

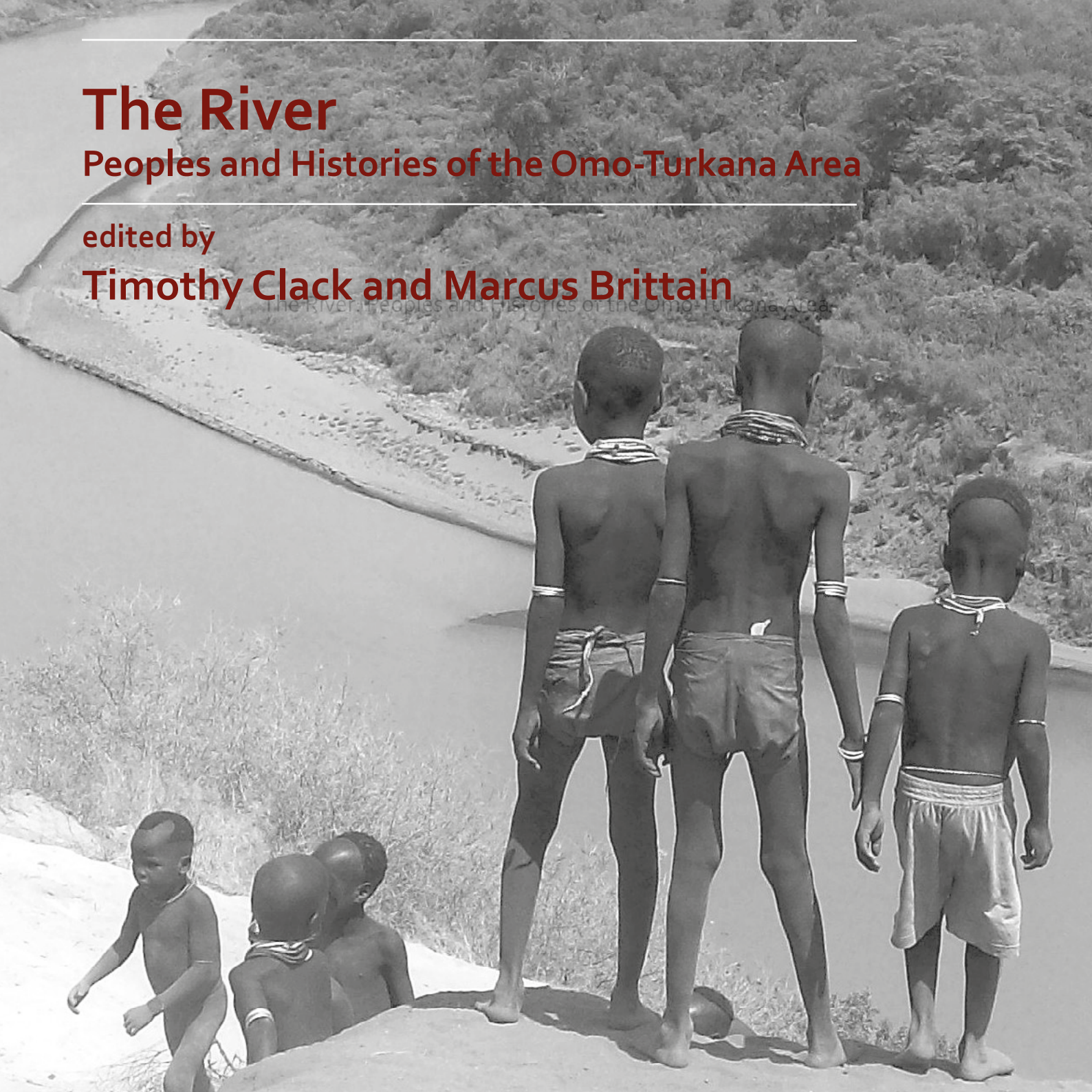
The River

Peoples and Histories of the Omo-Turkana Area

edited by

Timothy Clack and Marcus Brittain

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Cover image: View of the Omo River from Kara Korcho, March 2008 (credit: M. Bassi)

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Ethnic groups in the tri-nation boundary region



In a ritual act, after a long journey, a Mursi man throws clay into the Omo River (credit: T. Clack)

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22. Written Past: Explorers' Histories

Marco Bassi

The first historical accounts of Mursi were produced by a limited number of explorers, hunters, missionaries and scientists. Sometimes these accounts align with oral histories and oftentimes they do not. What can be learnt from these early annotations from the past?

