Who Are the 'True' Mao? A Contested Identity in Mao Komo *Ləyu Wäräda*

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Introduction

Mao Komo Special District (*ləyu wäräda*)[3] is the southernmost administrative unit of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, bordering both Sudan and South Sudan. It was created after a referendum was held between the two Regional States Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, which took place on the 2nd of July 1995 (Ethiopian Herald, 25/07/1995).[4] In 1996, the district administration was established (Mao Komo development association, 2003, MK 002). As the name indicates, it is a territory where Mao and Komo, who are recognised Ethiopian peoples, are titular groups, i.e. "indigenous nations and nationalities" (Benishangul Gumuz Regional State Revised Constitution, 2002, article 2). The term Nations, Nationalities and Peoples is defined as "a group of people who have a large measure of common culture or similar custom, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities and who predominantly inhabit in a contiguous territory" (Benishangul Gumuz Regional State Revised Constitution, 2002, Article 39:8; cf. Constitution of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994, Article 39:5).

The last census of Ethiopia counts a total of 43,535 'Mao' in Ethiopia, of which 12,744 are found in Mao Komo special *wäräda*. The total number of Komo in the district is 6,464 (Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census, 2008). It is unclear how the census counts these Mao and which criteria are used for defining who is Mao, as no attention

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[3] A *special* district (*ləyu wäräda*) is a district that is not placed within a zone but reports directly to the regional authorities. It is usually established to give more autonomy to peoples recognised as indigenous in a certain area. I will here use the term more common in English, 'Mao Komo', and not 'Mao and Komo' as it is written in Amharic (*Mao ənа Komo*), although the Amharic way of expressing it is more logical, since the name refers to two different identities. I use the term *wäräda* interchangeably with 'district'.

[4] The existence of this referendum is also supported by oral information from individuals at regional and district offices who were involved in the process. It is further mentioned in Meckelburg (2016).

is paid to the varying understanding of identities or the use of languages (Meckelburg and Küspert-Rakotondrainy, 2019).[5] At the time of the census, the total population size in the district was reported to be 42,050.[6] This means that more than half of the inhabitants in the district are classified under a different ethnic designation than 'indigenous'. These people may, for the most part, consist of individuals who identify as Berta[7] and Oromo. In the district capital, Tongo, there are also government workers from other areas of the country. The majority of the population in the district is Muslim.

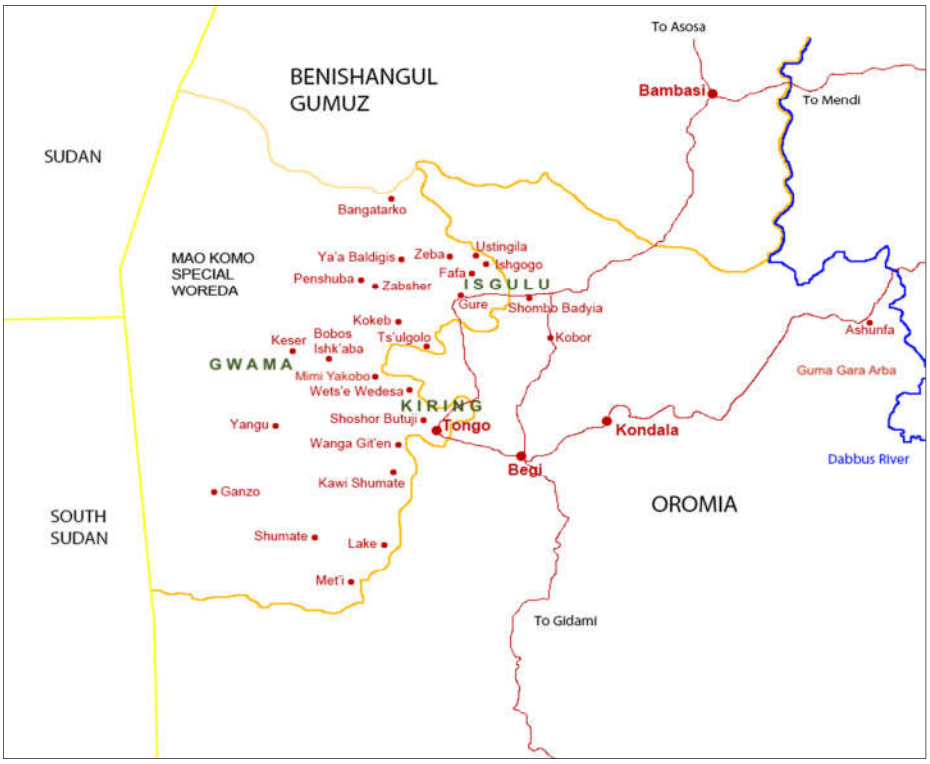

Figure I: Map taken from Küspert (2015); modified by the author

[5] Among the 12,744 'Mao', many may have Oromo as their mother tongue, and not the Nilo-Saharan (Koman Mao language, Gwama [Küspert, 2015]). Most individuals identifying as Komo speak the language Komo, which is a Nilo-Saharan language. The use of language will be discussed in section 2.

[6] In the 13 years since the census was taken, the population is reported to have risen to 72,929 (estimation from the Mao Komo *wäräda* health office, MK 001). It is unlikely that this figure includes the influx of refugees from Sudan and South Sudan, who inhabit the Tongo refugee camp. No disaggregation for different ethnic groups is given in this estimation.

[7] Berta is counted as an indigenous nationality in Benishangul Gumuz Region. They are considered a minority in Mao Komo special *wäräda*.

The term 'Mao' has generally not been used to refer to groups in the lowland of what today is Mao Komo special *wäräda*.[8] Instead, it was understood to denote people who live in a close relationship to Oromo-speakers in the highland around Begi and Kondala, on both sides of the Dabus River and in the Anfillo forest south of Gidami (James, 1980; Meckelburg, 2016). Therefore, the main settlement areas of the Mao are today predominantly found in Oromia Region. The spread of the Mao identity into Benishangul Gumuz Region and Mao Komo special *wäräda* is both historically and politically motivated and has added to the confusion around who the Mao are – a confusion this paper will address and contribute towards solving. The term 'Mao' is contested and has various meanings in different contexts. It is, furthermore, morally charged, and may, according to the varying standpoints of individuals, carry both derogatory and prestigious connotations. This ambivalence has been brought about by the emergence of several different and opposing dominant perspectives on honour and pride. To start discovering the meanings of the term, we need to look beyond the relationships *between* different categories, and into the competing perceptions concerning *one and the same* social label. The discussion on the complex terminology in this paper is likely to inform the wider discourse on ethnicity in Ethiopia and speak to the challenges of using ethnicity as the main category of difference between people.

The earliest mention of the settlement area of the Mao today is from travel reports by European explorers in the area. However, 'Amam'[9] may have been a more common term for the population around Begi in the 19th century. In the rare mention of the term 'Mao', it was used to refer to the people of Anfillo, "subjugated and governed" by an Oromo-speaking "aristocracy" (Schuver, 1883, p. 41).[10] Enrico Cerulli describes how the Mao were "conquered and subdued by the Anfillo [Busase ruling class], to whom they are still subjects today" (Cerulli, 1930, p. 87).[11] Eventually, the term 'Mao' was extended to a larger population beyond the Anfillo forest and came to substitute 'Amam'.

[8] 'Lowland' here refers to a curved north-south-going line along the border of Sudan, from Penshuba to Yangu to Lake. Tongo has an altitude of ~1800 m, whereas Yangu is on ~600.

[9] James, Baumann and Johnson (1996) explain that the term 'Amam' is probably of Arabic or Berta origin, and was replaced by the term Mao when the influence of the Oromo-speakers increased, although it is not of Oromo origin (James, et. al., 1996, p. 1xiv).

[10] Schuver categorises this overclass as Oromo because of their use of the Oromo language. However, through historical research, it becomes clear that the Busase were a previously Kaffa-speaking population in the area that was assimilated by Mačča (Oromo-speaking) clans (Lange, 1982; Negaso, 2000; Gonzáles-Ruibal, 2014).

