

Warfare among East African Herders

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and

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Armed Conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley, 1970-1976: An Analysis from within Nyangatom Society

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After a brief description of Nyangatom means of subsistence and social organisation, a detailed chronological account is given of inter-tribal conflicts in which they were involved between 1970 and 1976. In April and June 1972, August and December 1973 and September 1974 they clashed with the Dassanetch; in January and February 1973 with the Kara; in June 1973, again with the Kara, this time assisted by the Hamar. In these and other engagements they lost at least 400 lives.

In the second part of the paper it is suggested that ecological and short-term economic factors are likely to be more helpful in explaining these events than the historical record. On the other hand, it is essential to view these contemporary conflicts in a broad spatial and temporal context, for they then appear as one aspect of a northward drift of peoples which seems to be affecting not only the Nyangatom but also a number of their neighbours, from the shores of Lake Turkana, up to the Ethiopian Plateau.

In this paper I present an account of contemporary inter-tribal conflict in the Lower Omo Valley based on my own experience of Nyangatom society. Five successive stays from 1970 to 1976, representing a total of 24 months' fieldwork, made it possible, as well as necessary, to study this problem diachronically. I do

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not pretend to total objectivity but rely on other papers in this issue to correct any bias there may be in my account.

THE NYANGATOM AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

The Nyangatom, or Yellow Guns, number about 5,000 and inhabit a part of the Lower Omo Valley in the Province of Gamu Gofa, in southwestern Ethiopia.¹ Their territory lies on either side of the seasonal river Kibish, where it marks the Ethiopia-Sudan border. They move, according to the season, between the Omo River in the east and the Sudanese mountains of Tepes and Moruankipi in the west, where they come into contact with the Toposa.

The Nyangatom are one of the least known groups of the central Paraniotes. According to P. and P. H. Gulliver [1968: 93], who paid a short visit to them at Kibish in 1950, they are an offshoot of the Toposa who, in turn, originated from the Jie of Uganda. I am inclined to think that the separation of the Nyangatom from related Paraniotes is earlier than, or at least concomitant with, that of the Toposa. This separation probably occurred around 1800. At the time of the first explorations of the Lake Turkana area (by Höhnel and Teleki in 1888) two groups of Nyangatom, one at Kibish who were mainly cattle herders (the Dongiro), and the other at the Omo itself who lived mainly by cultivation and fishing (the Puma), were already settled in the Lower Omo Valley. It is likely that the expansion of the Turkana accelerated the migration of the Nyangatom from their original homeland (N. E. Uganda) to the northeast, and that of the Toposa to the northwest. The Nyangatom and Toposa have an alliance resulting from their reciprocal religious relationship of "Grandmother's thigh". The Nyangatom have, on the other hand, fought with the Turkana—indeed the expulsion of the Turkana from the Kibish area took place within living memory.

Toposa, Turkana and Nyangatom are closely related dialects and belong to the Karimojong cluster of the Teso group of Paraniotic languages. All of the other neighbours of the Nyangatom, however, speak languages which belong to distinctly different language groups. These neighbours are, (i) the Dassanetch (numbering about 15,000) who speak a Cushitic language and inhabit the southern part of the valley and the Omo delta; (ii) the Hamar (numbering about 10,000) and the Kara (800) who speak Omotic languages; and (iii) the Mursi (numbering between 4,000 and 5,000) and, further to the northwest, other Suri tribes, who belong to the Surma family of languages [BENDER 1976].

The Nyangatom call all these groups, with the exception of the Toposa, *ngimwe*, "strangers" or "enemies", while emphasising their own cultural and social identity.

¹ The Nyangatom are called BUMI, BUMA or BUME by Highland Ethiopians. This name is phonemically close to IL-KUUME, a name given to the Turkana by the Maasai; to KHUMI or HUMA, a name given to the Toposa by the Didinga [P. and P. H. GULLIVER 1968: 10]; and to KUM, a name given to the Toposa, Jie and Turkana by the Murle [LEWIS 1972: 22].

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² The following are mea Addis Ababa, during o Kibish:

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Like most of their neighbours, they were not colonised either by Europeans or Highland Ethiopians. Modern administration is virtually non-existent in the Lower Omo Valley, but the role of the local Ethiopian garrisons (at Kibish, Kalam and Namuruputh) and their Kenyan counterparts (at Kibish, Lokomarinyang, Kokuro and Todenyang in the Ilemi Triangle) must sometimes be taken into account when considering inter-tribal conflict in this area.

ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

All the tribes of the Lower Omo Valley subsist on resources which are both limited and irregularly distributed in time and space. The whole area may be regarded as a complex ecosystem with the following features:

- (i) low altitude (under 500 m on average);
- (ii) high average temperatures with little annual variation;²
- (iii) relatively low rainfall (350 to 400 mm) with a "wet" season from March to June and a "dry" season from July to January (secondary falls of rain may occur between August and early November);
- (iv) a drainage system in which the Omo and its tributary the Mago are the only permanent rivers; wells dug in the beds of a few temporary rivers, such as the Kibish, are used to water the herds during the long dry periods; springs, including some hot ones, are also used for watering;
- (v) contrasted vegetation areas, namely the riverain forest of the Omo, wooded and open grassland, bushland thicket and almost barren areas.

Apart from the Kara, who no longer own livestock, the people of this area cling to a pastoral ideology. Agriculture, however, is practised by all the groups—rain cultivation during the wet season and flood cultivation during the dry season. Fishing, hunting and gathering are subsidiary activities. This diversity would provide a stable and adequate level of subsistence, but for two further factors—the irregular and local nature of the rainfall and the presence of tsetse fly along the Omo, which makes it an undesirable area in which to keep cattle.

