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# Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa

## Age Systems in Transition

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# 5 Generational Systems on the Threshold of the Third Millennium: An Anthropological Perspective

SERGE A. M. TORNAY<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, when a new geopolitical situation has proved to be disastrous in many regions, particularly in Africa, are East African age systems in transition? Do they represent outmoded forms of social organization? In the present paper, I shall try to discuss such issues within the limited framework of some East African societies with generation systems. But let me first mention a recent, thematic, issue of *L'Homme* (no. 134, 1995) devoted to 'Age and Generations'. In her comparative paper A.M. Peatrik underlines Paul Spencer's contribution (1978) to the demography of generation systems. She illustrates the importance of demography for a global understanding of East African age and generation systems. She contrasts demographically 'restrictive' systems, the most typical example of which is that of the Meru of Kenya whom she has studied in the field, with 'fluctuating' systems which are not only far from being 'Malthusian' but, on the contrary, do everything possible to optimize the fertility of women and men alike. This is why, in the Karimojong cluster, as well as amongst the Gikuyu, women are not classified as marriageable or not marriageable by the generation system. Men's choices are limited only by the incest prohibitions, and marriage is a private affair. In order to maximize the benefits, new partners are continually thrown in. Polygamy is valued and fathers and sons are allowed to procreate at the same time: this is seen as a sign of the family's prosperity. These societies are expanding territorially and demographically. In contrast to this, amongst the Boran, Meru, Konso, Rendille and others, significant restrictions are placed on female fertility as well as on male procreation; and for parents and children to procreate at the same time is considered quite unacceptable. The population is either static or decreasing, although the

deficit might be made up by immigration as amongst the Meru. Obviously there are intermediate examples in East Africa, notably the Maasai about whom Peatrik has made some interesting comments.

This typology is also interesting from a political point of view. Whereas in restricted systems there is a tendency for the short-term transmission of power between the sub-divisions of generations (see the *gada* type systems, in which a change of the set 'in power' occurs every eight years), in fluctuating systems the generational and generative period is longer drawn out: men marry late in life and there are no social limitations or constraints on paternity; men can even continue to have legal children after death, by their legitimate wives. There is no female initiation and girls are allowed to have sexual intercourse before marriage; and, even when male initiation exists, it is possible for men to ignore it in practice amongst many of these peoples. Existing models (Spencer, 1978; Müller, 1989; 1991 and Tornay, 1989a) show that there is, at the level of the system, a generational interval of a little more than fifty years, while at the level of individual families the interval is only about thirty years. It follows that power between social generations is transmitted only about every fifty years (although there is a tendency amongst the Toposa for this period to be broken up, a point further explained below). Peatrik rightly emphasizes that 'these societies try to reconcile two diverging principles: a generational political principle and domestic interests which encourage fertility' (1995: 39). It is important to bear in mind that these ideas are not necessarily capable of generalization to all East African systems. The discussion which follows is intended to apply in the first place to the peoples of the Karimojong cluster.

For my part, I have presented (1995) a sociological argument about the generational systems of the Karimojong type. I then tried to identify, with reference to a common structure, the events which reveal the specific political dynamic of the system. Obviously, one of its functions is to ensure social cohesion but, as with all segmentary systems, it has to cope periodically with tensions: (a) tensions between seniors and juniors within the same generation, which normally leads to the emergence of separate age-sets, but which may also cause a political break-up of that generation; (b) conflicts between fathers and sons which can cause the secession of the latter and the emergence of a new, autonomous political entity. Since both processes are documented in the ethno-history of the cultural cluster, the case was ideal for comparative, structural, analysis.

My aims in the present paper are (i) to give specific information on the Nyangatom system by means of a comparison with the Karimojong system; (ii) to analyze the Nyangatom institution of the *asapan*-man, which seems to be unique in the Karimojong cluster; (iii) to question the dysfunctions of two related systems (Toposa and Nyangatom) throughout

history; (iv) to draw conclusions about the ideological background of the generational system.

### Two Generational Systems in a Comparative Perspective

*An outline of the system, with special reference to the Nyangatom*

If the *gada* system of the Boran is a mechanism for integrating clans which are the truly corporate units of society (Bassi, 1994), the situation is clearly different amongst the Karimojong group of peoples. Here clans are dispersed, both among the territorial sections of each tribe and among the tribes themselves. They do not function as corporate entities. It is not a lineage system either, but it rests on a structure of patriarchal families (*awuyi*: the physical settlement and the polygynic family) which are segmented into matrifocal units (*ekol*: the day hut and the mother with her progeny). The corporate units of the society are (a) generations and (b) sub-divisions into age-groups and age-sets (see below) of these generations. This corporateness is seen at four politico-territorial levels: the settlement, the territorial section, the tribe and the intertribal level, where, whether between enemies or friends, there is precise knowledge of generational differences and equivalents. How does the system work?

- (a) A multi-clanic group of contemporaries labelled *Ngiseukop*, 'Beginners of the country', is remembered in ethno-history as the generation which founded the new polity. According to the principle of patrilineal descent, all the children of this first generation, and only those, make up the second generation. The process continues, so that the entire population is distributed into successive generations which I call *species* because they are named arbitrarily after the names of animal species (Zebras, Elephants, Tortoises, etc.) or natural features such as Mountains etc.<sup>2</sup> Whether the naming is cyclical or linear does not have any bearing on the system itself.
- (b) Each generation has to wait its turn to reach a position of pre-eminence in the society, namely the status of senior generation which I call, following the Nyangatom, Fathers of the country. In the literature, this generation is usually said to be 'in power', but it is more than power. It is also a matter of legitimacy and authority. So, for as long as a society chooses to ignore, or refuses to accept, an outside ruler, the Fathers are 'a corporate body invested with sovereignty'.<sup>3</sup>
- (c) In age-grade systems the principle of seniority is lineal and transitive. In the generation system this rule is bent by a distribution of genera-

tions into two status-sets ('left-hand and right-hand' of the *akiriket* or ceremonial sitting order). These classes are considered to be equivalent but each has to wait its turn in order to attain senior status. If the Fathers are members of the left-hand stream, their grandfathers and grandsons are sitting with them; at the same time the Sons of the country are members of the right-hand stream and their alternate generations are assimilated to them. In other words the generation system consists of only two grades or statuses: Fathers of the country and Sons of the country.<sup>1</sup>

- (d) A crucial moment is when there is an inversion of status between the left and the right hand. This is the moment of generational transition or succession. The demographic models show that this crucial event occurs only twice in a hundred years. The same models show that, although a generation can exist for as long as 230 years, its members can only occupy the pre-eminent status of Fathers for around fifty years. Table 5.1. shows a reconstruction of the Nyangatom system by means of a demographic simulation.

