

Dynamics of Identification

Research on Northeast Africa at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale

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Since the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology was established in 1999, one of the regional research foci of the Department of Integration and Conflict has been Northeast Africa. Currently, the outcome of this research is a multitude of in depth anthropological studies that provide ethnographic data and analysis of conflict scenarios in the area. Our research, based on our ethnographic fieldwork data, feeds into the ongoing comparative discussion and generates theoretical output



Fig. 1: Günther Schlee talking to a Rendille elder in Northern Kenya

around the department's central questions, namely, conflict, identification and integration processes. These processes can be observed in different domains: kinship, friendship, language and history – commonly amalgamated to various forms of 'ethnicity' – and adherence to various complexes of rituals and beliefs, including corporate 'religions' in the modern sense but also in recent developments connected to globalizing market-dynamics that affect the entire region at an increasing pace.

Integration and conflict: Beginnings

The starting point of the Department of Integration and Conflict was that the processes of identification and differentiation, which occur in conflict situations and when population groups become part of new configurations, have been under-studied. Identity and difference are, therefore, key concepts for the department. To be able to merge and compare our findings from different settings we have further developed frameworks for the comparative analysis of collective identities and corresponding processes of identification (see Donahoe et. al. 2009; Schlee 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004, 2005). The character of these frameworks is grounded in the understanding of identities or components of identities as variables with which different actors engage differently in different situations and under different circumstances as they change over time. Northeast Africa with its cultural and ethnic diversity and with often rapidly changing political agendas provides us with a multitude of scenarios where dynamic and changing identification processes are part and parcel of the socio-political reality.

Dynamics of identification in Northeast Africa

While focusing on ethnic and other identification processes it became evident that these processes span the entire region of Northeast Africa in comparative or parallel ways but are also often interconnected across borders, as happened in the Ethio-Eritrean war in 1999/2000, and internationally as in more recent cases of the Sudan or on the Ethio-Kenyan Border, e.g. when alliances of interest were formed across borders (Tadesse 2009; Dejene 2012; Dereje 2009, 2011; Falge 2006; Fekadu 2009; Eulenberger 2013). Although unfortunately for the inhabitants of the region the changing identifications and alliances mostly happened in violent settings, not all our studies verified the borders' potential for conflict. We also describe the capacity of border societies to achieve, restore or maintain peaceful relationships or to creatively switch identities to their benefit. While conflict is one of the foci of the department (Schlee 2008), its intrinsic relationship with peace-making and reconciliation systems has been given much attention in the works of Gabbert (2012), Gabbert and Thubauville (2010), Nicolas (2011), Ambaye (2012), Fekadu (2009) and Dejene (2012) in Ethiopia as well as Hoehne (2011) and Hoehne and Luling (2010) in Somalia. They describe how traditional institutions and the innovative potential of 'social entrepreneurs' such as elders and speakers, as well as civil society, serve as resources for peace-making and mediation.

Our researchers have studied border regions at the periphery of countries or marginal areas in Northeast Africa in diverse settings (e.g. Bakonyi 2011; Bakonyi and Bliesemann de Guevara 2012; Behrends et. al. 2011; Ciabarrri 2010; Data 2005; Girke 2009; Scharer 2013; Schlee and Shongolo 2012a and b; Dereje 2009; Falge 2006). Hoehne and Dereje, in their volume *Borders and Borderlands* (2010), focus on borders as providing opportunities for creative interaction among their inhabitants. In Ethiopia, especially, where the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991 re-drew the administrative borders, we have observed new dynamics at the border zones, especially when they cut through the territories of ethnic groups such as the Oromo or when groups demanded their own territories (Ambaye 2012; Dejene 2012; Fekadu 2009).



Fig. 2: Civil war monument in Hargeysa

District and other administrative boundaries within Northeast-African states confirm the general hypothesis that decisions about identifications, including the drawing of social and political boundaries, are often influenced by the anticipated sizes of the groups that result from these acts of identification. Given the general human tendency to regard having more as better than having less, it appears somewhat paradoxical that district-level political elites often want their districts to be rather small. When district boundaries are redrawn they might try to shed territory or they might advocate splitting districts into smaller ones. They rely on ethnic bloc voting, a widespread feature, and they hope to be elected if the district, once reshaped, will have a reliable majority of their own ethnic group. If such reshaping is accompanied by violence, it is also known as 'negative conquest' (Schlee and Shongolo 2012: 131).