The economic, political and ritual life of the Nyangatom must be seen within the context of a division into territorial sections. The land is naturally divided into ecological strips (the river banks, the forest, bushland thicket and open grassland) which are roughly parallel to the course of the Omo. The three major territorial sections lie across these strips, so that, as among the Mursi [TURTON 1978], they

² The following are mean daily temperatures (centigrade) taken by G. Fällsten, P. C. M., Addis Ababa, during one dry season and the beginning of the following wet season at Kibish:

Month	Minimum	Maximum
Dec. 73	21.2	38.6
Jan. 74	21.0	39.1
Feb. 74	22.2	39.4
March 74	24.6	36.7

Nyangatom Territorial Sections

Names	Meaning	Shorter names
Ngilingakol	White-Bellied Stork (<i>Sphenorynchus abdimiti</i>)	Storks
Ngikapung	Greater Flamingo (<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>)	Flamingos
Ngisakol	Wood Ibis (<i>Ibis ibis</i>)	Ibises
Ngutokoraaman	Yellow-Necked Spurrowl (<i>Pternistis leucoscepus</i>)	Spurrowls
Ngibuney	Castor oil tree	Castors
Ngukumama	Proper name*	Ngukumama
Ngingaric	Proper name (section of Murle origin)**	Ngaric

* The Lango and the Karimojong call the Teso NGIKUMAMA [P. and P. H. GULLIVER 1968: 9]. Although the Nyangatom do not know the origin and meaning of this proper name, it suggests that agricultural Parakilotes, like the ancestors of the Teso [LAMPHEAR 1976: 87 ff.], were also involved in the origin of the present-day Nyangatom.

** Although the Ngingaric, or Nagric, may justifiably be called the "Omo Murle", they are fully accepted as Nyangatom, and only a few old women can still speak Murle. I think that the word Ngingaric comes from NGANDAREC, a name given to the Omo Murle by the Lotilla Murle [LEWIS 1972: 22]. The Dassanetch section name NARITCH [ALMAGOR 1972: 194] may have the same origin. I give further details about the ethno-history of the Omo Murle in my article [TORNAV 1978].

contain land of each type. Four minor sections are "guests" of the major ones, but retain their claims on fairly precise parts of the territory. The sections are set out in the above table.

A Nyangatom belongs to his or her father's section, membership of which gives rights to grazing, water and cultivable land. These resources, however, are regarded as belonging to "all the Nyangatom". A man can change his section by changing his residence, his transhumance movements, or his agricultural routine. For a man, marriage may be the occasion for such a change. A woman married outside her father's section is incorporated into her husband's section, but the major sections are strongly endogamous.³ The statistical distribution of exogamous marriages

³ The following endogamy rates were recorded at Kibish in 1973:

(0=totally exogamous; 1=totally endogamous)

Sections	Number of married men	Number of spouses	Rate of polygyny	Endogamy rate
Storks	174	280	1.61	0.8
Flamingos	123	237	1.93	0.8
Ibises	84	153	1.82	0.6
Nugkumama	34	60	1.76	0.5
Spurrowls	30	48	1.6	0.3
Ngaric	15	23	1.53	0.3

mean rate of polygyny 1.69

(from Torna [1975: 44])

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reflects the spatial proximity and political affinity of the sections [TORNAV 1975: 41-52].

The age organisation of the Nyangatom may be considered on two levels. Firstly, there is a division into generations, which produces an oblique slicing of the male demographic pyramid. There are, at any one time, two central generations, that of the *Fathers of the country* and that of the *Sons of the country*. Political and ritual power is, in principle, in the Fathers' hands. Alternate generations are symbolically identified, as is revealed on ritual and other formal occasions.

Secondly, every generation is subdivided into named age-sets which appear as corporate local age-groups within each territorial section, and as recognised age categories at the tribal level.⁴ Age-set names do vary from one section to another, but there is a general knowledge of the equivalence of sets of coevals. In a forthcoming paper [TORNAV 1979] I suggest that the division into generations is "superstructural" and essentially of politico-religious significance. The division of the generations into age-sets seems, on the other hand, to be "infrastructural": it extends the principle of seniority beyond the family cluster, thus providing a "vertical" means of control in productive activities. The principle of the solidarity of coevals provides, on the other hand, for the "horizontal" co-ordination of these activities. Authority and solidarity are also inescapable in matters of warfare. I shall return to the problem of social control in the second part of this paper.

A CHRONOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF HOSTILITIES, 1970-1976

The following account is based on my own observations, avoiding interpretation, and on evidence collected from Nyangatom who had taken part in or observed the events described.⁵

In July 1970 I arrived in the Lower Omo Valley as a member of the French Omo Research Expedition. I knew almost nothing of the people among whom I was going to work. I only knew that another anthropologist (Uri Almagor) was carrying out field work among the "Gelleps" (Dassanetch) and I therefore decided to undertake research among their northern neighbours, the "Bumis" (Nyangatom), who were regarded with some compassion both by Europeans and by Highland Ethiopians: they seemed to be less handsome, less strong, less "brilliant" than the Dassanetch.

My first contact with the people was at the Omo villages of Weleso and Cungura, which were, at that time fairly densely populated. The atmosphere was peaceful and the people friendly. At night the men went out fishing to the south, and the Dassanetch, when they came up the river to Weleso, looked proud but not aggressive. I was told that around the 10th of July the Dassanetch had had an altercation with

⁴ The distinction between local age-groups and tribal age categories is particularly well established by Turton [1978].

