

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

SERGE TORNAY, *Les Fusils jaunes. Générations et politique en pays nyangatom (Éthiopie)*. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2001, 363 pp., €27.44, ISBN 2 901161 64 2.

*Les Fusils jaunes* ('yellow guns'), the translation of their ethnic self-name, is a masterful ethnography of the Nyangatom, a highly interesting people numbering about 13,000 in the lower Omo River valley of the southern Ethiopian–Sudanese border region. They are culturally related to the better-known Turkana, Karimojong and Toposa. Serge Tornay has written a fascinating account of a functioning indigenous socio-political system, which he explains in rich detail and with great human interest and understanding. This system, whose originality and relative uniqueness Tornay repeatedly underlines, is the generational system, different from the age-set or age-class systems found in other parts of East Africa. It creates an 'opposition' between the subsequent generational groups and pairs the alternating ones, i.e. grandfathers and grandsons vs. fathers, and defines the mutual rights and duties and relations of respect and authority. The generations are the 'formative species of society', and have names of natural kinds (like the Elephants, Buffaloes, Antelopes, Ostriches, Stones, Mountains). They 'reign' for about forty to fifty years although the existence of the generation is reckoned to be some 230 years (p. 82). The system is non-centralised but has a clear and predictable leadership, or better, authority structure, whereby the 'Fathers of the country' are the formal, prestigious power holders or decision makers with the power of ritual blessing. The 'Sons', the generationally younger group, have to pay respect to the 'Fathers'—for example, through periodical sacrifice of livestock, and thus by 'feeding' them. The generational system fulfils many functions that the clan and lineage system does in other non-centralised societies, but bridges divisions based on clan and territorial section membership in a society vulnerable to fission and internal conflict in insecure material conditions (p. 184). Within the generations, age-groups exist. According to Tornay the Nyangatom, of all the peoples in the Karimojong cluster, have the most fully developed generational system. It is also interesting that women have a parallel generational system. While they can marry with a man from a different generation, their children are always assigned to the generation following that of their father.

On the basis of a thorough and exemplary field study of the Nyangatom, Tornay describes the system in detail and clarifies its relation to ecology, politics and other organising features in Nyangatom life such as age, gender and clan membership. Part One (pp. 29–181) of the book describes the ecological setting and production activities, the ethno-history of the Nyangatom, and their relationship terminology and norms (in particular, kinship and alliance). The second part (pp. 183–324) is about the complex of initiation and sacrifice, which defines, both metaphorically and practically, the crucial relation between Fathers and Sons of the country. The descriptive and analytical parts are interspersed with personal testimonies from either the author (e.g. from diaries or interviews) or from his Nyangatom friends and assistants (e.g. in dialogues, speeches and case studies). There is also an interview with a former British colonial administrator of the Nyangatom country (p. 113f.). The resulting ethnography is a careful, and sensitive account of Nyangatom society, framed in an appealing theoretical context without jargon or fashionable idiom, combining personal commitment and

professionalism. Both the ethnography and the theoretical interpretation also raise many further questions, but these cannot be dealt with in a review.

The work is mainly based on the author's fieldwork data of the 1970s, augmented during subsequent visits in 1991, 1992 and 1995. There is a very interesting epilogue reflecting on future challenges and problems (pp. 313–324), especially the apparent blockage of the system. The book as a whole only marginally touches upon developments of the last decade or so. It also gives little attention to neighbouring peoples (except the wider 'Karimojong cluster') that have an impact on the Nyangatom, for example through migration, patterns of trade and exchange. While the author pays attention to conflicts with the Kara and the Dassanetch in the 1970s insofar as these affect the generational relations in Nyangatom, there is no reference to the intensified violent conflicts and cattle raiding with peoples like the Kara, Mursi, Hamar and Suri over the past fifteen years. These are partly the result of demographic pressures and of a significant influx of automatic weapons, which apparently reached the Nyangatom in the late 1980s—that is earlier than other groups. Indeed, the socio-political system as described is characteristic of the Nyangatom as an autonomous political unit, but is predicated upon a self-conscious and often violent opposition to the neighbouring groups, rooted in the glorification of cattle-raiding, cursing, and killing enemies. This is true for most 'tribes' or ethnic groups in the area: a lack of inclusiveness due to quite different value commitments, local identities and economic competition. The elements in the Nyangatom system that reinforce such violent self-expression, both rhetorically and practically, might have been explored further by the author. In this context, a related development is the recent Nyangatom territorial expansion to the north and east, for instance the take-over (p. 323) of the Mount Naita area from the Chai-Suri people (who call it Shulugui). There is still no peace between the groups today, and they seem destined to further engage in violent conflict in the absence of government mediation. There is also enduring tension with the Mursi and the Kara peoples. The ethno-federal structure of post-1991 Ethiopia puts rhetorical emphasis on equality, local autonomy and peaceful relations between the various 'nationalities', but little of this is in evidence in government policy in the Ethiopian South-West.

In my opinion, this book will be of infinite value as a historical and human document presenting Nyangatom life as a unique cultural form. It also shows that not all societies are shaped by the process of 'globalisation' as we know it—and talk about in an almost obligatory and often uncritical manner. The book is a well-produced volume with beautiful colour photographs, drawings, graphs, maps, glossaries and genealogical charts. It is also a joy to read, written in a very accessible and engaging style. As someone who has done research in the Ethiopian South-West among a group neighbouring the Nyangatom, I express my admiration to the author for this excellent work. *Les Fusils jaunes* can be considered a major contribution to Ethiopian ethnology as well as to the comparative study of indigenous political systems. The work reveals the richness and complexity of communitarian African societies not yet blighted by 'modernity', authoritarian state policy and 'development' interventions. Undoubtedly the Nyangatom have already moved in that direction; a subsequent study might tell us more about the Nyangatom as they are facing these processes today.

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