[11] Original wording: "*Ma essi furono poi vinti e sottomessi dagli Anfillo, cui sono ancor oggi soggetti*."

The only ethnography of 'Mao' is by Vinigi Grottanelli (1940) who studied the Mao in Anfillo as well as the Mao in the area of today's Kondala district in Oromia.[12] The term 'Mao' is rarely mentioned in Ethiopian archival sources, but when it appears, it is used to refer to low-status workers or slaves of the prestigious Busase overclass in the Anfillo area.[13]

Lionel Bender (1975, p. 128) suggests that the term 'Mao' may come from the word for 'man' in the Seze and Hozo languages (*ma:y* and *ma*^{w} respectively), but another plausible theory is that it originated from the Kaffa/Busase term *mawo*, meaning "low clan" or "serf" (James, 1980, p. 45; Lange, 1982, p. 242). The classification of Mao languages, which is still valid today, was also proposed by Bender. According to this, some of the Mao languages belong to the Omotic language family, others to the Nilo-Saharan (Koman) family, but none to the Cushitic family (Bender, 1975). Historical and anthropological research from the same time associates the category 'Mao' with slavery; Mao is used to refer to domestic slaves as well as to groups who were raided for slaves in the early 20th century (Bahru, 1976; James, 1980; Triulzi, 1981; Abdussamad, 1999). Similarly, studies on Oromo migration, culture and religion found that individuals and groups classified as 'Mao' were usually equated with the rank of slaves in society, as opposed to *borana* ('pure' Oromo) or *gabbaro* (assimilated Oromo) (Bartels, 1983; Hultin, 1987; Triulzi, 1996; Negaso, 2000). The connection between Mao and slavery is today still present in the way in which individuals understand social hierarchies, reputation and prestige (Küspert-Rakotondrainy, forthcoming). This is also linked to skin complexion, where 'blackness' is associated with both 'Mao' and 'slave'.[14]

This paper will discuss the meanings and usage of the ethnonyms and labels understood to be related to 'Mao' in Mao Komo special *wäräda*. It will

[12] A comparison of the word list in Grottanelli (1940) with that of Küspert (2015) shows that the language of the group he calls 'northern Mao' is what today usually is classified as 'Hozo/ Shuluyo'. Grottanelli's 'southern Mao' or Anfillo Mao, is today an almost extinct or already extinct language (Amanuel, 2014). The *Ethnologue* counted 500 Anfillo language users in 1990 and classifies the language as "moribund" (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2020).

[13] In a report to the Emperor from 1/11/1935 E.C (8/07/1943 G.C) (NALA 014) it is stated that the Mao are the workers (*serateñoč*) of the Busase, a clan here identified as Oromo, and that the Italians advised them to stop working for the Busase by whom they were paid in coffee only (similar is stated in NALA 015).

[14] Most people in the research area acknowledge the existence of three colours: 'white' (foreigners of European or Asian descent), 'red' (light-skinned Ethiopians/Africans) and 'black' (dark-skinned Ethiopians/Africans). The boundaries between the three categories may be fluid, despite the way it is often described. The colour 'brown' is not used, but the term *ṭäym* (in Amharic) may represent the colour in between 'red' and 'black'.

analyse how individuals make sense of the different terms used to label groups speaking varieties of the only 'Mao' language in the district – the Koman language often called Gwama. It will therefore contribute to clarifying the present-day meanings of the Mao identity, and its constitutive sub-divisions. The discussion is divided into four main parts: (1) Mao as an ethnic term, (2) Mao as a linguistic term, (3) Mao as a political term, and (4) Mao as a term denoting status.

The corpus of primary data used for this study was mainly obtained through interviews and observations in the area.[15] Archival sources are used to support the argument. Approximately half of the interviews were conducted in Amharic and half in Oromo or Mao (Gwama) with translation into Amharic.[16] In addition to the data from my interviews, I received permission to use the field notes and interview transcripts of Klaus-Christian Küspert from his research between 2012 and 2015, which relate to a socio-linguistic survey done in 70 *qäbäle* (lowest administrative entities) in both Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Regions. This survey covered 25 of the 32 *qäbäle* of Mao Komo special *wäräda*. In addition to survey questions[17] completed with several individuals in each *qäbäle*, Küspert carried out longer interviews with 12 individuals from various villages, and 10 outsiders working in the district. The results from this study were published in an article entitled 'The Mao and Komo Languages in the Begi–Tongo area in Western Ethiopia: Classification, Designations, Distribution' (Küspert, 2015). In my research, I have focused on collecting in-depth data and have therefore lived with 'Mao' families in four locations in the district: Tongo, Gitan, Mimi Yakobo and Ishgogo. This in-

[15] Interviews with a total of 50 individuals from Mao Komo special *wäräda* or villages on the border between Tongo and Begi districts form the evidence base for the arguments put forward in this article. I have, in addition, interviewed several 'Mao' from Benishangul Gumuz Region in Asosa and been engaged in countless informal discussions with individuals self-identifying as 'Mao', 'Gwama' or 'Oromo'.

[16] I exclusively used local research assistants, travel companions and interpreters who at the same time became my key informants. Most of these were native speakers of at least one Mao language. I always made sure that key terms were well explained and translated correctly. This implied frequent discussions with informants about which terms they used in the various languages and the connotations of these terms, and it also meant going back to recordings to make sure the translation covered the exact meanings expressed. I have been able to acquire a certain level of knowledge of the Oromo language and could therefore follow most discussions and check that the translation was well done.

[17] Küspert's survey included a short socio-linguistic questionnaire to determine which language the respondents spoke (according to a predefined wordlist) and questions related to what they and others call their people and language, and in which other villages people are speaking the same language.

depth data is complemented well by the broader approach of Küspert's survey in the whole area.

1. Mao as an Ethnic Term

The society in Western Ethiopia is formally exogamic and patrilinear, meaning that individuals inherit the clan membership of their father, and must marry outside of this clan (Meckelburg and Küspert-Rakotondrainy, 2019). Polygyny is widespread among both Oromo and Mao, with 2-3 wives being common. This usually does not apply to Christians, who are a small minority in the area. The official terminology used to refer to ethnic groups is Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. More common in the area, however, is the Amharic term *zär*, which has similar connotations to 'ethnicity'. Examples of different *zär* are 'Oromo' and 'Mao'. Within each ethnic group, there are clans, called *gosa* or also just *zär* or *zeri* (Oromo pronunciation).[18] The expression 'having a *zär*' means that a person knows their father's ancestry and clan membership. As this article will discuss, 'having a *zär*' and having a *zär* that is believed to be biologically authentic, is essential for an individual's social acceptance.

In the Oromo clan structure, the *warra*, or 'family', is the lowest level and refers to people who are direct descendants of the same ancestor (Paulos, 1984). Mao clans also sometimes utilise the term *warra* (e.g. *warra* Setta), or other words for the same purpose, such as *mana* or *isman*/*dwaman*.[19] Other clans, especially in less oromised areas, do not use the terms *warra*/*mana*, but only a proper noun for their clan (e.g. Ikwasha). Some clan names are associated with one geographical area, whereas others refer to a social function. For example, the clan Kukulu[20] is said to be the clan of the traditional religious leaders (*sit shumbu*), and most individuals with positions as spirit mediums claim Kukulu clan membership. Some bigger clans are divided into sub-clans which usually do not intermarry.

