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Creating and Crossing Boundaries
in Ethiopia

Dynamics of social categorization and differentiation

edited by

Susanne Epple

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Cover image:

Bayso and Haro fishermen crossing Lake Abbaya together on a traditional boat (Susanne Epple 2012).

Recent cultural change and adaptation to a changing environment has led the Bayso people (agropastoralists) and the Haro people (formerly exclusive hippo hunters) to engage in fishing. The strict social boundaries between the two groups have in course of time been more and more blurred so that nowadays cooperation is the norm and social relations range from neighbourhood to bondfriendship and even intermarriage.

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THE NYANGATOM CIRCLE OF TRUST
CRITERIA FOR ETHNIC INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Gebre Yntiso

Introduction

Ethnic boundaries are neither given attributes nor arbitrary constructs—rather they represent consented or contested cognitive lines of group inclusion and exclusion. Depending on self and mutual interests of the groups involved, social boundaries are defined and redefined; negotiated and renegotiated; and emphasized or downplayed by actors representing or claiming to represent their groups. At any given time and place, therefore, an ethnic group may employ different principles for defining and maintaining relationships with different groups. Hence, as Katherine Verdery (1994) noted, people use ethnic boundaries to dichotomize insiders from outsiders through collective efforts of construction and maintenance.

The roots of this organizational form [viewing ethnicity as a form of social organization] are not in the *cultural content* associated with ethnic identities but rather in the fact of their *dichotomization*—the presence of boundaries separating groups. This shifts the emphasis from seemingly 'objective' cultural traits to behavior (including 'cultural' behavior) that is socially effective in maintaining group boundaries (Verdery 1994:35).

Ethnic groups claim to have identity markers that differentiate them from others. The common markers include mythical relation, common ancestors, shared a cultural heritage, a shared history, a common language, a common belief system, shared territory, and/or other shared experiences. It has long been recognized that ethnicity is a social construct (rather than a cultural given or basic human condition) and that ethnic groups do not represent cultural isolates or bounded entities. This is made apparent by the fluidity, permeability, overlaps, and the phenomenon of boundary shift that allows the inclusion or exclusion of ethnic membership. Social scientists have developed theoretical frameworks to explain the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries. Andreas Wimmer (2008: 986), for example, summarized his five strategies of ethnic boundary making as follows:

I distinguish between five types of such strategies: those that seek to establish a new boundary by expanding the range of people included; those that aim at reducing the range of the included by contracting boundaries; those that seek to change the meaning of an existing boundary by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories; those that attempt crossing a boundary by changing one's own categorical membership; and those that aim to overcome ethnic boundaries by emphasizing other, cross-cutting social cleavage through what I call boundary blurring.

While some groups try to stay guarded by sealing their boundaries against potential crossing, others expand their frontiers by keeping permeable and blurred boundaries (Wimmer 2008), and still others maintain a mixture of strategies

executed differently, depending on situations, which is the focus of this paper. In the literature, the widening or narrowing of group membership or inter-group alliance is explained in terms of, among others, political situation (Cohen 1978; Vincent 1974) and cost-benefit analysis (Schlee 2004: 137). Günther Schlee (2004) also called for caution that costs and benefits may be unintended consequences of group identifications, and that the freedom of rational decision-making should not be overemphasized.

With the above conceptual background in mind, this paper examines how the Nyangatom people of Ethiopia, who are surrounded by eight ethnic groups, have been maintaining various strategies of inclusion and exclusion.¹ Two of the eight neighbors, namely, the Toposa and the Turkana live across the international border in South Sudan and Kenya respectively. Three ethnic groups, the Nyangatom, Toposa and Turkana, are reported to have migrated to their present locations from a common original place called "Karamoja" in present day Uganda. They, thus, belong to the Karamojong Cluster (also referred to as the Ateker group), an ethno-geographic designation of numerous ethnic groups residing in northeastern Uganda, northwestern Kenya, southeastern South Sudan, and southwestern Ethiopia.² Moreover, they speak the same language, share a common belief system, common cultural values, and common practices. The Nyangatom have no common origin, long historical bonds, nor ethno-linguistic relationships with the other six neighbors (namely, Surma, Mursi, Koegu, Kara, Murle, and Daasanach) residing in Ethiopia.

Based on the existing historical, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, one might predict that the Nyangatom would maintain similar forms of relationships with their fellow Ateker neighbors in Kenya and South Sudan and yet a different one with the non-Ateker groups in Ethiopia. To the contrary, the Nyangatom's relationships with the Turkana and the Toposa are characterized by hostility and solidarity, respectively. Regarding the non-Ateker groups, the Nyangatom

¹ A number of individuals deserve recognition for their contributions to the study. I would like to thank all the Nyangatom informants for sharing their experiences and insights without any reservation. Acknowledgements are due to government officials and experts at the district, zonal, and regional levels for providing information. I want to express my indebtedness to Ekal Nettir, the then Administrator of Nyangatom *Woreda*, for his support in providing information and facilitating my trip. Lobuwa Kakuata, William Achuka, and Markos Lokali deserve appreciation for serving as very reliable field assistants and informants. My special gratitude goes to Phillemon Nakali for sending from abroad useful insights about the history and culture of the Nyangatom, Samuel Batu and Fikru Nyakal for providing information, and Admasu Lokaley for commenting on the draft paper.

² In the literature, there seems to be no clear consensus on which ethnic groups belong or do not belong to the Karamojong Cluster. Michael Quam (1999: 2) identified the Dodoth, Jie, Karamojong (which is further divided into Bokora, Matheniko, and Pian sub-groups), Teso, Turkana (Kenya), and one or two groups in Sudan, as the core groups of the Karamojong Cluster. Today, the Nyangatom, the Toposa, and Jiye (in South Sudan) are recognized as members of the Ateker group. The Chekwi, Kumam, Labwor, and Tepes are also reported to belong to the Cluster.

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perceive the Murle and the Koegu as close affiliates, while the Daasanech, the Kara, the Mursi, and the Surma are regarded as archenemies. The Hamar, who reside further east (east of Murle), are considered enemies, while the Bashada, officially considered as part of the ethnic Hamar, are treated as friends of Nyangatom. This paper seeks to uncover the Nyangatom circle of trust and the criteria for ethnic inclusion and exclusion.

