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ETHNIC BOUNDARY MAKING IN EAST AFRICA: RIGIDITY AND FLEXIBILITY AMONG THE NYANGATOM PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT   The concepts of inclusion and exclusion have been widely used to explain the strategies of making ethnic boundaries. However, some studies have indicated the existence of unique features (such as boundary overlaps and blurriness) that do not necessarily fit into the inclusion-exclusion binary divide. Moreover, the strategies of boundary making cannot be understood without knowledge about the underlying conceptualization of ethnic identity. With these complex issues in mind, the author of this paper examines ethnic boundary making strategies in East Africa by focusing on the Nyangatom people and their eight neighbors residing in three countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. Among the Nyangatom, elements of both essentialism and constructivism are used in conceptualizing ethnic identity. This enabled the society to employ multiple boundary making strategies with different ethnic groups simultaneously. The article reveals how the rules of rigidity and flexibility have been harnessed and harmonized to promote Nyangatom's strategic interests: keeping control over scarce resources, maintaining the balance of power, and ensuring continuity as a group.

Key Words: Ethnic boundary making; Inclusion and exclusion; Strategic interests; Essentialism and constructivism; Nyangatom; East Africa.

INTRODUCTION

At any given time and place, an ethnic group may employ different principles for defining and maintaining relationships with other groups. In many cases identity markers such as a common ancestry, a shared cultural heritage, a shared history, a common language, and common belief systems, among others, are used to differentiate insiders from outsiders. The process of defining and conceptualizing ethnic identity based on such given attributes and enduring qualities are considered as an essentialist approach. Advocates of the alternative constructivist perspective argued that ethnic groups are socially constructed and ethnic boundaries can be strategically manipulated to ensure the inclusion and exclusion of members as deemed necessary (Barth, 1969). The fluidity, permeability, overlaps, and shifts of ethnic boundaries (Moerman, 1965) justify the need to study and understand the process of ethnic boundary making strategies in context, which tend to vary from society to society and within the same society over time. Today, it has widely been acknowledged that every ethnic group has a range of options of identification (Epple, 2014).

Ethnic boundary making processes are principally explained in terms of inclusion and exclusion (Wimmer, 2008; Schlee, 2004; Elwert, 2002). Studies reveal that while some ethnic groups tend to seal their boundaries against crossing, others try to open their borders and expand their frontiers. The widening or narrowing of group membership or inter-group alliance is explained in terms of, among others, political situation (Cohen, 1978; Vincent, 1974), benefit-cost analysis (Schlee, 2004), and a host of multiple factors (Wimmer, 2008). Andreas Wimmer (2008: 986), who viewed ethnic boundaries as the outcome of struggles and negotiations between actors, identified the following five multilevel strategies of ethnic boundary making.

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

This paper is inspired by Wimmer's formulation of ethnic boundary making strategies because his multilevel conceptualization, which addresses the weaknesses of the previous appraoches that perceived inclusion and exclusion in dyadic terms, is consistent with the lived experiences of the Nyangatom people, the focus of the present study. Four of the five Wimmer's ethnic boundary making strategies (namely, expansion or inclusion, contraction or exclusion, alteration or change, and blurring) seem to correspond with the Nyangatom's boundary making strategies. The fifth strategy that requires changing one's own categorical membership to cross a boundary does not apply to the Nyangatom, who maintained their identity and integrity and only allowed others to join them.[1] The applicability of Wimmer's (2008) approach to the Nyangatom case lies therefore in the recognition of the existence of multiple boundary making strategies (as opposed to perceiving inclusion and exclusion as binary divide) and in the match between the strategies.

In the social science literature, the essentialist approach (that ethnic identities are based on fixed and underlying attributes) and the constructivist approach (that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple) are presented as if they represent clear-cut alternatives. It is important to recognize the fact that sometimes they exist as intertwined realities. In other words, an ethnic group can combine elements of essentialism and constructivism, which enables it to maintain multiple boundary making strategies with different groups simultaneously. An ethnic group can decide whether essential qualities such as cultural differences should be emphasized to consolidate ethnic boundaries or deemphasized to allow ethnic integration or cooperation. In this article, the lived experiences of the Nyangatom ethnic group in Ethiopia have been discussed to support these arguments and promote contextual understanding of ethnic boundary making.

The Nyangatom share physical borders with eight neighboring groups. Two of them, the Toposa and the Turkana, live across the international border in South Sudan and Kenya respectively. Historically, the Nyangatom, the Toposa, and the Turkana are reported to have migrated to their present locations from a common place of origin called Karamoja in present day Uganda (Tornay, 1979; Admasu, 2014). Hence, they belong to the Karamojong Cluster (also called the Ateker group). Moreover, they speak the same language and share a common belief system and common cultural values and practices. On the other hand, the Nyangatom lack common ethno-genesis and common cultural and linguistic links with their neighbors in Ethiopia: the Surma, the Mursi, the Koegu, the Kara, the Murle, and the Dassanech.