Apart from the clan structure, one can classify three main 'Mao' identities: Kiring (highland), Gwama/Kwama (lowland), and Isgulu (Ishgogo area – also

[18] Although *gosa* originally is an Oromo term, it is not widely used among Oromo speakers in the area.
[19]The term *mana* is often understood to be a 'Mao' term, although it also means 'house' in the Oromo language. In Koman Mao (Gwama), *isman* (*is* meaning 'person'/ 'man') refers to a male person and *dwaman* (*dwa* meaning 'woman') to a female person. This is particularly common in the Ishgogo area. A man would, therefore, for example, say that he is an Ismankasha, whereas a woman is a Dwamankasha.
[20] The clan may also be called Kukul in the highland and Kuki in the lowland, but they are understood as being the same clan and do not enter into marriage relations with each other.

highland), although the naming of these three divisions differs depending on the speaker and may not always be used as emic terms. The highland-lowland division is acknowledged by other researchers too (cf. Küspert, 2015; Meckelburg, 2016), whereas the third identity has not been discussed much in the literature. This division is not only a matter of language, with slightly different vocabulary and pronunciation, but, to a larger extent, it is a social division that can be explained by different marriage patterns, myths of origin, and understandings of what 'Mao' is. Today, differences between formerly contrasting identities are becoming increasingly blurred, since the use of ethnicity as the main category of difference has given rise to the idea of a common 'Mao nationality'. This does not, however, erase previous relations and disparities.

Kiring

The society around the capital of the district, Tongo, is ethnically extremely mixed. An individual belongs to the *zär* and *gosa* of their father, no matter what the ethnicity of their mother's family is, or that of their father's mother. The fact that someone 'is' Mao or Oromo often does not say much about that person's lifestyle or religion since most people here have the same lifestyle and are Muslims. Furthermore, it does not predict a person's appearance, language skills or any other easily recognisable characteristics. There are Oromo who speak Koman Mao (Gwama) perfectly, and Mao who do not speak 'their' language. There are Mao with a light complexion, Oromo with a dark complexion, and vice versa. It all depends on which label is given to the father's male lineage and thus where a person is said to 'come from' – both geographically and from which ancestor.

The Mao clans and families inhabiting the Tongo hills are often referred to as 'Kiring', both by people from the lowland and by themselves. A common narrative of origin among several clans here is that their first known ancestor was an Arab immigrant named Dawd, who married into the Mao clans of Begi/Tongo and started ruling the area, probably in the early 19th century, long before the local Oromo domination.[21] Alexander Meckelburg (2016, p. 103), writes:

> The emergence of Kiring as a Mao lineage illustrates the fascinating complexities of the frontier process. In search for land Dawd had been

[21] An estimation based on at least a dozen genealogies suggests that Dawd's birth may have been in the late 18th century. I cannot go into detail on Dawd's story here. See Meckelburg (2016) for an account of the Arab immigrants and intermarriage with local Mao and the argument of increased intermarriage between Oromo and Mao of higher status.

> going to Fadasi [modern-day Bambasi] but was unable to settle there with his people. In typical frontier manner, he moved further south in the direction of Begi and settled among the Begi Mao, who his lineage gradually came to control.

According to common myths, Dawd is said to have had four sons: Setta (Isak), Sasa, Iso (Isa) and Yakob.[22] These four sons and their descendants are said to have become 'Mao', as they intermarried with Mao women and took their language. Nevertheless, until one generation ago, the descendants of Dawd were usually categorised as 'Arab' and not 'Mao' (oral information from older informants; cf. Triulzi, 1981). The term *arab kwama* may be used as a synonym for Kiring but may also more specifically refer to later immigrants from Sudan who intermarried with the *mana* Sasa of Tongo similarly to Dawd's descendants. Although the term 'Kiring' is usually used to refer to the members of the four clans belonging to the line of Dawd, it is also a general term used for highland Mao, as opposed to those in the lowland and those around Ishgogo. There are several other highland clans, such as Kuro, Yalo and branches of Kukul, who may at times also be referred to as Kiring.

The descendants of the Dawd brothers remained socially separate from other Mao and were perceived as having a higher social status. A person who today can claim descent from Dawd is someone whose father's lineage is that of Setta, Iso, Yakob or Sasa. However, members of families belonging to these lineages may have a varying degree of closeness to 'Mao'. Whereas *mana* Sasa is associated with knowledge of the Gwama language and self-identification as Mao, a high number of individuals who claim *warra* Iso membership do not speak Koman Mao (Gwama) and have Oromo as their mother tongue. Furthermore, their fathers and grandfathers may not have spoken the language as they grew up in an Oromo-speaking environment, and older people of Iso descent still refer to themselves as 'Arab' and not 'Mao'. Because clans today are categorised into ethnic groups, and the Kiring clans are considered to be 'Mao', all the clans originating from Dawd have 'become Mao'. Therefore, even Dawd himself is, in retrospect, often classified as 'Mao'.

Another term frequently used in the whole highland area, up to Ishgogo, is *sit shwala* (meaning 'black people' in the Koman Mao language/Gwama). It is used as a synonym for 'Mao', and hence only refers to their own people, and

[22] Yakob does not always appear in some accounts and I have only met a few families who say they are *warra* Yakob. There is no historical certainty on how many sons Dawd had and what their names were.

not to other 'black' people. Areas that use the term 'Mao' to refer to their own people, usually also use the term *sit shwala*, whereas, in the lowland, where they say Gwama or Komo, the term *sit shwala* is not used (cf. fieldnotes by Küspert, 2015). The self-designation *sit shwala* may, in the Tongo area, be used by an individual who is not necessarily 'black' in the literal sense of the word. In fact, Kiring people are often said to be 'red' in appearance. We can conclude that the Kiring identity usually implies 'maoness' but that there are individuals of Kiring lineage who are not seen as Mao due to their light complexion or lack of language skills. Paradoxically, as we will see below, many of these individuals can at the same time be identified as a political Mao elite.

Gwama/Kwama

Most lowland inhabitants avoid self-identifying as 'Mao' or *sit shwala*, and instead prefer the ethnonyms Gwama or Kwama. Likewise, highlanders do not use the term Mao to refer to the people of the lowland but often refer to them as Komo. The problem with Komo, however, is that it is also used as a term denoting a language different from Gwama. The figure below shows that the ethnolinguistic term Gwama refers to people who utilise the same language as (highland) Koman Mao (*sit shwala*), but who may be identified as ethnically closer to Komo.

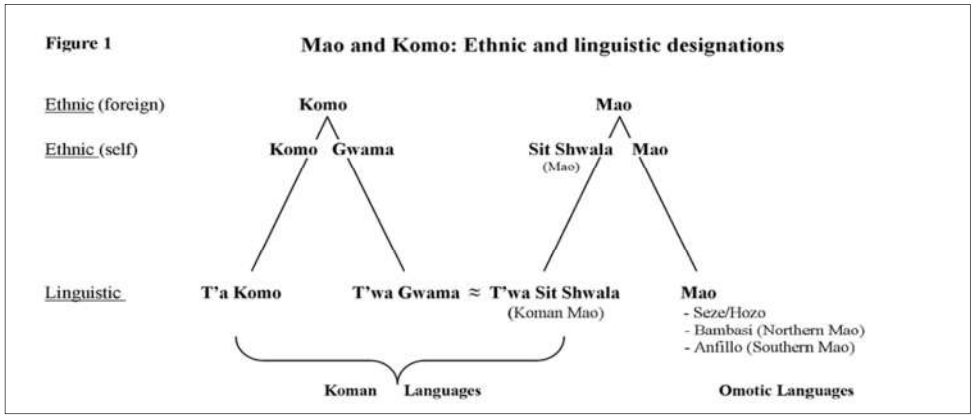

Figure II: Taken from Küspert (2015, p. 8)

What further complicates the landscape of ethnic designations is the term 'Kwama'. Kwama may be used for speakers of the Gwama language, but also the Komo language (in this case called *kwam^{a} dini*). However, even highland

Mao may sometimes use the term Kwama to refer to their people.[23] Hence, Kwama may be a term that sometimes encompasses Koman-speaking Mao and lowland Gwama, but sometimes may be reserved for only one of the groups, or, alternatively, used for Komo. It is therefore a vague and potentially confusing term, although it is widely used in the area.