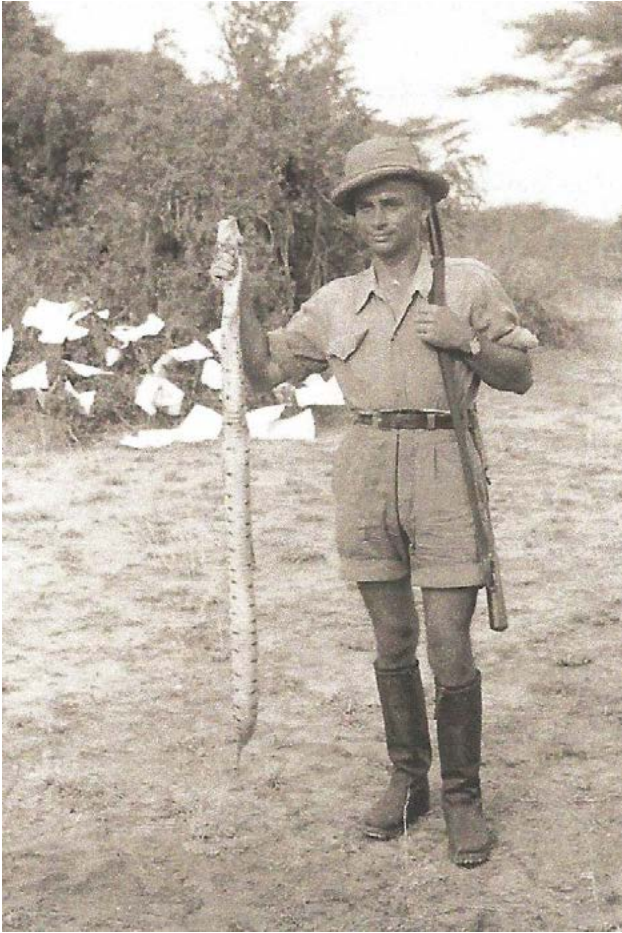
The Lower Omo Valley appeared in European writings in the second half of the nineteenth century. Sadly, the written sources on the people of the valley are so bound to the European colonial enterprise that no new record was produced when their territory was incorporated into the Abyssinian Empire. It was only more than half a century later that the people of the Lower Omo Valley 're-appeared' as a specific interest of modern anthropology. During the 1930s, two scientific expeditions by the French palaeontologist Camille Arambourg and the British geologist and explorer Vivian Fuchs ignored the people. Even the Italian short occupation, which lasted only two years in this region (1937-1938), did not produce much more than a few maps and good photographs, despite the expedition to the Sagan-Omo by Edoardo Zavattari, a racist but attentive scholar. His previous expedition to Borana country had resulted in an impressive series of publications in the ethnographic, botanic and zoological fields. However, the post-World War II political and cultural



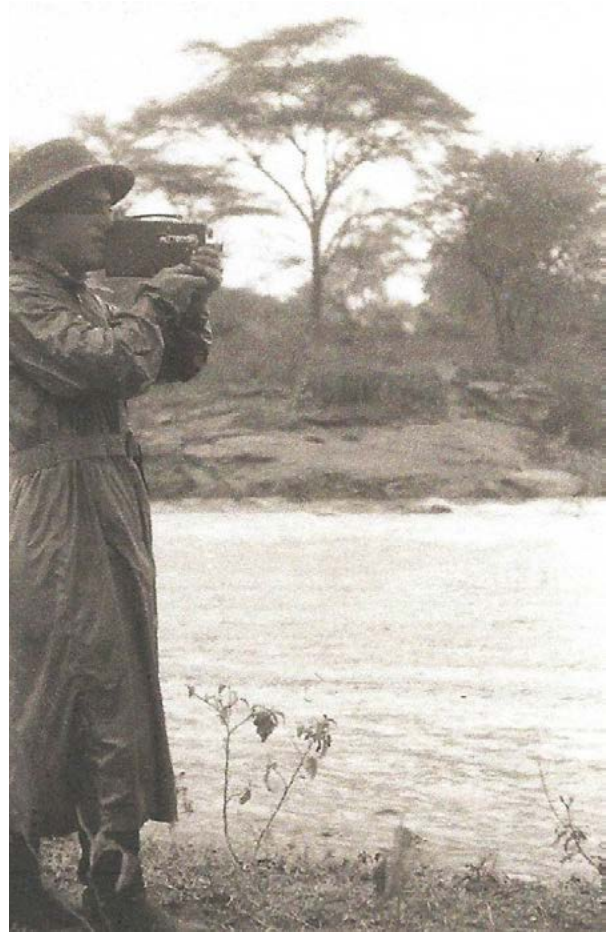
A photograph taken in 1939 of a 'scianggalla' woman from the expedition archive of Edoardo Zavattari. As 'scianggalla' is a negative term used by highlanders to refer to Surmic people, the woman is likely from the Mursi or Suri groups.