There are more examples of the influence of anticipated group sizes on acts of identification. In the face of competition for resources (especially for land along the Baro River suitable for flood retreat culti-

vation) and political representation, the Nuer in the Gambela state of Ethiopia, not unlike their co-ethnics in (South) Sudan, have adopted inclusive forms of identification. They practice polygyny at a higher rate than their neighbours, they also marry Anywaa women, accept children born to Nuer men by non-Nuer wives as Nuer, and encourage ethnic conversion by all those who culturally adjust to them. These practices have the effect, intended or not, of helping them out-number other groups. Among their competitors, the Anywaa, some have become assimilated by their Nuer neighbours, but most have adopted a defensive attitude. Their response to perceived Nuer expansionism is an increased emphasis on the relationship between a people and their land (territorial exclusivity) and on an ideology of purity; to have a non-Anywaa mother is a social stigma. However, this exclusive strategy is not successful. In the early 2000s the Nuer gained ground both literally and metaphorically, in politics and in their access to support



Fig. 3: Dereje Feyissa in the homestead of a Nuer Prophet in Gambela

from outside and in other fields of activity. The competition between the two groups needs to be perceived as two corners of a triangle, the third corner being the Ethiopian state, an entity both Nuer and Anywaa want to instrumentalise for their own ends (Dereje 2009).

On the surface of things at least, Ethiopia has since 1991 established a constitutional order of ethnic federalism. This influences identity politics not only in Gambela but also in other parts of the country. Like the Nuer, who secure their access to resources and strengthen their political clout by applying inclusive concepts of identity, the Oromo appeal to a wider, encompassing identity, but they do so only under certain conditions. In a wide sense, incorporating people who identify as 'Oromo' and speak a variant of the Oromo language, the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. But this wide identification does not always guide Oromo actors. It is foregrounded typically in situations where joint Oromo action is required against non-Oromo. For example, in a conflict over land between the (Oromo) Gujji and the (non-Oromo) Gede'ó, Boran and Arsi joined the Gujji in their fight. The Boran and Arsi are also Oromo, culturally very close to the Gujji and their immediate neighbours to the south and the north respectively. But for centuries, the three groups had been enemies with each other, respected enemies, in fact the only representatives of a certain idea of virility, but deadly enemies nevertheless, while Gujji-Gede'ó relations had been friendly (Tadesse 2009). Obviously, the new framework of ethnic federalism and the development of the Oromo identity towards a modern form of nationalism in this case has facilitated a wider Oromo solidarity against a non-Oromo group, a solidarity of a kind which had not been possible in earlier periods.

In their internal relationships (Oromo/Oromo) more identifications were used. Dejene (2012) has analysed the conflict about the boundary between the Gujji and the Boran zones. Many Gujji living in the Boran zone demanded inclusion of their areas into the Gujji zone. In the end they were mollified by the government, which was in a position to dish out 'development'. The people of the predominantly Gujji area inside the Boran zone did not get the desired correction of the boundary but gained a university (Bule Hora) instead.



Fig. 4: ‘Retraditionalizing’ the Gabra. The Gabra ritual elders (*dhabeela*) addressing a prayer in a sanctuary (*naabo*) during the ritual of power transfer

The ‘numbers game’ (identification influenced by anticipated group size) takes a specific form at the borderline between two high-level ethnicities, namely Oromo and Somali, both of which are recognized by the state (in Ethiopia and in Kenya). Smaller groups like the Gabra and Garre, who used to regard themselves as neither Oromo nor Somali but who can use their language competence and the histories of clans to claim links to both, have been engaging

in changing alliances. They also have the power to bargain for political privileges since they can threaten to side with the Somali against the Oromo and vice versa (Dejene 2012; Fekadu 2009 for Ethiopia; Schlee 2009 for Kenya).

Applied research on pastoralism and changing land use

Northeast Africa is home to one of the largest concentrations of (nomadic, transhumant, and agro-) pastoralists in the world. Pastoralism as a subsistence economy, mode of cultural identification and knowledge system is part of the historically evolved pattern of socio-economic diversity found in eastern African societies (Gabbert 2012; Hussein 2009; Khazanov and Schlee 2012; LaTosky 2013; Hussein 2009; Müller-Dempf 2014; Roba and Witsenburg 2008; Schlee and Shongolo 2012; Schlee and Watson 2009a, 2009b; Tadesse 2000; Roba and Witsenburg 2008). Especially regarding pastoralism, our early focus on ethnic identity and territory has gained new prominence in the last years (Abbink et.al. 2014; Girke 2013; Schlee 2013; Schlee and Osman 2012). This is due to changing land uses, e.g. large-scale land acquisition, large-scale farming and other forms of investment in the course of which pastoralist territories have become subject to investment and development

projects resulting in the loss or fragmentation of rangelands, induced sedentarisation of pastoralists, and a radical reduction in livestock numbers. Often policy makers relate these developments to an end of pastoralism.