In order to understand the social proximity and distance, as well as the boundaries between the Nyangatom and their neighbors, it will be helpful to first understand the cultural principles that characterize intra-Nyangatom relationships and their identification with neighbors. People tend to behave towards members of ethnic groups that they consider to be allies, friends, or relatives in a way similar to the way that they behave towards members of their own group. Correspondingly, sets of other codes of conduct are employed to deal with members of ethnic groups considered as enemies. With this in mind, certain codes of responsibilities, cultural prohibitions, and permissible acts have been identified (see 'important cultural principles' below) to understand the internal relationships. These codes also provide clues to the nature of the external relations.

This paper is based on information obtained from the descriptions of 24 Nyangatom informants. The sample of informants, though small, consisted of both sexes and people from different age-groups, generation-sets, and territorial sections. Hence, their views are assumed to reflect common perceptions. Data were collected in 2010 and 2011 through interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Data obtained from the local people have been validated through further inquiry with knowledgeable and educated Nyangatom living in urban area and overseas. Additional written sources have also been used to compare and contrast the emic perspectives with etic analysis and some related ethnographic accounts.

Apart from this introduction and the summary at the end, the paper is divided into five sections. The introductory section is followed by a brief ethnographic account on the Nyangatom. Section three focuses on boundary crossing in the context of Nyangatom-Murle and Nyangatom-Koegu relations. What may be described as a loosely defined blurry boundary between the Nyangatom and the Toposa is discussed under section four. The fifth and sixth sections are devoted to Nyangatom-Turkana relations that have deteriorated from being close relatives to enemies and thus to an alteration of the boundary between them.

The Nyangatom people and culture

General background

The Nyangatom (also Gnyangatom) people belong to the Nilo-Saharan language family and live in Southwestern Ethiopia in the border region between Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. The area is currently inhabited by the Nyangatom people

and two smaller ethnic groups (namely, the Murle³ and the Koegu) and comprises one administrative *woreda* (district), which is named after the dominant group—Nyangatom. The *woreda* is divided into 20 *kebeles*. *Kebeles* are the lowest-level, and most local, administrative tier. Kangaten, the capital of Nyangatom *woreda*, is located some 848 km southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. According to the latest national census, the population of the Nyangatom ethnic group is 25,252 (CSA 2007:85), and the land area of the *woreda* was estimated at 2,183.6 sq km.⁴

According to oral history, the Nyangatom and the Toposa left the Karamoja area, in northeastern Uganda, some 200 years ago due to severe drought that caused the death of both humans and livestock and after a volcanic eruption that dispersed the population of the Karamajong (NyaMuKo 2010: 25). One elderly informant in Kangaten noted that the eastward migration of the Nyangatom and the Toposa was not haphazard, but rather informed and planned:

Some people first arrived in Nakuwa [Kibish] area tracking a missing ox. In Nakuwa, they not only found the missing ox but also saw a place rich in water and grass. Upon their return, they informed the elders about the rich area. The elders then decided to move to the new land to avoid drought in Karamajong.... Upon arrival, our people met the Mursi people living in Nakuwa. Since the Mursi were hostile, the Nysaqol [the first Nyangatom territorial section to arrive in Kibish] had to fight with them.... They kicked some Mursi out of the area and intermarried with others.

Gulliver 1968 (in Tornay 1979: 98) considered the Nyangatom as a splinter group of the Toposa, who, in turn originated from the Jie of Uganda. However, Tornay (1979: 98) noted that the separation of the Nyangatom from what he referred to as 'the related Paranilotes' might have occurred around 1800, at least concomitant with that of the Toposa. Upon arrival, some of the Nyangatom settled west of the Kibish River. Later others moved further east and settled at Lere, near the Omo River. During their journey eastwards from Kibish, in the direction of Mount Kuraz, they are reported to have met the Arbore⁵ and the Daasanach people, other original inhabitants of the area. Traveler's accounts suggest that the Nyangatom were already in lower Omo valley by the time Count Samuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel visited the area in 1888 (Tornay 1979: 98).

Today, the territory of the Nyangatom stretches from the Omo River in the east to the Kibish River in the west. The local people claim that the Kibish area (both sides of the Kibish River) was their traditional homeland with its western border further west from the river.

³ In this paper, the name Murle is used to refer to those people residing in lower Omo valley in Ethiopia rather than their non-contiguous kinfolks living in South Sudan.

⁴ The figure for land area was obtained from the South Omo Zone Administration.

⁵ It appears that there was some kind of Nyangatom-Arbore relationship/interaction. Some members of one of the territorial sections of the Nyangatom called *Ngilingaqo* claim to be related to the Arbore, who later migrated east and currently reside in the Boito valley near Lake Stephanie (today a dry lake bed).

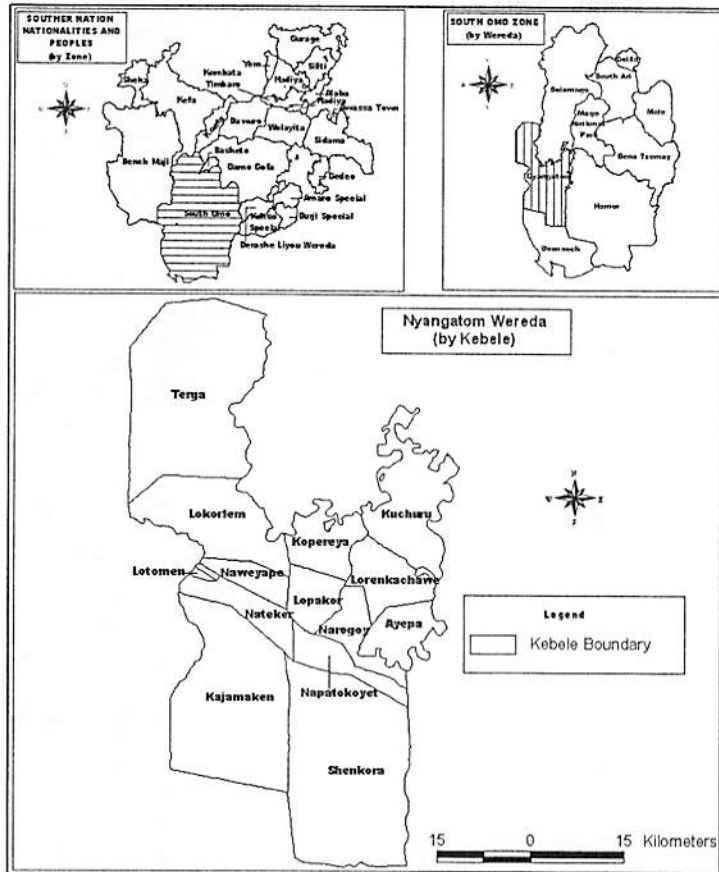


Figure 1: Map of Nyangatom Woreda (Source: Central Statistical Authority, 2011)

Those who live in the west and in central parts of the territory rely heavily on livestock production, while those in the east largely depend on flood retreat cultivation of sorghum, some maize, cowpeas, and tobacco along the Omo River. Some of those who reside along the river practice fishing as well. The Nyangatom send their livestock, especially cattle, to cattle camps located far away from permanent residential areas, where milking cows and small stocks are kept. Those taking care of animals in the cattle camp rely heavily on blood and milk for their subsistence, while those who live in permanent villages depend more on cereals. During the dry seasons, when animal products are in short supply, the herders in the cattle camp are provided with cereals produced along the Kibish and Omo Rivers.