People inhabiting or originating from the lowland may either refer to the highland Mao (Kiring) as Mao or Oromo. Because of their light complexion and because many of them do not speak the Mao/Gwama language, they are associated with Oromo. Those who speak the language may be identified as *sita mini* ('our people'). Nonetheless, I have met several individuals from the lowland who claim that the highland Mao represent another 'nationality' than themselves. The Gwama myth of origin is also much more similar to that of the Komo than the highland Mao and includes stories of their people meeting the Berta in Sudan and only then coming into Ethiopia from the northwest (Meckelburg, 2016). Contrary to the idea that the highland Mao are descendants of the Arab immigrant Dawd, several of my interlocutors from the lowland expressed the opinion that the highland Mao are in reality Gwama/Kwama who started speaking Oromo and do not know their 'real identity'. For example, one man from Keser, who lives in Tongo, said that those who call themselves Mao were Gwama, scattered by the socialist regime, the Derg (1974-1991), and then ended up in the highland, got confused with the Mao of Oromia and started calling themselves 'Mao'. According to him, only the Mao of Oromia Regional State should be called Mao, and all those in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State should be referred to as Kwama.

Isgulu/Sitgulu

The area around Ishgogo is seen as different from both Tongo and the lowland, and individuals living in the latter areas often seem to leave the Ishgogo Mao out of their accounts. Some of my interlocutors claimed that they didn't understand the language of the Ishgogo Mao, others that these people don't understand theirs (although they speak dialects of the same language), or that they were different Mao entirely. There seems to be less intermarriage between the Mao of Ishgogo and other Mao or Oromo, compared to most other areas. There are, however, marriage relations to Mao in Oromia Region, both with Koman and Omotic-speaking communities. I collected several accounts of families who currently, or in the past, have given women in

[23] "If there are many Mao, we say *makwama*. *Kwama mini* ('kwama people')", in the words of a young man from Gitan.

marriage to places as far away as the Dabus river (Omotic-speaking Mao area), and who have married women from this area. A man from the Gwama lowland who married a woman from Ishgogo, however, said that there are no other mixed couples like theirs to his knowledge. His wife's people are, in his opinion, the only 'real Mao' of Mao Komo special *wäräda* because they, supposedly, originally came from Oromia, where the Mao speak the Seze and Hozo languages, in which 'Mao' is an emic term meaning 'person' or 'man'. All Koman-speaking Mao should not, in his opinion, be called Mao because the term has no meaning in their language.

The term that is often used to refer to the Mao people inhabiting the Ishgogo area, is Sitgulu. The people that this term refers to may say Isgulu about themselves. *Sit* is the lowland and highland word for 'people' or 'person', whereas the corresponding word in the dialect of Ishgogo is *is*. *Gulu* has no meaning in the Koman Mao (Gwama) language but the word for 'mountain' in the Ishgogo dialect is *gulu* and not the Koman word *ko*. The term may come from the Seze (Omotic Mao) word for 'mountain', which is *guli* (cf. Küspert, 2015, p. 64).[24] Thus, *is gulu* means 'people of the mountain', which may refer to the hills of Ishgogo. The Omotic Mao in Oromia, however, use the term Gulmao ('Mao of the mountains') about all Mao of the highland, from Tongo in the south until Ishgogo/Ustingila in the north.

Unlike the Kiring and the Gwama myths of origin, many Isgulu use the same popular history as the Omotic-speaking Mao who live in Oromia. According to this history, the Mao came from the river Gibe further south in Ethiopia. An old man from Ishgogo said that they came with the Seze-speakers from Gibe, but that the Kwama (Komo) came from Sudan and that they met in Ishgogo. A man from Shombo (in Oromia Region but the same Mao community as in Ishgogo), said: "The Mao came from south of Gibe and until here [Ishgogo area]. They had to run away when the Oromo came and arrived here finally." Alfredo González-Ruibal has also recorded this version of the history among the Omotic-speaking Mao. He writes that the Mao coming from Gibe "is hardly true. It is absolutely not true for the Sith Shwala, whose ancestors (the Gwama) were living in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland well before the Oromo ever started their expansion" (González-Ruibal, 2014, p. 314).[25] This

[24] There is little reason to believe that the word for 'hoe', *gashgul* or *gulgasha* in the Tongo/lowland and Ishgogo dialects respectively, is the term that gave name to the Isgulu/Sitgulu identity. The term 'guli' is also present in several Seze place names in Begi and Kondala districts.

[25] Gonzáles-Ruibal (2014) asks why the Mao would have such a story of origin when it probably isn't theirs. Societies who had the same material art as today's Mao are likely to have already inhabited the area centuries before the Gibe migration, as found in archaeological

story is likely that of the Busase, who probably were the ones expelled from Gibe. One explanation as to why this is used by others than the descendants of Busase is that it reminds the Mao of their own experiences of being expelled from the land they inhabited by Oromo-speaking people, according to Gonzáles-Ruibal.

There is too little evidence on which to base any discussion on why people speaking the same Koman language (Gwama and Isgulu) may have such different stories of origin, but one could speculate that this area around Ishgogo may be the key to understanding language shifts among the Mao. It has puzzled researchers that the highland Mao are socially and culturally closer to the Omotic-speaking Mao, even though they speak a Koman language (cf. Küspert, 2015; Meckelburg, 2016). Obviously, at one point, these communities must have met, and it is not unlikely that some groups spoke another language than now a couple of generations ago (cf. Fleming, 1982).[26] Could it be that the *sit shwala* lack the "Gwama ancestors" Gonzáles-Ruibal suggests they had, and that they instead spoke a language from the Omotic family before they adopted the lowland Koman language? Similarities in culture to Omotic-speaking groups, marriage patterns, interpretations of history, lack of relationship to other Koman-speaking areas, the (likely) assimilative nature of the Gwama-speaking society[27], and the emic naming (*gulu*) are among the findings which point in this direction. There are, however, certain gaps in this theory, for example how it can be that even the lowland Gwama use the Omotic word *yere* for their creator-god.

2. Mao as a Linguistic Term

"The Mao have no name for their language", said a lowland informant to Küspert in October 2013. This illustrates the gap between the lowland people, who usually call their language Gwama, and the Mao, who have no distinct word that refers only to their language, in the opinion of this man. This belief

excavations. It is therefore likely that the Mao use the story of the Busase society (who would become the masters of the Anfillo Mao from the 17th century) as their own story of origin.

[26] Fleming (1982, p. 35) writes: "In the west on the Diddessa's eastern flanks (modern Lekemte [Nekemte] and environs) lived the Mao. To their west, and probably in the basin of the Diddessa, lived Koman." This suggests that the whole area which today is Omotic Mao-speaking previously was Koman. However, it is unclear on which grounds Fleming bases these claims.

[27] Küspert found that lowlanders whose mother tongue is Komo or Ganza almost always are bilingual in Gwama. Some of my Komo interlocutors even complained that the younger generation nowadays 'forget' their language in favour of Gwama.

is rooted in linguistic realities.[28] Languages that may be identified as 'Mao-languages' are found in three regions: Gambela, Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, and are found in the Omotic as well as the Nilo-Saharan (Koman) language families. Numerous researchers have, since imperial times, sought to explore which languages the term 'Mao' refers to, and what 'the Mao language' is, and their results suggest the existence of numerous different and differently named languages (cf. Bryan, 1945; Bender, 1975; ISEN, 1985 [IES MS 4484]; Siebert, Siebert and Wedekind, 2002; Jordan, Hussein and Davis, 2011; Küspert, 2015).

Today, the 'Mao' languages have been mapped. In Mao Komo special *wäräda*, there is mainly one Mao language, a member of the Nilo-Saharan (Koman) language family. Küspert (2015) estimates that the number of speakers of this Koman language (Gwama) could be as high as 25,000, counting speakers of the Gwama dialect cluster on both sides of the regional border between Mao Komo (Tongo) and Oromia (Begi). However, he admits that this number is likely to include an unknown number of individuals who have limited proficiency and now speak Oromo as their first language. Abosh Mustefa, a Gwama mother tongue speaker, writes that 'Kwama' is the name of the people, and 'Gwama' is the name of the language (Abosh, 2014).[29] This is also the politically correct interpretation, confirmed by the district education office in Tongo. However, *ttwa Kwama* ('the mouth of the Kwama') is a common linguistic designation used by people in the Tongo highland, instead of Gwama. Küspert (2015) recommends sticking to only one linguistic designation for the Koman Mao language: the official term, which is Gwama. This is because 'Kwama' is also a designation used for Komo speakers (*kwam^{a} dini*). This avoids the impression of a separate Kwama language, in addition to Gwama and Komo, which does not exist (see figure above). Another term frequently used in the highland is *ttwa sit shwala* ('the mouth of the black people'), corresponding to the label *sit shwala* ('black people'). Although this term is arguably the most widely used linguistic designation in and around Ishgogo (and partly also in Tongo), it is not used officially.

