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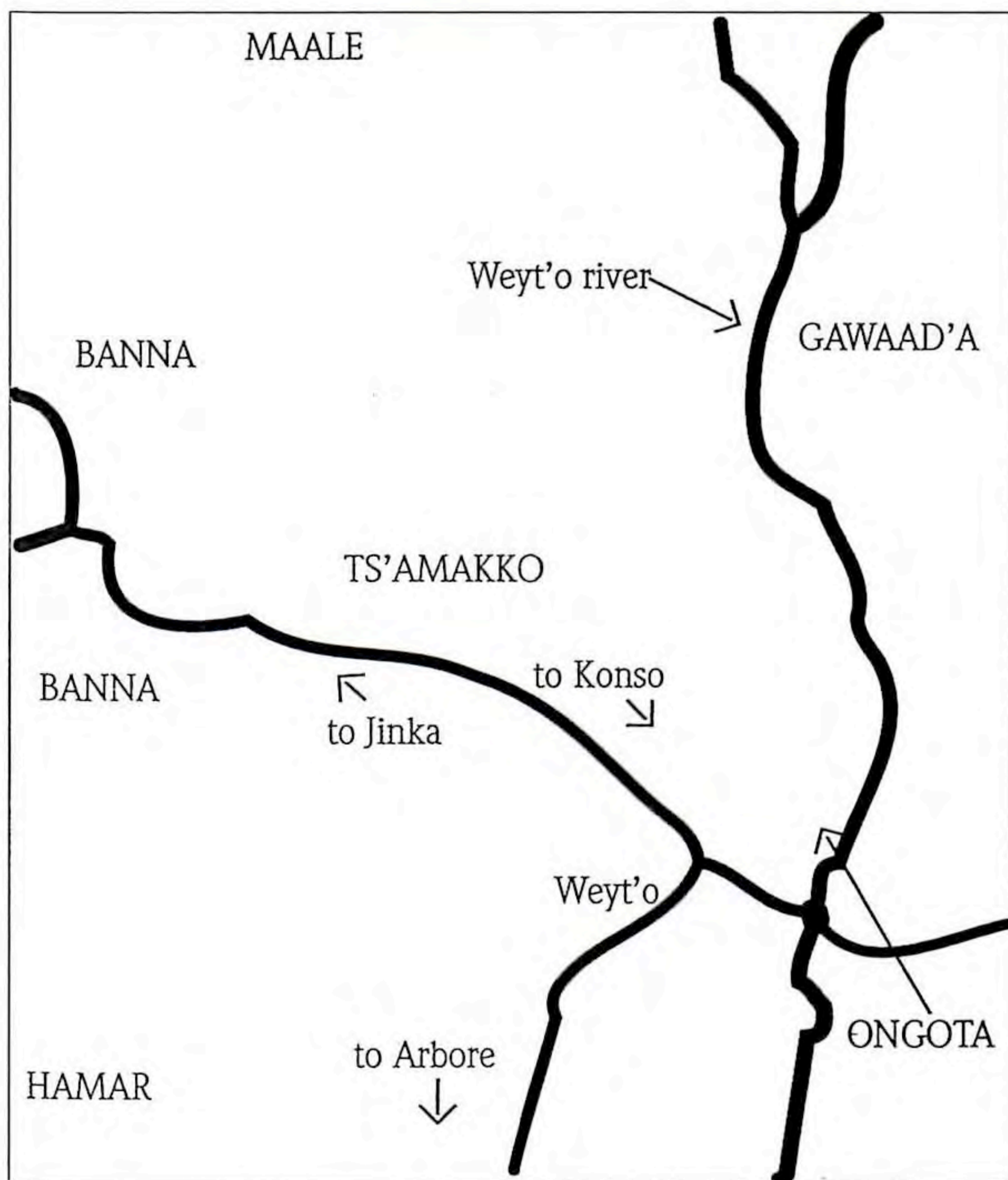
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Ongota: Back to Reality?