Table 5.1 Hypothetical reconstruction of the Nyangatom generation system

Generation name	Date of appearance	Period in power	Date of extinction
Country Beginners	?	around 1700	?
Wild Dogs	1600	1730-80	1830
Zebras	1650	1780-1830	1880
Tortoises	1700	1830-80	1930
Mountains	1750	1880-1930	1980
Elephants	1800	1930-80	2030
Ostriches	1850	(?)1980-2030	(?) 2080
Antelopes	1900	(?)2030-80	(?) 2130
Buffaloes	1950	(?)2080-2130	(?) 2180

Sources: 1973 census data in Tornay 1989: 651-79; computer simulation by Müller in Tornay, 1989: 517-25).

Each generation is a lasting social entity with its own history: it appears, it grows in numbers, it reaches its demographic peak and political maturity, then it begins a long decline until it disappears. For more than a century each generation includes men of all ages, all of whom are considered brothers and ought to prove it by their solidarity. Of course, there are seniors and juniors and seniority entails coercive authority. Each generation is made up of local age-groups which, at a territorial, inter-territorial or possibly tribal level, progressively unite into age-sets. Each

age-group recruits the young men of a settlement or neighbourhood (when they prove able to herd cattle and to scout in the bush), for a period of six to ten years. The senior members of the group will try to be recognized as a named age-set by the most senior members of their generation; they eventually achieve this by making payments to their senior generation-mates. At the same time, those seniors of the new age-set tend to exercise a tough authority over their juniors, imposing heavy duties on them, and beating them if they refuse to obey. This normally generates resentment and desire for autonomy among the juniors. If tension persists, they will wait till they feel strong enough to oppose their senior age-mates, when they eventually provoke an *ameto*, an open rebellion. Mock fights, but at times real stick fights, arise between the two parties, the solution of the crisis being the provisional recognition of the junior age group as an entity of its own; in the end, they will obtain full recognition when the name which they claim for themselves is accepted by the eldest living set of their generation. Thus antagonism between adjacent age-sets is both a demographic and a sociological process, while antagonism between more distant age-sets within one generation may lead to the break-up of the generation, as in the Toposa case mentioned below.<sup>3</sup>

In the literature, generation systems have sometimes been judged dysfunctional because generations 'artificially' bring together cohorts of all ages. In fact, this bringing together is only dysfunctional in relation to particular roles such as the military one. But Gulliver himself has stressed that the generation system of the Jie was not a military organization, a point that both John Lamphear and I have confirmed for related peoples. What are the advantages of mixed ages within the generations? What is the spirit of the system?

- (a) Basic rule: *feed your fathers*. To do this in a pastoral setting you cannot use your fathers' cattle. You need cattle and small stock either of your own or from your peers. You will have your own cattle if you are an *elope*, owner of a herd, but you can only acquire this status if you have no father living, and no father's brothers or elder full brothers. Outside your family, you may obtain cattle from members of your age-group or from older members of your generation. If you honour the seniors of your generation they may help you in feeding common fathers.
- (b) Secondary rule: *feed your peers*. To do this you can, of course, use your own cattle if you are an *elope*; if you are not, you may obtain cattle from elder brothers, both within your family or within your generation. Last but not least, you may receive cattle or small stock from your own father who thus encourages your goodwill as a herder and warrior.

These fraternal and filial offerings are the normal expression, at certain

times on a daily basis, of public life from the local to the tribal level. Killing an ox for generation mates should be considered an offering; in contrast, killing an animal for fathers should be regarded as a sacrifice because the sons/fathers relationship has a religious dimension. After the slaughter of the animal and while the meat is being roasted, current affairs are formally laid before the audience, bad actions are denounced and criticized while good actions are held up as an example. The providers of the meat are praised and blessed. The fathers call on Akuj, 'God', to witness their words: calling for the extermination of their enemies and for the prosperity and fertility of their own sons, wives, children and animals. The filial offering (called *apeyo*, literally 'invitation') is not just an act of butchery, followed by a meat feast and a prayer after the meal: anthropologically, it is a *sacrifice*. Of course, as Luc de Heusch (1986; criticizing Evans-Pritchard, 1954 on Nuer sacrifice) and Eisei Kurimoto (1992) have aptly shown, the Judeo-Christian model of sacrifice does not fit Nilotic realities. The Nyangatom sacrifice their oxen as oxen, not as themselves,<sup>6</sup> and they offer them not to God but to their fathers. In doing so they pay an endless debt, that of life itself. Akuj is only summoned to witness their piety. In return, the fathers call on Akuj to witness the blessing of their children and the cursing of their enemies.<sup>7</sup> The Nyangatom do not rely on their dead: the generation system does not produce ancestors. Thus the living fathers, being life-givers (procreation, blessing) as well as life-takers (cursing), are in the same position as ancestors (as in South East Asia) or gods (as in Hinduism, Judaism, etc.) to whom sacrifices are offered in payment for the debt of life.

#### *A comparison between the Karimojong and Nyangatom systems*

Like other African social systems, the generation system rests on mechanisms of initiation. Within the Karimojong cluster, different groups have a different interpretation of, or adapt in different ways to, this demand. Since there are two fundamental statuses one would expect the system to distinguish between two steps: recognition as Sons, which can be called initiation, and accession to the status of Fathers, called succession or transition. This logic is clearly seen in the model of the Karimojong system provided by Dyson-Hudson (1963).

- (a) **Karimojong**. The Karimojong conceive of their system as a repeating cycle of four generations (*nga-nyameta*, 'groups of those who eat together'), Zebras, Mountains, Gazelles and Lions. At any one moment only two generations are recognized as formally in existence: the senior generation which has stopped recruiting members and the junior generation

which is still recruiting. Its growth is accompanied by the successive initiation of a series of age-sets (*nga-sapanisia*). Once the process is completed, these age-sets will constitute the new senior generation. The Karimojong make a clear distinction between the initiation (*asapan*) of age-sets and generational succession ('dividing the haunch').

*Initiation.* The first phase, which is called 'spearing the ox', takes place near the settlement. Each *initiand* spears an ox of the family herd. The fathers of the initiands anoint each of their sons with the contents of the rumen of the sacrificed ox. Then they eat the roasted meat, inviting their sons, including the initiands, to join them in the feast. For Dyson-Hudson, the symbolism and values expressed in initiation are an affirmation of the supremacy of the senior generation and a reaffirmation of paternity, which initiation extends from the domestic level to the tribal level. As for the killing of the ox by the initiand, Dyson-Hudson sees this as prefiguring his role in later public ceremonies, including that in which he will, in his turn, eventually be honoured by the members of a new generation.

*Succession.* Age-sets can only be formed within a generation which has already been formally opened. The opening of a new generation implies the retirement of its alternate senior generation and the promotion of the intermediate generation from the status of junior to that of senior. The whole ceremonial process is called *akiding amuro*, 'dividing the haunch'. This ceremony is held once for the whole tribe. It takes place at Apule, the sacred place of the tribe. Representatives of each section take part with their wives, cattle and ornaments.