[28] There is also no Ethiopian language named 'Mao' in the *Ethnologue*. The language of the Bambasi Mao is called *Màwés Aas'è* (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2020).

[29] The booklet by Abosh Mustefa named 'The Article on Kwama (Mao) and Komo Tradition and Socio-Cultural Practices' is, to my knowledge, the only published text about Kwama written by a person identifying as such. Mr Abosh is a representative of Mao in the regional council in Asosa. The first part of his booklet contains information on Kwama and Komo history and culture, and a second part with wordlists and grammar of the language of the Kwama called Gwama.

This language has since 2019 been introduced as a subject in seven primary pilot schools under the designation 'Gwama', at first in grade 1 only, and now in grade 2 as well. Textbooks for grade 3 are under production.[30] The three main Mao identities of the district outlined above; Gwama, Kiring and Isgulu, also roughly refer to three Koman Mao dialects. One example of vocabulary, given by some of my key informants, exemplifies this: 'Have a seat' (a common term) is *mizizel* in the area around Tongo, *mizize* in the lowland, whereas the Mao of Ishgogo say *mikikara*.[31] However, according to government education experts, these dialect differences are usually quite easily solved in textbooks by using a slash between words that are different in the dialects. There is also another Mao language (in the Omotic language family) in Benishangul Gumuz, called 'Bambasi Mao' or 'Northern Mao' since it is the northernmost Mao language.[32] It is mainly spoken in the Bambasi district, although there are also speakers of this language in the Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region (Ahland, 2012). This language is introduced in primary schools as 'Mao'. Another argument for calling the Koman Mao language 'Gwama' is therefore to avoid confusing it with Bambasi Mao.

Most of the young Mao/Gwama involved in the early stages of the development of this language for teaching (around 2011-2013) were people from the lowland. In cooperation with the faith-based organisation SIL Ethiopia, they worked on making an alphabet using Latin script and writing the first few stories in Gwama. The reason for calling this language Gwama may, therefore, initially, not have been to avoid confusion with Bambasi Mao, which was rather unknown at that time, but because the people in the workshop naturally called their language Gwama. The highland Mao, who mainly came in at a later stage of the process, had to be convinced that their language was, 'in reality', not Mao, but Gwama. Later, it was for the teachers to convince the students and parents in highland villages "that they speak Gwama, and not Mao" (teacher from Mimi Yakobo). Similarly, lowland speakers "refuse that people in Ishgogo speak Gwama" (field notes, Küspert,

[30] Oral information from the district education office, October 2020.

[31] Küspert's interview with a linguist (Sept. 2012) confirms that there are "regular sound differences between 'Mao Ishgogo' and 'Gwama Zebsher'". This resonates with the opinions of my interlocutors both from the lowland and Tongo, who said that the Ishgogo Mao dialect is the "most difficult". Therefore, they sometimes spoke Oromo with Mao from this area to avoid misunderstandings.

[32] The term 'Northern Mao' is confusing in the history of linguistic research in the area as it has been used to refer to several different languages – from Gwama to Hozo and Bambasi Mao, usually in opposition to 'Southern Mao', which is mainly understood to be the language of the Mao in Anfillo.

2012). However, it seems that during the last 8 years, the common acceptance of the term 'Gwama' has been increased significantly by the governmental efforts for language development.

To my knowledge, no studies so far have assessed the degree of endangerment of the Gwama language. The *Ethnologue* classifies the status of the Gwama language as 'developing'[33] (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2020). This may be an optimistic estimation, considering the negative trend in the use among the younger generation, despite the introduction of the language in some pilot schools. However, due to the political decision to not officially recognise any language other than Oromo in the Oromia Region, the level of endangerment of the Omotic Mao languages (status: 'shifting', according to the *Ethnologue*) has progressed significantly more than Gwama. The Tongo highland is much more influenced by the Oromo language than the lowland, where Gwama plays the role of lingua franca for speakers of Gwama, Komo and Ganza. In Küspert's opinion, the success of the language development of Gwama/Koman Mao depends on the degree to which the highland Mao accept the term 'Gwama' and participate in the language development efforts. Now, 5-8 years after Küspert did his fieldwork, it seems that it indeed has been a success, in the sense that today there are Mao from Tongo participating in the governmental effort and there are several individuals from the highland who are active in Gwama language development.

The area around Ishgogo is quite isolated in terms of relations to other 'Mao' areas in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State. There is also limited immigration of Oromo-speakers from Oromia Regional State to Ishgogo, although Oromo farmers increasingly migrate seasonally across the border for agricultural activities. There is little intermarriage between Mao and Berta or Mao and Oromo here, and families identifying as Mao make up the majority in several *qäbäle*. Thus, the Ishgogo Mao dialect still serves as a mother tongue even for the current generation of small children in Mao households in Ishgogo. The area around Ishgogo may therefore provide human resources for language development because of the small, but stable community of native speakers. There are currently two pilot schools in this area (Ishgogo and Ustingila), but the average level of education of individuals from this area is fairly low. Furthermore, in the marketplace of Ishgogo, the main language of communication is Oromo, since most traders, shopkeepers, and governmental

[33] This means that "the language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable" (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2020).

extension workers from the health or agricultural sectors are Oromo-speakers who do not speak Mao.

Most individuals identifying as Mao in Mao Komo special *wäräda* use this term exclusively to refer to their own language group, and not to other Mao languages such as the Omotic Seze or Hozo in Oromia. Omotic-speaking immigrants from the Begi and Kondala districts, are, therefore, in the opinion of the Koman Mao, not speaking 'the Mao language', although they are recognised as 'being Mao'. In Oromia, however, the 'real' Mao languages are seen as being the Omotic Seze and Hozo. Therefore, using 'Mao' as a linguistic term may provide much confusion, both with Mao languages in Oromia and the Mao language in Bambasi. Nevertheless, this does not mean that highland Koman Mao (*ttwa sit shwala*) speakers will quickly adopt the term 'Gwama' for their language. There is an indication, however, that the term 'Gwama' is starting to gain more acceptance even among individuals not involved in the language development, such as the highland farmer who said: "Gwama is a new word. It means the same", thus acknowledging that Gwama may be the same as *ttwa sit shwala*.

3. Mao as a Political Term

The administrative unit where Mao is a titular group is Mao Komo *ləyu wäräda*. As we have seen, using 'Mao' as an ethnic or a linguistic term may have its limits, and there is a somewhat strange division between the name of the language (Gwama) and its people (Mao). The term 'Gwama' was likely rather foreign to the politically active Mao at the time of the development of Mao political consciousness. However, as a political term, 'Mao' is well established. Meckelburg (2016, p. 23) writes: "As a social label the term [Mao] is accepted by the political elite, it symbolizes a certain degree of coherence with the political territory, and a group idea in the political arena of ethnicity and group definition." Nowadays, Mao as a political term has an important function, and lowland Gwama/Kwama who participate in politics do so exclusively in the name of Mao.

The key to understanding Mao as a political term may lie in the history of the 'Arab' immigration, represented through the historical figure Dawd, and the intermarriage between these foreigners of higher status and the local population. The picture of this prestigious social stratum is strengthened by the political leader Kutu Gulja. Kutu was a contemporary of the Oromo king of Gidami, *däjazmač*[34] Jote Tullu (1855-1918) (Bahru, 1970; Meckelburg, 2016;

[34] High military rank in the Ethiopian imperial government, also used as a title of nobility.