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Abstract: After our descriptive sketch (Savà and Tosco 2000), the question of the genetic classification of Ongota has been addressed by Savà and Tosco (2002), Blažek (2005) and Fleming (2006), who has dedicated to this small and dying out (probably less than ten speakers remain today) and largely unknown and unclassified language of Southwest Ethiopia a whole monograph. Savà and Tosco (2002) basically support the inclusion of Ongota within Afroasiatic, Eastern Cushitic, and possibly Dullay. According to Blažek (2005) Ongota should genetically be classified as Nilo-Saharan, although later borrowings have to a large extent obscured its genetic affiliation. In our contribution we shall revisit again the lexicon of Ongota and compare it with those of its closest neighbors, Cushitic Dullay and Konsoid, as well as South Omotic Hamer. We shall also challenge Fleming's (2006) proposal that Ongota is an independent sub-branch of Afroasiatic and a direct split from the "Erythraic" group. This is one of the two main branches of the phylum and includes all of Afroasiatic except Omotic, which makes the second Afroasiatic branch. Fleming's proposal is based on lexical comparison with all the Afroasiatic language groups. Lexical similarities are preferred to morphological evidence since Ongota lacks the rich morphology of Afroasiatic. Actually, as already shown by Savà and Tosco (2000), Ongota has dropped all the subject-marking affixes (replacing them with prefixal pronominal clitics), but has instead largely preserved the Perfective-Imperfective opposition of Cushitic, replacing the tense-aspect-marking vowels with tonal apophony. Fleming's proposal runs against Occam's razor: what is known of the grammar of Ongota is easily amenable to perfectly "normal" processes of language change, with parallels in countless other languages. No "new" language branch, especially of such a huge depth as proposed by Fleming, is needed.



I. Introduction

Ongota is the traditional language of a hunter-gatherer group living in Southwest Ethiopia. The correct pronunciation of Ongota is [ŋongota]. The initial pharyngeal is commonly not pronounced by non-Ongota and is normally omitted in the literature. Ongota is also the self-ethnic name. Birale (Birayle, Birelle) is a name given by neighbors to language and people. The Ongota live about two kilometres from the bridge on the Weyt'o River, on the main road Konso-Jinka. Their only village (Muts'e) is found in the forest on the left bank of the river. From the administrative point of view, the area is found in the South Omo Zone, which is part of the Ethiopian Federal State of the "Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" (see map below).

The community, about 100 people, has by now adopted the neighboring Cushitic language Ts'amakko (Tsamai) as first language. Only about 15 elders speak their traditional language (Savà and Thubauville 2006). This probably makes Ongota the most endangered language in Ethiopia. Ongota is strikingly different from the languages of the area. It has an isolating morphosyntax and does not show the rich morphology which is so typical of neighboring groups of languages, i.e. Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan: gender and number have no formal expression on nouns; there are no person and tense verbal suffixes; person is indicated by pronominal subject clitics that precede the verbal forms; expression of tense is based on tonal change. Many other elements have forms not attested in the area: morphological exponents, such as deictic suffixes, determiner suffixes, adjectival endings and most of verbal derivation extensions; items belonging to other word classes, such as pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, clitics and postpositions; a certain amount of the lexical stock. Some numerals, colors and body part terms, in particular, find no parallel in neighboring languages. Ongota shows lexical strata and some morphological elements retraceable to Southwest Ethiopia language groups. The etymology of several lexemes is, however, unclear and in some cases totally unknown.

The divergent character of Ongota and its retention of genetically heterogeneous lexical elements make the classification of the language highly problematic and intriguing. After a note on the possible origin of the community, this paper presents an overview of the classifications proposed so far for Ongota and argues about a recent hypothesis by Fleming (2006): Ongota represents one of the main ramifications of the Afroasiatic phylum. In the final section, a few notes on certain "impossible" etymologies and on the idea of Ongota as originally a low-cast jargon (or a language strongly influenced by such a jargon) are included.