revolutions led the Italians to suppress the historical memory of the colonial experience, along with the Fascist regime and the monarchy. Most of Zavattari's notes and collections on the Omo Valley were lost in Italy.

This is the virtual reversal of the story of Vittorio Böttogo's exploration, resulting in the publication in 1899 of the outstanding *Seconda spedizione Böttogo: L'Omo, viaggio d'esplorazione nell'Africa orientale*. Böttogo knew very well the Italian territorial interests in the region. Accordingly, he convinced the authorities to provide institutional support to his project to discover the outlet of the Omo River. With Maurizio Sacchi, and Lieutenants Vannutelli and



Italo Archetti with a captured snake in the Murle area in 1939 during Edoardo Zavattari's expedition to the Omo



Oreste Maestri filming as part of Edoardo Zavattari's expedition, Keske, 1939

Citerni, he approached the Omo River from the east and followed it downstream, until in 1896 they discovered its outlet in Lake Turkana. Unfortunately, the Italian authorities failed to alert Bóttego that they had in the meanwhile decided to invade Ethiopia, thus changing his status from that of an 'explorer' to 'military enemy'. It is a miracle that the expedition continued for several months, until, that is, Sacchi was killed on his way back to Somalia and Bóttego on his way to Addis Ababa, when he reached an Oromo military post.

After the diplomatic negotiations, Emperor Menelik II not only released Vannutelli and Citerni, but also delivered the field notes and collections of the deceased explorers, making the publication of the book possible. Bóttego's mandate included the establishment of good relations with people that were regarded as future members of the Italian overseas territories. His descriptions are accordingly detailed and geographically reliable. As with most explorers' accounts, the style of the book reveals the European prejudices of the time against people with simple technology, hence 'needing' the civilizing actions of colonials. Yet, there are sentences that reveal a sincere admiration for the natives' ability and cleverness.



British Nigerian soldiers removing Italian frontier markers from the Kenyan-Abyssinian border, 1941

Bóttego was not the first European to reach the Lower Omo Valley. Three expeditions before him approached the area from south and east, thus failing to identify the local water course as the Omo River. In 1888, Sámuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel reached the northern part of Lake Turkana with their Austrian expedition. In 1895, Arthur Donaldson Smith managed to move a bit further upstream. Donaldson Smith is the first of a series of travellers mixing geographical curiosity with passion for adventure and game hunting. These travellers self-organised and self-sponsored their expeditions, often paying for them through the sale of ivory. The fact that they were moving in unknown countries justified the publication of their travel



Sámuel Teleki's portrait

accounts in geographical journals or books. However, their descriptions lack the accuracy derived by the scientific and often multidisciplinary preparation imposed by institutional sponsors. Indeed, each scientific exploration from this period generated one full account in the form of a book and several articles. Between 1895 and 1896, Oscar Neumann was the next to reach the Lower Omo Valley, on a hunting expedition, followed in 1897 by Henry Cavendish and Harry Andrew. This was the last European visit before the annexation of the region by the Ethiopian Empire.