The first step is called *akuwar asapanet*, 'acquiring the thing of initiation'. Those who are about to become seniors prepare a ceremonial enclosure and gather *unbroken* branches to make a new fire. One of these men, chosen by the senior elders, spears a piebald ox, yellowish-brown and white. The ox is cut up and roasted, with the exception of the haunches, from which only the perineal meat has been cut away. The perineal meat, called *elamacar*, is roasted and presented to the most senior elder present at the ceremony, who cuts it up and, contrary to normal practice, shares it with the members of the junior generation. After prayers conducted by the same elder, calling down the blessing of Akuj on the juniors who are going to assume responsibility for the country, all the participants share the roasted meat of the sacrificial animal. After the feast, the ritual of the division of the haunches takes place. The most senior elder takes hold of the blade of a spear with a long shaft, called 'the twisted spear of custom'. Behind him the largest number of members possible of the junior generation also take hold of the shaft, ranged according to their age. As the old man guides the blade, they all together divide the meat into two halves through the pelvis. The meat is then roasted and eaten in a convivial fashion by all the participants. On returning to their settlements

the members of the former junior generation proclaim their new senior status by announcing that their sons are able to be initiated. Throughout the country initiations are prepared and take place *en masse*, a fact which reflects the long wait which has preceded the generational transition.

According to Dyson-Hudson, one cannot enter a Karimojong generation simply by the fact of birth, as one can amongst the Nyangatom: it is necessary to wait for the formal opening of a generation of juniors and to go through initiation, a ceremony which places each individual into a previously 'opened' and named age-set. Until his initiation, a Karimojong hardly seems to play any role in public life. From this point of view he is a minor. On the other hand, Dyson-Hudson expressly notes that, in his private life, he suffers little handicap because of his politico-religious minority: 'When a person is out of phase with the state of recruiting ... he may marry prior to initiation, but in general the Karimojong disapprove of this and require men to be socially adult before taking a wife. This puts no limit on sexual activity for the uninitiated, however, since premarital relations are considered normal for both sexes and concubinage is permitted' (1963: 388). As far as military activity is concerned, it is hardly possible for this to take place outside an age-group, formally constituted by the initiation of its members. Ideally it is the responsibility of the junior generation to take part in military activity, while it is the privilege of the senior generation to hold political authority. One can understand from this why the Karimojong are preoccupied with the problem of adjusting their system to the constraints which follow from the classification of sons according to a generational rule. By means of various adjustments, they seem (or at least they seemed at the time of Dyson-Hudson's study, from 1956 to 1958) able to achieve a reasonable degree of congruence between age and generation. The junior adults are the initiands and initiates, the active body of herders and warriors; in their private lives they are bachelors or at the beginning of their matrimonial careers; even if they are married, they remain under the authority of their father or his legal substitute such as a father's brother or an elder brother. Ideally, older adult men are the 'owners' of cattle and people. They are the men who initiate their sons and who possess political and religious authority. They are fathers of a family and Fathers of the country, invested with supernatural power.

(b) *Nyangatom*. During the 1970s there were five generations with living members: Mountains, Elephants (the titular Fathers), Ostriches (the titular Sons), Antelopes and Buffaloes. Only the Mountains and the Elephants had 'made *asapan*' and they did so age-set by age-set. No *asapan* had been given to the Ostriches, but their adults, like those of junior generations, do

belong to named and recognized age-sets, wear an adult hair-style and are full legal adults. Many of them are heads of families and owners of herds who participate in public meetings; they are the most numerous sacrificers, obeying the basic injunction, 'feed your fathers', an injunction which applies to all generations with living members. This filial service is not, in Nyangatom practice, confined to men who have made *asapan*. In slaughtering animals for their fathers, the Nyangatom initiate themselves as sons and do not become real fathers themselves until their own sons begin killing animals for them.

During those years of drought, famine and warfare (Fukui and Turton, 1979), there was a high level of social tension. It was publicly debated whether the Elephants were going to hand over power voluntarily or whether the Ostriches should take the initiative by provoking the transition. The Elephants said that they were going to 'give *asapan*' to their sons. But the latter suggested that they might 'make *asapan*' of their own accord. Opinions varied according to the generational status of the actors<sup>6</sup> but everyone was in agreement about the structure and content of the transition rite.

#### The Nyangatom *Asapan* or the Transmission of Sovereignty

In the Karimojong cluster, the word *asapan* denotes several realities.<sup>9</sup> According to Nyangatom tradition, the *asapan* or transmission ceremony begins when five representatives of the men who are about to become Fathers spend a night in the bush. The next morning an ox is drugged with poisonous plants before having its throat cut<sup>10</sup> by the *asapan*-man, a member of the retiring generation: this key-person has been previously 'bought' from his family, by means of the payment of cattle, by members of his own generation. Having cut the ox's throat he touches the forehead of the five representatives of the new generation, thus giving them *asapan*, that is making them the new Fathers of the country. After this he is supposed to lose his mind and wander off into the bush and die. The cattle given in payment for this person allow his family to obtain a wife who will bear children to him. His name seems to become tabooed afterwards and he both assumes and symbolizes, in a dramatic way, the disappearance of his generation. The *asapan* ox is offered by the sons to the retiring fathers but both generations share the meat feast. After this initial ceremony, throughout the country, the age-sets of the promoted generation collectively affirm their *asapan* by sacrificing oxen for their retiring fathers. During these great festivities the latter are the recipients of the offerings, but this will be the last time they are fed *de jure* as Fathers of the country.

This model represents a condensation of the two-stage Karimojong

model. This being so, how do Nyangatom age-sets come into existence within generations? Comparative data (for example from Karimojong, Turkana and Toposa) show that the *asapan* initiation confers the right to wear the adult hair-style, a head-dress of coloured clay which can support decorative feathers. Amongst the Nyangatom, sons become members by birth, even if informally, of the generation which follows that of their fathers. Children and adults nevertheless have distinct statuses, recognizable by their hair-style. The adoption of the adult hair-style occurs independently within each generation, whatever its status position. As they approach adulthood and begin to participate in raids and to marry, young men, who have already managed to be recognized as an age-group, and who wish to be recognized as members of an age-set, demand their hair-style from their immediate seniors who give it in return for payments and gifts of tobacco, ornaments, small stock, etc. They then demand from the most senior set of the generation the right to bear the name which they have chosen for themselves and which evokes one of their exploits or the ox which they sacrificed for their seniors. In this respect, the adoption of a hair-style amongst the Nyangatom is analogous to Turkana initiation, except that the Nyangatom do not call this *asapan* and give it much less importance.<sup>11</sup> During the 1970s the clay head-dress was worn by a majority of Nyangatom adult men. As soon as the senior members of an age-set had obtained permission from their generational elders to wear the head-dress, junior members of the set imitated them without having again to 'bribe' their senior generation-mates.

