

# Modernization in the Lower Omo Valley and Adjacent Marches of Eastern Equatoria, Sudan: 1991–2000

*Serge Tornay*

Addressing the question of changing identifications and alliances over the last ten years, that is, since the fall of Mengistu, in the remote south-west of Ethiopia and adjacent marches, or borderlands, of Sudan does not make sense without first describing the background.

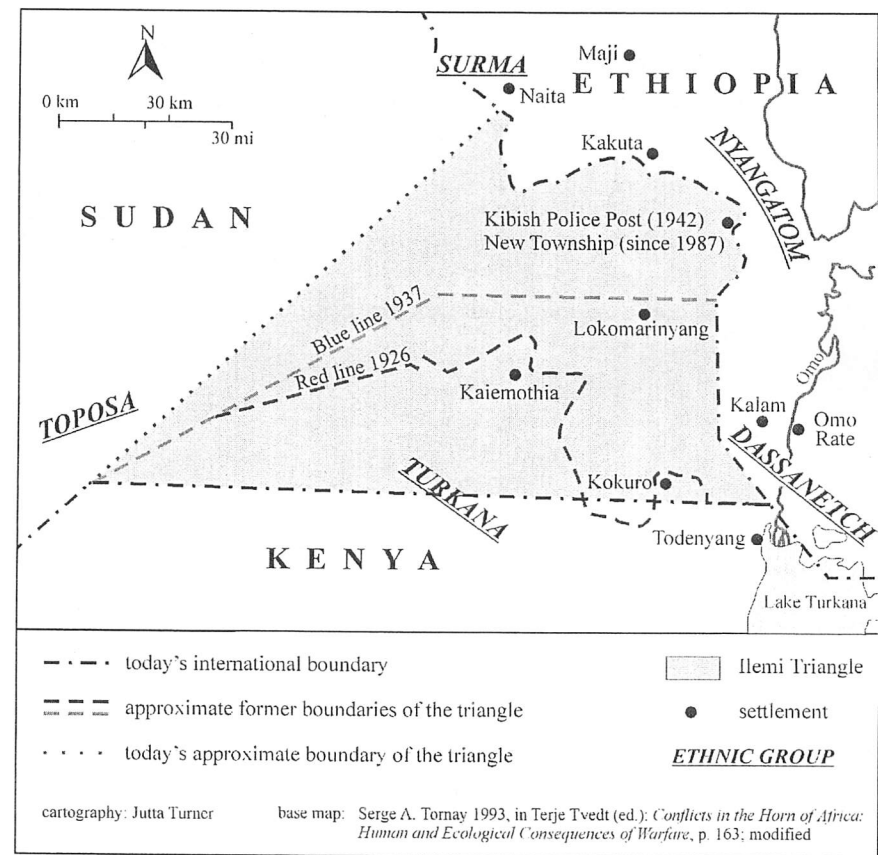
Are there 'more chances on the fringe of the state'? It is under this title that, at the Bergen workshop of April 1992, I addressed the question of the 'growing power' of the Nyangatom during a period of about twenty years since the beginning of my study (1970) and the beginning of humanitarian assistance (1972). I suggested that two factors contributed jointly to their growing power: (1) medical and alimentary assistance, which allowed the population to shift from about 5,000 in 1970 to over 13,000 in 1990; and (2) a high degree of political autonomy. The latter was the case, of course, before 1974, but it was also true under Mengistu, who tried to rehabilitate the 'Shanqillas' along the Ethio-Sudanese border, and who supported the Sudanese insurgency, the SPLA. In the early 1970s, the Nyangatom had been pressurized by the Dassanetch, their southern neighbours (see Map 3.1). The Nyangatom population numbers had declined and they considered that they had failed politically. Twenty years later, they had become the dominant people of the Lower Omo area. This trend was reflected in my 1992 contribution:

Compared with the often desperate conditions of millions of Africans, I can at least bring a note of hope and optimism from my recent trip to the Lower Omo. During the 1991–92 dry season, the Nyangatom were at peace with all their neighbours, and in December and January they were harvesting bumper crops of sorghum, both from river banks and irrigated fields. The political atmosphere was nothing less than euphoric. An Ethiopian government had at last conceded to them a large degree of autonomy. In October, 1991, twenty-five young Nyangatom had been trained in an EPRDF camp in Awasa and they had been sent back to their country with Kalashnikovs, as a purely tribal militia, committed to maintaining local

order under the guidance of their elders. It was said that no taxes would be levied and that political and economic autonomy would no longer be questioned. Being heavily armed – the twenty-five ‘official’ Kalashnikovs were just the tip of an iceberg – safe from starvation, and with a rapidly growing population, they had many reasons to feel confident about the future. Their optimism, which I shared, since I had seen them for many years in a worse condition, might have been exaggerated. Sooner or later hunger would return; they would have to fight again with their neighbours; relations with Ethiopia or Kenya would bring new problems; droughts would come again and crops would fail; the army worm would destroy the sorghum; diseases would kill cattle and small stock or people. The Nyangatom knew all this, but they were able to feel confident, provided these misfortunes, which are their common lot, do not affect them all at once. (Tornay 1993: 151)

The history of the Sahelian area, during and after the colonial period, exhibits a common feature: conflictual relationships between sedentary agriculturalists and pastoral nomads. Owing to a higher military capacity, nomads usually dominated their neighbours, but, with the arrival of modern states, the sedentary, more formally educated, populations often gained the advantage. This has often been experienced as the ‘rightful revenge’ of formerly subject peasants. It seems that in Ethio-Sudanese border areas such revenge hardly occurred. As an example, take Jon Abbink’s (1993a) article on the Dizi and the Suri of south-west Ethiopia. The Dizi were trapped between the imperial expansion under Menelik (where they were submitted to both the *gabbar* system and slavery) and permanent pressure from their southern neighbours, the Suri, who never accepted submission. Like the Nyangatom, the Toposa, the Murle and others, the Suri remained, and still are today, outlaws who take advantage of their marginalized situation (see also Abbink, this volume). Such a political setting might be at the root of modern forms of rebellion and warfare organizations, for example, in the case of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). Taking advantage of living on the margins could be seen as a truism today, as so many cases, from Somalia, Sudan and many other parts of the continent, illustrate. It is more frequently acknowledged that the imported state has proved to many African people and countries to be a dreadful, poisonous, gift. But of course this cannot be said of Ethiopia, where the state is ancient and indigenous, at least in the imperial core of the country.

I first met the Nyangatom in imperial times (1970–74). To them, *Mangist*, that is the state or the government, was an external reality, either hated or ignored. Locally it was still a time of traditional ‘ethnic’ conflicts. Under Mengistu (1974–91), the world of the local populations enlarged both towards the Ethiopian state – Mengistu fought for a better integration of the formerly despised and marginalized *Shanqillas* – and towards wider horizons through hazardous ‘openings’ in southern Sudan. Of the populations of the southern Omo Valley, the Nyangatom took the best advantage of the new opportunities, not only by chance, but because they have been, since 1972, the main, if not unique, beneficiaries of an effective programme of assistance



Map 3.1 Map of Ilemi Triangle showing ethnic groups, settlements and administrative stations (source: S. Tornay)

from the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission (SPCM). Objectively, their chances remain great today, even if they panic at seeing SPCM progressively leaving the scene. Their choice remains open between a soft integration into the Ethiopian zonal administration from Jinka and a freelance, de facto statelessness, by crossing a dry riverbed. At the same time, their great fortune during the 1990s was to have escaped the dangers and hardships of hosting refugee camps: there are no Itang, no Naser and no Kaakuma along the vast territory they share with their Toposa allies, a huge triangle between Narus, Naita and Kibish, an area larger than the Ilemi Triangle. But for how long such marches will remain under their control nobody can say. There is at least one efficient foreign power in the area, the Kenyan army, which continues a progressive annexation of the Ilemi Triangle (Map 3.1).

I agree entirely with Patrick Chabal when he writes: ‘Ethnicity has been excessively reified, meaning that it has all too often been studied separately from the more general question of identity. Ethnicity is not an essentialist attribute of the

African, but more simply one of several constituents of identity' (2001: 19). But such a concept is not universal: I heard from a known scholar that, to many Ethiopians, ethnic groups are, like vegetal and animal species, 'natural creations of God'. The cognitive and pragmatic consequences of such a conception of ethnicity are evident.