The establishment of the research network *Lands of the Future* in 2013 by an international group of anthropologists is an outcome of our long-term research focus on pastoral livelihoods in Eastern Africa. When, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, land in Eastern Africa formerly used by pastoralists was increasingly fragmented and turned over to other forms of investment such as large-scale agriculture, governments, NGOs, human rights organisations and investors articulated often diverging perspectives on the developments. The *Lands of the Future Research Network*, open to experts from all disciplines, wants to stimulate a constructive dialogue between the different ‘stakeholders’ and experts in order to work towards research and reflection-based joint solutions to the challenges of change, investment



Fig. 5: Ritual celebration of the death of a favourite ox in Bodi

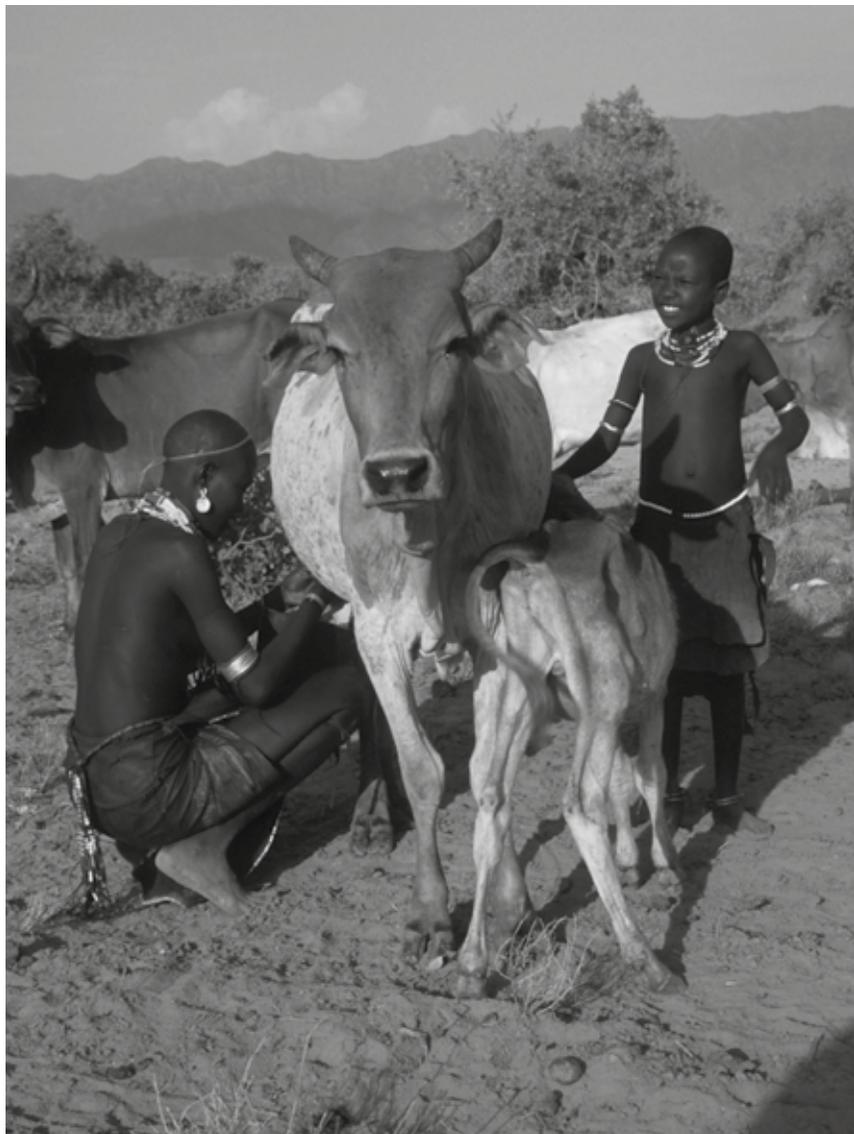


Fig. 6: Milking in the morning, Arbore



Fig. 7: Construction of the South Omo all-weather road

and community-based development for pastoral and agro-pastoral peoples. Based on a positive assessment of pastoralist's socio-cultural and material resources from long-term research, we work on models and policies that would expedite the integration of pastoralism into market economies and the wider society by seriously integrating pastoralists as equal partners in an emerging 'global neighbourhood' (Gabbert 2014). Based on our research on conflict we identify the potential costs and sources of conflict of development-generated displacement and the loss of pastoral economies and cultures.

Lands of the Future is not meant to be a closed academic group, but aims to bring together experts from different disciplines to discuss constructive approaches to the challenges arising from large-scale agricultural and other investments on pastoral territories. With this network we wish to explicitly draw on the expertise of agro-pastoralists in development planning and to establish strong ties between inves-

tors, NGOs, GOs, policy makers, researchers and local communities. Our approach, which takes collective identities and identification as its starting point and integrates the voices, perspectives and the knowledge of the groups of actors involved, can contribute to development studies that offer an alternative to the political economy and ecology of marginal or peripheral regions and people.

Lands of the Future, which is connecting to local expertise and decision-making processes in the respective areas and countries as well as fostering ongoing interdisciplinary discussion on theoretical frameworks and practical matters, highlights the potential of applied anthropological research today.

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