From an essentialist perspective, the common historical, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds among the Ateker groups are expected to represent attributes of their unity and one would assume that the Nyangatom are more open and close to their fellow Ateker groups in Kenya and South Sudan than towards others. Nyangatom relationships with the Turkana and the Toposa are characterized by hostility and solidarity respectively. As for the non-Ateker neighbors in Ethiopia, the Murle are perceived as part of the Nyangatom, the Koegu are viewed as close affiliates, and the other four groups (Dassanech, Kara, Mursi, and Surma) are considered as *emoit-loakora* (fighting enemies).[2] To sum up, multiple modes of relationships have been managed simultaneously by employing different boundary making strategies. Certain discrete group categories and qualities have been rigidly maintained and allowed to endure to differentiate the Nyangatom from some outsiders (essentialism) while at the same time exhibiting a degree of flexibility to accommodate and integrate other outsiders (constructivism).

Research approach. This paper was written based on research undertaken by the author in 2010 and 2011 in Nyangatom *Woreda* (district) on the Ethiopian side of the Ethiopia-Kenya border. The research was undertaken in Kangaten (the capital of the district), Lokorlam, and Napotkoy areas. The intention of the study was to understand the nature of the relationships between the Nyangatom and their neighbors by exploring the historical memories and lived experiences of key informants.

The study employed two approaches (document review and fieldwork) and two data collection methods (interviews and focus group discussions). The written sources have been used to understand the historical dynamics and the current situation. A total of 24 key informants have participated in the study. The informants consisted of both sexes and people from different age-groups, generation-sets, and territorial sections. They were selected based on their depth of knowledge, social status, and office positions. The snowball approach was employed to identify the key informants, who were selected from among generation-sets, age-sets, ritual specialists, and government offices. A total of six focus group discussions were held with both sexes and different age groups. The draft report was validated during a workshop attended by some informants and through further inquiry with educated Nyangatom, some of who read the paper.

Organization of the paper. The article is divided into four sections. This introductory section is followed by brief ethnographic accounts of the Nyangatom
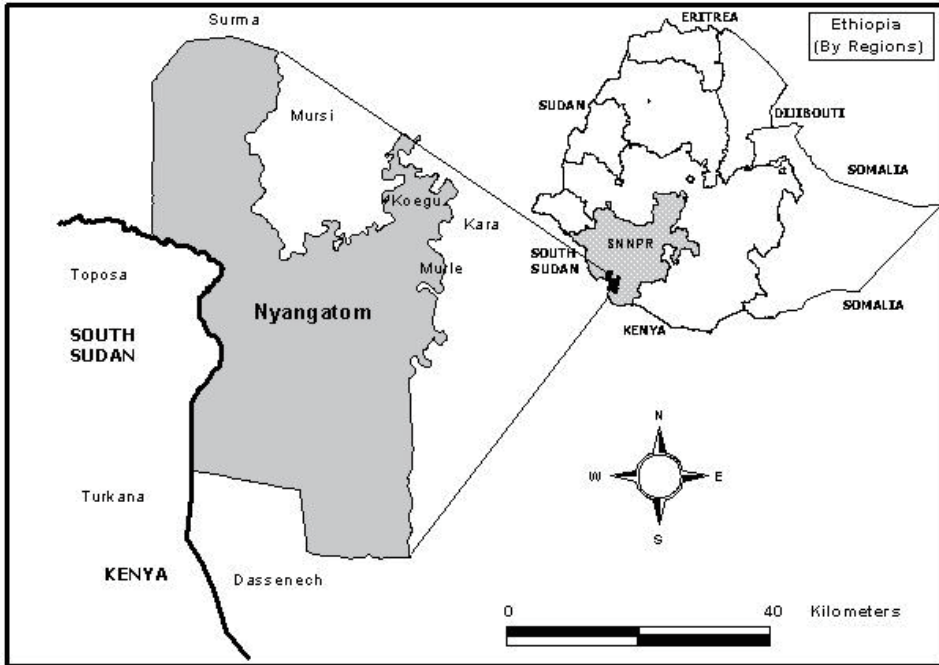
Fig. 1. Location of Nyangatom and its neighbors

people, which set the contexts for the next core part of the paper. Accordingly, section three identifies four boundary-making strategies: inclusion, blurriness, alteration, and exclusion, which are experienced with different ethnic groups simultaneously. The paper ends with concise concluding remarks.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS

Location. The Nyangatom (also Gnangatom) people, who belong to the Nilo-Saharan language family, live in Southwestern Ethiopia in the border region between Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan (see Fig. 1 above). The land area inhabited by the Nyangatom and two smaller ethnic groups (the Murle and the Koegu) comprises one administrative *woreda* (district) in South Omo Zone, which is in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. Kangaten, the capital of Nyangatom Woreda, is located some 848 km southwest of Addis Ababa. According to the latest national census, the population of the Nyangatom people is 25,252 (CSA, 2008: 85), and the land area of the *woreda* is estimated at 2,183.6 sq km.