In the course of the last two or three decades, if the Nyangatom still proved to be the 'Yellow Guns' of their past, they have also been nicknamed by their neighbours 'the children of SPCM', in spite of the fact that, in the course of the last five years, their relations with the Pentecostal NGO deteriorated. In the early 1990s, as I recalled, they were quite strong and confident in themselves. When I revisited them in 1994, a census of the population was going on, elections were being prepared and the general atmosphere was still euphoric because of a joint Toposa and Nyangatom conquest of Suri territory around Mount Naita (see Abbink, this volume). The Nyangatom leader of the SPLA incursion into the Naita area was a former Ethiopian administrator under Mengistu. Having no political future at the fall of the Red Emperor (1991) he decided to become a dissident in Sudan. He thus changed his political allegiance, but without losing one ounce of prestige and legitimacy among the Nyangatom. In 1996, when he came from Naita to recruit child soldiers at Kibish, on Ethiopian territory, he returned on foot with an enthusiastic group of about forty boys from well-famed if not wealthy families. At Kibish in November 2000, I met survivors of that group, who came home after one year of hazardous campaigns and three years of study in Kaakuma refugee camp, northern Kenya. Thus, the Nyangatom have their own 'lost boys', but unfortunately they were not given US or Canadian passports like the 4,300 'happy survivors' who had decided to stay in the camp 'for ever' (press informations, May 2001).

Since 1995, the situation in Nyangatom country has deteriorated for various climatic and political reasons. The floods and rains were excellent in 1994; beautiful crops were growing for the December harvest, but then insects invaded the fields and destroyed the crops. In January-February 1995, returning SPLA officers and soldiers brought bad news from Naita: the Sudanese government had been bombing Narus, the Toposa settlements and the SPLA camp on the border between Sudan and Kenya. Of course, Naita is over 200 km away from Narus, but there was a fear of what the next target of those 'high-flying Antonovs' would be. Women and children were taken from Naita to Kaakuma refugee camp. In February, according to a letter by Joseph Loteng (Plate 3.1, the man to the right), a Nyangatom who worked for the census, a 'sudden reaction between Mursi and Nyangatom along the Omo resulted in the death of six Nyangatom and five Mursi'. David Turton told me later that the event had not been confirmed, but the story is certainly connected with growing tensions between the two 'Nations'. On the Omo, the Muguji 'People' had quarrelled with the Kara 'Nationality',<sup>1</sup> and so they shifted their alliance from Kara to Nyangatom, a point first addressed by Hiroshi Matsuda (1994). The Muguji have now been included in the Nyangatom 1994 census, counted as a total of 417 persons: this is one of the ways a new 'section' can emerge in an existing polity. In

1. The 'Southern Omo Zone', with the capital town Jinka, is officially termed SNNP, that is, 'Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples'.

