities as Kara present problems for testing assumptions as well as for research methods. In the early phases of my fieldwork, I sometimes tried to ask ‘what if’ questions in order to get people to provide fitting examples to the issue at hand, drawing on their personal experience and their knowledge of past events. The aim was also to eventually get at the ‘workings’ of cultural operations, at ritual rules and other such regulated aspects of social life, and of course valid ways of justification: ‘So, given this and that, what would happen if ...?’ Mostly, I have to say, I got the reply ‘*hau de!*’ – ‘who knows, who cares?!’ Within such a small group, I was faced with an equally small sample size. People’s knowledge about the past usually only extended to their parents’ or (rarely) grandparents’ generations. This was my sample and, in fact, the sample of the wise Kara elders themselves was also limited in this manner. It is

not that people did not know what had happened in the past, it is just that there had not been so much of it. Many imaginable social constellations have actually yet to occur, and I witnessed on more than one occasion people acknowledging that they had no precedent on which to base their actions. Methodologically, this steered me away from the danger of a static view of culture; while one knows this abstractly, the drastic nature of the Kara case made it very clear that social life is emergent, ambiguous and open-ended. My interest in how actors strove to persuade themselves and others of a ‘definition of the situation’ thus proved especially appropriate – Kara is small enough that one can observe tradition as it is being invented and community as it is being imagined.

There is no reliable information about population numbers in previous decades. Kara accounts on this vary – sometimes it is emphasized that they always were few and sometimes their numbers are aggrandized to emphasize their past might. Consistently, though, the Kara history proclaims that around the end of the nineteenth century, two disasters struck: the *gind’o*, a sleeping sickness that killed many people, and the *tobolo*, a mighty flood of the Omo River that again decimated and scattered the population. The first is consistent with accounts of the wave of trypanosomiasis that swept Africa in the wake of the great rinderpest (see Loimeier 2011), while the second one has found less solid confirmation from other sources. It matters little: no matter how many Kara there were 200 years ago, to be Kara today is to live in a small-scale, face-to-face community. This notion, commonly used and hardly ever precisely defined, applies to Kara no matter how an eventual definition might turn out. They fit Benedict Anderson’s imagined ‘primordial villages of face-to-face contact’ quite well (1983: 6). One might even be tempted to assume that, as the Kara know and experience their actual community every day, they are possibly exempt from the necessity to ‘imagine’ it. However, much of Kara social life revolves not necessarily around the imagination of the existence of their community, but around persuasive attempts to keep it intact, to keep it relevant, to turn it into a collective actor and to keep up the at least superficial appearance of ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ between them (Anderson 1983: 7). In Kara (as elsewhere), community is always an achievement.

## **The Structure of this Book**

This book is about the rhetorical ways in which Kara relate to themselves and to others. In the first chapter, I develop my theoretical approach by discussing some concepts that allow me to trace, in the observation of everyday life, the persuasive processes that promise more material answers to the questions at stake: how do they do it? How do they maintain their autonomy? Who are ‘they’? My understanding of why people such as the Kara act in a way that asserts their autonomy in the first place is encapsulated in a model that I call the ‘Wheel of Autonomy’. It visualizes the circular motion of how a desire for autonomy creates



**Figure 0.3** Loxopil, the author's name goat (front), with a friend (December 2006). Photograph by Felix Girke.

conditions of agency, which is again used to achieve distinction. Distinction, in turn, is a logical prerequisite to autonomy – or, starting at another point, how purposive action, in displaying agency, enables autonomy. Such autonomy then leads to various ascriptions of distinction.<sup>12</sup> Wherever one starts, the Wheel of Autonomy posits that understanding these three notions as mutually constitutive of one another illuminates the political interaction between ethnically marked populations in South Omo. In the following chapters this model is applied to various relations in and around Kara, and rhetoric is shown to be the grease that makes the wheel turn. To talk about relations presupposes elements to be related, so I substantiate my case by analysing classificatory practices in social life. How can distinctions be imposed on an inchoate world of experience? How do categories of belonging emerge? How do they come to matter? The answer to these questions is rhetoric, in its aspect of persuasion, aimed at establishing common ground with others – or, in fact, obliterating it (Girke and Meyer 2011: 17–19). This is where the fundamental importance of the ‘definition of the situation’ in human interaction comes to the fore. ‘Situations’, however, are not merely ephemeral moments in our perception; they have very real consequences in that they crystallize categories, imbue distinctions with value, naturalize what was manmade and can be used to suppress dissenting narratives. In this context, I also address the role of power and ideology in the sort of human relations I look

at here. All in all, the chapter consists of one extended elaboration of how and why I work on ethnic relations with the vocabulary of rhetoric.