⁵ Among the most zealous informants I must mention Loceria Lopir, who kept a diary covering several periods from 1972 to 1975.

Shorter names

Storks

Flamingos

Ibises

Spurfowls

Castors

Ngukumama

Ngaric

P. and P. H. GULLIVER 1968: 9].
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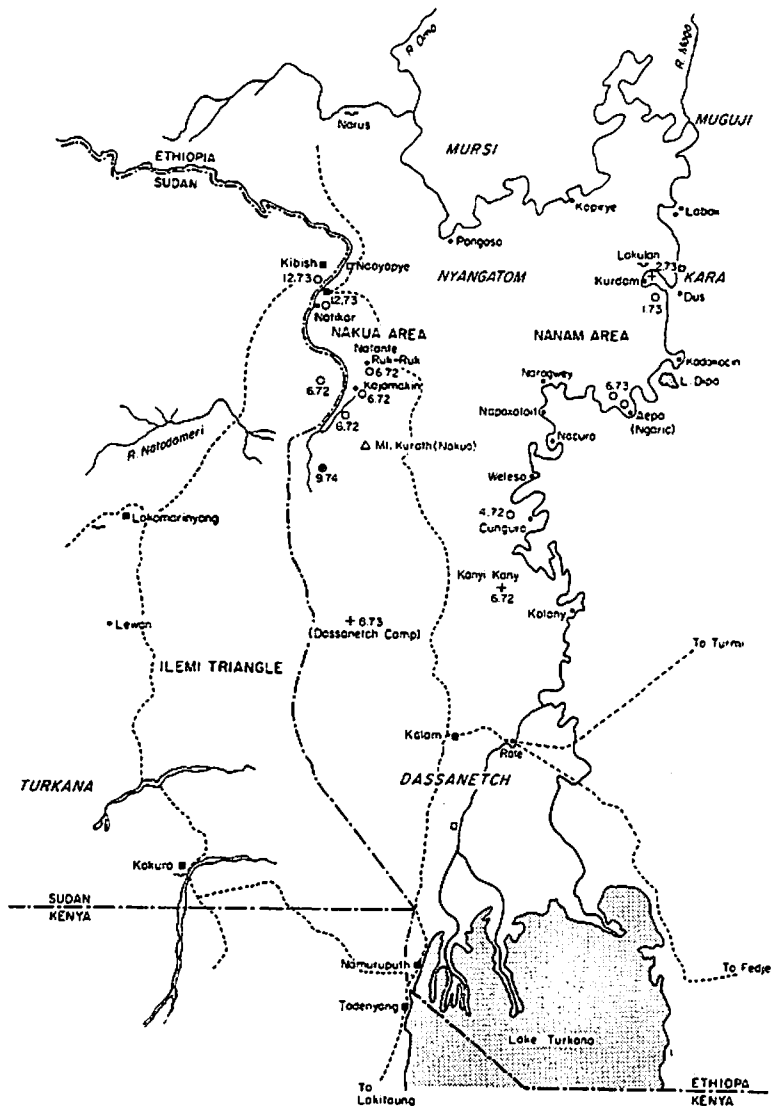
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Rate of polygyny	Endogamy rate
1.61	0.8
1.93	0.8
1.82	0.6
1.76	0.5
1.6	0.3
1.53	0.3

(from Torna [1975: 44])



- Key**
- Settlement
 - + Raid by Nyangatom
 - Raid on Nyangatom
 - ◻ Mission
 - Police post
 - Permanent water
 - - - Dry-weather motorable track

Location of Main Inter-Tribal Clashes in the Lower Omo Area, 1972-4

Note

- (i) The place names shown are those used by the Nyangatom
- (ii) This is a simplified version of a map which was drawn in 1977 by J. M. Chavy of the Laboratoire d'ethnologie, Nanterre, and which was based on the maps "Kibish" and "Namuruputh", Y 633, 1961, Nairobi, the "Southern Omo" map of the Wild Life Conservation Department, Addis Ababa, and on field surveys by the author.

the Kenyan police in the were killed. I arrived : settlements grouped to frontier. The Nyangatom the Kibish, the bed of said that if they crossed settlements on both sides herds in Sudanese territory dare to venture too far their herders a little from a settlement, which the killing the occupants in they had orders to make incidents between the turning a blind eye to

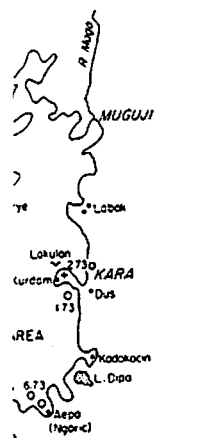
The July sorghum and Dassanetch seemed at Kokuro in 1966 betw to be holding.

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In July at Kibish was almost non-existent came up the river, people. They insisted, however the Kara." In fact, Kara and their allies, men (one Muguji and

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Omo Area, 1972-4

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Omo" map of the Wild Life
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the Kenyan police in the neighbourhood of Todenyang or Kokuro: three policemen were killed. I arrived at Kibish in August, and found Dassanetch and Nyangatom settlements grouped together around the police post, on the Ethiopian side of the frontier. The Nyangatom feared the Kenyan police who were stationed 2 km from the Kibish, the bed of which is considered to mark the international border. 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 in Sudanese territory (controlled locally by Kenyan forces). But they did not dare to venture too far to the west and were glad when I occasionally accompanied their herders a little farther west than usual. 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 order to prevent incidents between the Turkana, Dassanetch and Nyangatom. They were, however, turning a blind eye to the crossing of the border by Nyangatom.