Nyangatom is one of the remote districts in Ethiopia with bare minimum development activities, social services, and infrastructural facilities. Hence, modernity is still far from reality, as people continue to lead traditional lives relying mainly on their rich knowledge to exploit their natural environment. The introduction of the Protestant Christianity in 1972 by the Swedish Philadelphia Church

Mission (SPCM) represents the first Nyangatom contact with the western world. The Mission made contributions in terms of providing modern education in two primary schools (in Kibish and Kangaten), healthcare in two clinics (again located in Kibish and Kangaten), and irrigated agriculture using engine-pumps in Kangaten. Most of the educated Nyangatom currently serving or representing their people in various capacities have attended the SPCM schools. Although the Church existed for a long time, it was only from the second half of the 1980s that the teaching of the Bible spread among the population. During the research period in 2010/11, the followers of Christianity still remained a small minority. However, most of those Nyangatom serving their *woreda* belong to the Hiwot-Birhan (Life Light) or its splinter off-shoot and the newly formed Alem-Birhan (World Light) Churches—both Protestant sects.

The 2006 administrative restructuring in some parts of Ethiopia led to the division of the former Kuraz *Woreda* into Daasanech *Woreda* and Nyangatom *Woreda*. Since then, the newly established Nyangatom *Woreda* has taken steps in the area of office organization, health provision, school enrollment, agricultural extension, gender participation, transportation and communication, and investment attraction. The number of primary schools (including alternative schools), health posts, and agricultural extensions services are reported to cover most of the villages. During the dry season, there is a bus transport, twice weekly, from Jinka (the capital of South Omo Zone) to Kangaten, and there are both landline and mobile phone connections. According to the first issue of the Amharic annual magazine called *NyaMuKo* (2010: 11-12), which was published by Nyangatom *Woreda* Culture, Tourism and Government Communication Affairs Office, three agricultural investors have been given 10,000 hectares of land to grow cereals, sesame, cotton, and vegetables.

Social organizations

The Nyangatom have different types of social organizations that play important roles in their lives. There are seven⁶ named territorial sections (sing. *ekitala*, pl. *ngiteala*), namely, *Ngilingaqol*, *Ngkapung*, *Ngsaqol*, *Ngutokoraman*, *Ngukumama*, *Nubune*, and *Ngarich*. An individual is born into a given territorial section through his or her father. Section names are not place names, but rather the collective names of people occupying a given place. Hence, sections can best be described as political units where important decisions are made. In other words, a territorial section serves as a social identity and fundamental political and organizing principle. Individuals and communities participate in public life through their territorial sections. As Tornay (1981:160) noted, "Members of the sections have rights to settlement, grazing and watering, cultivation, and transhumance within their territory."

⁶ *NyaMuKo* (2010: 25) reported the existence of eight territorial sections in Nyangatom, Ngiribo being the eighth. Further study is needed to confirm this claim.

The generation-sets (*ekas*) constitute another very important social organization in Nyangatom. They operate side-by-side and in conjunction with the territorial section. The men of one generation-set are considered as fathers of the men of the next generation-set. Hence, each male individual belongs to the generation junior to his father's. At any given time, two generation-sets with living members are recognized as dominant, and they are called the 'Fathers of the Country' and the 'Sons of the Country.' During the research period, the Ngitome (Elephants) and the Ngorukopi (Ostriches) represented the Fathers of the Country and the Sons of the Country respectively. Junior to the Ostriches are three generation-sets: Ngugoleteng (Antelopes), Ngkosowa (Buffaloes), and the youngest generation (not yet formally named, but temporarily called the Ngikinyaga (Crocodiles) ranked in order of seniority. Women belong to the generation-set of their husbands and they do not occupy public decision-making positions.⁷

Traditionally, secular (administrative, judicial, etc.) and ritual powers are vested in the hands of the Fathers of the Country. Serious matters of public concern are brought to their attention for deliberation. Since the entire Nyangatom society is organized according to the principle of generation-sets, every territorial section has the same generation-sets. Hence, in all territorial sections of Nyangatom, during the time of research it was the Elephants who were responsible for the management of public affairs. Theoretically, the Elephants are the sole decision-makers. Practically, however, they involve a certain number of members of the junior generation-sets (namely, Ostriches, Antelopes, and sometimes Buffaloes) to attend crucial meetings. The Elephants can delegate power to the Ostriches to handle certain issues on their behalf. The Sons of the Country are responsible for ensuring the implementation of the decisions of the Elephants and for giving orders to the junior sets, who are in turn responsible for the actual implementation of decisions.⁸

The generation-sets of the Nyangatom are again divided into age-sets, which are formed in different localities and with different names. Age-mates willing to be initiated into a new age-set have to demonstrate their readiness by participating in some offensive or defensive actions. Moreover, they are expected to offer animals (e.g., goats) to the members of the senior age-sets within the same generation. As Tornay (1981:162) noted, the senior age-sets "in return allow the initiands to wear the adult mauve plastered head-dress and to adopt the new age-set name". The name could be chosen by the new initiates or imposed on them by the elder age-sets. More youth continue to join the newly initiated age-set until the group becomes numerous and strong enough to declare its autonomy. Although the dates of age-set formation and the names given to individual sets vary from one place to another, people know the ranks of the sets and their structural equivalence.

⁷ Although social change resulting from the expansion of modern education, the gender sensitization work of the government, and conversion to Protestant Christianity seem to have paved the way for some women to air their voices in public meetings, men continue to make ultimate decisions.

⁸ Despite the introduction of modern administrative and justice systems, the Nyangatom prefer to resolve intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts through traditional mechanisms.