II. An old mystery...

Donaldson Smith's report of his travel in South Ethiopia, dating 1890, contains the following statements:

- "We came to a large and warlike tribe called the Arbore, inhabiting half of the valley above Lake Stephanie (pp. 224)."
- "They were Burle, Dume, Mali, Borali in succession towards the north, and then the Buno, Dime, Ario, and Amar to the west (pp. 224)."
- "Dume, Mali and Borali are pygmies. The Dume conquered the Burle eight years before (pp. 224)."

Fleming (2006) relates the Borali to the Ongota (Birale) and considers these people as remnants of hunter-gatherer pygmies. From Donaldson's description, it appears that the Borali live to the North of the present area. This geographic difference may be accounted for with the help of a local history recently collected by Savà and Thubauville (2006). It tells that the Ongota used to inhabit an area more to the north, nearby the Maale, and gradually moved southwards along the Weyt'o River. Donaldson Smith's record is extremely important. However, should his report be taken as true? One has to say that at the end of the nineteenth century many travelers in Africa wished to disclose the myth of pygmies. Seeing some of them in Ethiopia would have given particular prestige also to the Scottish traveler (comment by Wolbert Smith, p.c.). We could see ourselves that the Ongota did not look like pygmies at all. The mystery persists...

III. Hypotheses on classification

Several classificatory hypotheses on Ongota have been put forward in the past years (Savà and Tosco 2003): that the language is an autonomous branch of Nilo-Saharan (Blažek 1991, 2001 and 2005); that it constitutes a separate branch within South Omotic (Ehret, p.c.); that it is a hybridized Cushitic language (Bender, p.c.); that it is a divergent Lowland East Cushitic language (Savà and Tosco 2003); that it is a primary node of Afroasiatic. The “new lexicostatistic” analysis by Bender (1994), shows that the “mystery language of Ethiopia”, Ongota, cannot be paralleled to any neighboring group because no lexical strata prevails statistically. Any kind of affiliation is problematic also in the opinion of Aklilu (p.c.). He thinks that Ongota is a creolized pidgin resulting from the meeting of people from all over Southwest Ethiopia. Most of these classificatory hypotheses are based on lexical comparison. Only a few propose morphological differences. In his comparative studies of Ongota, Blažek has pointed out the presence of lexical strata from Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan. Which strata is genetically value is a question that the Czech scholar proposes to answer looking at morphological material. He finds out similarities between the pronominal series in Ongota and some “fringe” Nilo-Saharan languages. On the basis of this, Ongota is considered a Nilo-Saharan language with uncertain internal collocation.