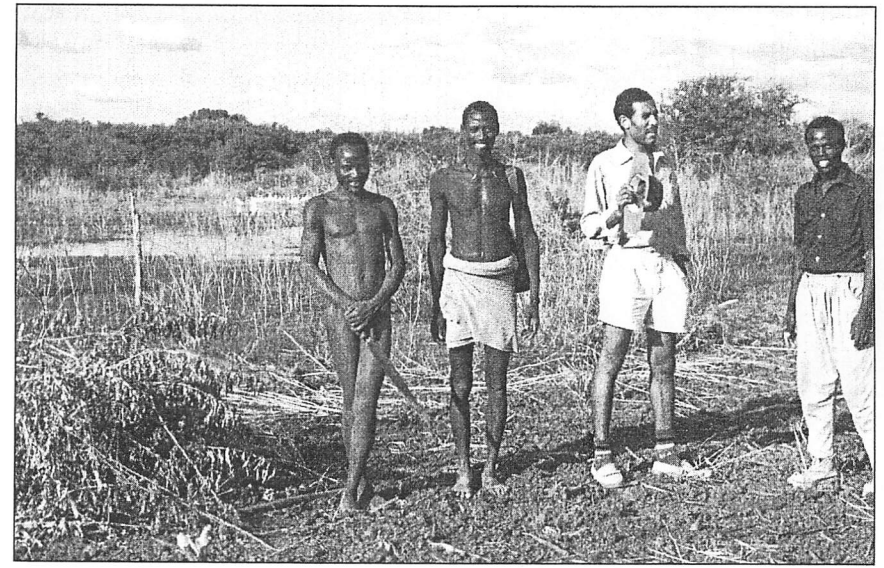


Plate 3.1 Nyangatom men in company of an Ethiopian agronomist working for the SPCM NGO (photo: S. Tornay, 1992)

June 1995, a peace meeting was organized by the government, which brought together representatives of 'Bume, Nyangatom, Hamar, Mursi, Kara and others'. Dassanetch were not mentioned, and in August Yvan Houtteman (studying this region in the mid-1990s) informed me that, due to the deadly conflicts of the 1970s, the relations between the Nyangatom and the Dassanetch were still very hostile: 'When I mention the Bume,' he writes, 'my Dassanetch friends point their fingers to their chest, showing where the bullets should pass' (August 1995). There was a vast no man's land north of a line from Omo Rate to Kalam. If there was no real clash between the Nyangatom and the Dassanetch, there were some between the Dassanetch and the Turkana. Four Turkana were killed in revenge for the killing by the Kenyan army of two Dassanetch men who went to Turkana country 'for buying blankets'. 'When I visited Kangaten,' Houtteman writes, 'I got the impression that the Nyangatom are much better armed, in quality and quantity. The Kara also fear the Nyangatom' (21 August 1995). There were good reasons for fearing the Nyangatom: early in 1993, six Nyangatom had been killed when they came, on board on SPCM vehicle, to bring medical assistance to the Kara. The victims were Louryen, the son of the late Lokuti Nyakal, the greatest Nyangatom leader during the 1970s and 1980s, his wife, children and friends. Still today this absurd murder – allegedly for a stolen gun – is not forgiven. Various other incidents could be quoted, but they would not change the general features that still show a very 'ethnic' pattern of relations in the area in the last decade of the last century.

In sum, in terms of conflicts and alliances with the immediate neighbours, nothing very special happened, apart from the conquest of Naita and the eviction of

the Suri owners of that country further north towards Maji. The Suri, called Ngikoroma, have always been considered resolute enemies by the Nyangatom. The exact opposite relationship holds between the Nyangatom and their 'grandmother's thigh', the Toposa: no war is reported between them, and that is why their alliance in Naita is so strong against their common enemies. Between the neighbours in the Lower Omo, if Karl von Clausewitz's famous statement applies that war is a 'continuation of politics by other means', it seems equally relevant to say that, to the peoples of the Lower Omo, 'peace is nothing but war conducted by other means'. In this domain, the Nyangatom and their neighbours seem to be very conservative. Periods of peaceful relations are interrupted by 'a sudden reaction', which might be caused by the theft of a gun or of grain, a rape, an injury or a murder, which call for an immediate response. Among some documented examples, I shall mention one that occurred in January–March 2001 between the Hamar and the Nyangatom: a Hamar shot his Nyangatom personal friend in the back while both were apparently in peaceful company in a riverside garden. The victim survived but the Nyangatom carried out four consecutive cattle raids of growing importance. The legal authorities of the zonal government in Jinka do not seem to be able to enforce peace. Today, a Hamar has succeeded a Nyangatom as president of the zone, but this has definitely no link with the recent conflict. It is necessary to underline that non-resident Nyangatom, whatever their positions in the administration, are perceived very negatively in the country. Nyangatom elders consider their sons, once elected to administrative jobs in Jinka, to be lost if not treacherous children. They accuse them of 'driving for themselves' and of playing the game of former Amhara predators. The only modern leaders whom the Nyangatom accept, because they share a common life, are the locally elected heads of *kebele* or localities, initiated under Mengistu and not abolished by the present regime.