For the Karimojong, initiation consists of the completion of the filial sacrifice. At succession a man of the new generation spears a piebald ox which is then consumed in a convivial feast. Dyson-Hudson gives us only one indication about the status of this man who is, in appearance only, similar to the *asapan*-man of the Nyangatom. He is 'nominated by the gathered seniors'. So he is chosen by them but he is a member of the new generation, while the *asapan*-man is chosen by his fellow-generation members who are retiring from their position as Fathers of the country. Furthermore, no particular fate is expected to overtake the Karimojong officiant. In any case, it is not the sacrifice which is seen by Dyson-Hudson as the mechanism of the succession but the division of the haunches, in his opinion an explicit symbol of the separation of the two generations.

The two ritual situations differ profoundly. Amongst the Nyangatom, we see a sacrifice which is quite special (a) in relation to the identity of the sacrificer (a Father of the country who is condemned to die in a state of madness); (b) in relation to the special way of putting the sacrificial animal to death; (c) in relation to the emergence of the idea of a substitution: in this unique case, the animal victim seems to stand for its sacrificer.<sup>12</sup> The Nyangatom say that the man will soon die: is it not from the poisonous

plants<sup>13</sup> which have been put into the mouth of the animal before its death? The head of the ox, which has been in contact with these medicines, and which is normally eaten collectively by the sons who sacrifice for their fathers, is, in this particular case, eaten only by the sacrificer, who is a Father, but who has been 'bought' by his generation-mates for the dangerous office. Human sacrifice is therefore barely concealed, which makes succession absolutely distinct from the filial offering.

Dyson-Hudson states that, amongst the Karimojong, the sacrificial act is confined to a particular category, namely, that of the initiates. It is not easy to envisage how such a restriction would be put into practice. The non-initiates, in Dyson-Hudson's sense, could make up, according to the state of the generational system, a significant part of the adult population. Inability to act as a sacrificer, whether the sacrifice is intended to feed the fathers, cure illness or eliminate pollution, could result in a dangerous situation for the community. The Nyangatom Elephants remembered having made *asapan*, age-set by age-set, but they did not refer to the initial ceremony which should, as amongst the Karimojong, have opened their generation to initiation as sons. They considered that the *asapan* of their generation was complete; they were acting as Fathers of the country and no one denied them this status. For their part the Ostriches recognized that their defunct age-sets had disappeared without having 'made *asapan*'. They insisted, however, that it was urgent, in their eyes, that the Fathers of the country should confer *asapan* on them; and that as soon as this had been done all the Ostriches, including those not yet born, would be promoted to the rank of Fathers. It seems clear therefore that both the Fathers and the Sons conceived of *asapan* as basically not an initiation to the status of Sons, but as a transition to that of Fathers.

The generational identity of the *asapan*-man calls for comment. According to Kotol, himself an Elephant, there is no doubt that the generation which is leaving power ought to provide the officiant. His bovine substitute is provided by the new generation. In killing this animal the officiant is clearly reversing the normal direction of the filial offering (a Father killing an ox offered by his sons), committing in the process a kind of symbolic suicide. The *asapan*-man strongly resembles a divine king who is required to stop breathing. In any case he says of himself, 'It is finished for me. I am at the end.' Through him, his whole generation makes the same confession and I interpret the individual loss of reasoning as a metaphor for the collective loss of paternity. But at the same period, the Ostriches hold a different opinion about the identity of the next *asapan*-man: he ought to be one of themselves. What should one make of their view? The Ostriches, who had not 'made *asapan*', were nevertheless sacrificing, just like Karimojong initiates. Obviously it was pragmatically that the Nyangatom ignored the status of non-initiates (except for

'children' who had not yet killed any animal to feed their fathers) and conceived of the *asapan* ceremony of their Turkana neighbours and their own *asapan* as more or less the same ritual. They had simply put into practice the (analytical) assumption that whoever has sacrificed has been initiated. However, it remained clear to them that if killing oxen for Fathers means becoming true Sons, it does not turn the latter into Fathers of the country. In other words, the implicit initiation attained by killing livestock for feeding the fathers can only promote people to the first status, that of Sons; the promotion to the higher status of Fathers requires the 'hard stuff', the *asapan* ceremony with an *asapan*-man. During the 1970s both Elephants and Ostriches expressed their desire to organize the ceremony, but nothing was done. It was not until 1989 that I learned about a blockage of the *asapan* process, and until my return in 1991 that I discovered the reasons for it.

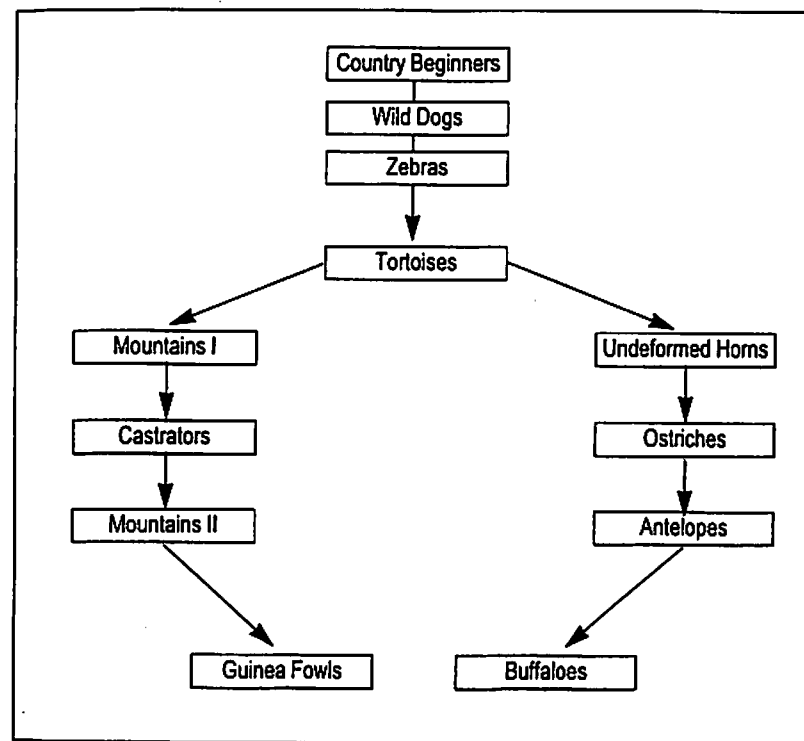


Figure 5.1 The Toposa system (after Müller, 1991: 561)

## Generation Systems and Their Dysfunctions

*A comparative comment on the Toposa. (Figure 5.1)*

One sequence of the Toposa generation names is practically identical to that of the Nyangatom: this underlines the close ethno-historical relationship between these two peoples and also their continuous coming together. According to Müller (1991), a quarrel occurred amongst the Toposa around 1880, which resulted in a schism amongst the sons of the Tortoises. To begin with, they were all Mountains but the quarrel led to a secession of the juniors who created a new 'league', calling themselves the 'Undeformed Horns'. Tribal unity was not broken, however, and a hundred years later, during the course of the 1980s, the descendants of the two 'leagues' were talking about reuniting. Around 1982-3 the situation was as follows. The Ostriches, more specifically their age-set called Ngikurono, were recognized as the 'set in power'.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the 1980s the Ostriches had not begun to 'give *asapan*' to their sons the Antelopes because they themselves had not yet completed the *asapan* of their own juniors. One therefore has a situation which, on the one hand, reflects the 'decompacted' Karimojong system and, on the other, the Nyangatom 'condensation' or the bringing together of making *asapan* and becoming Fathers of the country.