Interethnic relations. According to oral history, the Nyangatom, the Toposa, and the Turkana left the Karamoja area in northeast Uganda some 200 years ago due to natural disasters. The Nyangatom people recognize the Ugandan Karamojong

people as the earliest ethnic group from which all Ateker members originated. The Ateker members commonly known to the Nyangatom include the Matheniko, Ngipian, Bokora, Dodoth, Jie, Kumam, Tepeth, Toposa, Jiye, Turkana, and Teso. The Nyangatom informants recognized the following common features among the Ateker: common ethnic origin, common geographic location in Uganda, mutually intelligible language, common belief system, similar social organizations, and similar music/dances.

Gulliver (1968 in Tornay, 1979: 98) considered the Nyangatom as a splinter group of the Toposa, who, in turn originated from the Jie of Uganda. However, Tornay (1979: 98) noted that the separation of the Nyangatom from what he referred to as 'the related Paranilotes' might have occurred around 1,800, at least concomitant with that of the Toposa. The Nyangatom first settled west of the Kibish River and later some of them moved further east and settled at Lere, near the Omo River. During their arrival and the journey eastwards from Kibish, they are reported to have met the Mursi, the Arbore and the Dassanech people, other original inhabitants in the area. Today, the territory of the Nyangatom stretches from the Omo River in the east to the Kibish River in the west.

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

Religion. The Nyangatom believe in *Akuj* (God) and *ngamuroto* (ancestor spirits), which represent the traditional belief system. In 1972, the Swedish Philadelphia Church Mission (SPCM) has introduced Protestant Christianity. The Mission has made important contributions in terms of providing primary education and healthcare in two locations (Kibish and Kangaten) and irrigated agriculture in Kangaten. As it was only from the second half of the 1980s that the teaching of the Bible spread among the population, during the research period, the followers of Christianity still represented a small minority.

Social organizations. The Nyangatom have different types of social organizations that play important roles in their lives. These include territorial sections, generation-sets, age-sets, and clans. There are seven named territorial sections (sing. *ekitala*, pl. *ngiteala*), namely, *Ngilingaqol, Ngkapung, Ngsaqol, Ngutokoraman, Ngukumama, Nubune,* and *Nyarich*. An individual is born into a given territorial section through his or her father. The territorial sections can best be described as political units where important political and administrative decisions are made. As Tornay (1981a: 160) noted, "Members of the sections have rights to settlement, grazing and watering, cultivation, and transhumance within their territory."

The generation-sets (*ekas*) represent another important type of social organization in Nyangatom. It operates side-by-side and in conjunction with the territorial

section. The men of one generation-set are considered as fathers of the men of the next generation-set. Hence, each male individual belongs to the generation junior to his father's. At any given time, two generation-sets with living members are recognized as dominant, and they are called the 'Fathers of the Country' and the 'Sons of the Country.' During the research period, the *Ngitome* (Elephants) represented the Fathers of the Country and the *Ngorukopi* (Ostriches) were the Sons of the Country. Junior to the Ostriches are three generation-sets: *Ngugoleteng* (Antelopes), *Ngkosowa* (Buffaloes), and *Ngikinyaga* (Crocodiles). Women belong to the generation-set of their husbands and they do not occupy public positions.

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

The Nyangatom are divided into 14+ named patrilineal exogamous clans (*ngatekerea*, sing. *ateker*). These include *Ngimuyoko, Ngitoroy, Ngukuko, Ngikakurecha, Ngidhocha, Ngikor, Nginyangia, Ngipucho, Ngiribo, Ngithiger, Ngiraputa, Ngilobol, Ngimeturuana,* and *Ngikuren*.[3] An individual becomes a member of his or her father's clan at birth. Clans do not serve as organizing principles to form a political entity; they are not territorial to claim resources in their names; and they do not have publicly recognized roles in major decision-making processes. However, certain clans are believed to have ritual powers to make/stop rain, deceive enemies, cure snake/scorpion bites, and control disease. Clans are also differentiated based on their marriage ceremonies, dressing styles, body decoration, and physical marks placed on cattle.

Core cultural principles. The social proximity and distance as well as the boundaries between the Nyangatom and their neighbors can best be understood through an examination of their codes of responsibility, cultural prohibitions, and permissible acts. In other words, people tend to behave towards members of ethnic groups considered as allies, friends or relatives in a way similar to the way they behave to members of their own group. The core cultural priniciples identified in this paper include sharing of food and other resources, mutual assistance at time of need, and the prohibition to raid and kill fellow Nyangatom.

There are two major ritualized sharing and caring festivities: *apeyo* and *ekumamar*. *Apeyo* is an initiation ceremony during which young men slaughter animals for their immediate senior age-sets to be allowed to form and join a new age-set. After the *apeyo* ceremony, the initiates are recognized as men and members of a fighting force, who can assume responsibilities such as defending the Nyangatom territory and livestock. *Ekumamar* is a festival sponsored by genera-

tion-sets and territorial sections in rotation to care for their fathers (seniors) and secure their blessing in return. In 2009, the territorial section called *Ngukumama* coordinated an *ekumamar*, and the ceremony was sponsored by the generation-set called the Buffalos, who organized the festivity for their fathers, who were called the Antelopes. Tornay (1998: 102) also reported that 'feed your fathers' and 'feed your peers' are two basic rules in Nyangatom.