The Nyangatom are divided into over 14 named patrilineal exogamous clans (*ngatekerea*, sing. *ateker*). These include Ngimuyoko, Ngitoroy, Ngukuko, Ngikakurecha, Ngidhocha, Ngikor, Nginyangia, Ngipucho, Ngiribo, Ngithiger, Ngiraputa, Ngilobol, Ngimeturuana, and Ngikuren.⁹ An individual becomes a member of his or her father's clan at birth. Clans do not serve as organizing principles to form a political entity. They are also not territorial and thus do not claim resources (such as grazing land) in their names, and they do not have publicly recognized roles in major decision-making processes. However, certain clans are believed to have special powers, such as the power to make or stop rain, to deceive and trick enemies, to cure snake or scorpion bites, and to control disease. For instance, the Ngikuren are reported to be responsible for fire and war rituals. Apart from the differential ritual roles, clans are differentiated based on their marriage ceremonies, dressing (e.g., beads and leather) styles, body decoration, and physical marks placed on cattle.

Important cultural principles

In this sub-section, attempts are made to identify and elaborate certain important codes of conduct in Nyangatom. These cultural principles are helpful for understanding both internal and external relationships.

Sharing and caring. There are two major ritualized sharing and caring festivities: *apeyo* and *ekumamar*. *Apeyo* is an initiation ceremony during which young men slaughter animals for their immediate senior age-sets to be allowed to form and join a new age-set. After the *apeyo* ceremony, the initiates are recognized as men and a fighting force, who can assume responsibilities such as defending the Nyangatom territory and livestock. *Ekumamar* is a festival sponsored by generation-sets and territorial sections in rotation to care for their fathers (seniors) and secure their blessing in return. In 2009, the territorial section called Ngukumama coordinated an *ekumamar*, and the ceremony was sponsored by the generation-set called Buffalos, who organized the festivity for their fathers, who are called the Antelopes. Tornay (1998: 102) also reported that 'feed your fathers' and 'feed your peers' are two basic rules in Nyangatom.

Apart from *apeyo* and *ekumamar*, which take place only once in a while, non-ritualized gift-giving represents part of the sharing culture of the Nyangatom society. Sharing of food and other resources with peers, relatives, neighbors, and fellow Nyangatom who are in need due to natural or man-made adversities, is widely practiced. Grown-up children are expected to take care of their parents, grandparents, and other needy relatives. The herders share cereal foods sent to cattle camps and animal products from the cattle camps are shared among those living in permanent villages. The needy can expect to be helped by the resource-rich

⁹ Serge Tornay (1981: 153-4) counted 20 clans in Nyangatom and noted that some of the clan identities were carried by women who came to Nyangatom as wives from Dodoth, Lotuko, and Turkana ethnic groups. The reduction in the list of Nyangatom clans today may partly be explained in terms of the death of these women.

reestablishment of broken ties. The prohibition to kill and raid is extended to groups affiliated to the Nyangatom (i.e. Toposa, Murle and Koegu).

Identification with the Ateker group. The Nyangatom people recognize the Karamojong of people in Uganda as the earliest ethnic group from which all Ateker members originated. According to one informant, the word "Karamojong" is made up of two terms: *ngikaru* (year) and *mojomong* (old). Thus, the Nyangatom define the Karamojong as their ancestors who had lived in the original homeland, Karamoja (in Uganda), for many years before their migration to their current location. All ethnic groups that originated from the earliest group (Karamojong), are collectively called Ateker. In this context, the meaning of the term Ateker means 'related people' or 'relatives' (the term also refers to clan). The Ateker members commonly known to the Nyangatom include the Matheniko, Ngipian, Bokora, Dodoth, Jie, Kumam, Tepeth, Toposa, Jiye, Turkana, and Teso. When asked what the Ateker groups have in common, many informants listed the following: common ethnic origin, common geographic location in Uganda, mutually intelligible language, common religion (belief in *Akuj* and *ngakujo nachik* (or *ngamuroto*), God and ancestor spirits respectively), similar social organizations (e.g., territorial sections and age-system¹⁰), similar dances, and similar songs.

Boundary making and unmaking

Permeable boundary with Murle and Koegu

The Murle and the Koegu are non-Ateker people, who have been integrated into the Nyangatom society later in time. Of the six neighbors on the Ethiopian side of the border, the Nyangatom allowed only these two groups to cross their ethnic boundaries. Before their inclusion, the two groups were too small and powerless to defend themselves against their enemies. Why did the Nyangatom forge an alliance with powerless minorities and maintain enmity with their powerful neighbors? Attempts are made to briefly discuss historical factors and recent developments that led to the process of boundary crossing before answering this question.

The Murle (also the Omo Murle, Ngarich, Narich) people in Ethiopia represent a splinter group of the Murle ethnic group in South Sudan. The oral history about the splinter group goes on to state that during a regular dance party, a small group of

¹⁰ The Nyangatom perceive themselves as the only Ateker group that keeps the original generation-set system intact. The Nyangatom, the Toposa, and the Turkana seem to have comparable generation-sets. The Nyangatom informants believe that their generation-sets are structurally similar to that of the Toposa than Turkana, and markedly original compared to the generation-sets of the other two groups. According to Harald Müller-Dempf (2008), the Toposa and the Turkana changed their generation-set system later in time due to environmental stress and social unrest that resulted from demographic crisis. The Nyangatom managed to maintain the original generation-set layout because their population in the past did not experience major upsurges to complicate the operation of the age-system.

young Murle men decided to run away from their homeland (today's South Sudan), together with their sisters, to avoid whipping that youngsters were expected to endure. When they arrived near the Tepes Mountain in the Kibish area, the young migrants were warmly received by the Nyangatom, specifically the Ngikapung territorial section. The Murle then moved to a place called Lere, near the Omo River, looking for a missing donkey. The Ngilingaqol territorial section of the Nyangatom already inhabiting the area helped the newcomers settle amongst them at Lere. With the intention to live on their own and maintain their identity, the group later moved further north along the eastern course of the Omo River to what is now called Murleland. After many years in their new homeland, the Murle crossed the Omo River and rejoined the Nyangatom due to conflict with the Kara and the Hamar, and because of human death caused by sleeping sickness. Until recently, the Murle represented a powerless minority within the Nyangatom society.

According to oral history, the Murle took refuge with the Nyangatom before their assimilation into the host community to become the seventh territorial section. In concrete terms, this means that the Murle completely lost their mother tongue and adopted the language and identity of their hosts. Following the introduction of an ethnic-based federal system in Ethiopia, some educated Murle demanded ethnic recognition of their community. In the 2007 population and housing census of Ethiopia (CSA 2008:85), Murle is listed for the first time as an independent ethnic group with a population of 1,469.¹¹ The zonal and regional governments also recognize Murle as an independent ethnic group. The rebirth of Murle identity through official endorsements marked the reconfiguration of their ethnic boundary.