*The 'blockage' of the Nyangatom system*

In 1989 a young Nyangatom, at that time an administrator in Jinka, wrote to tell me that the *asapan* of the Ostriches had failed because nobody agreed to play the role of *asapan*-man. I wondered if the custom had been explicitly forbidden by the (at that time communist) government, but it is clear that the Ngikumama, the section responsible for providing the officiant, had refused to do so. When I returned to the field in November 1991 the situation had not changed and I learned something which had been carefully hidden from me up to then: that a quarrel had broken out 'in the past' between the Elephants and the Ostriches, the latter demanded their *asapan*, and when their fathers refused, they hit them with sticks. Because of this unpardonable insult the refusal of the Elephants became definitive. In order to revenge themselves for this affront, the senior Ostriches cursed, not their fathers, which would be senseless and ineffective, but their own junior generation-mates: 'if you eventually accept initiation which has been refused to us, may you all die!'

What could have happened? According to the demographic model, the

Elephants should have become Fathers of the country around 1930 and 'reigned' until 1980. They confirmed that they had made *asapan*, set after set, and the chronology of the generation suggests that these initiations started at the beginning of the century, at the time of Menelik's conquest. At that time the Elephants were in fact the Sons of the country which was under the authority of the Mountains. One of the latter, Loteng, persuaded the Nyangatom that they had no choice but to submit to the Emperor and he became the first Nyangatom *balabbat*. The quarrel between Elephants and Ostriches must have occurred much later, probably during the 1930s, just before the Italian episode, at a time when the Elephants should have become Fathers of the country. The conflict would not only deprive the Ostriches of *asapan* but, equally, would fix the Elephants in the *status quo*: it would be only in a *de facto* sense that, because of the disappearance of the Mountains, they would eventually become Fathers. This position was not denied to them during the 1970s but, since they had not yet 'given *asapan*' to their sons, *de jure* they were still Sons of the country.

One understands that the system is not only an arena for political debate but functions as a political game: promoting a new generation or refusing to do so are political issues. Normally, the generation in power takes all important political decisions and is vested with religious authority. But with time the Sons gradually take decisions about pastoral and military policies. The Fathers may concede this to them, but in fact, at the end of their reign, they have no alternative but to abandon some of their authority. As regards privileges, the difference between Fathers and Sons might not be of such importance, since both generations have sons to feed them. It is possible that the Nyangatom system today is running a risk comparable to that which faced the Toposa a century ago, namely, the emergence of two concurrent leagues, each of which, as with the Turkana 'alternations', would hold its own rituals without reference to the other as a source of legitimacy. This is the implicit threat that the Ostriches have in mind when they consider making *asapan* for themselves, choosing an officiant from their own generation and, by this means, becoming Mountains, two generations above their present status. They feel that the 'blockage' of the system has kept them for too long in an *under-aged* status, that of sons of Sons who had gained only the *de facto* status of Fathers. In order to become Fathers themselves, which implies being able legitimately to initiate their own sons in the future, they must take the place of their grandfathers the Mountains who have regularly initiated their sons the Elephants. Is this how the Nyangatom system might evolve? The history of the coming decades will tell us.

The Toposa and Nyangatom systems have reflected, throughout this century, a compromise between an initiatory logic and a management of both generational time and the crises which are linked to the slowing



down of the system by the generation occupying the dominant position. These systems, then, are in a *chronic state of transition* which gives them a good chance of surviving their entry, despite new disturbances, into the third millennium. Since the act of submission to the Emperor Menelik at the beginning of the century one could say that the Nyangatom Fathers have lost their sovereignty, at least vis-à-vis the outside, but internally certainly not their authority nor their power of sanction. Generational precedence continues to be respected and the filial offering continues to be the civic and religious act which confirms membership of the society.

What changes have occurred since the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, and what might be their impact on the generational system?

Outside influence has grown, mainly because of the presence, since 1972, of a non-governmental organization, the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission (SPCM), which has worked in three main sectors: education, health and irrigated agriculture; and partly because of the intervention of the socialist regime, which has replaced three *balabbat* with about thirty *lokamember* or chairmen of the *kebele*.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the 1980s, a majority of Nyangatom *kebele* representatives were Ostriches, a generation to whom the Elephants had handed over 'the affairs of war' but who were above all preoccupied with the *asapan* ritual which would promote them to fatherhood of the country. Politically, the time of the end of the Mengistu regime (1991) was euphoric in Nyangatom: people felt liberated from a regime from which they had not suffered much but which was perceived as authoritarian; the Transitional government of 'Tigrean rebels' announced that taxes would be abolished and the people would be able to run their own affairs; within three months a purely Nyangatom militia replaced the local contingent of Mengistu's disbanded army; these twenty-five soldiers returned triumphantly with honestly acquired kalashnikovs and paraded as symbols of the liberty which had been given back to their people. These young men, some of whom had a school education, belonged mainly to the Ostriches, but some of them to the Antelopes and the Buffaloes. The Elephants, still Fathers of the country since their sons the Ostriches had not yet been promoted officially, assured me that they would keep all of these 'children' under their control. The NGO, which had been requested to feed the militia for a time, handed over the rations to the Elephants to distribute to the militia at their discretion. In this context of a new feeling of prosperity, demographic growth<sup>16</sup> and political autonomy, the Ostriches remembered the old curse which had prevented them from receiving *asapan* and, therefore, from being considered the true Fathers of the country.

Under the Transitional government, the *kebele* system has survived and several localities have not felt it necessary to change their representative. In general, these office-holders, who are adults with no school education,



Photo 5.1 Nyangatom militia men  
(Omo river, December 1991)

are not politicized and their main contact is with the staff of the NGO rather than with the government. So it is unlikely that the chairmanship of the *kebele* would lead to quick changes in the society. It could be otherwise, however, with the actual emergence of a new educated elite. Formed by the SPCM and the Ethiopian Pentecostal churches, this elite is assuming new roles: as health assistants, mechanics, drivers, builders, store keepers, and a few teachers and religious leaders of the newborn local church. Despite the progressive mentality of these young people, I could find only one example of a deliberate break by a Nyangatom from his society. When he returned after a long absence a young man was beaten by his age-mates for having refused to offer them a feast. He left Nyangatom country, married an Amhara and settled in Jinka where he took on higher responsibilities. Those who, on the contrary, may need local votes, obviously do not neglect to feed their fathers and their peers as generously as possible. This is the best way to prove one's attachment to the country.