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

In Nyangatom, social solidarity in offensive and defensive actions against enemies is expected. An enemy attack on a particular person is perceived as a perpetration of violence against the group (e.g., age-set, generation-set, and/or territorial section) to which the victim belongs. Since livestock belonging to different households are grazed together, loss of some animals belonging to one or few households due to raid would agitate the entire community for revenge. Traditionally, unprovoked raiding and killing by enemies are not tolerated. Revenge actions on enemies may be delayed for strategic reasons, but when the time comes or when the need arises, the fighting forces in a given territorial section are expected to cooperate with each other and, if necessary, with forces of other sections. The same principles of solidarity characterize the relationship between the Nyangatom and their friendly neighbors in dealing with individual or common enemies. The Nyangatom and the Toposa are often allied against foes. The Nyangatom claim to have rescued the Murle and the Koegu from enemy attacks.

Rhetorically, all Nyangatom people are said to belong to one family. Hence, the different social groups within the society (e.g., families, age-sets, generation-sets, and territorial sections) are not allowed to attack each other and intra-Nyangatom raiding is unthinkable. However, there are cases when individuals or families may be motivated to confiscate the livestock of other individuals or families due to some acknowledged grievances such as adultery, bride-capture, theft of property, and failure to settle debts. While people generally consider such acts as justified or understandable, the customary law does not allow individuals to take the law into their own hands. Hence, the peace-makers and senior members of the top generation-set would interfere to resolve disputes through the customary mechanisms, which would involve the returning of confiscated animals to the rightful owners and the punishment of the original wrongdoers. The same principle applies to property-related problems involving members of other groups considered as the Nyangatom's close affiliates.

The killing of a fellow Nyangatom is called *akiar itoon niyawi* (killing family

members) and it is believed to cause ritual impurity and the bloating of the killer's stomach. Despite the cultural prohibition of killing, there are cases when a Nyangatom's life was taken by a fellow Nyangatom accidentally, in self-defense, or in a premeditated act of violence. If the act was a premeditated offense, the enraged relatives of the deceased may take the life of the killer in revenge. Therefore, the killer is expected to hide in the bush or take refuge with the *Ngukumama* (the peace-makers) until the conflict is resolved and a cleansing ceremony performed. The pollution caused by the *akiar itoon niyawi* is cleansed through an elaborate reconciliation and purification processes called *akikis akoit*. Apart from the cleansing rituals, homicide reconciliation involves the payment of blood indemnity to the relatives of the deceased. A comparable indemnity principle governs homicide that involves close friends of the Nyangatom while the killing of enemies, which is culturally acceptable, does not involve cleansing and blood compensation.

MULTIPLE BOUNDARY MAKING STRATEGIES

I. Open Boundary (Inclusionary)

Of the six non-Ateker neighbors on the Ethiopian side of the border, the Nyangatom allowed the Murle and the Koegu to join them through a ritualized process of ethnic inclusion. From this it is apparent that cultural differences and ethnic boundaries do not necessarily coincide. As Wimmer (2008: 983) noted, sometimes "ethnic boundaries do not divide a population along obvious cultural lines but unite individuals who follow quite heterogeneous cultural practices." The three groups involved obviously deemphasized their cultural differences to allow integration. Before their inclusion, the two groups were too small and powerless to defend themselves against their enemies. Why did the Nyangatom forge an alliance with some small groups and maintain enmity with other small and large neighbors? Before answering this question, it is important to discuss historical factors and recent developments that provided the contexts for boundary making.

The Murle case. The Murle people (also the Omo Murle, Nyarich, Narich) in Ethiopia represent a splinter group of the Murle ethnic group currently residing in South Sudan. There are two competing narratives about the two Murle groups. According to Jonathan Arensen (2012), the Murle currently residing in South Sudan have originally migrated from Ethiopia and the Omo Murle represent people who were left behind. Those in South Sudan are reported to have started their journey from a place called Jen in present day Ethiopia, moved southward along the Omo River to Lake Turkana, then turned west and finally arrived around Kapoeta area in present day South Sudan.[4] It was Serge Tornay (1981b) who first reported about the complete assimilation of the Omo Murle into the Nyangatom society. Arensen (2012: 5) has the following to say about the Omo Murle.

Early explorers to the region in the 1890s had made reference to a Murle people as a flourishing tribe living on the banks of the Omo River. But after 1910 there were no more references to these Murle people. It was assumed that they had died of illness or been killed in battle. But it now seems from the evidence that Tornay gathered that the Omo River Murle did not die off completely. They had been the tail of the Murle migration and those that remained behind had simply changed their cultural identity and became Nyangatom.