To summarize, 'One misfortune never comes alone.' As we have seen, during the 1990s, which initially were years of plenty, the pastoral part of Nyangatom society gained in power: human and animal demography increased considerably; Suri or Surma people had been expelled from their Ethio-Sudanese borderlands, especially from the Naita area, and chased away to the north. The Nyangatom took Naita as their stronghold, joined together with Toposa herders and warriors there and developed an SPLA base. It might be that such a move to the west and to the north – a continuation of the famous drift on which we elaborated already in the 1977 Osaka symposium – had become a necessity: Nyangatom herds had overgrazed the whole of the Kibish area and the grasslands between Kibish and Kangaten, where a joint project (Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)/UNICEF/SPCM) had built rainwater harvesting plants with cisterns of 30,000 litre capacities. Water availability enabled long periods of residence and hence overgrazing. Zebus, goats and sheep multiplied, but donkeys did so excessively. Of course, donkeys are useful as pack animals, especially on the 100 km between Kibish and Naita where there is no motorable road, but donkeys eat up not only the grass but also its roots. In November 2000, two inedible species (*Tribulus cistoides* L., Zygophyllaceae, and *Heliotropium steudneri* Vatke, Boraginaceae) had almost completely replaced the grass cover between Kangaten and Kibish; only herds of donkeys were still around; cows had left the

Kibish (Nakua) area, once the economic and political centre of Nyangatom, for Naita. What Marshall Sahlins (1961) said about the Nuer here holds true for the Nyangatom: either they disappear or they become 'a system of predatory expansion'. Sahlins attributed that quality to a segmentary lineage organization, but the same applies here, I believe, to the generation system of the Nyangatom, the Turkana, the Toposa and related peoples (Tornay 1995).

As could have been predicted ten years ago, the general atmosphere in Nyangatom is no longer euphoric. When I revisited them after the Addis Ababa conference in November 2000, I found them psychologically depressed and highly pessimistic. The first and universally acknowledged reason for this was that their benefactor for the last thirty years, the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission, was in the process of 'abandoning' them: the clinic and dispensaries had already been handed over to the Ethiopian government. The consequence of this was that no medicine would be given for free any more, and in practice hardly any medicine would be dispensed in the area. Some assistance was still extended in the name of SPCM, but no one could say for how long this would continue. At the time of my visit, a huge food relief operation was also going on. In response to two years of crop failures and the ensuing starvation, European and Canadian wheat, maize grain and flour were distributed on a large scale. Vehicles of the Ethiopian government transported the food from Arba Minch to Omo Rate, and then back up to Kangaten, the SPCM post on the eastern bank of the Omo. The Ethiopian government, having no vehicle of their own in operation on the west bank of the Lower Omo, not even a military vehicle, simply requisitioned the SPCM to take food across the river. The SPCM had to distribute food locally and transport what was needed to the Kara, Muguji, Mursi and other peoples in the area. They had to do this for free; not a cent was paid for fuel. The SPCM workers from the highlands were upset and somehow agreed that the whole project of the Pentecostal NGO could not continue to be operative. Schooling had also decreased: in contrast to the past, only a vague primary and some grades of secondary schooling seemed to operate. Moreover, no 'educated' Nyangatom had yet agreed to teach in Nyangatom country. According to news in May 2001, all local schooling had been transferred to the regional capital of Jinka, five Nyangatom having finally agreed to teach there. The only Nyangatom who have jobs today outside Jinka are a small crew of SPCM workers: gardeners, mechanics, *zabanya* night watchers and one health assistant.<sup>2</sup>

What about agricultural development? The main objective of SPCM, was to encourage irrigated agriculture and sedentarize the pastoral population along the River Omo. Various attempts to implement solar energy pumps to carry water from the river finally proved to be failures: the wonderful solar panels of 1991 are now used to hang out the washing or to dry crops. Fuel pumps are more reliable, but the cost of the fuel – together with the cost of transporting it almost 1,000 km – makes

---

2. Henceforth paid by the government but not working because of the lack of medicine, this man had become a rich small-stock owner because he gradually invested his wages in buying goats and sheep.

its use prohibitive, unless under foreign sponsorship. The flooding of the River Omo itself is also highly unpredictable: for three years (1995–98) the flooding was so extensive that irrigation around Kangaten was abandoned and the channels neglected. Over the last two years (1999–2000) the river has not flooded over its banks. Since no irrigation had been carried out, starvation began in the country. Food shortages and suffering were finally followed by the food relief operation of November and December 2000. The Nyangatom may have increased in number in recent years – I was told that their demography had reached 20,000 today, but it is difficult to check such a figure – but evidently their dependency, especially on food and medicine, has increased correspondingly.