In spring 1995 several young Nyangatom were elected to the zonal, regional and national councils respectively in Jinka, Awasa and Addis Ababa. At that time, the *asapan* question did not seem to be resolved but

the mechanism of the filial offering had been restarted. Important meat feasts had been offered by the Antelopes to the Ostriches and the latter intended to do the same for their fathers the Elephants. This social effervescence occurred one month after a Toposa and Nyangatom raid on a Dassanetch settlement in which they killed one person, took a boy prisoner and seized 25 cattle. An informant wrote to tell me that the Nyangatom elders at Nakua had disapproved of this raid and required the raiders to return the cattle. The letter ended with these words: 'the raided cattle have been returned'. This shows that the authority of the elders still exists and that the Nyangatom have not yet entered the era of outlaw gangs, a development which cannot, unfortunately, be ruled out and which is well described by Lamphear (in Fukui and Markakis, 1994) for the Turkana and Jie.

*Asapan-man or ... chairman?*

Let me conclude with the interesting story of E.H. As a child he, like many Nyangatom during the 1970s, experienced the death of close family members. His sister was killed by the Mursi and his father died of thirst on returning from a campaign against the Dassanetch. E.H. became the first commander of the Nyangatom militia after the fall of Mengistu. In 1993 he was elected to the South Omo Zonal Council at Jinka and soon he took higher responsibilities. Going through my genealogical data, I discovered that E.H. might have been a key figure in the generational system. He belongs in fact to the Nginyanga clan of the Ngikumama section,<sup>11</sup> which is supposed to provide the *asapan*-man. He himself could then be chosen as the officiant for the ceremony, but one can easily imagine that neither he nor his family and generation-mates would play this risky game.<sup>12</sup> Up to the present the problem remains unsolved. How do the Nyangatom live with this dilemma? A correspondent writes:

At the time of elections (spring 1995) my fellow Ostriches hold *apyo*-ceremonies according to their sections: the Ngarich began, followed by the Flamingos and the Ngikumama. The question of the *asapan* of the Ostriches is not yet settled because it is the hardest method of *asapan* since it has been done by a man: everyone is afraid to be used. There is another hint of a solution: to let it be organized by Toposa, to discuss, and finally to throw *amusungipit*<sup>13</sup> into the sunset and to recircle the *asapan*. My suggestion for this process of *asapan* is to use a baboon instead of a man: *ejok isuwario ecom anierumor lasapanere*, 'it is good that a baboon be acquired and when this is finished the people be given *asapan*'. This is my suggestion, in order not to stop the process of *asapan*. At the present time, the generational system is just using the rank, while they haven't done the *asapan* process, so that Antelopes are considered as Elephants and the Ostriches as Mountains.

This text calls for a longer discussion than I have space for here. It shows the concern of the first Nyangatom MP in Addis Ababa to save Nyangatom custom. He said to me last year: 'not to make *asapan* is to live in ignorance'. The suggestion to replace the *asapan*-man with a baboon is based on an implicit reasoning: the baboon is an animal but at the same time it has something human in its appearance and being. The suggested substitution reinforces the sacrificial interpretation of the role of the *asapan*-man.

The Ideological Background of the Generational System

Let me now make some comments on the remarkable absence of women in our ethnographies, an absence which can be connected with the (often male) sex of ethnographers, but which also reflects the male bias of East African societies which is shared by many other cultures. There is a well known, universal, orientation in the sexual division of labour. Nyangatom men certainly tend to monopolize political activity but they do this by means of exercising another monopoly, that of sacrificial practice. Commenting on Nancy Jay (1992), P. Erny writes:

Everything starts from the following observation: more than any other religious institution, sacrifice has a close connection with the sexual dichotomy. Why do so many societies exclude women, during their child-bearing years, from sacrificing? Why are they only allowed to sacrifice after the menopause or as consecrated virgins? Why is the father-son relationship so often associated with sacrifice? And why is it so often associated with 'fathers' either in a real or metaphorical sense? Why, in the islands of Hawaii, is it called 'male child-birth'? (*L'Homme*, no.135, 1995: 138, my translation).

This line of questioning is equally applicable to the generational system of the Nyangatom and their neighbours. The Nyangatom perform three types of sacrifices:

- (a) The filial offering which is an act of piety, an initiatory act which is repeated throughout a person's life. The statuses of Fathers and Sons are sacrificial statuses: one cannot become a Son without sacrificing to the Fathers, the Fathers themselves occupying the position of gods. The Fathers are those to whom a sacrifice is made when they receive a filial offering, but they are in turn the sacrificers for their own fathers. The chain of paternity goes back indefinitely. Akuj, 'God', is only the witness of the transmission of life. In sacrifice the body of the victim is dismembered but the convivial meal which is part of the sacrifice rebuilds the social body and reaffirms the solidarity of all its members. This is how we should interpret the rules for distributing

parts of the sacrificial animal to generation- and age-set members, the constituent bodies of the society.<sup>20</sup>

(b) Piacular sacrifice (*ajulot*: 'skin-victim') is carried out to remove the effects of pollution from individuals and settlements, to treat sickness, to bring rain etc. In the domestic sphere, this sacrifice can be carried out by a female healer but a man is always the officiant for the community. The way of slaughtering is evisceration.<sup>21</sup> The first stomach (rumen) is invested with a special meaning. Its contents are the sacred substance which unites all the participants because it is obviously a mixture of all the plants and grasses eaten by the living animal.

Through these two types of sacrifice, men construct their paternity and restore life and fertility.

(c) The third type of sacrifice, that of the *asapan*-man, is infrequent but indispensable. The human victim is 'bought' by his peers in order to transmit paternity (sovereignty) from one generation to the next. This rare type of sacrifice<sup>22</sup> also aims at asserting the patrilineal link between successive generations.

*Nyangatom cosmology*

The relationship between mother and child is metonymic. The child is 'flesh of her flesh'. There is natural evidence of continuity. If Malinowski did not convince us all when he said that the Melanesians were ignorant of the role of the father in procreation, it is nevertheless obvious that paternity, in traditional settings, is not subject to naturalistic proof and is, above all, a social and conceptual act, the affirmation of a discontinuity. The Fathers of the country are the living affirmation of the necessity,