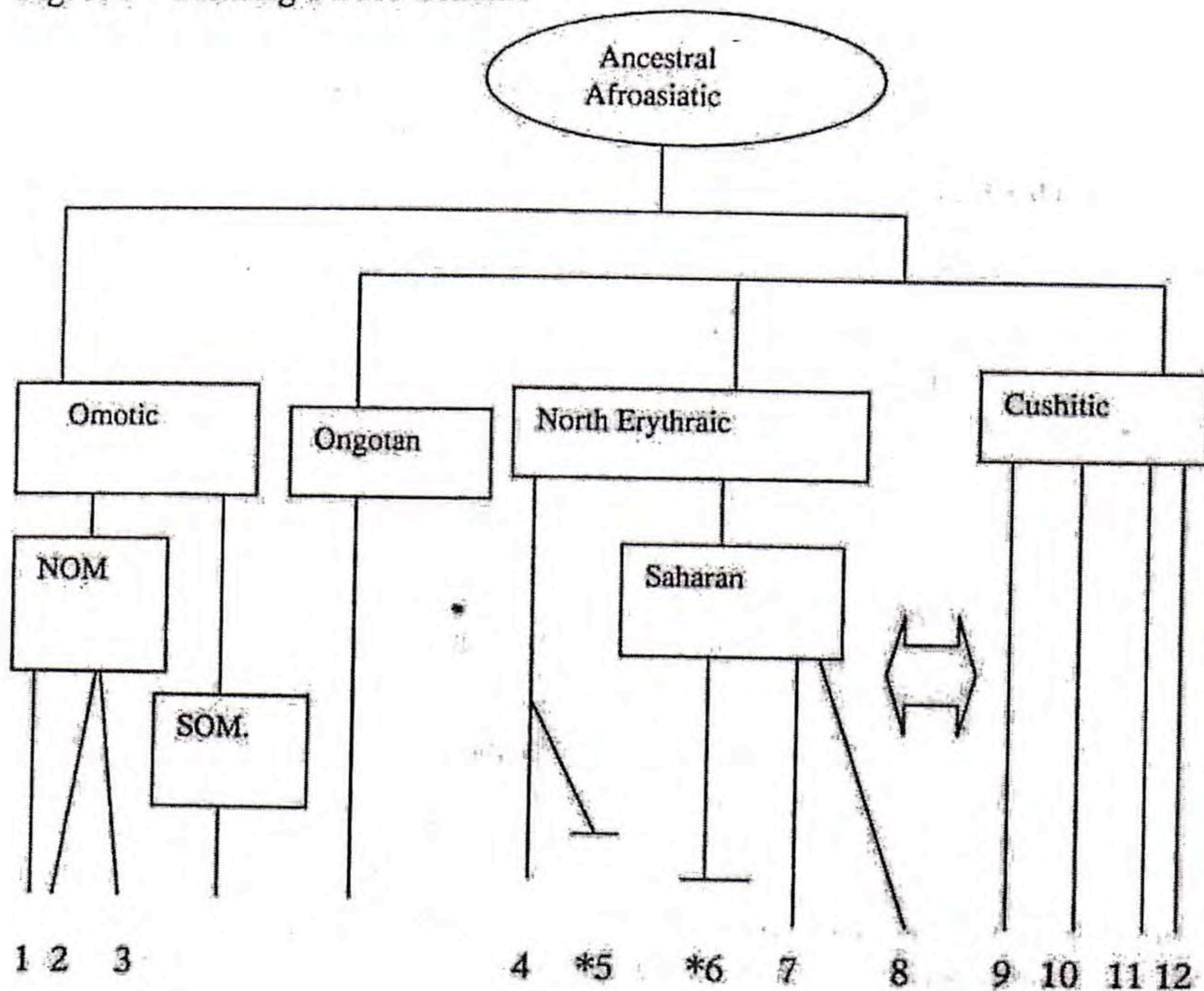
The result of Ehret’s lexicostatistic study is that Ongota is a South Omotic language. The presence of South Omotic lexicon in Ongota is out of doubt. However, Ehret’s study remains unpublished and his hypothesis unverifiable. Aklilu Yilma’s opinion that Ongota is a pidgin is based on linguistic and historical evidences. The linguistic indication is that Ongota has very little morphology. The historical one is that the Ongota think of themselves as the meeting of people coming from several surrounding populations. In particular, this is told in an Ongota legend on the origin on the community. Savà and Tosco (2003) give priority to morphological comparison. They notice that the tonal pattern of main tenses and imperative paradigms in Ongota can be connected to those found in the Dullay dialect Ts’amakko and Gawwada. Accordingly, they suggest that Ongota might be a highly divergent Dullay dialect.

The lexicostatistic study of Bender (1994) is based on the assumption that two or more languages cannot be affiliated if they have less than 5% of lexical similarity. Ongota reaches that percentage with none of the languages of the area compared by Bender. Therefore, Ongota cannot be classified. In a later contact, we came to know from Bender that in his opinion Ongota might be a hybridized Cushitic language. This hypothesis has not been formalized whatsoever. The most recent hypothesis is by Fleming (2006). It will be discussed in deeper details in the following pages of this paper.