In thirty years of SPCM development in Nyangatom, the geographical centre of the Lower Omo area, no regional, that is, inter-ethnic, market – with the exception of the one in the new town of Omo Rate in Dassanetch country – emerged between the peoples of the area, the Hamar, Karo, Muguji, Mursi, Nyangatom, Turkana and Dassanetch. Only some forms of dualistic barter survive in some contexts (Nyangatom-Hamar, Nyangatom-Kara, Nyangatom-Muguji, Kara-Dassanetch and episodically Hamar-Dassanetch). In spite of the introduction of currency, mainly through wages paid by the NGO, the failure to generate new, regional, ways of sociability, is patent.

The absence of a regional market cannot be attributed only to possible shortcomings on the part of the NGO. For sure, SPCM agents did not spurn material concerns, but they did show some protectionist or monopolistic attitudes. It is true that they have been, and still are, the only agency with vehicles on the west bank of the Omo. Modern transportation of goods is, then, a *de facto* monopoly. Why should we exclude the people's accountability for the non-emergence of markets,<sup>3</sup> a social and economic form of activity that is universally cheered in Ethiopia, as it is elsewhere in Africa? Among the factors that put obstacles in the way of the emergence of a regional market I would quote: a very low population density – probably no more than one inhabitant per square kilometre in the whole area; very long distances to walk to meet people of other 'nationalities'; a very hot climate, and a lack of water supplies on the way; lack of information about 'what is going on there'; permanent fear of being 'raped or killed by our enemies'; and finally, of course, the absence of a regional political authority – rare peace meetings do not suffice for creating a constructive political consciousness.

There is one domain in which the Nyangatom have acquired a real degree of independence, and that is religion. The Swedish missionaries were and are Pentecostals (Tornay 1997). They have not themselves been proselytizers of the

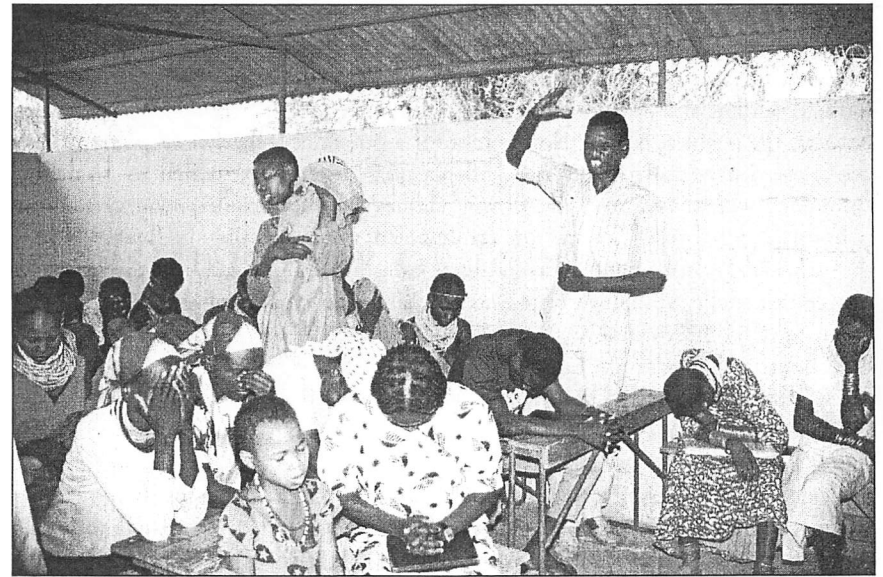


Plate 3.2 Pentecostal service (photo: S. Tornay, 1994)