The July sorghum harvest had been excellent and relations between Nyangatom and Dassanetch seemed to be peaceful. The "white peace" established by the police at Kokuro in 1966 between the Turkana, the Dassanetch and the Nyangatom seemed to be holding.

Meanwhile I was told that on the Omo, farther to the north, "questions" (*ngakuro*: words, problems, conflicts) had arisen with the Kara. Around 1968, after a long period of peace, the Nyangatom had stolen goats from the Kara who were then settled on both sides of the Omo (near Lokulan, by the hot springs where there are no tsetse fly). The Ethiopian police forced the Nyangatom to return the stolen livestock and sent six Nyangatom to prison in Jinka. In 1969 the Kara killed one Nyangatom who had come to exchange a gun. In 1970 they killed two more Nyangatom at Kopirye in Nyangatom territory. These events were the prelude to the more serious incidents which are described below.

1971

The year had a bad start for the Nyangatom. In January, at Loole, in the Sudan, they were attacked by Suri (Ngikoroma). Men, women and children were killed and all the flocks and herds of one camp were taken.

In July at Kibish, as a result of a very poor rainy season, the sorghum harvest was almost non-existent. In August, at Cungura, I noticed that, when Dassanetch came up the river, people painted their faces with brown ochre—a protective ritual. They insisted, however, that "It is still peace with the Dassanetch and still war with the Kara." In fact, that year, the Nyangatom killed one Kara at Lokulan. The Kara and their allies, the Hamar, counter-attacked at Kopirye and lost at least three men (one Muguji and two Hamar).

In the course of the dry season of 1971-2 there was friction between Nyangatom and Dassanetch at Kibish: young herdsmen, underfed and increasingly combative, stole each others' cattle.

1972

Relations between the Nyangatom and the Dassanetch degenerated to such an extent that, at the height of the dry season, in January, the Nyangatom refused the Dassanetch access to the water-holes of Natikar, at Kibish. Relations had broken down entirely. The Dassanetch were forced to retreat with their herds to the south and southeast. This explains why the first violent fights occurred on the Omo near Kanyi-Kany and Cungura. In March three people from each place were murdered, followed by a Dassanetch girl. In April the Dassanetch replied by killing ten Nyangatom near Cungura. The Nyangatom then abandoned their southern villages on the Omo, took refuge in the bushland thicket on the left bank (an unoccupied area) and went up the river to Nacuro. Other Dassanetch attacks were made on Nyangatom travelling between the Omo and Kibish. In early June an age-group of Nyangatom went out at night to attack a Dassanetch camp, shooting seven Dassanetch. The latter then mobilised on a large scale and took advantage of unexpected rainfall to start a concerted attack at Kibish, around the 20th of June. They succeeded in exterminating the southern pastoral settlements at Kibish, namely Natante, Ruk-Ruk and Kajamakin. They fell simultaneously on the different settlements while their occupants were still asleep, massacring men, women, children and old people, with guns, spears and clubs, and setting fire to the huts. Surprise was total. Only the most speedy managed to escape and/or save part of their livestock and pursue the attackers. Only a few Dassanetch were killed, however.

I arrived on the scene in July. The Dassanetch were gathered around the police station at Kalam and close to the American Mission on the Omo, a position to which they normally withdraw only in the wet season. At Kibish the Nyangatom were still nursing the injured who had survived the attack. All the settlements south of the Ethiopian police post had been abandoned, including those which had not been attacked. The Storks, the section most affected by the raid, had retired into the Flamingos' territory, north of the police post. The sorghum fields of Natante, which were almost ready for harvesting, had also been abandoned, because of the proximity of the corpses which were still being eaten by hyenas and vultures. The crop was destroyed within a few days by birds, warthogs and antelopes. At the Ethiopian police post the Nyangatom *balabats* (government appointed chiefs) helped to count the casualties; most estimates, both by local people and outsiders, varied between 300 and 400 dead. I prefer the lowest estimate, that of the *balabat* Nasike, who told me that 204 casualties had been reported to the police.

A period of starvation followed. The Nyangatom had consumed too large a part of their livestock and some families had been ruined by the Dassanetch raid. In July the Kenyan police officially "opened" the frontier to the Nyangatom in the Kibish area, although they had already been crossing the border before the raid took place. In August the Ethiopian police drove 86 skinny cattle to Kibish as compensation from the Dassanetch, a response which was, of course, received ironically by the Nyangatom. At the end of the year Ethiopian officials distributed

some maize at Kibish : Dassanetch. At about some economic pressure. It was under this agreement numbers around Nacuro opposite that of the Kara crop. The Nyangatom mutual thefts of sorghum

The presence of the Kara quickly caused the Kara for the purpose of among them than the would not admit to the deaths had occurred and attacked the Omo between 80 and 100 of the violence of the N asked the Ethiopian police. The police did not act set off to "exterminate" north, the Storks and where the waters of the Kurdam where 104 people away, with their wives took refuge near the because of the corpses

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In May the Mur in the Kibish area, the murder of a Mursi boy Nyangatom about the June the Dassanetch

⁶ According to David but a very influential been shot, from the

degenerated to such an extent that the Nyangatom refused the relations had broken their herds to the south occurred on the Omo on each place were murdered. The Dassanetch replied by killing and abandoned their southern settlements on the left bank (an unprovoked Dassanetch attack was reported at Kibish. In early June an attack on a Dassanetch camp, shooting and taking advantage around the 20th of June. Incidents at Kibish, namely separately on the different sides of the river, men, women, children were taken to the huts. Surprise attacks saved part of their lives; others were killed, however. Gathered around the police station on the Omo, a position to which the Nyangatom were driven from the settlements south of the Omo, those which had not been destroyed had retired into the sorghum fields of Natante, abandoned, because of the attacks by hyenas and vultures. The police and antelopes. At the time appointed chiefs) helped the police and outsiders, varied in that of the *balabat* Nasike, the police.