Introducing the ‘Categories of Being Kara’, Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic overview over the many social categories that divide the Kara just as they unite them. This list takes account of material conditions such as settlements and livelihood, but equally addresses more abstract organizational divides and individually or corporately achieved or ascribed status. Hardly any of these items matter to non-Kara. Hence, the chapter can be read not just as a description of institutions, but as a part of the answer to the question ‘who are the Kara?’ Explicitly sidelined are internal ethnic differences, which are the subject matter of Chapters 3, 4 and 5. To establish the categories of being Kara in this way lays the groundwork for the rest of the book, which – while more outwardly oriented and focusing on ethnicity – often recurs to inter-Kara dynamics.

Consequently, Chapter 3 still concerns the internal categories of being Kara by introducing the ethnic subdivisions. A spectacular social drama erupted when some members of the Bogudo category decided to relinquish a certain ritual they had up until then been performing. This was treated as a challenge to the *ädamo* of the Kara, and the true Kara re-established their control over the ritual order by recategorizing these Bogudo as ethnic Gomba, lower in status and in fact usually understood as a natural, birth-ordained identity that one could not simply join even if one wanted to.

The relationship between the Kara and the Moguji, a ritually ostracized and politically marginalized ethnic category, is the focus of Chapters 4 and 5, which should not be read individually. This new focus widens the perspective to take in aspects beyond what is Kara in a strict sense: while many Moguji are found in the Kara settlements of Labuk, Dus and Korcho, others live in Kuchur, a Moguji-only settlement further out north, or across the river in Nyangatom territory. Thus, as the Moguji population already is half inside, half outside of Kara, this is even more true for the ritual status of this social category: through a very marked application of metaphor, true Kara constantly ‘other’ the Moguji, pointing out their general lack of refinement and productivity. Whence this radical othering? The Moguji, I argue, present a problem for Kara. According to myth, they are the true autochthones of the Omo Valley, supposed hunter and fishermen, the ones whose lands the Kara cleverly took over when they arrived on the scene. Today, in most respects, the Kara dominate the Moguji, and the use of metaphor facilitates keeping them in a subordinate position. Unsurprisingly, the Moguji have begun to rally against this situation, engendering ever more drastic response from the true Kara. I analyse how these two groups are forever entwined, as the Kara define the Moguji as what they themselves are not. This provides further insight into how the Kara rhetorically manipulate *ädamo* claims to sustain their autonomy. Thus, this case serves as an ethnographic illustration for the Wheel of Autonomy: by preventing the Moguji from reaching self-determination in any of

the fields of economy, ritual or politics, through material as well as metaphorical means, the Kara assert their agency and display their power to define the existence of others (compare also Girke 2014b).

What the Moguji are excluded from in this way is – so to speak – full membership in what I call the ‘cultural neighbourhood’ (see also Gabbert 2010). The exploration of this notion makes up Chapter 6. I found that there is a horizon of relevance for the Kara, which includes some of the neighbouring populations as significant others. These other groups are at the same level of existence as the Kara themselves: autonomous, territorial, culturally particular polities (see Map 0.1). Important examples are the Hamar, who are so similar to the Kara, and the Nyangatom, with whom the Kara have fought so much over the last decades. These examples indicate that such an equivalence is never a given, as the case of the Moguji already suggested, who were being kept just below this level of autonomy.

