Border Narratives and Ethnogenesis along the Southwestern Ethiopian Frontier
The experience of Nyangatom

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Introduction

This paper explores the coping strategies adopted by Nyangatom communities situated along the crossroads of Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan. Ever since their incorporation into the Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, the Nyangatom – a small agro-pastoral group –have come into contact with a host of outsiders, including travellers, tourists, missionaries, pastoral neighbours and government representatives of the various Ethiopian regimes and bordering states. For the last four decades, the Nyangatom have been affected by the overlapping wars of the three states that influence the area in which they live. Nyangatom communities have been exposed to massive infiltration by machine guns, which has led to more frequent and widespread conflicts with neighbouring ethnic groups across the pastoralist continuum of Southern Ethiopia, Northern Kenya and South Sudan. The following article attempts to examine the patterns of interaction that evolved over time among Nyangatom, their pastoral neighbours and the surrounding states along the border.

Borders and boundaries have long been the focus of academic inquiry. Yet, like many other issues in the field of social science, boundary/border studies suffer from a lack of adequate theorization. Concepts such as border, boundary and frontier are often used haphazardly and possess overlapping meanings. Widely differing conceptualizations of the limits of social groups have also made academic discussion on borders inconsistent (Baud and van Schendel 1997; Rankin and Schofield 2004). A survey of the literature shows three major approaches in the study of borders: (1) borders as activities, processes and discourses; (2) borders as a means for regional integration and cooperation; and (3) borders as barriers and possible causes of conflicts and\or violence.

The focus here is on the first approach, which views borders as activities, processes and discourses. This approach helps us to explore border narratives and ethnogenesis from the perspective of the Nyangatom living in the warscape of Ethiopia–Kenya–South Sudan.

The following article is divided into two major sections, followed by some brief concluding remarks. Part one focuses on providing the historical background that helps explain the forms of interaction that have emerged between the Nyangatom and external groups, including the Ethiopian state. Part two then provides a discussion of anthropological approaches in the study of borders and the shifting trend in analyses toward the activities, discourses and processes involving people residing in and around border areas. In this section, empirical evidence – such as the day-to-day activities of individuals living in and around the Ilemi Triangle[1], their narratives and the stories they tell amongst each other – is provided to show how borders have shaped the experience

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1 The Ilemi Triangle is a large segment of land adjoining Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan. Until recently, the area served as a grazing land for pastoralists residing on the peripheries of these countries.

of the Nyangatom over time. A brief explanation of the Nyangatom perception of the Ethiopian state and vice versa is also included.

The data for the paper was collected using ethnographic fieldwork methods, including interviews, field observation and review of archival sources.[2] The discussion will also be supported by empirical evidence collected during research in 2011 and 2012.

Aspects of the Relationship Between the Ethiopian State and Local People

Two basic views of Emperor Menelik II's campaign of conquest, which led to the incorporation of the people of the south and southwestern provinces and the creation of the modern Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, seem to have emerged. First is the assumption, held by most historians, that the customs and lifestyles of the people of the newly incorporated areas were thought, by the forces of Menelik and the subsequent Ethiopian administrators from the centre, to be inferior and that that people were in need of salvation and that Menelik's campaign of conquest was justified as incorporation (Bahru 1991; Bulatovich 2000). This view portrays Menelik's campaign of conquest in a positive light. Second is the view held mainly by anthropologists, who interpret the conquest as internal colonialism (Sisay and Holcomb 1990; Asmerom 2001). While the first school of thought stresses nation-building and nationalism, the latter concentrates on the experience of local people during and immediately after the conquest.

Both archival sources and oral histories indicate the fact that the pastoralists of the southwestern region experienced a number of ups and downs. There were violent encounters with the forces of Menelik II before the state managed to exert its influence via taxation in the years after the area was incorporated by his successors. Taxation, however, never meant a peaceful relationship between the local people in general, and the Nyangatom in particular, and the Ethiopian state.