had consumed too large a quantity of food by the Dassanetch raid. The Nyangatom in the border before the raid took their kinny cattle to Kibish as was, of course, received from the Ethiopian officials distributed

some maize at Kibish and tried to conclude a peace between the Nyangatom and the Dassanetch. At about the same time the Nyangatom, voluntarily, although under some economic pressure, made peace with the Kara at Kadokocin, in Kara territory. It was under this agreement that the Omo Nyangatom, who were gathered in large numbers around Nacuro, were temporarily allowed to settle and cultivate land opposite that of the Kara. In December the Kara were expecting a bumper sorghum crop. The Nyangatom, however, were fighting the Mursi, probably because of mutual thefts of sorghum. Three people were killed by the Nyangatom at Pongoso.

1973

The presence of starving Nyangatom on the opposite bank of the Omo from the Kara quickly caused problems. The Nyangatom "offered their services" to the Kara for the purpose of watching over their crops, but probably caused more damage among them than the birds. In my interviews with them, however, Nyangatom would not admit to stealing sorghum from the Kara. In January, after a number of deaths had occurred on both sides, the Kara and their Hamar allies crossed the river and attacked the Omo Nyangatom (who, having no cattle, have no guns either) killing between 80 and 100 of them. (I cannot establish the exact number, but to judge from the violence of the Nyangatom reaction it was high). The Nyangatom of Kibish asked the Ethiopian police to intervene and to punish the offenders within six days. The police did not act, however, and in February many hundreds of Nyangatom set off to "exterminate" the Kara. They approached in two wings, the Ibises to the north, the Storks and Flamingos to the south. They forded the river at Kurdam, where the waters of the Omo are at their lowest, and destroyed the Kara village of Kurdam where 104 people were killed. Later, they returned from Kibish, 50 km away, with their wives to take away the sorghum and the pots. The panicking Kara took refuge near the mission station at Dus and did not come back to Kurdam because of the corpses.

By March some settlements had been reconstructed at Kibish, south of the Ethiopian police post, but the occupants feared a renewed attack from the Dassanetch, who had experienced particularly difficult times in the course of the current season. Fences around the settlements were strengthened and stockades built, but there was no move to attack the Dassanetch on their own ground. Their thinking was expressed as follows: "Sooner or later they will be forced to come back to the north. Then we shall have only to open our compounds to catch their cattle."

In May the Mursi killed 8 Nyangatom women who were gathering wild greens in the Kibish area, north of Naoyapye. This was apparently in retaliation for the murder of a Mursi *balabat* by the Nyangatom (there was disagreement among the Nyangatom about the facts of this case, which has not yet been cleared up).⁶ In June the Dassanetch tried to capture some Nyangatom hostages, apparently in order

⁶ According to David Turton (personal communication) the Mursi do not have *balabats*; but a very influential Mursi, called Balukwe, whom Turton knew personally, had in fact been shot, from the right bank of the River, and for unknown reasons.

to negotiate peace and their return to grazing lands around the Kurath range, southeast of Kibish. At the same time, however, they killed the occasional Nyangatom herders, and women out gathering. (I saw the corpses of such victims on several occasions.)

On the 21st of June a joint war-party of Kara and Hamar attacked two Nyangatom villages of the Ngaric section at Aepa, on the Omo. Two days later I visited one of the raided settlements in the company of some Ethiopian policemen. We counted about 20 corpses which had already been reduced to skeletons by hyenas and vultures. According to the accounts of witnesses who escaped the massacre, an even larger number of people had been killed in the second village: Altogether there were 60 casualties. There was no counter-attack against the Kara, since the Nyangatom were preparing to raid the Dassanetch. Together with some Toposa warriors recruited from the Sudan, the Nyangatom set off on August 29th: about 400 men, between the ages of 12 and 55, attacked an important Dassanetch camp south of Kurath. Owing to an error by the Nyangatom scouts, however, most of the Dassanetch managed to escape, only five of them being killed. The Nyangatom brought back to Kibish, however, around 1,000 head of cattle, 2,000 small stock and a large number of donkeys. Immediately after the attack the fugitives alerted the Ethiopian police at Kalam, who sent out a lorry with about thirty men to attack the Nyangatom, but this action was soon called off to prevent further deaths, and the police took back only a few animals. The last of the Nyangatom returned home in the evening of the 30th, at least twenty men and boys having died of thirst on their way home, despite the efforts of the women who carried water from Kibish. From that day onwards the Nyangatom were expecting a Dassanetch counter-attack. The raid had enabled them to restore their herds, and to buy a good deal of ammunition (from Maji), but many of them left for the Sudan, in order to take their stolen cattle to a safer place. In December the Dassanetch counter-attacked at Kibish, once again trying to raid settlements in the early morning, but the Nyangatom were waiting for them and vigorously repulsed the attackers, who left behind about 20 dead.

1974

In January the Mursi demonstrated their desire for peace by coming to Kibish. Some Dassanetch leaders were also escorted there by Ethiopian police, for the same purpose, but in July the Dassanetch killed another two Nyangatom at Narogwey on the Omo. In August, influential Nyangatom were called to Kalam to make peace, but nobody believed in this "strangers' peace" and the Nyangatom showed little interest in it. In a further incident, sorghum was stolen at Natante and Dassanetch were accused of the theft. Twenty Dassanetch warriors were seen at Natodomeri (north of Lokomarinyang) by the Kenyan police, and were reported to be approaching the Nyangatom grazing areas. In September a Nyangatom scout killed a Dassanetch at Naalungmur, west of Kurath, and on the following day a Nyangatom war-party fell into a Dassanetch trap at the same place. Twenty-six Nyangatom were killed and all their guns stolen, the Dassanetch losing twelve men.