As the Wheel of Autonomy turns, groups are engaged in a constant struggle to retain their distinctiveness and autonomy, to keep themselves significant in the eyes of their neighbours. Not all is symbolic, though: there are very material interests at stake, since the Kara and their neighbours maintain not only ethnic but also territorial boundaries. One notable aspect of these relationships is the heavy stereotyping in which groups engage vis-à-vis one another in the narratives they tell. The groups discussed from a Kara perspective in Chapter 7 – specifically, the Hamar, Nyangatom, Mursi, Arbore, Aari, Maale and Dassanech – are specific exemplars of the encompassing category Shank’illa. This term was originally an epithet, employed by the ‘Abyssinians’ (today: Habesha) of the Ethiopian centre, to designate the ‘blacks’, the lowlanders, pastoralists and potential slaves at the edge of their sphere of influence (compare Lydall 2010; Smidt 2010). Today, though, the term ‘Shank’illa’ has been adopted by those very groups to express their relative similarity in their polyethnic field in the lowlands in the face of the Habesha highlander. As such, it is a relevant cognitive and possibly political category, under which the Kara group all the specific groups of their cultural neighbourhood.

Chapters 8 and 9 are committed to the ‘cleverness’ of the Kara, a salient contemporary charter, under whose banner the Kara seem to prepare themselves for an uncertain future. Even though South Omo has been incorporated into the Ethiopian state in its various incarnations for over one hundred years now, it turns out that there is still an unbridged divide between Shank’illa and Habesha. Instead of seeing this encounter again in terms of ethnic difference, I found that it is the crass imbalance of power and scale that makes these two categories still irreconcilable. Rather than opposing the imposing Ethiopian state directly, the Kara assume an ironical stance towards the narratives of development and national integration. In the face of all appearances, the Kara seem to deny that they, on the very periphery of Ethiopia, are necessarily powerless. Well aware of

the predicaments that individual officials face, they turn the tables on those who would govern them, calling attention to incongruities, and generally being shiftily and elusive. This sustains their self-esteem where it would be easy to become despondent, and allows them to look to the years ahead, confident that their alleged cleverness will serve them well. Irony is the appropriate trope wherever claims and realities diverge, where (with Nietzsche) ‘final vocabularies’ such as the high modernist narrative of the state reveal themselves to be as contingent as any others. The stance assumed by the Kara is markedly different from that attributed to other groups of the region, such as the Aari, for whom the conquest was a much greater trauma and who seem to have little confidence in their ability to deal with modern times on their own terms.

The argument thus starts from a narrow focus on processes that have relevance inside of Kara only (Chapters 2 and 3). It then widens, turning to the tricky question of the Moguji, whom the Kara try to keep close even as they metaphorically distance them as much as possible (Chapters 4 and 5). Increasing the scope again, the discussion turns to how the self-determined members of the ‘cultural neighbourhood’, all categorically similar groups, belong to the larger Shank’illa category, and how they struggle to assert and sustain their autonomy vis-à-vis one another (Chapter 6). The precise relations the Kara maintain to these other groups, through war and peace and less intimate relations, are the subject of Chapter 7. But all the dramatic interaction of the various Shank’illa groups is relativized when (in Chapter 9) they encounter the awesome power of the Habesha, the dominant representatives of the Ethiopian state. Recognizing the ironies inherent in the national project, the Kara refuse to simply accept this definition of the situation.

Finally, I reassess my two main projects: to gain insight into the protean ways in which the Kara use the term *ädamo*; and to develop a rhetorical approach to the study of ethnopolitical group relations. The original interest in group size inevitably led me to not only tactics and strategies of boundary-making, but also the epistemologically prior question of how ‘the Kara’ even relate to themselves. The conversation on ‘how do the Kara do it?’ cannot be concluded – it is necessarily ongoing and open-ended, especially considering the incipient transformations of Kara life, and of South Omo in general, through developmental mega-projects such as dams, plantations and oil-drilling, changes that have begun in recent years but whose actual impact can only be assessed in the future.