Furthermore, archival sources reveal protracted border negotiation between the Ethiopian state and the then colonial administrators of British East Africa and the Sudan. The Ilemi Triangle had become a bone of contention between the two parties, and most official meetings between the British – and, after independence, the Kenyan and Sudanese – authorities indicate a lack of agreement as to the exact location of the border between the three nation states. Official documents from the imperial regime take Ileret, Nabremus and the River Kibish as the limits of the border between Kenya and Ethiopia. But Nyangatom informants claim that their territory extends deep into what is now the Kenyan province of Lokichokiyo Natera.

Most government documents from the imperial period[3] indicate that Kenyan and Ethiopian officials held frequent meetings (especially in the period between 1940 and late 1960s), mainly about cooperation between the two governments in identifying local people who had crossed the border and evaded taxes. In the interviews I carried out for this research, Nyangatom elders denied these allegations and even claimed that they had never evaded the taxes imposed by successive regimes. Instead, they complained about

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2 These are written documents (primary sources) from Jinka municipality, the National Museum of Addis Ababa and Wolde Meskel Archive that I collected over the course of researching for a PhD dissertation at the University of Bergen between 2010 and 2016.

3 These are primary sources produced during the imperial period in various government offices.

a lack of state support for their cause in the face of frequent attacks from Kenya and curtailment of their freedom to routinely move across the border.

One archival source[4] indicates that Nyangatom had crossed into Sudanese territory, thus avoiding taxes. In the report produced by the concerned tax collector, the religion of the local chief in question was described as *aremene* (literally 'uncivilized savage'). This source may support the argument of those who portray the campaign of Menelik as internal colonialism, aimed amongst other things at 'bringing the uncivilized into light'. Similarly, one elderly informant related how he collaborated with Ethiopian state representatives and was converted to Orthodox Christianity: the culmination of the civilizing mission of the Ethiopian authorities. Thus, it could be said that the authority of the Ethiopian government – like that of the European powers in the late nineteenth and twentieth century's – was mainly felt through some form of administrative presence, predominantly in the form of taxation, in almost all frontier regions.

Borders as Activities, Processes and Discourses

Until recently, border studies paid little attention to the complex activities and processes that take place along border areas (Baud and van Schendel 1997; Paasi 1998). As Baud and van Schendel have stated:

> There is an extensive literature on how the states have dealt with their borderlands, but historians have paid much less attention to how borderlands have dealt with their states. As a result, borderlands have been represented as far more passive and re-active than is warranted. The study of borderlands assigns an active historical role to borderlands and their population. The purpose is to redress the imbalance of 'state-centred' studies, and to discover which social impulses originated in the borderlands and what effects they had locally as well as beyond the borderland (1997: 235).

In their introduction to *Anthropology in the margins of the state*, Das and Poole (2004) argue for a thorough examination of marginal practices, places and languages in an attempt to bring the state, which has long been sidelined, back into ethnographies. By using Agamben's notion of exception (Agamben 1942), the editors explore the role of margins as an instrument of exclusion and inclusion. Horstmann (2004) highlights the need to include the voice of borderlanders in the study of state margins. Based on research conducted in Southeast Asian borderlands and the activities of the people on the margins of different states, he suggests the need to explore boundary-crossing practices. Following Paasi (1998), Horstmann asserts that:

> Boundaries and their meanings are historically contingent, and they are part of the production and institutionalization of territories. In this sense all boundaries are socially constructed. Attention should be paid to boundary producing practices and to narratives of inclusion and exclusion (2004: 3).

What is more, the activities of people living on state margins challenge the state monopoly of identification and the accepted concepts of nationalism. The practices of frontier

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4 This source is retrieved from the National Archive commonly known as *Womezekir* in Addis, Folder 290: File No. 124. It was a letter written to the Ministry of Interior from a Galab and Hamar Bakko District administrator.

communities are in contradiction with the basic assumptions of social anthropology, which is characterized by the fixed boundaries of the nation state.

This limitation could be addressed by shifting the focus of anthropological investigations away from such widely held assumptions (Radu 2012). Radu argues that it is more fruitful to think of borders as 'actants', instead of viewing them as 'enacted' entities. In this, Radu underscores the view that considers the frontier as having active and agentive capacity in relation to the centre. He then suggests:

> Anthropologists will be more beneficial to borders, and vice versa, if they consider the frontier as processes and activities and redirect a closer look at both internal-personal and relational experiences of crossing and dwelling the frontier in their multiplicity and various scales (Radu 2012: 20).