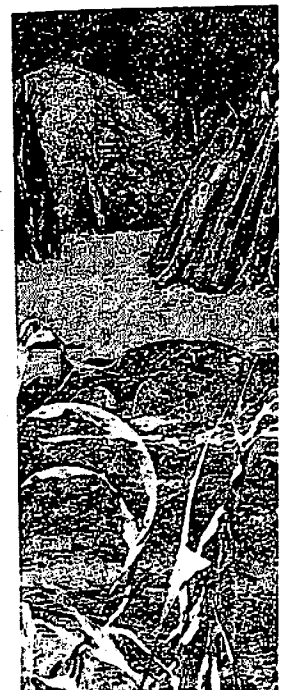


Photo. 1. A bur
at Aep



Photo. 2. Meat-e

Later some Mursi came to Kibish to exchange pots for food. In November peace was made between the Nyangatom and the Kara on the initiative of Swedish missionaries at Kibish. In December the new Ethiopian government distributed maize and clothes at Kibish, to the local people. Among them were Mursi who had come there without interference.

1975-6

No major hostilities took place, but it was clear that the conflict with the Dassanetch would not be settled for some time. In January the Nyangatom killed three Dassanetch on the path to Napoxotoit, on the Omo. The Dassanetch were reported to have tried to arouse the Turkana against the Nyangatom, which could have had serious consequences for the Nyangatom southwest of Kibish. I heard complaints about the "men of the west", a group of Nyangatom who appeared to have virtually seceded, not having been back to Kibish since 1973, thus leaving the "men of Nakua"—that is the people of Kibish—to confront their powerful Dassanetch enemies alone. Various diplomatic attempts were made to persuade this group to return to Kibish. It was said moreover, in January 1976, that the Sudanese police had tried to repatriate these Nyangatom to Ethiopia and that they had begun to quarrel with the Toposa over the use of water-holes. Finally, the southern areas of settlement on the Omo, in particular Weleso, Cungura and Kanyi-Kany, had not been reoccupied by the Nyangatom, for any length of time since April 1972.

INTERPRETATION

Any account of the type I have given above is likely to give the appearance of having its own internal logic. Although we must go beyond this superficial kind of causality, it should be emphasised that the facts do have a logic of their own which is not entirely without significance. Once hostilities break out one can rightly speak of a chain reaction of events. The actors themselves certainly think and act in some such logical sequence, and they insist that aggression inevitably leads to counter-aggression until the "debts are paid off".

The period described here marks, I suggest, a crisis in Nyangatom society, by which I mean a critical time, a hazardous and crucial moment in the development of the Nyangatom as an autonomous group. A population of 5,000, living in such a harsh environment, cannot go on losing 400 to 500 people every five years, not to mention the deaths which result from starvation, which usually follows defeat. We are clearly not concerned, therefore, with a "normal" period.

However "quarrelsome" they may be, these tribes are known to enjoy long periods of peace with at least some of their neighbours. But during the period described here the Nyangatom had no peaceful relations with any of their close neighbours, and we can therefore speak of this as a period of generalised war, but although there was a crisis, it was not a matter of anomy: there was no question of a "breakdown" of Nyangatom society, or of any neighbouring society. The prob-



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General of his father, who
Dassanetch, August 1973
(Musée de l'Homme, Paris)

lem is the more general one of the relationship between ecology and subsistence on the one hand, and inter-tribal relations on the other.

If factors inherent in the social structure were not responsible for the events described above, and if neither the Nyangatom nor their neighbours were going through a period of "revolution", were they nevertheless at a particularly crucial moment in their history? Is warfare, in other words, to be explained as the result of an historical process? Almagor [1974] has analysed the historical antecedents to the contemporary period in the Lower Omo Valley and I summarise here the main points he raises which are of interest for the present study.⁷

The Ethiopian conquest of the Lower Omo area (1898-1903) both exacerbated and confused inter-tribal rivalries by setting them within the context of a war of influence between British and Ethiopian imperialism. The frontiers fixed in 1907 cut the Dassanetch off from their western dry season transhumance territories: the northern slopes of the ranges of North-Turkana and the adjacent savannahs. The Dassanetch and Turkana fought desperately for these grassland areas between 1920 and 1940, the former, although outnumbered, getting the better of the latter. The British sent several punitive expeditions into the area (1918, 1926, 1932, 1939), but did not manage to end the fighting. The Nyangatom supported the Dassanetch against the Turkana on several occasions, in particular from 1919 to 1924. [The Nyangatom gained from this alliance, since they successfully forced the Turkana to withdraw to the south, and drove them from their Kibish grazing areas.]

In 1939 the Sudanese Government admitted that it could not control the so-called Ilemi Triangle and this task was handed over to Kenya. During their occupation of the Lower Omo Valley (1937-41) the Italians armed the Nyangatom and Dassanetch and persuaded them to fight on their side against the Ethiopians, the British and the Turkana. In September 1941 the area was occupied by the British, coming from Kenya. At the end of 1942 they established military posts and finally succeeded in controlling the whole Triangle. They granted the Turkana the right of pasture up to a "Red line" and converted the remainder of the Triangle, the so-called "Appendix", into a no-man's land. Since then, the Dassanetch have been officially excluded from the western areas, and no serious conflict seems to have occurred between the Dassanetch and the Turkana between 1942 and 1962.