IV. Fleming: Ongota as an independent branch of Afroasiatic

As mentioned above, Fleming’s hypothesis sound remarkably strong: Ongota is an Afroasiatic language generated from Proto-Afroasiatic millennia ago. The precise position of Ongota among the Afroasiatic languages can be spotted in the following genealogical tree proposed by Fleming:

Figure 5 Fleming's 2005 Scheme



Key: (1) = Dizoid, (2) = Mao, (3) = 'ta/ne', (4) West Semitic, (5) = East or *Akkadian, (6) = *Egyptian, (7) = Berber, (8) = Chadic (West, Central, East), (9) = North Cushitic or Beja, (10) = Central Cushitic or Agau, (11) = East Cushitic (Highland, Lowland, Dullay and Yaaku), (12) = South Cushitic (Dahalo and Mbuguan-Rift). Libyan = (7) + (8)

Fleming's idea is supported by interesting factors. There are cognates between Ongota and geographically distant Afroasiatic groups, such as Berber, Chadic and Egyptian. The Ongotan branch of Afroasiatic has the same low percentages of shared lexicon as those relating the other branches to one another. Similarities between Ongota and neighboring languages are possible due to borrowings from Ongota to other languages. On the other hand, Fleming's idea is open to a number of criticisms. Those presented in this paper concern the proofs supporting the main hypothesis and the research methodology.

V. Criticisms on Fleming's etymologies

Fleming makes lexicostatistic calculations based on etymological reconstructions. The words under considerations are those of the Swadesh list and some others considered less prone to borrowings. We find that several etymologies are not as sound as one would expect for supporting such a strong classificatory hypothesis. In our review, we would like to stress some methodological problems that make these etymologies not fully convincing.

Too many parallels, not enough substance

We have noticed at least four lexemes with very little phonological material. The etymologies built around these words involve a great number of Afroasiatic languages. This is taken as a proof

that Ongota and many other Afroasiatic languages have retained proto-Afroasiatic lexical material. Instead, we suspect that these broad connections are due to little phonological substance. Words such as *ii[?]a* “hand” are easily comparable with words having similar shape and meaning within Afroasiatic and beyond. This is so true that even Fleming notices a similarity with the word *ii* “hand” in Dongola, which is not Afroasiatic, but Nilo-Saharan. Fleming’s etymologies of *ii[?]a* “hand” and other words are shown below.

ii[?]a, *iyya*, *i[?]a*, *iia*, *iya* (p.98) “hand, arm, shoulder, front foot of elephant” (ST¹ *ii[?]a* “arm; hand; finger”).

North Cushitic: Beja *eyi* / *ayê-b* “hand, arm” (Imera dialect), Bisharin *o-ya* “hand”, Hadareb-B. dialect (Thompson), (*wæ-[?]*)*æyo* “hand”, Beja *hiw-* / *yîhi[?]* “to give”.

Egyptian: Old: *i[?]* → [*â[?]*] “hand, arm”.

Somotic: Dime *íyyù* “arm (wrist to shoulder), ‘elbow’ of front leg of a quadruped”.

Agau: general: Awngi (Awiya) *íy-* “to give”, Xamir *yuw-* / *uw-* “to give”, Bilen *îwu-* “to give”.

East Cushitic: Highland: common HEC *uuw[?]* / *uw[?]* / *haw[?]* “to give”.

South Cushitic: Dahalo *hee[?]* “to give”.

South Cushitic: Mbuguan: *Ma’a o* “to give” and *awi* “to give”. Note: Identical forms exist in Egyptian, Beja, Meroitic, and Nile Nubian.

Nilo-Saharan: East Sudanic: Nubian: Kenuzi, Dongola *ii* “hand”, Old Nubian *ei* “hand” (Murray 1923: 70), South Nilotic: Nandi *-ee* “hand”, Sogoo *eu* “hand”, Central Nilotic: Masai *-ai-* “hand”, Ongamo *-hê-* “hand”.

