

The Ngibokoi Dilemma: Generation-sets and Social System Engineering in Times of Stress – an Example from the Toposa of Southern Sudan*

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Abstract. The Toposa are an agro-pastoral people living in the south-eastern corner of the Republic of Sudan who organise themselves by a system of generation- and age-sets. The layout of this system is not governed by fixed time intervals as in some other generation-set systems. It is argued that the layout of the Toposa generation-set system partly reflects internal conflicts within the male part of the society, and that in times of stress this layout is deliberately changed in an act of social system engineering. Evidence and the logic background are presented for such a change that has actually taken place about 130 years ago following a centennial drought, which had put the generation-set system into disorder.

[*conflict, generation-set system, drought, Toposi, Sudan*]

Introduction

The Toposa are an agro-pastoral people living in the south-eastern corner of the Republic of Sudan, on the borders to Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, numbering an estimated 200,000 to 250,000.¹ They practice a mixed agriculture: sorghum cropping² and animal husbandry with cattle, goats, and sheep. The animals, especially cattle, are more prestigious than the crops, and almost every social fact and activity is connected to them. It is the men who are responsible for the animals and for the defence, and it is the women who take care of the family, the children, the food, and the crops. The marriage pattern of the Toposa is polygynous. Toposa have stable settlements, i. e. homesteads of extended families called *ngiereá* (sg. *nyeré*), sometimes set isolated and sometimes in loose clusters. In the wet season, most animals are kept close to the *ngiereá*, and some cattle are at distant cattle camps called *ngawiyéi* (sg. *nyawi*) where

* Acknowledgement is made for the sponsoring of the current research by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Special thanks go to Martine Guichard and Virginie Tallio who reviewed the draft paper and gave extremely useful comments.

¹ Figures given vary greatly. These are my own estimates based on various sources and field data. The April 2008 population census data is not yet available.

² Besides sorghum as their staple food, also sesame, beans, etc. are grown.

grazing and water is always available. In the dry season, only some goats remain with the *ngiereá*, while all the cattle and the sheep go to the cattle camps. They are tended by the young men, and their girlfriends and young wives follow them while the elderly and most children remain at home.³

When a visitor comes to a Toposa settlement during the daytime, he or she would rarely find men in the village as they would all be under their shade trees. There would be different and spatially separated trees, one for each generation-set of the closer vicinity. When asking who those men were, the stranger would be informed that, for example, the men under the first tree were all of the group of *Ngikaléso* (Ostriches), and under the next tree the men would be called *Ngingoletyáng* (Gazelles), and that the *Ngingoletyáng* are the sons of the *Ngikaléso*.⁴ There may even be a third shade tree where the *Ngikurukwá* (Crows) sit, the sons of the *Ngingoletyáng*. It would be mostly the elders, who are not active any more, to sit or to lie under the tree, but when the younger men are not in the cattle camps or busy otherwise, they would also come to their tree.

Also, when there is any social, political, or ritual event, men would gather in groups according to their generation-set affiliation. Whenever men meet, may it be only for drinking beer made from sorghum, or at marriage ceremonies, or at *nyakidamadám*, the traditional war dance and mock attack, or on other occasions, they always come from the wider area and some even from far away, and they would take the opportunity to discuss matters of common interest. In these gatherings, everybody may speak, but there are always certain men who are known for their wisdom and integrity, and they would hold long and elaborate speeches bringing forward their different arguments. Every generation-set has its elders, as we shall see below, and Toposa elders are quite conservative. Thus, the main argument how to deal with certain issues and to settle matters is often *nyetál*, which can be translated with tradition, or common sense, or adequate behaviour. If people act against *nyetál* or in general impose their will on others, the elders threaten the wrongdoer with their curse. The older a man and the higher his rank in the generation-set system the more effective is his curse, and normally curses seem to work, either factually or in the minds of the people.

The Toposa are part of an ethnic cluster called Ateker or Karimojong cluster,⁵ comprising of the Karimojong, the Jie, the Dodos, the Turkana, the Toposa, the Jiye, and the Nyangatom, who all lead a similar way of life, only modified by their political and

³ For a fuller account of the Toposa economy and their social, ritual, and political relations see Müller 1989.

⁴ I prefer using the Toposa generation-set names as some of the English translations are rather unwieldy.

⁵ The term "Karimojong cluster" has been introduced by Gulliver (1952) and makes some sense as the Karimojong are the dominant part in this group, and the Turkana as well as the Toposa are split-off groups of the Karimojong. But the term is rejected by Toposa intellectuals who prefer the native term Ateker, meaning relatives.

ecological situation. The Turkana, for example, living in a much more arid environment, practise only little agriculture and have to a great extent substituted their cattle by camels. In fact, it is not only the Ateker sharing a similar way of life, but many neighbouring peoples in the area like the Didinga, Longarim, Oromo, Samburu, Rendille, Hamar, Dassanetch, Murle, and Konso, just to mention a few.