Radu supports his argument by revealing how the border along the Danube River between Rumania and Yugoslavia has been subject to different interpretations since 1989, when a dam was constructed across the border. The dam and the opening of the border coincided with the collapse of socialism, which in turn enhanced the interaction of the borderlanders, who have different interpretations of their own day-to-day encounters.

In spite of the poor infrastructure along the Ilemi Triangle connecting the borderlands of Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan, individuals there have been actively engaged in a web of relationships. Most Nyangatom people on the Ethiopian side have relatives living across the borders, either in northwest Kenya or in southeast South Sudan. The patterns of these relationships can be expressed in different forms. It is not uncommon to meet individuals who spend some time in southeast South Sudan among their Nyangatom and Toposa[5] kin. For example, one young Nyangatom informant, interviewed in June 2012, explained how he managed to make a living by moving across and along the border: 'I used to sell local liquor for Toposa militia in exchange for bullets; and upon my return to home, I sold the bullets to Suri[6] pastoralists in Ethiopia.' This is just one example of how some Nyangatom have managed to manipulate their location along the international border and acted as intermediaries between the Toposa and the Suri.

Yet, since 1989[7] the Ilemi Triangle and specifically the River Kibish has become a constraint, which the Nyangatom people may not cross as usual. Their movement and exchange activities have been curtailed by the Kenyan authorities and surrounding Turkana pastoralists. According to Nyangatom borderlanders, the porous border has even become an excuse for sudden Kenyan attacks in the form of cattle raids. Most Nyangatom informants feel that the failure of the Ethiopian state to secure the border has made their situation miserable. While Kenyan troops are always on the other side of the border, acting as a watchdog, until recently there were no security guards to be seen on the Ethiopian side. This has created an environment conducive to cattle raiding by the Turkana and Kenyan soldiers. During field research, I witnessed a number of occasions when

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5 The Toposa are one of the groups called *ateker* (commonly known as Karimojong Cluster), and they have a peaceful relationship with the Nyangatom.

6 The Suri are a small agro-pastoral group living north of the Nyangatom.

7 In 1989, just before the final collapse of the Derg regime, the Nyangatom were in conflict with their Turkana neighbours. In this conflict, however, the Kenyan government intervened on behalf of Turkana pastoralists and attacked Nyangatom across the border with the help of a helicopter.

Turkana pastoralists launched cattle raids across the River Kibish against the Nyangatom. The absence of state control and support on the Ethiopian side has led most Nyangatom to think that they are neglected by the state, especially in comparison to the support the Turkana receive from the Kenyan government. The cumulative effect of these acts of cattle raiding seems to have been an erosion of the borderlanders' perception of belonging to the Ethiopian state. This, coupled with the relative security and protection that Ethiopian Nyangatom[8] have received from the Sudanese side and their historic ties with the Toposa, has persuaded Nyangatom borderlanders to negotiate their allegiance in favour of the youngest African state, South Sudan. The fact that a large segment of Nyangatom live in South Sudan, makes it easy for those from the Ethiopian side to move to South Sudan. This kind of border crossing might be accompanied by a permanent shift in home base and employment in the Sudanese civil service and bureaucracy.

In addition to the above-mentioned forms of relationship – of trade and conflict – the Ilemi Triangle exhibits a wide variety of interactions among pastoralists inhabiting the area. Here the experience of Merimug is worth mentioning. During my research, he was the only person who adhered to the traditional hair-dressing style for men, using red and white clay for decoration. When asked why he still practiced it, he stated: 'I have still bond friends in Turkana across the border, although Nyangatom no longer cross River Kibish to bring clay, needed for the clay cap, or other commodities inside Turkana territory.' What is perplexing is that, even though he had contacts and bond friends amongst the Turkana, Merimug was killed by these same people in a sudden raid launched by the Turkana early in 2012. Contrasting reactions emerged from Nyangatom informants upon learning of the death of Merimug. One of them – a key informant from the Ngiribo clan, who was a blood relative of the deceased and in charge of the Security Office of Nyangatom *Woreda*[9] – exclaimed, as if he didn't want to believe what happened: '...this is the very first time where I hold grudge against the people of Turkana. How could they kill Merimug in such a way?' Another comment came from an informant from a different territorial section called Ngilignakol and from the Ngidocha clan, who claimed: 'Merimug was killed because he was cursed by Nyangatom people, since they believe that he was collaborating with the Turkana.' He then added:

> Most Nyangatom are happy because he is dead. It was he who was helping Turkana to trace Nyangatom settlements. Imagine he didn't even have a fence for his homestead for he knew that Turkana wouldn't steal his property.

The first case shows how a blood relative of the deceased was hurt by the incident. His opinion also indicates he was ready to forgive the Turkana as long as nobody was killed from his own clan. The latter opinion reveals the other side of the story, suggesting that Merimug's death was a relief since there was a belief among some sections of the society that his action of crossing the border and continuing to foster a relationship with the Turkana was not acceptable at that time. The phrase 'imagine he didn't even have a fence

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8 During the Sudanese civil war, Nyangatom communities used to get material support like guns, bullets and the like mainly from the SPLA/M rebels. In some cases, Nyangatom youth were recruited by rebels in the fight against Khartoum.

9 Administrative unit next to *kebele; kebele* is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia.

for his homestead for he knew that Turkana wouldn't steal his property' indicates that the importance of fences for protecting cattle was well known. Yet, Merimug had none, which contradicted what other sections of the society were doing. His actions were, thus, interpreted differently: he was characterized as a defector, whose death was welcome.

On the surface, Merimug's case shows the extent to which the relationship between Nyangatom and Turkana has become tense around the border. The international border has become a barrier to communication. But, the two different interpretations of Merimug's death also indicate how individuals' perceptions of similar events constitute different border narratives.

Dereje and Hoehne (2008) pinpoint the need to take a look at the opportunities and affordances that borders offer, and at the ways in which the people of borderlands exploit them. According to them, most studies of African borderlands have emphasised the constraints of borders as opposed to the opportunities and the strategies often employed by the inhabitants to make use of them. They give a number of examples of how people along the borders of the Horn of Africa manage to use borders to their own advantage. One example is provided by the Gadabuursi, a Somali clan living along the Ethiopia–Somalia border in the eastern part of Ethiopia. By virtue of their very location along the crossroad of the two countries, the Gadabuursi manage to make economic and political gains from both the Ethiopian government and the British Protectorate of Somaliland in the face of taxation from the two competing powers. For example, effectively exploiting the situation in which they were caught, some members of one Gadabuursi family held an important traditional leadership role in the British Protectorate, while others rose to the position of *dejazmach* (Commander of the Gate) on the Ethiopian side.

Following Feyisa and Hoehne (2008), I contend that the international Ethiopia–Kenya–South Sudan border, along which the Nyangatom are located, offers a number of opportunities for the local people. Of the many affordances the border offers, I want to underscore the political and cultural dimensions in the following.[10] In particular, the birth of South Sudan appears to have been the most important political factor providing new opportunities. Educated Nyangatom from southwest Ethiopia were immediate beneficiaries of South Sudan's emergence, as some of them got the opportunity to join high-up government offices in South Sudan's bureaucracy. The case of the State Minister of Environment, Wildlife Conservation and Tourism in South Sudan (in 2012) illustrates this. He is a Nyangatom by birth, attended Sudanese elementary schools, was educated at university in Kenya, and served as a civil servant during the Derg regime in Ethiopia (1974–91). He then fled Ethiopia in 1995, and joined the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) during the height of the civil war in the Sudan. He, along with many other Nyangatom youth, either spent their formative years in SPLA-controlled South Sudan or directly participated in the war, standing side-by-side with the southern rebels. Similarly, some Nyangatom civil servants working in Nyangatom *Woreda* received their education in South Sudan or Kenya, in places such as Narus and Kapoeta. It seems clear that cross-border mobility offers multiple choices and opportunities not only with regard to employment, but also education.