From 1962 to 1965 the level of Lake Turkana rose, and 300 km² of agricultural and pastoral land, essential to the Dassanetch, was flooded [BUTZER 1971: 143]. This ecological change forced the Dassanetch to try to win back their former grazing areas and new incidents occurred with Kenyan forces. [The Nyangatom and Turkana were involved in these incidents, since they had taken part in the "white peace" made in 1966 at Kokuro, as was mentioned above.]

The Dassanetch, Almagor reports, say that the Italians were their only true allies. They resent the Turkana who have enlarged their territory at their expense,

⁷ Information or commentary which is not contained in Almagor's paper is enclosed in square brackets.

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the British and their Kenyan successors who have driven them from their western grazing areas, and the Ethiopians whom they regard as incapable of reconquering their territory. "They are hostile to the Nyangatom with whom they had co-operated in joint raids, but whom they saw return to their grazing areas north of the Appendix, because they were considered more amenable" [ALMAGOR 1974: 11]. [As a matter of fact, we have seen that in 1970 the Kenyans tacitly allowed the Nyangatom to cross the frontier at Kibish. But conflicts with the Kenyan police had occurred in the recent past, as was indicated by the destroyed settlement which the Nyangatom showed me in 1970.]

Almagor's analysis certainly throws light on our problem, but although it is indeed essential to know the events which immediately preceded the present crisis, I am not sure that "history", in the western sense, will provide the essential clue we are looking for. In Western societies history is part of the dominant ideology, one of its functions being to allow the social classes in each society to follow a certain evolutionary path. But the societies we are concerned with here have no social classes and they can therefore behave more freely towards their history: they have no official historians and no history books. They are not, in other words, totally bound by their past. Nor can one say that inter-ethnic relations here take the place of class relations,⁸ for the former are constantly changing. Moreover, and this is still more important, these societies do not appear to be bound in the long run even by the image of their own identity, which is why they give such an impression of turmoil: peace today, war tomorrow. One is reminded of Dilthey's famous statement: "Peace is nothing but war carried on with other weapons."

I therefore suggest that the present situation is more important than historical experience in understanding the origin of the conflict described above. Great importance should be attached, in my opinion, to ecological factors and to the economic consequences of political events. I quite agree with Almagor when, following Butzer, he suggests that the rise in the level of Lake Turkana (1962-5) made it inevitable that the Dassanetch would fight to regain their former grazing areas. But in this fight they encountered overwhelmingly superior modern armed forces. The crisis experienced by the Nyangatom and their neighbours in the 1970's was, in my opinion, the consequence of a more localised and slightly earlier crisis with which the Dassanetch also had to cope. Both crises were, at base, economic. Around the end of the 1960's the Dassanetch found themselves blocked in the east by their long-standing enemies, the Hamar, in the south by Lake Turkana, which now covered an important part of their most productive territory, and in the west by impregnable armed forces. They could do nothing but move to the north, towards their former allies, the Nyangatom, in order to share with them the grazing areas around Kurath, while watering their herds, during the driest periods, as far north as Natikar (Kibish). This situation was temporarily tolerated by the Nyan-

⁸ I refer of course only to the ethnic groups of the Lower Omo Valley, which have neither castes nor other institutionalised hierarchical inter-tribal relations.

gatom; but owing to their limited resources and, in particular, to the drought which started in 1971, they could not sustain such coexistence indefinitely. The peace which prevailed in 1970, therefore, was a precarious one, and the very poor harvest which the Nyangatom obtained in 1971 made it all the more certain that they would soon be in conflict with the Dassanetch. Similarly, the deterioration in Nyangatom-Kara relations resulted from encroachment by the former on Kara territory after Dassanetch attacks on their southern settlements (at Cungura). The Kara are a small tribe of sedentary agriculturalists and supply their permanent allies, the Dassanetch, as well as the Nyangatom, with pots and other clay products (the Nyangatom make no pottery and are dependent for this important product on the Kara and Mursi).

STRATEGY, TACTICS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

One striking aspect of the tribal wars described above—but certainly not of tribal warfare in general—is that overall strategy was expressed only in the most general terms: “Our enemies want to reduce us to nothing, to treat us like dogs. We must exterminate them.” Statements of this kind hardly amount to a real strategy. Although the prize of war is access to localised resources, this seems to be “forgotten” by the antagonists: no attack was followed up, at least during the period of this study, by the occupation of the territory of those who had been “reduced to nothing”. Although tactics are effective enough (scouting, simultaneous attacks on several settlements, surprise attacks, ambushes, etc.), they do not seem to be carried out with any global strategy in mind, particularly from the territorial point of view. I shall come back to this point in my conclusion.

The political problems with which these “egalitarian” or “acephalous” societies are faced are well known. What they lose in overall co-ordination they gain in flexibility. In emergencies there is a spontaneous mobilisation of individuals, age-groups and territorial sections, there being no need to refer to any authority before taking action. This is a particularly effective system in defensive wars. In offense its major drawback is the risk of anarchy. Young men, individually or by age-groups, are particularly eager to distinguish themselves by killing an enemy, for this brings with it a highly valued status. Anyone who has killed an enemy is proud to be addressed by his “enemy’s name”, which quite often becomes that by which he is most widely known. Consequently, the elders are sometimes unable to hold back the young warriors, although it should be noted that among the Nyangatom, as among the other Central Paraniotes, war is not the prerogative of men of a particular age-grade, as it is among the Maasai and the Samburu. The Nyangatom are an example of an “armed nation”. In the case of a large scale mobilisation, either defensive or offensive, any male may participate in the action. More restricted operations, however, are undertaken by particular age-groups of coevals who are usually co-residents, which obviously facilitates their mobilisation (see Tornay [1975: 64–71]).