Some hundred years ago, the Toposa split away from the Karimojong in what is now called Karamoja in Uganda and migrated to their present habitats. Resulting from this migration, the Toposa still have a strong feeling of unity. Even today, when asked what makes a Toposa, they would often answer that it is those people who have migrated together. The exact time of this migration is not quite clear, and estimates vary, but the fact as such is still a source of corporate identity. This corporate identity even has a symbol, a sacred stone located at a place called Kalok on the bank of the river Loyoro. The *Nyamóru ka Nyetál*, i. e. Stone of Tradition, has been brought along on their migration from Karamoja, and it is a ritual centre until today.⁶

The relations of the Toposa with their immediate neighbours are ones of latent hostility, with the exception of the Nyangatom who are deemed to be relatives of the Toposa. All the people in the area keep cattle, and all of them try to increase their herds by means of cattle raiding from their neighbours, if there are no temporary peace agreements like presently between the Toposa and the Turkana. The issue of cattle raiding as such has been extensively discussed (cf. Bollig 1990, Gray et al. 2003, Almagor 1979, Frank 2002, Hendrickson et al. 1996, Roba 2008). It exemplifies quite well the complex relations between old family heads and young men. Almagor (1979) has shown this for the Dassanetch, and it is quite similar among the Toposa.

It is the young men who go raiding. In principle, raiding and being a fierce warrior is highly esteemed by the entire Toposa society, also by the elders who recall the time when *they* were the fierce young men and the pride of their people. On occasions I heard them insulting the young men why they were not out on a raid but sitting at home. On the other hand, it is the older herd owners who suffer from counter raids and punitive actions when the government confiscates cattle as compensation. Thus, on the one hand, all the members of the Toposa society, including the elders, encourage the young men to go raiding, but the elders, on the other hand, are unhappy when raiding becomes excessive or politically problematic, because then all Toposa and especially the elders suffer. In 1983, for example, young Toposa went west to the Nile, and from the area around Mongala about 200 km away, they raided a herd of Dinka cattle. The Dinka, however, are the largest group in the Southern Sudan, and it must have dawned to the Toposa elders that this action meant asking for trouble. I saw part of the cattle in Kapoeta in a provisional kraal, and I could immediately understand what had attracted the young men. The cows looked magnificent with their enormous

⁶ There are other ritual groves where stones play a role, e. g. the three ritual cooking stones at Longeyang south of Kapoeta.

horns, in comparison to the small-horned Toposa cattle. And it was of course an act of bravery to bring back the animals all the way through enemy country. But, despite all the bravery, the exploit actually turned out to be more than problematic as it provoked counter-action by the Dinka. Armed forces of what the Toposa called “Dinka-Police” came for revenge but were annihilated in an ambush. Somehow, the elders managed to settle the matter, but the incident has strained the Dinka-Toposa relations up to today when the new government is dominated by these very Dinka.

When I first studied the Toposa in 1982 and 1983, the Toposa were almost untouched by government interventions, as neither the British colonial power nor the Sudanese State cared much for this far-away part of the southern Sudan where the Toposa lived. NGO⁷ activities were at a low level, except for the Catholic Church, the Africa Inland Mission (AIM), and the development organisation Norwegian Church Aid (NCA). The Toposa economy was almost completely subsistent, with a few exceptions (beads, soap, and various petty items available in small shops – clothes were made of animal hides), and the use of money was very limited as things were rather bartered – a bag of sorghum against a goat of a certain size, etc.

Up to now, there are only two modern quasi-urban settlements in Toposa-land, Narus in the East and Kapoeta in the western part of the area, each of them, however, having only a few thousand people and little urban ambience. Kapoeta had been made the administrative capital in the 1920s when the British occupied the area, and Narus is a result of the last Sudanese civil war when the Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA) had its stronghold in Ethiopia and in the very eastern part of South Sudan. Presently, the SPLA, i. e. its civil wing the Sudanese People Liberation Movement (SPLM), has gained the political power in Southern Sudan, and Kapoeta has been made the capital of Eastern Equatoria province.⁸

After my first visit to the field and an interruption of 22 years caused by the second Sudanese civil war, I was able to resume field research among the Toposa in 2005. In this paper, I will not deal with the obvious and non-obvious changes brought about by the civil war, a new government, and the efforts of NGOs and relief organisations, but I will focus on the historical incidence of “social system engineering”, which I was able to uncover during my recent fieldwork in 2008.

The term “social system engineering”⁹ shall denote the fact that people deliberately alter the shape of their social system. It is apparent that the layout of social systems varies through time and between adjacent ethnic groups, but there is rarely evidence on how the changes came about, i. e. for what reasons and how people did it. My ar-

⁷ Non-Governmental Organisation.

⁸ At least this has been decided. Torit, however, the old capital and a bit more townish than Kapoeta, is struggling to retain the status quo.

⁹ “Social system engineering” should not be confused with the term “social engineering”, which is used to denote psychological manipulation of individuals or attempts to influence the behaviour of a social group.

gument is that this type of social system engineering occurs in times of stress, and I will show a paradigmatic example from the recent Toposa history, the paradigm being the Toposa generation-set system.