The Koegu ethnic group (also Kwegu, Koyego, Muguji), with a population of 1974 in 2007 (CSA 2008: 85), was constituted by three major clans (Garshma, Woreba, and Baada) that migrated to the area from different directions and different ethnic groups (NyaMuKo 2010: 23-24). NyaMuKo presented the movement details as follows. The Garshma clan originated from the Aari (to the north) living in Baytsimal area. The Garshma first settled at a place called Marsha on the eastern side of the Omo River and later relocated to Kuchuru, a village across the river. The Woreba clan, believed to have originated from the Arbore people located further east, is reported to have lived in Mugugna, Nakure, and Woreba areas before the Kara joined them to settle in Dus village. In the late 1980s, the Woreba clan left Dus and started to live with the Nyangatom at Galgida due to conflict with the Kara.¹² The Baada clan migrated from the Bodi and Bacha groups further north and first settled at Makule, and then joined the Garshma clan at Qalo and finally moved together to their present location—Kuchuru.

¹¹ This official recognition of the Murle as an ethnic group displeased people who consider them as part of the Nyangatom. Some informants dismissed the new development as a wrong move instigated by the educated youth.

¹² According to Eisei Kurimoto (1998), the Koegu, who occupied a subordinate social position in Kara, switched alliance from the Kara to the Nyangatom following the rise in the military dominance of the later.

According to Hiroshi Matsuda (2008), the Koegu ethnic group was constituted by five local groups: the Duuyu (or Duyi), Adara, Baada, Dukule, and Waruba. The Duuyu and the Adara are believed to have come from the Mursi, the Baada (also Naada) from the Bodi, the Dukule (who are sub-divided into Worle and Tsodi groups) from the Aari, and the Waruba from the Arbore. Obviously, there are some differences between the NyaMuKo report and Matsuda's accounts regarding the names of the original migrants and whether they represent clans. NyaMuKo did not mention anything about the two groups (Duuyu and Adara) that came from the Mursi. However, the two sources of information are consistent in the presentation of the ethno-history of the Koegu people. Like the Murle, the Koegu group represents a minority in Nyangatom in terms of population size, political representation, economic resources, and military power.

Although the Koegu action to leave Dus (the village they shared with Kara) was viewed as a survival strategy, Matsuda (1994) cautioned that the relationship of the Koegu may be shifting from annexation by the Kara to assimilation by the Nyangatom. Matsuda (1994: 48-49) narrated the late 1980s event as follows:

Dus... had a mixed population of Koegu and Kara. The two groups were closely integrated in a relationship I call annexation.... While I was there [in 1988], this relationship broke down amidst conflict. As the distance between the Kara and the Koegu widened through violence, the latter moved closer to the powerful Nyangatom, a former enemy of both Kara and Koegu.

The Nyangatom ethnic boundary has been open for small non-Ateker groups desperately seeking refuge as a survival strategy. The Nyangatom take pride in shielding powerless groups against powerful enemies. The newly integrated groups are entitled to protection and resources available to ordinary Nyangatom. However, it has not been all about helping the weak on humanitarian grounds. The Nyangatom informants openly admitted that the incorporated ethnic groups brought several economic and security advantages. First, the Murle and the Koegu joined the Nyangatom with valuable resources: pasture and arable land along the Omo River. During the dry seasons, some Nyangatom move their livestock to Murle and Koegu territories, while others grow crops along the river on permanent basis. Second, the two groups are viewed as dependable allies and buffer zones against strong Nyangatom enemies such as the Daasanech from the south and the Hamar and the Kara from the east. Third, the Murle and the Koegu are too small in number to put pressure on Nyangatom resources and militarily too weak to cause security concerns. In short, the incorporation of the new groups contributed to the Nyangatom's resource base and military strength, which in turn ensured the safety of the people and continuity of the group.¹³

¹³ In 2007, the population of the Nyangatom was 25,252 (CSA 2008: 84-85). According to the same census report, their neighbors considered as enemies were quite numerous: Daasanech (48,067), Hamar (46,532), and Surma (27,886). The Mursi (7,500) and the Kara (1,464) always allied with their respective kinfolks, the Surma and the Hamar respectively. Therefore, as a survival strategy, the Nyangatom had to refrain from inter-

Blurred boundary with the Toposa

The ethnic boundary between the Nyangatom and the Toposa is blurred due to heavy emphasis on brotherhood and group solidarity. Based on mythical narratives and oral history, the Nyangatom believe that they share a common ancestry with the Toposa. The oral history goes on to state that they out-migrated together, due to an environmental crisis. When they reached the Mount Tepes area, however, they split into two and moved in different directions to exploit the available resources. This is when they believe to have started an independent existence. Other informants explained the separation into two groups resulted from a disagreement over how to eat elephant meat. While one group proposed to eat the meat fresh and to keep on traveling, the other group suggested the need to take time to slice and dry the meat before eating it. Those who ate the fresh elephant meat and left the scene immediately came to be known as the Nyam-etom ('elephant eaters', later the name was transformed into Nyang-atom or 'yellow guns'), and those who camped for a while and ate the *tosa* ('dry meat') became the Toposa. After many years, the descendants of the original migrants accidentally met in the forest while hunting wild animals, and found out (through genealogical counting) that they were not only both members of the Ateker, but also close relatives. Hence, they consider one another as *amuro-katta* (grandmother's thigh), an expression that emphasizes common ancestry and the notion of brotherhood.

There are cultural prohibitions that the Nyangatom and the Toposa people should not raid and kill each other. In Nyangatom, the concept of *emoit* is used contextually to describe a 'stranger' or an 'enemy.' This term is never used to refer to the Toposa people. As explained above, for Nyangatom, killing a fellow Nyangatom causes ritual impurity and is called "killing a person from the household". Killing Toposa, although not designated by the same expression, is also believed to cause ritual impurity, as the two groups are believed to be closely related. Thus, inter-ethnic killing between the two groups involves special ritual cleansing and blood compensation to the family of the deceased in a similar manner as homicide is resolved within Nyangatom. On the contrary, the Nyangatom neither pay nor receive blood compensation following reconciliation with groups considered as enemies.