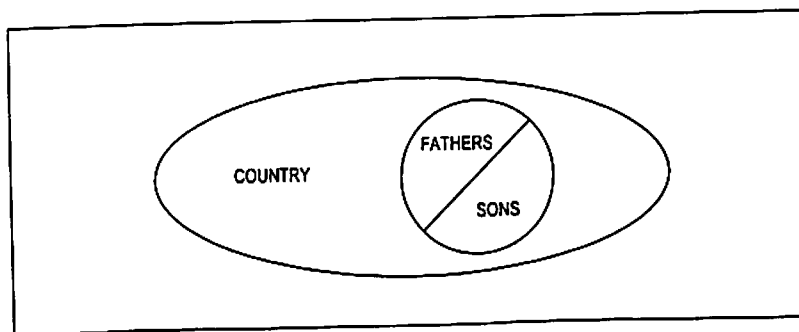


Figure 5.2 The metaphor of patrification

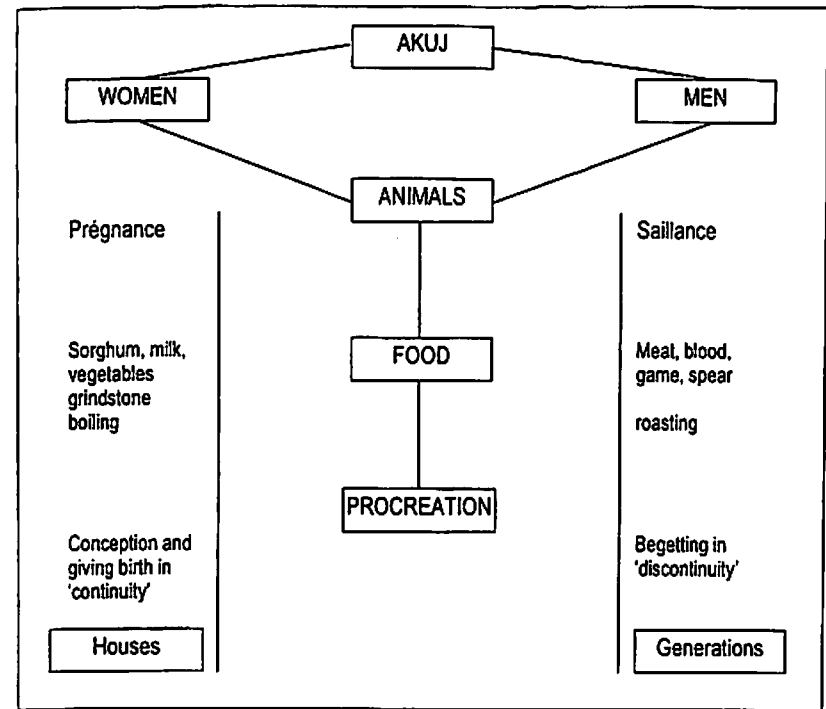


Figure 5.3 Nyangatom cosmology

which is underlined by the long, but limited, generational time which is given to them, of affirming paternity as discontinuity. The spatial metaphor suggests a solution. It is the 'disjunctive conjunction' of Fathers and Sons in the spatial whole, which they call the country, which creates the community as a generational system (see Figure 5.2).

But Fathers and Sons can only constitute a country through their complementary relationship to women of the same country. It is only together that they can maintain life and they do this, first of all, through the mediation of domestic animals which are destined to be sacrificed and also because they both share in a part of the principle called Akuj. This interpretation is set out in summary form in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3 shows the complementarity of women and men,<sup>23</sup> the mediation of domestic animals and the role of both sexes in producing food and descendants. We see the two fundamental social units, *houses* which consist of mothers and their progeny, and *generations* which are recruited by patrification. Animals, and particularly oxen, the ideal sacrificial victims (being neither male nor female), are in the position of mediators between the human world, both masculine and feminine, and

an invisible principle, Akuj, whose creative and destructive powers are shared by humans. As the Nyangatom would say, women are, or are like, Akuj because they bear children and therefore control the stream of life. On the other hand, men are, or are like, the rain, because they fertilize women. They are, or are like, Akuj in their power to take life when they sacrifice as Sons, and, this time as Fathers, in their power to bless their Sons in return for their offerings. The remarkable absence of ancestors is perhaps the most intriguing sociological characteristic of the generational system. It is a system which enables us to envisage sovereignty without the state, initiation without circumcision or masks and, finally, three modalities of sacrifice without elaborate ritual, as, for example, is found amongst polytheistic societies in Antiquity or monotheistic Judeo-Christian societies. Such are the many assets and resources which could, in my opinion, ensure a long life for this powerful mechanism for asserting links between the visible and invisible worlds, maintaining social order and potentially generating new societies.

## Notes

- 1 Special thanks are due to David and Pat Turton for their hospitality in Manchester while David translated an earlier version of this paper into English. Acknowledgements are due to the participants in the 'East African Age-Systems in Transition' Symposium, especially the editors of the present volume, for their remarks and constructive criticism and also to Jean Lydall for her kind reading of the final version.
- 2 'Species' thus has an Aristotelian meaning, both analytically and for the Nyangatom, who conceive of the generations as the various species of their society. The three main territorial sections (Storks, Ibises and Flamingos) are also named according to (migratory) bird species. Cf. Tornay, 1989: 328-407.
- 3 If Lewis Henry Morgan did not acknowledge the existence of the political process in tribal societies, Robert Lowie, a pioneer in political anthropology, expressed a different view. In *The Origin of the State* (1927: 2) he reminds us that the Hellenist Eduard Meyer 'pleads for the absolute universality of the state in human society' (a position opposed by all anthropologists I know), adding that 'we can hardly deny the title of governmental fabrics (*Herrschaftsgebilde*) to the illiterate peoples' (which seems a sounder anthropological opinion). On his side, Marcel Mauss writes (in 1931): 'je renonce définitivement à considérer l'État comme la seule source de cohésion dans ces sociétés' (that is, in the so-called primitive societies) and 'je crois que la notion de *souveraineté* s'est appliquée dans toute la vie sociale' (1968: 134). He thus means that there exists, in every society which claims its own identity and autonomy without reference to any rule or power from outside, a sense of its sovereignty even in the absence of a king, a state or any other form of centralized power structure. In the case discussed here, I consider that the Elephants, while recognized as Fathers of the country, collectively embody the sovereignty of the Nyangatom society.
- 4 Even if the Sons' generation, as we shall see, can be invested with the responsibility of warfare, there is no 'warrior grade' whatsoever. Other sources of prestige and authority are: (i) the killer status. The acquisition of this status is a considerable social asset. Killers use their warrior names amongst themselves even if they are fathers and sons. Sharing warrior status helps to reduce the frustrations which arise from differences of generational status amongst contemporaries. (ii) public office. In the traditional setting,

there were only two clearly differentiated offices: *amurn*, diviner and *ekatumon*, spokesman. Since Menelik's conquest, there has existed a new office, that of *balabbat* (in Amharic 'one who has a known ancestry'), an officer responsible to the administration for his territorial section. These offices, which have no link with generational status, can confer prestige and wealth. But a diviner is in no sense a 'chief'. He is simply an adviser or healer: an interpreter who builds a bridge between visible and invisible realities. All men who speak in public are not necessarily given the title *ekatumon*, spokesman. To earn this title a man must have not only a talent for speaking but also good judgement, integrity, clear-sightedness. A spokesman is no more a chief than a diviner is. The spokesman speaks on behalf of his settlement or his section; certain spokesmen can gain tribal authority, like the great Lokuti who was called the 'mouth' of the Nyangatom (Tornay, 1989b). But intervening with the administration is the lot, not of the spokesmen, but of the *balabbat*, whom the Nyangatom call 'diviners', which means 'intermediaries' between the 'here' of Nyangatom society and the 'there' of a foreign power. The collection of taxes was one of the principal tasks of the *balabbat*. The role was outside the generational system but a *balabbat* who was accused of corruption could be cursed by the Fathers of the country.