## Notes

1. Several conferences on ‘Rhetoric Culture Theory’ were held at Mainz University in 2002 and 2005 (financed by the Volkswagen Foundation), in Evanston, IL, in 2012, and in Hannover in 2016 (again financed by the Volkswagen Foundation). The resulting book series ‘Studies in Rhetoric and Culture’ is being published by Berghahn Books, the series

editors being Ivo Strecker, Stephen Tyler, Robert Hariman, Christian Meyer and Felix Girke ([http://www.berghahnbooks.com/series.php?pg=rhet\\_cult](http://www.berghahnbooks.com/series.php?pg=rhet_cult)). The original presentation of the project itself can still be found at <http://www.rhetoricculture.org>. See also the early reviews by Carrithers (2005a and 2005b).

2. In my approach, the two bugbears of ethnicity studies – primordialism and constructivism – are relevant as characterizations of emic views on and expressions of ethnicity. As established by Dereje Feyissa in a work on western Ethiopia, many people are ‘playing different games’, some of them being more ethnically integrative (which presupposes a certain reflexivity), while others insist on purity and descent (Dereje 2011). The main difference between Dereje’s approach and mine is that I would not assign the labels of ‘emic constructivist’ or ‘emic primordialist’ to kinds of people in any stable manner, as I found situational circumstances paramount. The self-same individuals could voice a constructivist argument then, and a primordialist argument now, as it suited their rhetorical purposes.
3. Nevertheless, I do provide a glossary (pp. 261–70).
4. The SORC is an established forum for anthropological research and debate in southern Ethiopia, established by Professor Ivo Strecker and long administered and maintained by researchers from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany. Today, it is administered by Arba Minch University, with support from the MPI for Social Anthropology (Halle/Saale, Germany).
5. On that journey, I was also accompanied by Sophia Thubauville, then a researcher among the nearby Maale (and later director of the SORC, today at the University of Frankfurt am Main), as well as by the Ethiopian researcher Tsegaab Kassa.
6. It speaks of the positive image that anthropologists have among the indigenous populations of the South Omo region that such easy access could be found: scholars such as Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall, as well as David Turton and Serge Tornay, have all sustained their commitment to their fieldsites (Mursi and Nyangatom, respectively) over decades, and my ‘cohort’ of colleagues, among them Echi Christina Gabbert, Shauna LaTosky and others, have not flagged in their engagement either. Through their example, anthropology has come to be recognized by the resident populations as a normal and appreciated pursuit for foreigners in South Omo, which has enabled a new and more numerous generation of researchers to further enhance the academic understanding of the region.
7. I have undertaken six trips to Kara, starting in 2003. Following on the first stint, when I stayed all of two weeks, I went again in 2004 (two months), 2005 (one month), 2006–7 (one year), 2008 (two weeks) and again a brief visit in 2012. The durations of my respective stays in Ethiopia were longer, but it often took me a week or more to even reach Kara. Mostly in the company of Kara friends, I travelled all over South Omo, with the South Omo Museum and Research Center providing a valuable place to retreat to for rest, to view video material and to discuss recordings together with Kara.
8. To this day, I am grateful to Haila, Nanga, Lale, Arballo and Barke for the faith implicit in this amicable gesture, which was immeasurably helpful and encouraging.
9. Asmarom’s attack on ‘vicarious ethnocentrism’ is well taken, as when a researcher adopts the viewpoints of his most familiar others and then projects their likes and dislikes onto more distant others, creating an unwholesome mess of stereotypes and biased descriptions (1973: 276). Accordingly, my active engagement with stereotypes and the various ways members of ethnic categories maintain their boundaries always explicitly traces the sources of the ethnocentrism I explore. I discuss this in more depth later (see Chapters 6 and 7; see also Girke 2014a).

10. This is a dissatisfying attempt to render the German word 'Deutungshoheit', also translatable as 'exegetic' or 'hermeneutic dominance' or 'interpretational sovereignty', 'authority' or 'privilege'.
11. Donald Tuzin, writing on the Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, wonders (in a direct reversal of my initial question) how a specific local section 'had managed to achieve and maintain a population size which, at 1,500 persons, was extraordinarily large by Papua New Guinea standards' (1989: 278)
12. I use both the terms 'distinction' and 'differentiation' in discussing such processes. Differentiation highlights the active nature of difference-making. Distinction is more of an achievement than a process. By engaging in differentiation, an actor might achieve distinction.