According to the oral history of the Omo Murle, a small group of young men decided to runaway from their homeland (in today's South Sudan), together with their sisters, to avoid the whipping that youngsters had to endure. The decision to leave their homeland and migrate towards the east was made during the night dances without the knowledge of their community. When the young migrants arrived near Mount Tepes in the Kibish area, the Nyangatom, specifically the Ngikapung territorial section, offered to settle amongst them. After staying in Kibish for a while, the Murle moved further east to Lere, near the Omo River, and joined the Ngilingaqol, anther Nyangatom territorial section. With the intention to be independent and maintain their own identity, the group later moved further north along the eastern side of the Omo River to a place now called Murleland.

It seems that there is some link between the two competing narratives. The splinter group (the runaway youth) may have sought a return to the beloved ancestral home (Jen) by following the trails of their ancestor's migration in the opposite direction, first to the east and then to the north along the Omo River.

Later in their history, the Murle crossed the Omo River and rejoined the Nyangatom due to conflict with the Kara and the Hamar and because of the deadly sleeping sickness disease in their area. When they took refuge with the Nyangatom, they were adopted as the seventh territorial section named Nyarich. In the course of time, the Murle lost their language and adopted the language and identity of their host. Following the introduction of an ethnic-based federal system in Ethiopia in 1991, demands of some educated Murle and a favorable decision by the Council of Nationalities of SNNPR led to the recognition of the Nyarich community as Murle ethnic group. In the 2007 national census, for the first time, Murle was listed as an ethnic group with a population of 1,469 (CSA, 2008: 85). Moreover, the people of Murle are represented in the House of the Federation, the upper house of the bicameral Federal Parliamentary Assembly of Ethiopia.

It is to be recalled that the Murle crossed the ethnic boundary of the Nyangatom by changing their identity when they were in a desperate situations (weakened by disease and conflict with the Hamar and the Kara). The consequence of joining the Nyangatom was the loss of their language, culture, and ethnic identity and they were living as a subordinate and marginalized minority among their hosts. From this it is apparent that ritulized ethnic inclusion does not necessarily guanranee the equality of the integrated groups. The national policy environment enabled the Murle to change the meaning of the existing ethnic

boundary configuration. However, they are still close to the Nyangatom, speak the Nyangatom language, and follow the Nyangatom traditions. According to informants, many Nyangatom are displeasd by the recent redefinition of the Murle identity. It is not clear how and whether the Murle will assert their complete independence.

The Koegu case. The Koegu ethnic group (also Kwegu, Koyego, Muguji), with a population of 1974 in 2007 (CSA, 2008: 85), is constituted by three major clans (Garshma, Woreba, and Baada) that migrated to the area from different directions and different ethnic groups (Nyamuko, 2010: 23–24). Nyamuko (the first Magazine published by Nyangatom Woreda Government Communication Office) presents the movement details as follows. The Garshma clan originated from the Aari (to the northeast) living in Baytsimal area. The Garshma first settled at a place called Marsha on the eastern side of the Omo River and later relocated to Kuchuru, a village across the river. The Woreba clan, believed to have originated from the Arbore located further east, is reported to have lived in Mugugna, Nakure, and Woreba areas before the Kara joined them to settle in Dus village. In the late 1980s, the Woreba clan left Dus and started to live with the Nyangatom at Galgida due to conflict with the Kara.[5] The Baada clan migrated from the Bodi and Bacha groups further north and first settled at Makule and then joined the Garshma clan at Qalo and finally moved together to Kuchuru.

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

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

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

The Nyangatom, who kept their ethnic boundary open for small non-Ateker groups seeking protection, take pride in shielding powerless groups against strong enemies. However, it has not been all about helping the weak on humanitarian

grounds. The Nyangatom informants admitted that the incorporated ethnic groups brought economic and security advantages. The Murle and the Koegu joined the Nyangatom with valuable resources: pasture and arable land along the Omo River. During the dry seasons, some Nyangatom move their livestock to Murle and Koagu territories, while others grow crops along the river on a permanent basis. The two groups are viewed as dependable allies and buffer zones against strong enemies such as the Dassanech from the south and the Hamar and the Kara from the east. The Murle and the Koegu are too small to put pressure on Nyangatom resources and militarily too weak to cause security concerns.

II. Blurred Boundary

The relationship between the Nyangatom and the Toposa is based on mythical and cultural affiliations and strategic alliances. The level of mutual trust between the two groups has been so enormous and enduring that their differences have been downplayed in favor of narratives that emphasized communalities and coop-eration. On the other hand, despite the strong sense of belongingness and lack of major cultural differences, the ethnic boundaries are recognized and respected. This unique boundary making strategy is distinct from others that aim at the expansion or contraction of ethnic membership. This strategy is consistent with Wimmer's (2008) idea of overcoming ethnic boundaries by emphasizing other crosscutting social cleavage.