Meroitic: (Unclassified and controversial) *iy* “hand” (Bender 1981 < D.Meeks 1973).

i[?]ee (p. 92) “come” (regular verb) (ST *ee-* “to come”)

North Cushitic: Beja *i[?]* / *ê[?]a* “come”.

Egyptian: Old Egyptian *3y/3w* “come”, Coptic *ii* “come”.

East Cushitic: Lowland: El Molo *y-* “come”.

Chadic: Eastern Mokulu *aa[?]* / *aa[?]* “come”, Tumakò “come”.

Chadic: other branches: Boghom *a* “come”, Gwandara *ya* “come”, Musgoi *ya* “come”, Daba *ya* “come”, Musey *y* “go”, Masa *ya* “come”.

Nomotic: Dizoid (Majoid): common Dizoid *yâ* “come”.

Nomotic Gimojan: Male *ye[?]* “come”, Basketo *yê* “come”, Oyda *yi[?]* “come”, Yemsa *y-/yê-* “come”.

Nomotic: common Mao *yê/ya* “go”.

Somotic: Hamar, Banna *iia/yi* “go”. The late Illich-Svitych proposed a Nostrativ verb **[?]ejâ* “arrive, come” where his [j] is our [y]. Included in that etymology were: (Kaiser, n.d.). Afro-Asiatic **?j* “arrive, come”, Indo-European **hei* “go”. (Cf **ei-* Watkins, Decsy), Dravidian **ej-* “arrive, approach”, Altaic **ii-* “arrive, enter”.

¹ ST= lexeme found in Savà, G. and Tosco, M. (2000): A sketch of Ongota, a dying language of Southwest Ethiopia. Studies in African Linguistics, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 59-134.

[?]iila (p. 116) "child" (ST *iila* "sons, boys", *eela* "children")

Going on the assumption that this is related to the ancient Afrasian root /*wld/ which may only be the Semitic root or Erythraic root, it is also found in:

Nomotic: Gimojan: Gimira *yel* "give birth", Basketo *yêl* "bear children". Dorze *yel* "bear children".

East Cushitic: Lowland: El Molo *hélè* / [?]*élè* "child", Galab (Sasse) *wèl* "child", Boni *êêlê* / *êênê* / *wêêlâ* 'child / child / children'. Greenberg (1963: 54) also cites this cognate in Chadic and Berber, thus

Chadic: Affade *ul* "child", Kuri *wuuli* "child", Somrai *wiil* "child".

Berber: *u* / *ul-t* "son / daughter".

[?]na a (p.96) "to give" (ST *naʃ-* "to give")

Agau: Bilen, Xamir *nak'* "to give", Bilen *naan* "hand", Xamta *nên* "hand", Qimant *naan-têt* "hand".

North Cushitic: Beja *nun* "give, hand over".

Nomitic: Mao: Hozo *neeni/nîn-* "to give", Gebisi *nên-i* "give".

Somotic: Banna (Bender 1971) *aanni* "hand", Ari *?aan* "hand", Dime *aano* "hand".

Chadic: Western: Hausa (*ha*)-*nnuu* "hand", Maha *oni* "to give", Ngamo *ona* "to give", Bolanchi *?on* "to give", Gwandara (two dialects) *nani* "hand".

Chadic: Central: Buduma *une* to give, Kuri *un* "to give", Gisiga *hanj* "hand".

East Cushitic: Yaakuan: Yaaku *iin* "to give", but perhaps

Nilo-Saharan: East Sudanic: Surma: Tirma *aañô'i* "to give", Nilotic: Jumjum *eñâ* "to give" and *in-te* "hand", Nara *nii* "to give", proto-Kuliak (Heine 1976: 75) **an* "hand".

Nilo-Saharan: (taxonomically unresolved taxon): Shabo *hanno* "to give".

Too much fantasy

A strong support to Fleming's theory is provided by words shared by Ongota and Afroasiatic languages spoken far away. We find the etymology of those words questionable because they do not involve more than one language or language group. We also find it doubtful that words shared by Ongota and a single other neighboring language must be considered Afroasiatic cognates. The six examples of similarities shown below look accidental and semantically not always similar. In a classificatory work they should be ignored.

kimiša (p.119) "crocodile, fish" (ST *kimiša* "crocodile", *kara* "fish").