- 5 Contributions to this book by Simonse and Kurimoto shed new light on age-set antagonisms. Antagonism between successive generations is addressed in the third section of this paper.
- 6 With one exception addressed below, the symbolic sacrifice of the *asapan*-man.
- 7 *Edwar angajep a ngikasukowa*: 'bitter is the tongue of the elders': this is how the Nyangatom express the dangerous power vested in the invocations and curses (*ngi-lam*) of the Fathers of the country. The Nyangatom qualitative opposition *-duwar/-peana* (bitter/tasteless) shares many features with similar Nilotic semantic pairs, as shown by Kurimoto (1992).
- 8 Of course, this was one symptom of the conflict which they revealed to me only 15 years later and on which I comment below.
- 9 As a noun, it means 'initiation' amongst the Karimojong or the Turkana, but 'succession' amongst the Nyangatom; for the latter, and only for them, the noun also denotes 'the person of custom' (*itwan ka etal*), the *asapan*-man, without whom transmission cannot be performed properly. The verb *a-ki-sapan* is either intransitive (*asapanete kolong Ngilome, tarau taapakex ka akop*: 'in the past, the Elephants went through or made the ceremony and thus became Fathers of the country'), or transitive (*moi asapanete Ngilome ngideker*: 'the Elephants will soon *asapan* their sons', which means promoting them to fatherhood of the country); the latter example can also be translated as 'they will shave their sons'. A first shaving (*a-ki-bany*, not *a-ki-sapan*) is done by the mothers, a few days after giving birth, when babies are given a first name. At the *asapan* ceremony, the shaving of the sons is done by their fathers and this is universal in the Karimojong cluster. The derivative *i-sapa-i* is the common name for 'son' in all dialects of the cluster.
- 10 Both the intoxication and the method of slaughter are exceptional. Compare this with the Maasai special sacrifices where the victim is drugged with honeywine before being smothered. Amongst the Nyangatom, the usual way of slaughtering an ox is by spearing it. Cutting the throat is appropriate for slaughtering small stock for domestic disposal and also for killing an enemy in a hand-to-hand fight.
- 11 This is hardly surprising since this is the only age-ceremony which the Turkana still perform (Gulliver, 1958; Müller, 1989).
- 12 The idea derives from my analysis, not from Nyangatom exegesis.
- 13 *Euphorbia triaculeata*, *Caralluma russelliana*, *Aristida adscensionis*, *Aloe turkanensis*: such plants contain a poisonous milky latex or other toxic substances like alkaloids.
- 14 Amongst the Toposa, power is held by successive sets of the 'generation in power'; in contrast, amongst the Nyangatom power is held collectively by the whole generation of the Fathers. So the Toposa seem to be an intermediate case between 'short-term' (e.g. *gada* system) and 'long-term' transmission of power, a case which fits well into Peatrik's paradigm (1995).
- 15 The *kebele* is the basic administrative entity created after the 1974 revolution by the Communist regime: a ward in a town, a locality in the countryside. Each *kebele* has an elected representative or an elected committee.
- 16 In the early 1970s I estimated the total Nyangatom population to be around 5,000.

According to data from the 1995 Ethiopian census, there are today at least 12,000 Nyangatom (census field workers, pers. com.).

- 17 The origin of this section is probably a group of (today Ugandese) Kumam emigrants which has been incorporated by the Nyangatom. In return, they have seemingly been required to provide the *asapan*-man 'for ever'.
- 18 Unfortunately, on my last visit in 1994, I was not able to ask Eliyas himself about his potential candidacy as an *asapan*-man.
- 19 According to the writer, 'the bad omen which had tied the *asapan*'.
- 20 This is an inversion of the Judeo-Christian schema: in the latter, the fathers sacrifice, if necessary, even their sons to God the Father in order to confirm their alliance with him, to sanctify their procreation and to guarantee an endless progeny. The son is in the position of potential victim (cf. the story of Abraham ready to sacrifice to God his son Isaac). Amongst the Eastern Nilotes, the father is a divine repository of procreative power. The son is not a potential victim but a sacrificer. He makes himself into a Son by sacrificing to the Father. Through his filial offering he pays a religious homage to the Father, who continues to exercise the power of life and death over him through his blessings and curses. The Father himself sacrifices to his father and the sacrificial debt goes back indefinitely.
- 21 We should note an analogy here between this operation and a caesarian. The man opens the stomach of the animal and, sometimes helped by an old woman (a wise-woman?), presses on the stomach to force out the entrails. The entrails could be seen as symbolizing 'the child of men'.
- 22 The *asapan*-man is no scapegoat; if he is no king either, he is nevertheless a human being who is sacrificed to regenerate power and recreate sovereignty in his society.
- 23 More appropriate than the classical opposition *physis/nomos*, the contrast between *prégnance* and *saillance* is taken from Thom, 1988.

## 6 Gada Systems on the Meta-Ethnic Level: Gabra/Boran/Garre Interactions in the Kenyan/Ethiopian Borderland

GÜNTHER SCHLEE

### Introduction

*Im Lande des Gada* is the title of one of the earlier works about *gada* systems (Jensen, 1936), and this title suggests that there is a '*gada*-country', a continuous geographical area marked by the presence or former presence of *gada* systems. Having learned to doubt earlier anthropological assumptions that there are as many 'cultures' as there are 'societies' and that each of these forms a 'system' of its own (assumptions which Jensen and the other representatives of *Kulturmorphologie* never shared), we may be tempted to ask whether these societies and their *gada* systems exist in isolation from each other or whether they form a meta-system, a meta-culture through which cultures interact, or, to quote another, rather better known old book, *The Political Systems of Highland Burma*, a 'single extensive structural system' (Leach, 1954:17). Our answer will be differentiated, partly 'yes', in other aspects: 'not really'. We shall find that some of those *gada* systems which are most similar run parallel in almost complete independence of each other, while some which differ greatly rely for their working on heavy inputs from each other. Paradoxical as it may look at the first glance, this is not that much of a surprise, because it combines well with a number of ideas: those about geometry (parallels never touch), and those about general sociology, that systemic interaction has to do with functional differentiation, in other words, that we interact through our differences rather than our similarities. But as these ideas have not been applied to *gada* systems so far, it may be fun to try to apply them.

What qualifies *gada* systems as *gada* systems? They are a sub-type of — generation-set systems. Other such sub-types are *eigworono* and *asapan* (see Nagashima in this volume) and *monyomiji* which Kurimoto and Simonse (in