Based on mythical narratives and oral history, the Nyangatom believe that they share a common ancestry with the Toposa. The oral history goes on to state that they out-migrated together from the Karamoja area due to an environmental cri-sis. When they reached the Mount Tepes area, however, they split into two and moved in different directions to exploit the available resources and start an inde-pendent existence. They consider one another as *amuro-katta* (grandmother's thigh), an expression that emphasizes common ancestry and the notion of brotherhood.

There are cultural prohibitions and cultural expectations that the Nyangatom and the Toposa are expected to observe. One of the prohibitions is not to raid and kill each other, in order to avoid ritual impurity and mystical dangers. Thus, inter-ethnic killing between the two groups involves ritual cleansing and blood compensation to the family of the deceased. One of the cultural prescriptions trelates to the sharing of food and other resources and coming to the rescue of each other at times of crisis. At the individual household level, when a Nyanga-tom slaughters an animal, any Toposa who happens to be around deserves the hindquarter as a matter of cultural right. This is called the *amuro-katta* sharing. Failure to live up to this expectation is considered culturally unacceptable and may provoke annoyance and cursing. An elderly Nyangatom informant stated,

> The *amuro-katta* sharing is not based on age. Blood relationship does not matter. Marital affiliation is not necessary. Any male Toposa is my *amuro-katta*. Hence, it is my duty to give the rear leg to my *amuro-katta*. As I carry the meat to him, I am supposed to walk slowly and limp, as if my legs hurt or the load is heavy. This is how we share meat and express our

respect for each other.

As friends, relatives, and neighbors, the Nyangatom and the Toposa also engage in non-ritualized sharing of other foods such as grain. At times of scarcity, the Nyangatom travel to Toposa to get or buy sorghum from bond friends, relatives, or sellers. At a community level, the Nyangatom and the Toposa share pasture, water, and residential areas. Seasonally, some Nyangatom households are reported to migrate to the Nyangatom-Toposa border with their livestock. The decision to move livestock in the direction of the Toposa border is based on strategic factors: trust and security against risks of raiding. Some Nyangatom people have established permanent residence in the Toposa villages called Lotimor and Matarba, while others visit temporarily.

The depth of the relationship between the two goes beyond sharing of food, pasture, water, and residential areas. They often form alliances in the fight against their common enemies such as the Surma, the Turkana, or each other's enemies and they provide access to firearms. In the 1980s, it was through the Toposa that the Nyangatom acquired modern automatic rifles (AK47) that gave them military superiority, at least temporarily, over their neighbors. On the whole, from the perspective of the Nyangatom, their relationship with the Toposa provided advantages in terms of resource sharing, ensuring security, and ensuring continuity as a group.

III. Alteration of Boundary

The Turkana are viewed as fellow Ateker with whom the Nyangatom used to live in peace. The Turkana are reported to have migrated from the south to join the Nyangatom in Kibish area. The local narrative about the northward expansion of the Turkana is consistent with written accounts (Mburu, 2003; McCabe, 1996; de Waal, 1991). During their early contact in Kibish, the Nyangatom welcomed the Turkana migrants, cherished their common identity as Ateker, and experienced intermarriage (Admasu, 2014; Gebre, 2012). The Ngilingaqol and Ngikapung territorial sections in the border area are reported to have experienced extensive marital and economic interactions with their Turkana neighbors. In those days, due to their intimacy, the physical and social boundaries between the two groups were rather blurred (as it is with the Toposa today). The elderly informants recounted to have heard positive stories during their childhood that shaped their dreams to visit Turkana and to establish relationships through marriage or bond-friendship.

Later on, the relationship between the two groups began to deteriorate when the Nyangatom were displaced by the Turkana from the western side of the Kibish river. At times of peace, there existed movement of people back-and-forth across the border for business and family visitation. In recent decades, conflicts occurred more frequently and peace deals lasted only briefly rendering the area to be perpetually insecure. Within two to three generations, perception about the Turkana has changed completely and many informants recounted to have lost their relatives, livestock, and land to the Turkana. The younger generation seems to be

deeply traumatized because they grew up witnessing death, displacement, and loss of livestock since a deadly incident in 1988.[6]

Despite the rise in the cycle of violence, the Nyangatom claim to have initiated repeated peace deals, which were violated one after the other allegedly by the Turkana. In 1998, ten years after the Kibish incident, the Nyangatom elders reached out to the Turkana elders and performed reconciliation rituals. On the very day of the peace negotiation, the Turkana reportedly launched an attack on the Nyangatom. In 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2008, the Turkana and the Nyangatom elders swore not to attack and raid each other. However, all the peace deals were violated shortly after each meeting. Although sufficient data are lacking from the Turkana side to counter the Nyangatom claims, it would be naïve to assume that the latter have always been passive victims and are not to blame for attacks on the Turkana. In the literature, the Nyangatom are portrayed as expansionists, aggressors, and fierce fighters (Girke, 2008; Turton, 1994; Abbink, 1993; Alvarsson, 1989; Tornay, 1979). During the research period, the Nyangatom appeared completely different from what is said about them.[7]

The downward spiral in Nyangatom-Turkana relations was first set in motion by the British colonial administration during the first half of the 20th Century through the enclosure of the so-called the Ilemi Triangle to control pastoral movement.[8] In recent decades, the relationship between the two groups further deteriorated due to the northward expansion of the Turkana border, the participation of non-pastoral commercial raiders, and the alleged involvement of elements of the Kenyan security forces in assisting attackers from the Turkana side (Admasu, 2014; Teshome, 2010; Gebre, 2012).