Generally speaking the fact that a man belongs to a particular social generation

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The Dassanetch approach problem of social control wanted to enter into negotiations on several occasions. The gathering, played an important role in the mass raid

TERRITORY AND TRIBE

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does not in itself affect his involvement in military activity. There is, however, at any time, a leading generation in matters of war: namely that with the most warriors in the prime of life. After the Dassanetch attack of 1972 the Elephants, today still “Fathers of the country”, designated their sons, the Ostriches, as responsible for the war. This was a significant prelude to the handing over of the ritual and political power of the aging Elephants to their sons. Under such circumstances the Ostriches, and especially their junior age-sets, were particularly keen to go on raids, both to honour their fathers and to distinguish themselves as a great generation of warriors. The political leaders among the Elephants had much difficulty in restraining their warrior sons: “Sooner or later the Dassanetch will have to return to Nakua. Let them settle there. At the proper time we shall only have to open our kraals to catch their cattle.” Finally, however, the Ostriches had their way and the successful raid of the 29th of August, 1973, ensued.

The Dassanetch appear to suffer at least as much as the Nyangatom from this problem of social control. During the summer of 1973, when the Dassanetch elders wanted to enter into negotiations, young Dassanetch killed Nyangatom individuals on several occasions. The repeated murders of herdsmen, and of women while gathering, played an important part in the build up of Nyangatom resentment, which resulted in the mass raid of August 1973.

TERRITORY AND TRIBAL EVOLUTION

In 1976, after five years of fighting, the Dassanetch occupied neither Cungura nor Weleso, on the River Omo, despite the fact that both of these had been unoccupied since 1972. Nor did they settle, even temporarily, in the vicinity of Kurath, where they could have grazed their livestock during the wet season without having to water them at the water-holes of Kibish.

If these groups have any territorial strategy, therefore, it does not result in the early occupation of land left vacant by their defeated enemies. There is thus no real “conquest” of territory. Territorial conquest, in fact, is characteristic of sedentary peoples. For nomads, or semi-nomads, gaining free access to a place is more important than occupying it. Any operation which causes one group to retreat widens the potentially useful space available to others. The consequences of the Dassanetch assault in June 1972 at Kibish still affect the settlement pattern of the Nyangatom. Both of their settled areas, at Kibish as well as at the Omo, shifted northwards to a marked degree and in both places settlement is more concentrated than it was before 1972.

Thus the apparent absence of general strategy in the conduct of war is probably connected, not only with problems of social control, but also with mechanisms of adaptation. Although there is no conscious, explicit territorial strategy, we may discern, I believe, a slow but certain territorial drift. This drift is clearly distinct from an historical tendency: it is rather the expression of an unconscious mechanism of adaptation. During the twenties the main settlements of the Nyangatom

were located at Leere, near Kalam, the Ethiopian police post which is in Dassanetch territory. Nakua or Kibish was a grazing area, used for transhumance, from which the Nyangatom, with the help of the Dassanetch, drove away the Turkana. The successive initiation places of the Elephants' age-sets illustrate a continuous northward movement of the tribal centre. This centre, located today at Natikar (Kibish), has moved about 40 km northwards during the last 50 years. Now, the main spatial characteristic of the present war has been the northward push of the Dassanetch. We may conclude that external political events, by excluding the Dassanetch from their western pasturelands, and the ecological changes noted above accelerated this northward push of the Dassanetch. But we may also see it as part of a general territorial drift, the Dassanetch simply filling the space left vacant by the northward progression of the Nyangatom.⁹ The time dimension thus overtly plays an important role in understanding contemporary conflicts in the Lower Omo. These conflicts are to be seen as a particular moment in a major process of tribal evolution; the movement northwards seems to affect not only the Nyangatom but also their neighbours along the river, from the shores of Lake Turkana to the Ethiopian Plateau. This drift might ultimately be attributable to inescapable contradictions between lowland pastoralism and highland agriculture.

These views are in accordance with Turton's analysis of Mursi territorial organisation in a recent article [TURTON 1978], an analysis which stimulated my approach in this paper. The Mursi too are moving northwards, towards the Ethiopian Plateau and are slowly penetrating Bodi territory. Can we suggest that the resumption of fighting with the Bodi in 1972 was part of the shock-wave initiated by the Dassanetch assault on the Nyangatom in the same year? In any case, the fact that the Nyangatom and the Mursi had only minor conflicts during this period means that the most tense and critical area is not located at the Omo, at the boundary between the Nyangatom and the Mursi. The Mursi move northwards, leaving their southern border area in a state of depression. The few Nyangatom attacks on the Mursi in this area can be seen as a prelude to the movement of Nyangatom across the river, towards the north. One day this may be the only course open to them, unless the "people of the west"—those who left Kibish in September 1973, with the cattle stolen from the Dassanetch—persuade more people from Kibish to join them permanently in the Sudan.

Thus, the successful raid of August 1973, which apparently restored the strength of the Nyangatom, may lead ultimately to their division and to the break up of their corporate identity. Indeed, the Nyangatom may be in the process of losing their very identity. The conflicts described above may thus be seen as a vigorous although desperate attempt by the Nyangatom to prove that they still exist, although there is already a feeling that, "The Nyangatom are finished, aren't they?"

⁹ It should be emphasised that this move of the Nyangatom towards the north does not seem to be a consequence of Dassanetch hostility.

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