The Nyangatom view the Toposa as belonging to their circle of trust. Trustworthiness is partly measured in terms of observing cultural prescriptions that stress the sharing of food and other resources and solidarity at times of crisis. For instance, at the individual household level, when a Nyangatom slaughters an animal, any Toposa (old or young) who happens to be around is entitled to the hindquarter as a matter of cultural right. One elder Nyangatom remarked,

The *amuro-katta* sharing is not based on age. Blood relationship does not matter. Marital affiliation is not necessary. Any male Toposa is my *amuro-katta*. Hence, it is my responsi-

mingling with their powerful neighbors to avoid subordination and recruit trustworthy allies to keep the power balance in the area.

bility to give the rear leg to my *amuro-katta*. As I carry the meat to him, I am supposed to walk slowly and limp,¹⁴ as if my legs are injured or the load is heavy. This is how we share meat and express our respect for each other.

Any Nyangatom would expect the same when his Toposa neighbor has slaughtered an animal. Failure to live up to this expectation is considered culturally unacceptable and may provoke annoyance and cursing. Informants indicated that the Nyangatom curses are considered effective and highly feared by the Toposa. As friends, relatives, and neighbors, the Nyangatom and the Toposa also engage in non-ritualized sharing of other foods such as grain. At times of scarcity, the Nyangatom travel to Toposa to get or buy sorghum from bond friends, relatives, or sellers.

At a community level, the Nyangatom and the Toposa share pasture, water, and residential areas peacefully. Seasonally, some Nyangatom households are reported to be migrating to the Nyangatom-Toposa border with their livestock. The decision of moving livestock in the direction of the Toposa border is based on strategic factors and trust, not to mention the ecological dimension. Keeping Nyangatom livestock in the common border and in Toposa territory also provides maximum security against risks of raiding. In other words, when it comes to livestock security, the Toposa are fully trusted by the Nyangatom.

Some Nyangatom people have established permanent residence in the Toposa villages called "Lotimor" and "Matarba". Some seasonal Nyangatom transmigrants temporarily leave their wives and children behind under the protection of their Toposa friends. Although on small scale, there exists Nyangatom-Toposa intermarriage. In most cases, the Nyangatom men take Toposa women as wives because they travel more often to Toposa than the Toposa men travel to Nyangatom.

The depth of the relationship between the two goes beyond sharing of food, pasture, water, and residential areas. They often form alliances to fight against their common enemies such as the Surma, the Turkana, or each other's unshared enemies (e.g., the Daasanech are considered as Nyangatom's enemy and the Jiye as Toposa's). Cooperation involves not only fighting enemies together but also supplying or providing access to firearms. In the 1980s, it was through the Toposa that the Nyangatom acquired modern automatic rifles (AK 47) that gave them military superiority, at least temporarily, over their neighbors. Some offenders (e.g., criminals) from both communities are reported to be escaping to the other side to avoid capture and evade justice.

On the whole, the relationship between the Nyangatom and the Toposa is based on a deep cultural connection and a strong sense of cooperation in a manner that respects their respective identities and ensures their continuity as independent groups. At the same time, the depth of the historical and cultural affiliations, the

¹⁴ The limping and the slow walk represent respect and express that the giver is at the service of the receiver.

strength of the strategic alliances, and the level of mutual trust between the two groups are so enormous and enduring that their ethnic differences have been downplayed in favor of narratives that focus on communalities and cooperation. From the perspective of the Nyangatom, their relationship with the Toposa provides a maximum advantage and poses a minimum risk in terms of resource sharing, security, and continuity.

Alteration of boundary with Turkana

The Turkana are viewed as fellow Ateker with whom the Nyangatom lived in peace in the past, a time many people are nostalgic about. According to the elderly informants, the Turkana people have migrated from Lodwar area and peacefully joined the Nyangatom in Kibish area. The local narrative about the northward expansion of the Turkana is consistent with the reports of Alex De Waal (1991) and Nene Mburu (2003) that the boundary of Turkana grazing and the limits of Kenyan administration moved north over the years. Terrence McCabe (1996) also discusses Turkana early migration as well as later expansion during which they pushed to the north and east to Lake Turkana.

During their early contact in Kibish, the Nyangatom welcomed the Turkana migrants from Lodwar (giving them access to settlement, pasture and water points); they cherished their common identity as Ateker; experienced intermarriage; and sometimes allied against the Jie of Uganda. The Ngilingaqol and Ngikapung territorial sections in the border area are reported to have experienced extensive marital and economic interactions with their Turkana neighbors. In those days, due to their intimacy and intense interaction, the physical and social boundaries between the two groups were rather blurred. The occurrence of intermarriage has gradually decreased as conflict intensified and the Nyangatom moved further east from the western side of the Kibish River due to security concern. At times of peace, there existed movement of people back-and-forth across the border for business and family visitation. In recent decades, conflicts occurred more frequently and peace deals lasted briefly rendering the area to be perpetually insecure.¹⁵

Nyangatom informants were asked whether they grew up in Kibish area experiencing serenity and love or fear and hatred. The answers were mixed. The elderly informants recounted many positive stories that shaped their dreams to visit Turkana and to establish relationships through marriage or bond-friendship. They also remarked that in the past, stick-fighting with the Turkana was seen as a sibling rivalry aimed at demonstrating competence. In recent decades, the introduction of modern firearms turned the traditional competitive display of agility into deadly clashes of mutual destruction. Many informants recounted having lost their

¹⁵ Some writers noted that the Nyangatom people might originally have migrated from Uganda due to Turkana pressure (Tornay 1979: 98; Mburu 2001: 150), and this suggests that they may have been rivals from early on. However, the informants of the present research did not establish any association between the Nyangatom exodus from the Karamoja and a conflict with the Turkana.

relatives, livestock, and land to the Turkana, and that they could not regain control over the lost land in Kibish, their traditional homeland. Neither could they launch counter-offensives that matched the massive and frequent Turkana attacks. Thus, those who grew up witnessing death, destruction, displacement, and loss of livestock especially since the 1988 infamous Kibish massacre locally called the *dio* incident¹⁶ have been deeply traumatized.

Nowadays, therefore, the Turkana are viewed *asemoit-loakora*, which literally means 'fighting enemies'—the same label given to the non-Ateker enemies such as the Surma and the Daasanach. The Nyangatom informants argued that their very existence as a dignified group has been shaken by their eviction from the western side of the Kibish river in 1988 and the continued displacement ever since. Hence, it was necessary to redefine their relationship. As mentioned above, killing other Nyangatom, Turkana, Toposa, and the newly incorporated members (Murle and Koegu) is traditionally associated with impurity that needs ritual cleansing and blood compensation. Since the level of enmity has grown so deep that killing the Turkana is no longer associated with ritual impurity, no purification is required, and no indemnity is paid (blood compensations is not paid to or received from enemies). The escalation of conflict, the brutality of the fights, the restriction of cross-border movement, the eviction of the Nyangatom from western side of the Kibish river, and the significant decline of intermarriage altered the physical and social boundaries between the Nyangatom and the Turkana from blurred to closed. Resisting Turkana advances is now considered as a survival strategy.