Bulatovich, 2020 [1899]). Kutu, who was given the title *fitawurari*[35] by the imperial government in the early 20th century, was frequently faced with threats both from *däjazmač* Jote and the Arab *sheikh* Khojali al-Hassan in Asosa. However, he also engaged with them in the trade of slaves and other commodities. Meckelburg argues that Kutu may have been a Nigerian immigrant. In the local, orally transmitted stories, he is the grandson of Setta Dawd (hence *warra* Setta) and got the leadership position from his uncle, the famous spiritual leader Taki Yakob (grandson of Dawd).

Interestingly, the elite highland lineages around Begi and Tongo today identify with the term 'Mao', and it consequently became associated with prestige, despite its derogatory connotations (cf. the association with slavery). One could imagine that other terms, such as 'Kiring' or 'Kwama' could have fitted better as high-status labels. Alexander Bulatovich (2020 [1899]) writes in his letters from 1899-1900 that Kutu was the "tribal chief" of the Mao, but he does not write that Kutu himself identified as Mao. Over time, the term started being associated with the elite themselves. Harun Soso, the grandson of Kutu, a landlord in Begi in the imperial times, and most famous for his fight against the Derg regime, was the main driving force behind the establishment of the Mao Komo special *wäräda*. Meckelburg (2016) writes that the fame that was gained gave the highland Mao the political leverage needed to name the district 'Mao Komo' (and not 'Gwama Komo' or any other term). The Institute of the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN) – an institute established by the Derg, had already in 1985 established 'Mao' as the main ethnic term used for the people in Begi (IES MS 4484).[36] Hence, it was for the local elites to own the label 'Mao'.

The political system in the district, as part of ethnic federalism, is based on rights and duties that individuals enjoy as members of one of the Nations, Nationalities or Peoples in Ethiopia. Therefore, many political positions in Mao Komo special *wäräda*, such as *qäbäle* chairperson or member in the district cabinet, are reserved for 'Mao' and 'Komo'. There are occasional Berta chairpersons in *qäbäle* with a substantial Berta population. The district administrative council (*wäräda astädadär məkər bet*) consists of a few members accepted as Oromo and Berta, while all other members hold their positions in the name of Mao or Komo (50/50 respectively). Mao are also represented in Asosa, in the regional council (*kələl məkər bet*) and the region's administrative council (*astädadär məkər bet*). On the federal level, Mao are

[35] Title slightly lower than *däjazmač*.
[36] None of the studies done by this institute operate with the term 'Arab', but '*käwami*' is mentioned as a *gosa* (clan) of Mao (IES MS 4485).

represented in both the House of People's Representatives and in the House of Federation.

Many political positions today are occupied by individuals claiming membership in one of the three main Kiring clans around Tongo (Setta, Iso and to a certain extent Sasa). This does not go unnoticed by the rest of the population in the district and causes resentment in the lowland and in the Ishgogo area. However, it also causes frustration among the Mao in Tongo that individuals who only speak Oromo, and not Gwama (Mao), have many prestigious positions because of their level of education and political connections. Although any person is seen as 'Mao' if their father is 'Mao' (in a patrilinear society), it is also expected that a Mao person should speak a Mao language. Therefore, individuals from the lowland often categorise the 'elite Mao' from Tongo as 'Oromo'. The level of education in the lowland (the original settlement area of the Gwama and Komo) and the Ishgogo area is lower than in the Tongo highland (information from the regional education bureau). This further demonstrates the politically and socially superior position of the Tongo Mao. However, among men from the lowland who currently are in their 20s, there is a substantial number of individuals with higher education beyond grade 10 or 12. It is therefore likely that we may witness a shift towards more equal representation within the next generation.

Politically, there is no ethnic term (such as Kwama/Gwama) used for the Koman Mao other than 'Mao'. Therefore, no difference in political representation is made between Mao from Bambasi and Mao from Tongo. However, to my knowledge, so far, there are no speakers of the Bambasi Mao language among individuals with political positions, for example on the regional level. Interestingly, the Benishangul Gumuz political notion of 'Mao' is so wide that there are Mao from Oromia who have made a political career in Benishangul Gumuz. When the border between Tongo and Begi (Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Regional States) was demarcated in 1995 – in itself a contested political process – several Omotic-speaking Mao who had been *cadre* in Begi after the downfall of the Derg were transferred to Tongo. They continued their political activity in the name of 'Mao' together with the Mao of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State but were unable to work for their own language communities. The Mao in Oromia Regional State remained unrecognised and unable to participate in politics *as Mao* since the only recognised ethnicity and language in their region are Oromo and the Oromo language, respectively (Abbink, 2006; Van der Beken, 2015).

'Mao' as a political term is slightly different from the term used as an ethnic or linguistic designation. Since language competence is not a criterion in politics, 'Mao' with any language background (e.g., Seze) may fully participate. However, the principle of basing political participation on ethnicity also makes a promise to the communities who identify as 'Mao', that they will be represented by one of their own. The question is, who is going to represent them, and the answer depends on the perspective of the individual. Local dynamics exemplify the challenges with Ethiopian ethnic federalism: Who is a 'true' Mao? Since it is not socially accepted to 'change' one's ethnicity, regardless of lifestyle or language knowledge, an individual born from a Mao father, has to 'be' a Mao. However, this person may not be accepted as 'one of us' by the local community, for example, if this person does not speak the language. In contrast, a person whose father is Oromo, but who speaks Gwama and is integrated into the Mao society, may not be allowed to occupy political positions in the name of Mao.

4. Mao as a Term Denoting Status

The label 'Mao' may carry hierarchical and moral connotations apart from the above-mentioned ethnic, linguistic and political uses and associations. In some contexts, this term is seen as carrying less prestige than other terms, while in other contexts, it conveys honour. On the one hand, some speakers attribute derogatory connotations to the term Mao, yet others associate Mao identity with ideas of pride and autonomy. However, speakers often qualify the Mao identity and designate certain Mao as 'better', 'purer' or 'truer' than others. Therefore, although it is often contrasted with other hierarchically ranked identities and generally seen as designating a low-ranking group in the area, 'Mao' is also internally stratified. In both cases, criteria for stratification are highly subjective and depend on the speaker's social positioning.

Hierarchies Between

When Wendy James started her research in Western Ethiopia in the 1970s, her findings revealed a multitude of different clan names, but only one unifying category for individuals and groups living within and among the mainstream Oromo-speaking society: Mao. She inquires into the origin of this term and argues that it may originally have been the Busase, the Kaffa-speaking "overlords", who brought the term 'Mao' (James, 1980, p. 53-54; cf. Bartels, 1984, p. 21). This term was then, after the arrival of the Maccča Oromo, extended to label all "the aboriginal population" in the area who lived in a close relationship with families identified as 'Oromo' although they may previously not have referred to themselves as such (James, 1980, pp. 63-64;

James, 1981, p. 29). Furthermore, she argues that 'Mao' may also be used for "Oromo-speakers whose families were formerly local slaves" (James, 1980, p. 62). Other researchers have confirmed James' interpretation that 'becoming Mao' may have been a process for all people subordinated to the Oromo (Gonzáles-Ruibal, 2014; Meckelburg, 2016). The connection between Mao and slavery can also be found in research that focuses on slave raiding and trading; the Mao are said to have been the main victims of *ləj gəbər*, the payment of children as tribute, a tax introduced between 1909 and 1911 (Atieb, 1973, p. 54; cf. Triulzi, 1981; Rashed, 1995; Abdussamad, 1999).

The derogatory connotation linked to 'Mao' is today mainly found in Oromia, where the Mao population is a small and excluded minority. However, also in Mao Komo special *wäräda*, the social memory of slavery and subordination to Oromo is still present. "The Oromo didn't count the Mao as people, but as baboons. We were counted as slaves", said a Mao elder in Mimi Yakobo. Küspert writes in his fieldnotes that an Oromo informant had said to him that "Mao means (former) Oromo slave" (Aug. 2013). Similarly, an educated and politically active young Mao man from the Tongo highland expressed his dislike for the term Mao:

> I still don't know the meaning of 'Mao'. It may have its own meaning… maybe like a slave, or something like that in *afaan* Oromo. They may mean *anasa* ['minority'][37], and that, I think, could be the reason why people hate this word.