The unabated conflicts over decades required the redefinition of Nyangatom-Turkana relations. Traditionally, killing the Turkana was associated with ritual impurity and required both cleansing and blood indemnity. Since the level of enmity has grown so deep that killing the Turkana is no longer associated with ritual impurity, no cleansing is required, and no compensation is paid. The escalation of the conflict, the brutality of the fights, and the eviction of the Nyangatom from the Kibish area have altered the physical and social boundaries between the Nyangatom and the Turkana. Intermarriage and other interactions are reported to be taking place between the two groups during peace times (Admasu, 2014). Although the sense negativity has been on the rise, simultaneous coexistence of hostility and amicability seems to characteristize the relatioship between the two groups.

IV. Closed Boundary (Exclusionary)

Until the second half of the 20th Century, the Nyangatom had friendly relationships with the Dassanech, the Kara, the Mursi, and the Surma. However, their ethnic boundaries, which coincide with cultural differences, have been unambiguously drawn and carefully maintained. During the second half of the 20th Century, the scramble for scarce resources increased the need to emphasize differences as a strategy. For the Nyangatom, who were pushed out of the Kibish area by their fellow Ateker, it was an existential matter to maintain the balance

of power and demonstrate assertiveness. It appears that the Nyangatom felt lack of cooperation and sometimes threat from the four ethnic groups. As the Dassanech and Surma were numerous and strong[9] the Nyangatom did not want to take the risk of being overwhelmed in the context of intermingling. The Mursi and the Kara were not trusted because of their loyalty to their respective kin-folks, the Surma and the Hamar respectively. The history of conflict between the Nyangatom and the four ethnic groups points to the former's acitve efforts to emphasize their differences, which helped the group to expand its physical boundaries in all four cases discussed below.

The Dassanech case. Historically, the Dassanech and the Nyangatom had amicable relationships in Kibish area (also called Nakwa), where both groups lived together. The cooperative relation and peaceful co-existence gave way to animosity in 1950 when a Dassanech herder killed an elderly Nyangatom woman in Nakwa (Sagawa, 2010). In the late 1970s, sporadic conflicts between the two groups culminated in major assaults and retaliatory attacks. In the 1970s, the Dassanech had an advantage over the Nyangatom, partly because the latter had been involved in battles with other neighbors, mainly, the Kara and the Hamar (Sagawa, 2010). In the 1980s, the introduction of AK47 automatic rifles to the Nyangatom from the southern Sudan changed the balance of power and the Dassanech were the first target. The Nyangatom pushed the Dassanech out of Nakwa and their discord over the control of two resource-rich areas (Kare and Kuraz) continued to date. Livestock raiding/theft and homicide have perpetuated the cycle of retribution.

The Kara case. Historically, the Nyangatom and the Kara not only had peaceful relations but also lived together in the Lokulan and Kandaqochin areas, along the Omo River. According to Kara oral history, the Kara were once the dominant power in the Lower Omo and have even helped the then few, poor and weak Nyangatom, who were expelled from the Kibish area by the Turkana (Girke, 2008). As their population increased and poverty intensified, a large number of Nyangatom migrants began to penetrate deep into territories traditionally cultivated by the Kara. The Kara, who grew weary of their neighbors' behavior, began to bar the Nyangatom from using their lands (Girke, 2008). This marked the transition from solidarity to hostility. Alvarsson (1989) mentioned a conflict between the two groups in the 1970s in which the Kara lost. A large-scale conflict between the two groups occurred as recent as 2006. The Kara used to ally with the Hamar against the Nyangatom and this was observed in 2003 and 2006. The 2006 administrative restructuring in the area demarcated the long contested arable land on the western bank of the Omo River under Nyangatom District to the disappointment of the Kara.

The Surma case. Historically, the Surma (also Suri) were friendly neighbors of the Nyangatom and they used to live together around Mount Naita. In the 1980s, however, a Nyangatom-Toposa coalition launched an attack on the Surma after the latter allegedly killed two Nyangatom herders and raided goats. The sustained pressure from their well-armed neighbor forced the Surma to evacuate from the Mount Naita area—their traditional grazing land. The acquisition of

firepower gave the Nyangatom a decisive edge over the Suri and inflicted heavy looses in 1986–1987 (Abbink, 1993). The Surma are distressed and see themselves as living in exile from their homeland, Shulugui (Mt. Naita), where their most important rituals should be held (Abbink, 2009). The major causes of conflict between the Nyangatom and the Surma include the displacement of the Surma people from Naita area and the consequent loss of pastureland, water points, and ritual site. Retaliatory actions perpetuated the cycle conflict in the area.