Despite the rise in the cycle of violence, the Nyangatom initiated repeated peace agreements, which were violated one after the other. For example, in 1998, ten years after the Kibish massacre of 700 people, the Nyangatom elders reached out to the Turkana elders and performed reconciliation rituals at Lokiriyama, Kenya. To the embarrassment of the Nyangatom, the Turkana launched an organized attack on the very day the Lokiriyama meeting was held. In 2004, elders from the two ethnic groups met at Kibish, Kenya, and swore not to attack and raid each other. Once again, according to Nyangatom informants, the Turkana violated the deal by launching an attack shortly after the meeting. In 2006, the Nyangatom *Woreda* administration sent a delegation to Lokitang, Kenya, to initiate peace talks. This initiative led to the January 2007 initial meeting at Kangaten, Ethiopia, and the March 2007 peace conference at Kibish. During this conference, elders of the Nyangatom and the Turkana signed a comprehensive peace agreement, which was violated in January 2008 allegedly by the Turkana. The 2008 Turmi Accord and the later peace agreements were similarly violated shortly after.

Although data are lacking from the Turkana side to counter the Nyangatom claims, it would be naïve to assume that the later have always been passive victims

¹⁶ During this incident, according to Alexander De Waal (1991: 345-6), some 700 Nyangatom were killed by the Kenyan forces, and in the attack, at least five villages in Ethiopia were partly destroyed. Dio is taken from the abbreviation 'DO', which stands for District Office in Kenya from which the Kenyan forces came.

and were not to blame for any attacks on Turkana soil.¹⁷ Also, given the portrayal of the Nyangatom, in the literature as expansionists, aggressors, fierce fighters, and/or dominant (Girke 2008; Turton 1994; Abbink 1993; Alvarsson 1989; Tornay 1979), one needs to understand the context for the new image that depicts them as tolerant and peace-seekers. It appears that a combination of factors, namely, the shortage of firearms, the military superiority of fighters on the Turkana side, modern education that provided an alternative life style for some youth, government programs that raised hope for social change, and religious teaching about sin/forgiveness may have discouraged the motivation towards offensive actions.

One might wonder why such intimately related and culturally connected people became enemies. The Nyangatom informants associated the problem with several recent changes/developments, including the growing tendency of the younger generation and the educated Turkana not to honor the decisions of their elders; commercial raiding and the participation of non-pastoral raiders; and the involvement of elements of the General Service Unit (military) of Kenya in assisting the Kenyan perpetrators. The downward spiral in the Nyangatom-Turkana relationship was actually set in motion by the British colonial administration during the first half of the 20th Century, and the conflict continued to escalate ever since. The following section sheds light on how pressure on scarce resources and military power imbalance altered the physical and social boundaries between the Nyangatom and the Turkana.

Some factors responsible for Nyangatom-Turkana discord

Land alienation and movement restriction

The northward expansion of the Turkana became evident during the colonial period. In the early 20th Century, certain Turkana sections are reported to have migrated to Ethiopia to avoid surrender to the British colonial army. According to Mburu (2001: 154), "Resistance to British military conquest was weak as some Turkana sections collaborated with the colonizers whereas those defiant evaded confrontation by simply relocating north to sanctuaries in Ethiopia." At this stage, the Turkana did not pose a real threat to Nyangatom interest. Probably the most serious blow to the pastoral economy in the Nyangatom area was the movement restrictions that followed the colonial demarcation of boundaries. The British colonial administration in Kenya took several measures that restricted free movement and denied access to traditional pastures and water points. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Ilemi Triangle was created and patrolled by the army called the King's African Rifles in the name of protecting the Turkana against the Nyangatom

¹⁷ Informants admitted to have engaged in counter-raids and counter-attacks but only after repeated enemy offenses. This claim sounds credible from the incident narrations of researchers (Girke 2008; Tornay 1979) and the 2009 IGAD-CEWARN report that the Nyangatom exhibited tolerance against repetitive Turkana attacks.

and the Daasanach.¹⁸ In July 1939, according to Mburu (2003), "Britain conducted a punitive raid with the King's African Rifles (KAR) supported by the Royal Air Force who dropped 250 pound bombs north of Ilemi."

The British troops of the KAR occupied Ilemi in 1941 and consolidated control over the area when the British entered Ethiopia to fight the Italians during World War II. In the 1940s, the British colonial administration in Kenya established "a series of police posts along the Ethiopian border at Kokuru, Liwan, Lokomarinyang, Kaiemothia and Kibish" (Almagor 1986: 98), thereby curtailing the movement of the Nyangatom and the Daasanach to their traditional grazing lands. This was a time when Ethiopia was deeply indebted to Britain for the help in expelling the Italian forces after five years of occupation. The Turkana were perceived as enemies of the British and had to be brutally pacified.¹⁹ At the same time, they profited from the colonial policy in that the boundary demarcation expanded their grazing territory further north deep into the Daasanach and Nyangatom territories. The Nyangatom-Turkana relationship worsened after the enclosure of the so-called Ilemi Triangle.²⁰

The Ilemi Triangle has been a disputed territory claimed by Ethiopia, Kenya, and the former Republic of Sudan for more than a century now. From the turn of the 20th Century to the 1970s, numerous meetings were held to determine the status of the area. Since the meetings were held without involving all disputants, the agreements failed to have binding effects. Temporary maps drawn during the colonial period place the triangle under Sudan's control. Sudan and Kenya made arrangements for the latter to administer the area. Hence, Kenya has *de facto* control over the triangle today.

The lack of demarcation meant underdevelopment of the area due to state neglect, prolonged Nyangatom hope to reclaim land, and protracted conflict to realize this hope. After 100 years, unfortunately, there seems to be no solution in sight. In the past, the three countries seemed to have chosen to avoid conflict over this remote and inaccessible location perceived to have marginal economic importance. With the Ilemi Triangle now described as potentially rich in unexplored oil reserves, the prospect for peace in the area remains bleak.

¹⁸ Paradoxically, during the same period the Turkana needed protection, the British military was responsible for the protection of the Karamoja of Uganda from Turkana aggressors (USAID 2002: 23).