Semitic: Central: Arabic *timsaH* "crocodile". Note: May well be spurious, an accidental similarity; yet the resemblance is so strong it cannot be ignored.

fada / fad-tam (p.118) “to pour / to flow” (ST *fad-* “to put down”).

Semitic: Central: Arabic *faDD* “to drip, be annihilated”.

Semitic: Modern South Arabian: Jibbali (Johnstone) *feδ’δ’* “to squeeze a cow’s udder to see if there is milk, to milk a squirt” and *fâδ’δ’ôt / fδ’eδ’* “a squirt of milk” (same source).

Note: the sound [δ’] is equivalent to glottalizing English ‘th’ of ‘this’, i.e. a voiced glottalized interdental in Afrasian.

Note: All based on notions of liquids moving in small or large amounts. This may relate to the milking cognates, q.v. below. Jibbali and Ongota are so remote from each other in time and space that borrowing is out of question.

arba (p.88) “big” (not present in ST).

Semitic: Northwest (ancient): Ugaritic *rb* “big, great”, Hebrew *raβa / rôβô* “grow, become much, great”.

Semitic: Easter (ancient): Akkadian *rabuu* “big”.

Semitic: Central (Hetzron classification): Arabic *rabaa* “grow”.

Semitic: Modern Aramaic (of Urmi) *raba* “big”.

ind’a (p.99) “he” (3rd person singular) (ST *inda* “this”).

Nomotic: Mao: Didessa *’ênt’e* “man, person”.

tip / tiib- (intervocalic) (p.93) “die, to” (ST *tib-* “to die”).

East Cushitic: Lowland: El Molo *tiβe* “to bury”.

?abba (p.98) “good” (ST *abba* “good; beautiful; well”).

East Cushitic: Lowland: El Molo *ápód’a / aboda* “good”.

Occam’s razor (borrowing as an easier solution)

A bunch of etymologies involve Ts’amakko and other Dullay languages. The similarities of the compared items are too strong to discard the possibility that the word has been borrowed from these languages. In some cases, Fleming suggested a loan from Ongota to Dullay. But we do not know of a contact situation in which the speakers of these languages borrowed the word from Ongota. The opposite direction can be easily justified. We should not forget that Ongota is being replaced by Ts’amakko and that in the shifting process heavy borrowing is unavoidable².

² Notice that a similar status of Ongota as an ancient donor was attributed to Dahalo by Nurse (1986).

s'iib (p.127) "squeeze, make a fist" (not present in ST).

In East Cushitic: Yaakuan: Dullay *t'iib* "squeeze".

East Cushitic: Lowland: Konso *d'iipp* "to squeeze", Gidole *čiip* "to squeeze".

East Cushitic: general: proto- (Arvanites 1991) **t'iib* "press".

South Cushitic: Mbuguan: Ma'a -*sibi* "to wring".

South Cushitic: Dahalo (Tosco) *t'uuf-* "to squeeze out" and *t'uufit-* "to milk" and *t'uub-* "to squeeze" (Tosco). The odd phonetic correspondence at a minimum argue for Ongota's distinction. Ongota also has *s'oob'* for "squeeze" which might be a variant or a distinct cognate.

b'ul (p.121) "to jump" (not present in ST).

Compare Tsamai *b'ul* "to jump" and Hamar *b'ul-* "to jump over (e.g. over oxen)". Since it seems related to the local area's custom of jumping over cattle, as initiation rite, it favors Hamar as a source.

moora (p.95) "fat (of meat)" (not present in ST).

Somotic: Ari *moora* "fat (of meat)".