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10 Economic status and rights resources seem to have been outweighed by the political and cultural opportunities. For more, see the introduction section by Dereje and Hoehne (2008).

Returning to Dereje and Hoehne (2008: 11), we find a situation where the Anywaa and the Nuer ethnic groups inhabiting the western Ethiopia–Sudan border are using citizenship as a means of inclusion and exclusion. When the Ethiopian Empire and the British agreed the boundary in 1902, the majority of the Anywaa resided in Ethiopia, with some groups living in the Sudan, while most of the Nuer became residents of the Sudan and only a small section remained in Ethiopia. However, since the EPRDF came to power in Ethiopia in1991 and adopted a policy of ethnic federalism, the Anywaa have begun to question whether the Nuer qualify for Ethiopian citizenship; and some have gone further, considering the Nuer to be 'foreigners'. Today the major political debate in the state of Gambela in Ethiopia is about who is a citizen or who is not.

In the discussion above, we have seen a few ethnographic cases that might reflect the ways in which the Ilemi Triangle (as an international border) shapes the different activities and narratives of the Nyangatom. However, focusing on the lives of Nyangatom and their relationship with other groups living nearby may not allow us to see the bigger picture: the role and perception of the state toward local people and vice versa.

In this regard, it is crucial to revisit what Donham (2002) once underscored in his introduction to *Southern marches of imperial Ethiopia: Essays in history and social anthropology*. According to Donham, seen from the perspective of the salient developments of late nineteenth-century Ethiopia, the notion of 'frontier' seems to be a relevant analytical concept. The modern Ethiopian state is a product of a series of campaigns of conquest launched by the forces of Menelik II (1889–1906). The newly conquered places of the southern and southwestern provinces were called Dar Ager. Dar Ager is an Amharic term that can be literally translated as 'fringe territory' or 'frontier province' (Donham 2002; Tsega-Ab 2005).

Since then, historians have examined the peoples of the southern and southwestern provinces from the perspective of the centre; whereas anthropologists have been inclined to consider peoples of peripheral areas as distinct categories. Nevertheless, for Donham (2002) the situation represents a confrontation of power between the centre and the periphery. Accordingly, using 'frontier' as an analytical concept enables us to bring the history and anthropology of Ethiopia together. The notion of 'frontier', with its emphasis on cultural contact, helps to bridge the gap between the existing historical and anthropological studies. Yet, Donham's analytical reflection does not provide an adequate explanation of the confusing and often misleading concepts of 'frontier'. Instead, 'frontier' was suggested as a remedy for the existing problem of centre–periphery relations in the context of Ethiopia in general. Still, it seems apparent that Donham implicitly acknowledges the salient feature of 'frontier', as the term was originally used by Frederick J. Turner in 1893, that is as a centrifugal and 'outer edge of a wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization' (Rankin and Schofield 2004: 4).

In other words, this indicates that starting from the time of incorporation there seems to have been two slightly different ways of treating the peoples of the southern and southwestern periphery. Historians are inclined towards the study of the newly incorporated people from the perspective of the centre, whereas anthropologists are more interested in dealing with the peoples and cultures of the inhabitants of the southern and southwestern areas in isolation.

Concluding Remarks

The foregoing has discussed the complex ways in which borders, in particular the Ilemi Triangle, shape the experiences of the Nyangatom living along the crossroads of Ethiopia–Kenya–South Sudan. By adopting an approach which views borders as activities, processes and discourses, I have explored how the Ilemi Triangle became an axis for various forms of relationship among inhabitants of the region. In some cases, the Ilemi Triangle has become a source for cooperation, as Nyangatom traverse the international border to visit kin residing on the other side and even establish close ties when individuals decide to migrate. In other circumstances, the Ilemi Triangle has become the source of constrained relationships between Nyangatom and their surrounding neighbours, when conflicts break out among groups.

The conflicting and contradicting narratives embedded in the long history of the relationship between the Ethiopian state and the Nyangatom of the Lower Omo Valley have also been explored. The history of Ethiopian state formation and the power struggle of the late nineteenth century among various groups in the region have played an important role in shaping the perception of Nyangatom toward the state and vice versa.

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