Furthermore, this young man related the term 'Mao' to being 'black'. It can thus be argued that the social discourse in the area, related to honour and prestige, is racialised. In Gitan, outside of Tongo, several people told me that they were *sit shwala* ('black people') but not *gurracha* ('black' in the Oromo language), meaning that they identify as Mao but that their real complexion is not black. They probably also wanted to express that any negative associations with being 'black' do not apply to them. The notion of blackness is inseparably linked to ideas of slavery, an example being the derogatory term 'black Oromo', often used as a synonym for 'slave of Oromo' (Küspert-Rakotondrainy, forthcoming). This means that individuals who are said to have slave ancestry are categorised as 'black'. Still, being 'black' may also indicate a refusal to mix with Oromo people, and hence remaining 'purer' than 'red' Mao. This will be addressed below.

[37] The term *anasa* (አናሳ) in Amharic was commonly used for 'minority'. Since it at the same time also translates 'inferior', it is not anymore considered to be appropriate.

Interestingly, the above-mentioned politically active man from Tongo, who said that he associates 'Mao' with 'slave', later in the interview expressed that the correct political term for his people is 'Mao'. He then expressed how he and his fellow young Mao consciously use this term in politics to make sense of their right to have a position in the name of their ethnicity. Hence, they are now taking a term they perceive as originally having been pejorative and are using it to create a new identity that is not supposed to have a derogatory meaning. Today, the term 'Mao' in Benishangul Gumuz is rather related to political power and recognition than to subordination, as shown in the discussion below on the prestige of individuals who claim to be Mao or have Mao ancestry.

Several highland Mao clans enjoy a high reputation in the area. These are especially families who have ties to Harun Soso and Kutu Gulja and other lineages who claim Dawd as their ancestor. However, as discussed above, members of these families and clans may by others be characterised as 'Oromo', and previously as 'Arab'. Therefore, the typical picture of Oromo doing high-status work and Mao doing low-status work does not describe the Tongo society. Here, higher positions may often be occupied by the 'Mao elite', whereas lowlanders (Gwama/Komo) or work migrants from Oromia may do tasks seen as less prestigious. The mistrust that Gwama from the lowland or Ishgogo Mao may express towards the Tongo Mao bears many similarities to the way in which mistrust and resentment towards 'Oromo' is often expressed. This social division is rooted in the suspicion of 'the other' being racist and arrogant. A man from Keser who lives in Tongo said that "the Oromo" (including individuals with Oromo appearance and lifestyle who may self-identify as 'Mao'), "make a difference between us. Since [we] are black." This arrogance is indeed visible at times when individuals from Tongo (whether Mao or Oromo) associate the Gwama/Komo or other 'black' peoples in the lowland with a 'primitive' lifestyle, no education and having "lost direction in the bush and then they were called slaves" (a young man from Tongo).

In the countryside, other than the villages around Tongo, educated government workers (except elected leader positions) and teachers are often not born and raised in the community where they work. Instead, they often come from outside of the region or from Tongo. Here, there is a clear status difference between highland and lowland, 'red' and 'black', 'Oromo' and 'Mao', respectively, where the former may have more prestige. This difference is apparent in work and neighbour relations, exemplified in dependency or lack of cooperation. For example, in the Ishgogo area, the Mao neither intermarry

with Oromo, nor with Tongo Mao, but they may engage with Oromo farmers on sharecropping on Mao land, where the Mao may or may not profit equally to the outsiders. A man from this northern settlement area asked the rhetorical question: "They [the Oromo] don't see us as people and then they want to marry our daughters? We would chase them [the elders coming to the house to ask for the bride] away!" This man is not the only one refusing kinship relations with individuals he classifies as Oromo because of the discrimination he reports to have experienced. He and many other Mao choose to keep a distance to Oromo families to spare the daughters given in marriage any possible ridiculing or ill-treatment by the in-laws. Tongo Mao families, on the other hand, frequently intermarry with families of Oromo descent.

Despite the Mao outside of Tongo being associated with low education and 'backwardness', the Mao/Gwama living in these areas do not infrequently express pride in being rooted in their culture and language.[38] The category '*warra*-Setta-and-*warra*-Iso' has come to represent individuals who speak the Oromo language instead of Koman Mao (Gwama), do not display any cultural features of Mao, and are not 'black'. Therefore, they are considered to have lost what should be their 'true identity' (although there are numerous individuals from these clans who do speak the language). Some of my interlocutors talked about the highland Mao needing to 'find themselves': "Today, I may be *warra* Setta or *warra* Iso and I can use that [identity]. But for tomorrow, Gwama or Komo […] I need to learn and do my research." What the individual who said this, a young man who identifies as Gwama, means, is that if the highland Mao would research their ancestry, they would find that they are in reality Kwama/Gwama. These highland Mao are regarded as too absorbed into the dominant culture of the Oromo. Therefore, although they may be socially, politically and economically powerful, they lack the authenticity of a 'real Mao'. To put it differently, a 'real Mao' is not a Mao at all, but, in reality, a Gwama/Kwama. This tension between a 'true Mao' and a 'would-be Mao' introduces the second way of analysing social status: hierarchies within the various clans and groups.

[38] It is difficult if not impossible to define what the 'Mao culture' is and is not. For some individuals, 'culture' refers to traditional song, dance and brewing of 'local beer' – practices that are not common outside of the most remote areas where people are closer to the traditional religion (*shumbu*) than to Islam. For other Mao people, who themselves have a lifestyle adapted to the mainstream society, 'culture' may just refer to the knowledge of these practices, or to certain symbols, such as practices of putting a chain of pearls around the hips of a new-born baby (a 'Mao tradition').

Hierarchies Within

In an interview with a man identifying as Seze from Oromia, who lives in Asosa, I asked what he thought was the difference between Mao and Oromo. He answered that the Mao are 'pure' because no Mao slaves exist. The Oromo have slaves, and therefore, they are not 'pure'.[39] "The Oromo have *borana* and *garba*.[40] The Mao only have their proper *zär* and are not like the Oromo," he said. What he refers to, is that there are individuals who belong to regular Oromo clans, who are believed to have a different biological origin from other Oromo. These low-status families are allegedly descendants of slaves. The belief is that, even after abolition, these families remained distinguishable from others because of their darker skin complexion. My Seze interlocutor used this interpretation of history to give Mao a morally superior position because all Mao are 'pure' as they do not consist of assimilated slaves from other groups. However, in Mao Komo special *wäräda*, the picture becomes more complicated. Here, some individuals are said to have been slaves of *Mao*. Hence, there are hierarchies within 'Mao', within clans and even within families.

The label *kiring kwama*, may in some settings be understood as 'slaves of the Kiring'. Supposedly, these slaves were raided from the lowland or other peripheral areas and came to serve the 'Mao' (Kiring) and later Oromo upper class.[41] What is particular about how slavery seems to have been abolished, is that former slaves did not form their own class or clan but were incorporated into the clan of their masters and took their genealogy. Thus, there are no exclusive slave clans. Both Oromo and Mao clans may have so-called 'pure' members as well as so-called 'slave' members. Various terms may be used to distinguish between members along these lines, such as the Gwama term *kussun* or the Oromo term *garba*, which is added to their clan name.[42] Alternatively, for 'slaves of Oromo', the allegory 'black Oromo' is used.

[39] The term used here is the Oromo word *qulqulluu* or *nəs´uh* in Amharic, both terms meaning both 'clean' and 'pure', and in the case of Oromo, also 'holy'. The corresponding term in Gwama, which also has all these connotations, is *assere*.

[40] *Borana* denotes an individual or a family that is 'pure' Oromo (not assimilated from other ethnic groups or slaves). *Garba* is the Oromo word for 'slave'.

[41] There may have been more slaves around the Tongo highland, but I have also found several references to 'slaves of Kwama/Gwama' among wealthy lowland families.

[42] *Kussun* in Gwama can be translated with 'servant'. The corresponding word in the highland dialect is *kkup gasha* (in Gwama spelling, the double consonant indicates an ejective sound). When speaking Oromo, the term *garba* ('slave') is used, and in Amharic, the term *bariya* ('slave') is most common, although *ashkari* ('servant') may also be used.