¹⁹ The establishment of the colonial rule involved brutal military expeditions against the Turkana and the consequent disarmament, which made them vulnerable to attacks and raids by their northern neighbors (Mburu 2001).

²⁰ Nyangatom and Turkana were not the only to experience hostility partly due to the colonial legacy. More than half of what became Turkana District was transferred from Uganda to Kenya in 1926 (USAID 2002: 24) thereby exacerbating conflict between the Turkana and those who lost their land. The report further noted that during the punitive military expeditions in Turkana, the British seized large number of livestock, which were passed on to members of the Pokot ethnic group for taking part in the campaign on the side of the colonial power, and this increased the animosity of Turkana towards Pokot.

Nyangatom eviction from Kibish

The ordeals of the Nyangatom did not stop with the end of British colonial rule in Africa. Reports and informants revealed that they have continued to lose more land and more lives ever since. Tornay (1979: 103) reported his observation in 1970 as follows:

The Nyangatom feared the Kenyan police who were stationed 2 km from the Kibish... They said that if they crossed the river, the police would shoot at them. Since they had settlements on both sides of the river, they did in fact cross it daily to pasture their herds... They showed me the remains of a settlement, which they said the Kenyan police had destroyed a few years ago, killing the occupants in the process. For their part, the Kenyan police told me that they had orders to make a no man's land of the Ilemi Triangle.

In July 1988, the Kenyan government, which was planning to annex the Ilemi Triangle earlier in the year, massacred many Nyangatom and displaced the rest from the Kibish river valley (de Waal 1991; Matsuda 1994). Alexander de Waal (1991: 345-6) wrote:

[In] July 1988, the Kenyan police clashed with a group of Toposa or Nyangatom raiders who had previously attacked the Daasanech, and came of worst. Fifteen [Kenyan] policemen were killed, and some taken hostage. The Kenyan government responded the following day with an attack using helicopter gunships and paramilitary forces on the Nyangatom area of Kibish, which straddles Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. About 200 Nyangatom raiders and a minimum of 500 civilians were killed by the Kenyan forces over the following 18 days. In the attack, at least five villages in Ethiopia were partly destroyed, the Swedish Philadelphia Mission at Kibish was burned.

The 1988 Kibish massacre is locally known as the Dio incident, after the District Office of Kenya at Kibish from which the attack was launched. The Dio incident led to the forced relocation of some Nyangatom eastward as far as the Omo River, while others fled further north to Mount Naita. On the very day the Kenyans bombed the Nyangatom positions, the survivors fled the area in disarray, abandoning their chief called Loguti Lobotol, who died shortly after. The local people believe that the disappointed and humiliated chief cursed his people and the land, and that the curse is being manifested through natural disasters and man-made adversities.

Soon after the Kibish massacre, the Kenyan government is reported to have strengthened its presence by increasing the police force, establishing a military camp, and reinforcing the district administrative post. Since the 1988 incident, the grazing area that stretches from the Kibish River to the Tepes Mountain has been under Turkana control. The Turkana continued to attack and raid the Nyangatom by crossing the Kibish River, deep into Ethiopian territory. A large-scale attack in December 2008 on Lebere, Kajamakin and Natikar villages caused property destruction and a massive displacement of the Nyangatom people eastwards. In June 2011, the Turkana occupied Lebere for weeks and then withdrew reportedly after high-level government officials of the two countries were alerted.

Livestock raids

Among most pastoral groups, raiding is widely practiced to replenish lost stock or build new one. A USAID (2002: 5) report stated, "In some respects, this raiding can be seen as a quasi-legitimate sharing of resources, permitting groups on the verge of economic ruin and even starvation to reestablish their systems of food production and natural resource management." Traditionally, in Nyangatom, loss of animals to pastoral raiders was downplayed by comparing it against loss of animals to drought or animal disease. An informant remarked, "If your cattle are taken by your neighbors, you could get them back later. It is better that they are in the hands of people. If they perish due to drought, you lose them forever." Today, this perception has changed because raiding involves killing of people, raiders are not necessarily Turkana pastorals, and raided animals are sometimes sold out to butchers. As the frequency and intensity of raiding increased, the cycle of retribution and violent conflict in the Ilemi Triangle intensified. A high-profile raid took place in August 2009 when the Turkana allegedly raided more than 13,316 livestock from the Nyangatom.

The practice of raiding is reported to have transformed because of the alleged involvement of some elements of the Kenyan security force, livestock traders, arms dealers, and armed gangsters (Omolo 2011; Teshome 2010). The alleged non-pastoral actors behind cattle rustling are reported to be employing sophisticated strategies to ensure success in raiding. These include meticulous planning and execution of raids, the use of advanced automatic weapons, the use of trucks to load and drive the animals away, and the selling of animals immediately. This makes the defense and retrieval of raided animals almost impossible.

On the whole, despite their historical connection and close cooperation, the Nyangatom and the Turkana have become archenemies locked in protracted bloody fighting and livestock raiding. The Turkana are portrayed as deceitful, untrustworthy, aggressors, merciless killers, and averse to reconciliation. Since defending the people and livestock of the Nyangatom is considered as a duty, and since revenge against strong enemies brings prestige, the Nyangatom people revere killing and raiding the Turkana and other enemies.

Conclusion

Ethnic boundaries are characterized by fluidity, permeability, or shifts and these features serve as mechanisms for ethnic inclusion and exclusion. While the typical tendency of most ethnic groups seems to be upholding the principle of either expansion, contraction or keeping blurred boundary, the Nyangatom people appear to have developed a unique cultural adaptation that combines all elements at the same time. To be specific, the Nyangatom expanded their boundaries through the incorporation of the powerless Murle and Koegu; maintained strong alliance with the Toposa to the extent of blurring the boundary between them; severed alliance with the powerful Turkana that led to boundary alteration; and refrained from

intermingling with the powerful Dassanech and Surma to avoid subordination. The differential adaptation of boundary mechanisms can be explained in terms of strategic reasons: control over resources and maintaining power balance. The Nyangatom chose to cooperate with groups (whether Ateker or non-Ateker) that posed a minimum risk and promised a maximum advantage both economically and militarily. The physical and social boundaries are kept open for those who earned their trust and closed for those outside of their circle of trust. This conscious and rational decision-making behavior should not be reduced to a cost-benefit analysis aimed at maximizing economic gain or attaining military superiority. In Nyangatom, the boundary management mechanism is dictated by the need to maintain social identity and ensure continuity with integrity and dignity.

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