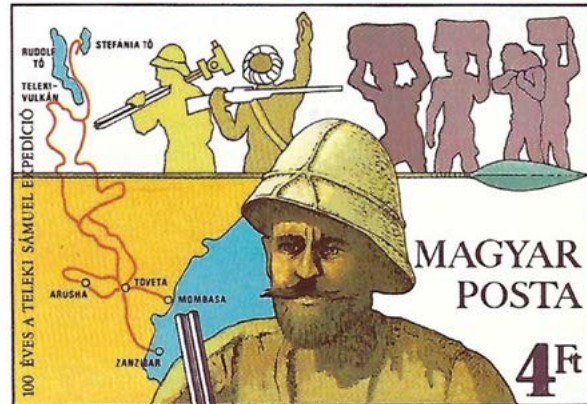
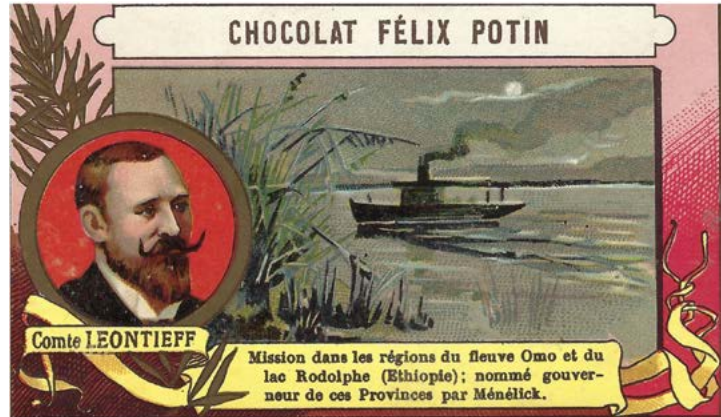
The first large-scale Abyssinian military campaign was led by Fitawrari Habte Giyorgis in 1898. He came down from the north, along the western bank of the Omo River. It was common practice to legitimise colonial expansions with scientific accounts. On that occasion this role was taken up by Alexander Bulatovich, a Russian military attaché, who described the extreme violence of Giyorgis' campaign. The year after another Russian, Nicolai Stéphanovitch Leontieff, led a bizarre military campaign from the east, a sort of 'private colonial enterprise' on behalf of Menelik II, with soldiers from Russia, Ethiopia and Senegal, a French colony. He published one article and a pamphlet. In 1898, just before



Sámuel Teleki and his caravan,
1888



Photograph of locals and aliens in Mursiland taken during the 1899 expedition of Donaldson Smith



Celebrity and the Omo. A French chocolate advertisement drawing on the celebrity status of the Russian adventurer-explorer, Nicolai Stéphanovitch Leontieff (top) and a postage stamp from Hungary depicting Samuel Teleki and his expedition to East Africa (bottom)

Leontieff's campaign, Herbert Austin opened a series of British surveys aimed to define the frontier with Ethiopia. He was followed in 1899 by Montagu Wellby, in 1900 by James Harrison and others, in 1903 by Philip Maud, and in 1909 by Charles W. Gwynn.

Most of these surveys were conducted by military personnel in agreement with the Ethiopian authorities. The typical public output was an article for *The Geographical Journal*. The British colonial project was for a while



Modern research fieldwork in the Lower Omo, especially large-scale and remote interventions such as the Mursiland Heritage Project, can be reminiscent of elements of expeditions from the golden age of exploration. Modern researchers/explorers, however, work with local consent and through a strict ethical framework (credit: A. Arzoz)

conflicting with the French dream to link Africa from East to West. This idea inspired the French Aristocrat Robert du Bourg de Bozas' exploration, crossing the region in 1902. This was the last institutionally supported scientific mission, the findings from which were regularly sent back to France. The book of the expedition, *Mission Scientifique du Bourg De Bozas: De la Mer Rouge à l'Atlantique à travers l'Afrique tropicale (Octobre 1900 –*

Mai 1903), though written by historian Fernand Maurette (thus producing an additional interpretative layer between the raw material and the final product), discloses a degree of interaction between the explorers and the people of the Lower Omo Valley, unrivalled by any other account.

The 'golden age' of the European travels to the region was closed in 1909 by C. H. Stigand, again an independent traveller and hunter. Altogether, these 21 years produced a large number of sequential accounts that enables the historian to apply validating techniques to observations that on their own would have little reliability. They have also provided a quite accurate description of the main human and environmental events of the process that forcibly brought the people of the Lower Omo Valley under the domination of the Ethiopian empire and, with that, for the very first time into the condition of statehood.

Further Reading

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