A 'pure' ancestry is interpreted as one where no person in the genealogy is falsely claiming an ancestry that is not biologically theirs. A 'false' ancestry may be that of a slave who takes the genealogy of their master, or an illegitimate child who does not have a father's ancestry. Therefore, there are in principle no clans that are higher or lower in status than others. An individual of any clan may be respected as a person from a prestigious family, whereas an individual from the very same clan or even (extended) family, can be labelled a *kussun* ('servant'). 'Purity' depends on the genealogy of the male line (father, father's father, etc.). An individual who cannot produce a credible ancestry is not seen as 'pure' and hence a 'slave'. Consequently, the main status difference often does not go *between* different clans and ethnic groups, but right through their middle.

The Oromo term *oromumma* is said to describe and encompass the 'Oromo identity' (cf. Gemetchu, 1996). Similarly, several Mao people talked about their *maoumma* or *maoiñənet* ('mao-ness').[43] One of my travel companions and interpreters, a 'Mao' from the lowland, patiently tried to explain *maoumma* to me, after many conversations with other Mao about this concept.[44] He summarised the idea with the following words:

> *Maoumma* is to be proud of being Mao. It is shown through the language, loving people, and not lying – for example not saying 'I am Oromo' when they are Mao. It is not only about [skin] colour. It's about transparency and faithfulness [to 'Mao']. Through this, *maoumma* is shown.

What he means by saying "shown through the language", is that he, like many other individuals whose mother tongue is Gwama, makes language proficiency a criterion for *maoumma*. "*Maoumma* is for those who know the language", said a woman from Ishgogo. According to her, a person who does not speak the language is not only not 'true Mao', but is not even to be considered 'pure'. A man who lives in Tongo said: "They ['oromised Mao'] are not real

[43] The terms *maoumma* and *maoiñənet* in Oromo and Amharic respectively, do not exist as terms found in the dictionary, like the term 'mao-ness' in English. It is a means of making sense of being Mao in ways that are permitted by the grammar of the respective language. An exact equivalent in Koman Mao/Gwama language does not seem to exist. The closest one gets in this language, is *sit mini* (Tongo), *is mini* (Ishgogo) and *sita mini* (lowland) – all three meaning 'our people'. This does, however, seem to work as a proper noun rather than an abstract noun. My interlocutors usually preferred to use the term in Amharic or Oromo languages.

[44] Interestingly, this individual advocates 'Gwama' as the best term for people and language, and not 'Mao'. However, since a term for 'gwama-ness' doesn't seem to exist, he embraces the term *maoumma*.

Mao […]. They may be Oromo, but no one says the truth." A Mao man from the Ishgogo area said: "He has forgotten his language and we count him as a *garba* [slave]." Here, the term 'slave' is used figuratively and shows a reinterpretation of the stigma of slavery. It does not imply a sense of captivity or forced labour, nor a lineage back to enslaved individuals, but rather not being able to claim one's ethnic identity proudly. Using a language that is 'borrowed' from an ethnic group that is not the ethnicity of one's biological ancestors, hence, creates the link to 'slavery'.

If a (Mao) child who grew up in an Oromo home took the clan membership and ancestry of the household's head (Oromo), the descendants of this child may be seen as an 'impure' Oromo, rather than Mao, and other Mao may demean him. Hence, the hierarchy between 'Oromo' and 'Mao' is, in this case, reverse, with the ('black') Oromo having less honour than the Mao. For example, a young Mao man from Oromia who wanted to marry a Mao girl from Tongo had to provide evidence that he was not a 'black Oromo', since it would be a shame for a Mao family to give their daughter in marriage to a 'slave'. The girl's father told the elders sent in the name of this young man that "among the Mao in Oromia, there are black Oromo. They say they are Mao, but they are not true Mao" (retold by the young suitor). The young man then had to ask a person trusted by the girl's family to vouch for him. This man "made them believe so that they understand the truth [about the 'purity' of the ancestry]". This is an example of the complex hierarchies that operate in the area, and the dynamic relationships between individuals with different backgrounds, identifying with various ethnic and clan labels.

Conclusion

This article has discussed various uses of the term 'Mao' in Mao Komo special *wäräda*: whom and what it, in its various contexts, does and does not refer to, as well as its connotations and interpretations.

'Mao' may be used as an ethnic term, but with various outcomes. In general, three Mao groups can be identified in the district, one of which is often not categorised as 'Mao' but rather self-identifies as Gwama or Kwama. However, individuals from the lowland identifying as Gwama/Kwama, usually recognise the connection to the 'Mao' and the common language. The other two Mao groups are Kiring and Isgulu/Sitgulu, who, despite both usually identifying with the term 'Mao', have a contrasting understanding of what it entails. For the Kiring, the term Mao is mainly a category of prestige and political power, whereas for the Isgulu, it may be a way to distance themselves from groups

they categorise as 'Oromo' (which may be Kiring), and at the same time establish a connection to the Mao of Oromia.

'Mao' as a linguistic category is perhaps the most confusing use of this term because there are several Mao languages both inside and outside the region. Therefore, the precise term for the Koman Mao language is Gwama, which may pose problems of non-acceptance among individuals from the highland who associate 'Gwama' with Komo and prefer to call their language *ttwa sit shwala*, by a clan name, or just 'Mao'.

The use of 'Mao' as a political term is clearer since it indicates an official category recognised as 'indigenous' in the region. However, who is and is not 'Mao enough' to represent Mao politically is a disputed question. People from the lowland may be under-represented as 'Mao', whereas people from around Tongo may be overrepresented. At the same time, not every family from Tongo is accepted as 'proper Mao' by Gwama speakers, mainly because of a lack of language skills.

Lastly, Mao is rarely, if at all, a neutral category. To some individuals, 'Mao' may carry derogatory connotations linked to slavery, whereas being 'proper Mao' may in other contexts imply the opposite, i.e., purity and autonomy. In this latter sense, a so-called 'pure' Mao is someone who claims a genealogy that is accepted as 'biologically correct'. This leads to the conclusion that underlying all the different interpretations of what 'Mao' refers to, it (in theory) boils down to 'Mao' being an individual whose genealogy goes back to an ancestor recognised as 'Mao'. However, which kind of ancestor is 'Mao' or not, becomes a subject of interpretation, as does the question of how much creative interpretation of ancestry is allowed. Biological descent, exclusively in the male line of ancestry, is stressed as the most important criterion for *maoumma* ('mao-ness'), although this rule is granted much leeway in practice. Sometimes, an ancestor married to a Mao woman is accepted, which is what the sons of the historical figure Dawd represent when properly examined. Furthermore, an individual who does not have an immaculate genealogy of 'pure' Mao in the male line, may or may not be seen as having *maoumma*. Precisely because 'Mao' is such an ambiguous term, it can encompass various identities and social ranks. It may therefore have a unifying effect on individuals with diverse backgrounds, but it may also contribute towards fragmenting the Mao identity into an idea of it encompassing 'no one, yet everyone'.

The reason why the term ‘Mao’ may be difficult to decipher, and why it has various meanings, is that the process of naming groups and languages has originated from both inside and outside of the groups affected by the term. Furthermore, the communities in the area have likely been engaged in an exchange of cultural features and languages, leading to a situation where ethnic boundaries do not always coincide with linguistic boundaries. The process of institutionalising ethnicity in Ethiopia has further added a complicating layer to the landscape of terms and designations. To fully be able to answer how and why the term ‘Mao’ has come to have the connotation it has today, more research into the historical movements of people, language change and transformations of hierarchies is needed. Short of being able to explain the historical causes for the complexity that surrounds this designation of identity, this article has shown some of the challenges related to using ethnicity as the main method for classifying groups of people in a given society. An essentialisation of ethnicity runs the risk of overlooking other categories of difference and other factors that influence status. This study, therefore, shows the need for exploring social relations within and across perceived ‘ethnic groups’ to better understand the functions of various terms and their semantic complexities.

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