East Cushitic: Lowland: Oromo *moora* "fat (of meat)", Gidole *moor-at* "stomach fat". Both the Ari and Ongota forms are suspected as loan words from Oromo. If not, then cognates abound all over Afroasiatic; see Greenberg

šumaxa (p.109) "sand" (ST *šumaħa* "sand").

Tsamai has *šumaH-to*. Both are isolated so the direction of borrowing cannot be determined.

Somotic: Hamar, Kara *šami* "sand", south Ari *šaami* "sand", Banna (Bender 1971) *šaammi* "sand". These Somotic forms are not likely to be ancestral to the Ongota and Tsamai forms because they are phonetically simpler.

ga^c (p.89) "to bite" (ST *gaʃ-* "to bite").

Somotic: common Somotic *gâ[?]* "bite".

Nomotic: Dizoid: Dizi (Adikas dialect) *gya[?]* "chew noisily, crunch (with teeth)".

East Cushitic: Highland, common HEC *gê^m* "bite".

Semitic: Central: Arabic *ja^{c-c}* "to eat earth, clay" and *ja^{c-m}* "to have an appetite". Both Arabic forms were proposed by Ehret as derived from his reconstructed proto-Afroasiatic.

VI. Still other possibilities

What about accounting for Ongota uniqueness by considering it a hunters' jargon? The idea is to be seriously considered, since there are all the socio-historical conditions that favor the generation of a secret code, which later became a "normal" language. There are several low-caste jargons, for example, in Somalia. However, Ongota does not show the clear manipulation, which characterizes these jargons. It is simply too different to be accounted for on the basis of a jargon from another language. However, one cannot ignore that some words, not included in Fleming's etymologies, are

hardly comparable to any language. The absence of any possible etymology makes one think about some sort of language disguising. Below is a list of these “mysterious” items:

binta “animal”	baram “tomorrow”
uke “elephant”	boda “saliva”
aaka “women”	burinki “today”
askam “to go”	cata “meat”
ašana “how?”	carba “thin”
ašinkuni “sister’s son”	coma “ten”
ayki “now”	dabaša “baboon”
ayta “which?”	dibita “cat”
iccama “slowly”	gabare “snake”
ifam “to marry”	gidana “hair”
igire “daughters, girls”	guskutu “inside”
iida “there is / there are”	guta “to jump; to dance, sing”
iište “neck”	ħaji “rain”
inkena “so”	jaaka “child”
ista “eight”	kano “vagina”
išma “play n.”	sorra “anus”
itima “tooth”	šeera “knife”
olla “village, settlement”	tsanafa “six”
ʕangat “to mix”	wowa “ear n.”
baaxa “dirty”	yaayo “jackal”
baqa “excrement”	zooba “beewax”

It is also worth looking at the personal pronouns and the related subject clitics. In spite of Blažek’s parallels, they look etymologically quite problematic (but subject clitics are common in Dullay and much East Cushitic):

	Subject Clitics	Independent
1Sg	ka=	kata
2Sg	i=	janta, jaama
3SgM	ki=	kita
3SgF	ku=	kuta
1Pl	ju=	juta
2Pl	gita=	gitata
3Pl	kiʔi=, kiʔa=	kiʔita

VII. Conclusions

As a response to Fleming’s proposal, there is definitely *not* enough evidence for Ongota as a separate branch of Afroasiatic. His role as donor-language is unproven. Parallels with Ts’amakko/Dullay are better viewed as (early and recent) loans into Ongota. As for further analysis, it is to consider that there is a layer of Ongota lexicon that resists comparison. A few lexemes are not

analyzed by Fleming. For others, Fleming's proposals are in our opinion weak. Morphology should also be taken into proper consideration. The presence of unique personal pronouns is evidence that also at the morphological level Ongota is a language, which defies classification. Moreover, some other features and phenomena of Ongota grammar are still unclear from a descriptive point of view. Future lexical and etymological studies should also attempt to establish phonological correspondences, which at present are absolutely unclear. In order to do this, one should make use of the phonological histories of neighboring language groups. However, these have not been reconstructed so far.

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