Christian faith, mainly because of pressure from the imperial and then the Marxist governments, and moreover from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. During the last half-century, Reformed and Catholic churches developed as (almost) purely Ethiopian churches in many areas. The Nyangatom created their own Pentecostal Church under the well-known label *Hiwot Berhan* ('Life Light'). Today they have two modern and handsome church buildings, one in Kangaten and the other in Kibish, the construction of which was financed by Swedish Pentecostals and Canadian Adventists. 'Ethiopian *Hiwot Berhan*', said the Nyangatom, 'tried to eat up the money for building our churches. We refused and all the money has been invested in our buildings. Now of course we have our independent Nyangatom church, but no single cent from outside! We are abandoned!'

The church service that I had the opportunity to witness showed that a new Nyangatom culture is emerging through religion, and that a strong element in it is a new, artistic – in singing – and theologic – in praying –, role of women (see Plate 3.2). Through this 'revolution' a new identity may emerge, either within Nyangatom society or by dissidence. The 'believers' (in Nyangatom *ngi-ka-nup-ak*) do not stand too firmly against the 'traditionalists' or non-believers; in times of crisis the converted say, 'Let us live together and share everything like the early Christians.' Saying this, they wonder why the SPCM missionaries, overt believers and more evidently rich, do not share or give away for free all the goods they have. When discussing SPCM's departure, they say, 'It is not their money which is finished, it is their heart: they have lost their heart.'

For the present, modernization has not yet deeply affected the society. Transformations are superficial as the general conditions of life demonstrate: the

3. Instead of developing a regional market, Nyangatom employees waste their Ethiopian money in 'Kibish City', a new town on the Sudanese side (today Kenyan by annexation) of the River Kibish, to the Eastern edge of the Ilemi Triangle (Map 3.1), where Somali and other merchants operate. There, an addicted Nyangatom would pay almost the equivalent of his monthly wage for a bundle of chewing tobacco. The same was extorted thirty years ago by the Kibish imperial police! One can only wonder why the Nyangatom accept such unequal terms of exchange today. Is it through lack of individual entrepreneurship or because of crystallized cultural bias?

customary clothing and other bodily attire, the huts and kraals, the food habits, the whole lifestyle are well preserved. At the same time, it seems that the relations with the neighbours still operate in a rather traditional, 'ethnic' way. An alternation of sudden warfare and fragile peace remains the normal mode of communication between the peoples. Nevertheless, a root for a potential *sentiment de solidarité* does exist: the inter-ethnic institution of personal friendship, which is somehow considered sacred, and does save lives in clashes or other hostile encounters. But a political, regional solidarity has not yet emerged, except possibly in Jinka, between the pluri-ethnic members of a common administration<sup>4</sup> and more specifically between secondary school students who are sharing new modes of livelihood day and night. In this context, new types of relations are also emerging between the sexes.

Let me conclude on the recent conflict between the Hamar and the Nyangatom. My correspondent writes, 'The Nyangatom are not interested in returning the stolen cattle' (Addis Ababa, April 2001). The details clearly show that *Mangist*, the state and/or government, although it exists and has members from the various peoples of the zone, is still a foreign reality. Jinka, 120 km to the north, remains unknown to a majority of the people of the Lower Omo valley. The video record of the public audience given to me at Kibish in November 2000 is particularly significant. To the Nyangatom in the field, there are 'more chances on the fringe of the state': if women today believe that there is no spiritual salvation outside their church, men continue to think that there is no military or food security dispensed by the Ethiopian *Mangist*. They continue to perceive *Mangist* to be a foreign predatory agency, if not a public enemy. Evidently, the expected African Renaissance will not primarily rely on state structures, but will require, especially from formerly marginal or marginalized populations, a new, wider understanding of political action.

---

4. But of course negative feelings also emerge: the Nyangatom elites in Jinka describe the Ari men (the main local population) as 'abominable wizards, drunkards killing each other with knives and spears every Saturday night. On Sunday mornings, the alleyways are filled with their mutilated bodies.' I walked through 'the town' one Sunday morning and could see no evidence of my friends' depreciative statements.

## Part II

# Institutions of Identification and Networks of Alliance among Rift Valley Agriculturalists