The Mursi case. The relationship between the Nyangatom and the Mursi has been characterized by peaceful co-existence and by conflict. According to Nyangatom oral history, the Mursi were the first groups that the Nyangatom encountered in the Kibish area and early conflicts between the two groups forced the Mursi out of Kibish. The discord between them intensified when the Nyangatom tried to migrate to the Mursi territory after being displaced from the Kibish area by the Turkana and drought. In the mid 1980s, the Nyangatom launched a serious attack on the Mursi (Abbink, 1993; Turton, 1994), who lost an estimated five percent of their population by 1987 (Turton, 1994). The main causes of conflict between the two groups include cattle raiding and revenge killings. The Mursi are closely related to the Surma and the Nyangatom views a potential coalition between the two as a major threat.

CONCLUSION

The strategies of ethnic boundary making are largely explained in terms of a binary divide—inclusion vs exclusion. This dyadic approach fails to capture strategies that are not meant to expand or contract group membership. Therefore, the inclusion-exclusion constructs should be viewed as suggestive contrasts that enhance understanding rather than conclusive expressions about a predetermined reality. The discussion of ethnic boundary making strategies cannot be detached from the conceptualization of ethnic identity, namely, the essentialist and constructivist perspectives. The paper reveals how discrete group qualities such as cultural differences were emphasized to avoid ethnic intermingling and deemphasized to facilitate ethnic integration or cooperation. The rules of rigidity and flexibility were consciously harnessed and harmonized. It appears that ethnic identities are conceptualized in essentialist terms, constructivist perspectives, and an intertwined logic that involves elements of both.

To be more specific, the Nyangatom people opened their ethnic boundaries to incorporate the Murle and the Koegu by deemphasizing their cultural differences; maintained a strong and enduring inter-ethnic alliance with the Toposa by emphasizing their cultural similarities; altered their ethnic alliance with the Turkana by reexamining their relationships; and closed their boundaries to the Dassanech, the Surma, the Mursi, and the Kara by emphasizing their cultural differences. In general, in the absence of threats and presence of benefits, ethnic boundaries were affirmed, emphasized, and even left open for outsiders to join. On the other hand, actual and perceived threats necessitated the manipulation and closing of ethnic boundaries. The differential ethnic boundary making strategies can be explained

in terms of strategic interests of the Nyangatom people: controlling scarce natural resources, maintaining the balance of power, and ensuring the continuity of the group with integrity and dignity.

NOTES

(1) The Murle and the Koegu ethnic groups, however, had undergone ritual processes that amounted to changing their own categorical memberships to join the Nyangatom.
(2) The concept of *emoit*, which means a stranger or an enemy, is not used to refer to the Murle, the Koegu, and the Toposa people.
(3) Tornay (1981a: 153–154) counted 20 clans in Nyangatom and noted that some of the clan identities were carried by women who came to Nyangatom as wives from Dodoth, Lotuko, and Turkana. The reduction of the number of clans from 20 to 14 may be explained in terms of the death of these women and the reduction in interethnic marriage.
(4) Arensen (2012: 1) wrote, "When I asked the Murle elders about their origins they always pointed to the east and said they originated in a place called Jen…. It also refers to the location of the rising sun, bringer of warmth and light. The rains also come from the east, bringing vital water for pastures and gardens. The Murle elders also described their original area of Jen as being a place of mountainous terrain."
(5) According to Eisei Kurimoto (1998), the Koegu, who occupied a subordinate social position in Kara, switched alliance from the Kara to the Nyangatom following the rise in the military dominance of the later.
(6) In 1988, there was a mjor incident in Kibish area that involved the Nyangatom and the Turkana, who were backed by the Kenyan security that used helicoper gunship. According to de Waal (1991: 345–346), some 700 Nyangatom were killed by the Kenyan forces and at least five villages in Ethiopia were partly destroyed.
(7) A combination of factors may have discouraged their motivation towards offensive actions. These include the decline in the flow of firearms following the end of civil war in Sudan, the rise in military superiority of the Turkana, modern education that provided an alternative life style for some youths, government programs that raised hope for social change, and religious teaching about sin/forgiveness.
(8) In the 1940s, the British colonial administration established "a series of police posts along the Ethiopian border at Kokuru, Liwan, Lokomarinyang, Kaiemothia and Kibish" (Almagor, 1986: 98) thereby curtailing the movement of the Nyangatom to their traditional grazing lands. The Ilemi Triangle has been a disputed territory claimed by Ethiopia, Kenya, and the former Republic of Sudan for more than a century.
(9) In 2007, the population distribtuin of the differnet ethnic groups was as followes (CSA, 2008: 84–85): Nyangatom (25,252), Dassanech (48,067), Hamar (46,532), Surma (27,886), Mursi (7,500), and Kara (1,464).

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