Basics of Generation-set Systems

There are two basic principles by which the Toposa and most of their neighbours are organised: age and generation. Each of the ethnic groups has a somewhat differing layout of their system, and, in some way or another, the systems are related to each other, which, however, cannot be discussed here.

It has become common use to apply the term age-set to a group of people, male or female, who are of approximately¹⁰ the same age, have their own and distinct name, distinguishing features like special ornaments etc., and act as a corporate group. The same applies to generation-sets, except for the fact that the recruiting principle is not age but generation. As generation-sets are basically an ordering phenomenon of the male population,¹¹ we would say that each man is a member of the generation-set following the one of his father. In many cases, and also among the Toposa, a man is per definition both a member of an age-set and a generation-set.

A system of age-sets only, when generation-sets do not exist, is a relatively simple matter and can be graphically depicted in the following way:

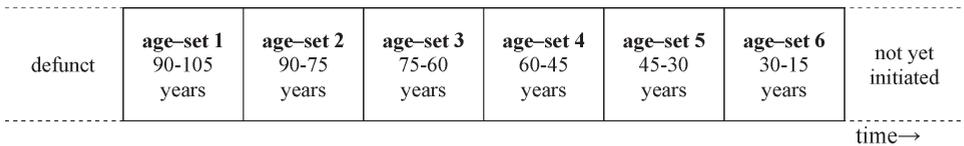


Fig. 1 Schematic example of an age-set system.

Figure 1 is a schematic example of a system grading people by age. I have assumed that the time span of one age-set comprises 15 years. Living members of this society are grouped into 6 age-sets, assuming that they are initiated into the system at the age of 15. Certain functions may be attributed to this system, but we shall not discuss this here. What I want to show is the neat borderlines in age between adjacent age-sets – which is not the case for generation-sets. This needs some explanation.

¹⁰ The age differences within one age-set vary and may be as much as 15 years and in some instances more.

¹¹ Among the Toposa, for example, girls form age-sets of their own. When a woman marries, her age-set celebrates with her and gets an oxen slaughtered by the future husband. The married woman then becomes attached to the generation-set of her husband, and her age-set loses importance.

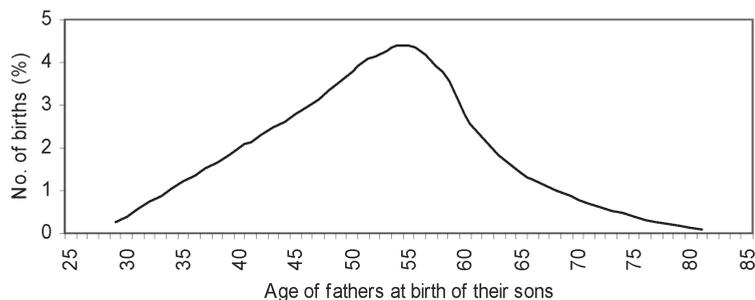


Fig. 2 Patri-filiation curve of the Toposa.¹²

Adjacent generation-sets overlap in age. This can be easily explained by the procreation habits of the people in question. Not only among the Toposa, but also among some of their neighbours, especially the Ateker,¹³ men marry late, at around the age of 30. The reason for this is that in these societies, which often have been termed “gerontocratic” (cf. Spencer 1965, Almagor 1978, Aguilar 1998) and which are polygynous, old men often, instead of allocating animals to their sons as a dowry so that they can marry, prefer to use these animals for their own convenience, i. e. to marry another young wife.¹⁴ This is why fathers are sometimes considerably old at the birth of their sons, as shown in Figure 2. It shows how men start procreating around the age of 30, reaching a peak at the age of about 55, and quite a few continue up to the age of 70 and some even up to 80, which, physically, seems to be a bit astonishing. There is, however, a simple explanation for this phenomenon.

One has to take into consideration that among these people it is not so much the physical but the social fatherhood that counts. There are no orphans in Toposa society because every child whose father is dead or not known is adopted by somebody. If a girl becomes pregnant before she marries, the child is incorporated into the girl’s family and adopted by either her mother or another co-wife of her father, and the girl’s father becomes also the (social) father of the child. If a man dies and his brothers take his wives into levirate, the children born are deemed to be the offspring of the deceased man. The latter explains the surprising fact that old men of 80 years should still procreate. Socially they can.

If a man “A” produces sons during 50 years, and if his oldest son “B” is able to marry at the age of 30, he (B) may already have a son “C” of 20 years when his young-

¹² For exact values and data sources, see Müller 1989.

¹³ As the Karimojong, Jie, Dodos, Turkana, Toposa, Jiye, Nyangatom.

¹⁴ In some instances, withholding young men from early marriage is even institutionalised: men up to the age of 30 or more are kept in “warrior groups” like among the Samburu (cf. Spencer 1965). Hazel (2000:1) argues that regulating marriage in this way is “at the very root of Cushitic generation-set systems”.

est brother “D” is born. Thus, C is one generation below D, but he is 20 years older – the classic example, which sometimes, but not as often, also occurs in our societies, that a nephew is older than his uncle. If this happens frequently, and the great spread in the procreation age of men does suggest it – and it actually does happen – the result is a considerable overlap in the age of generations. See schematic below:

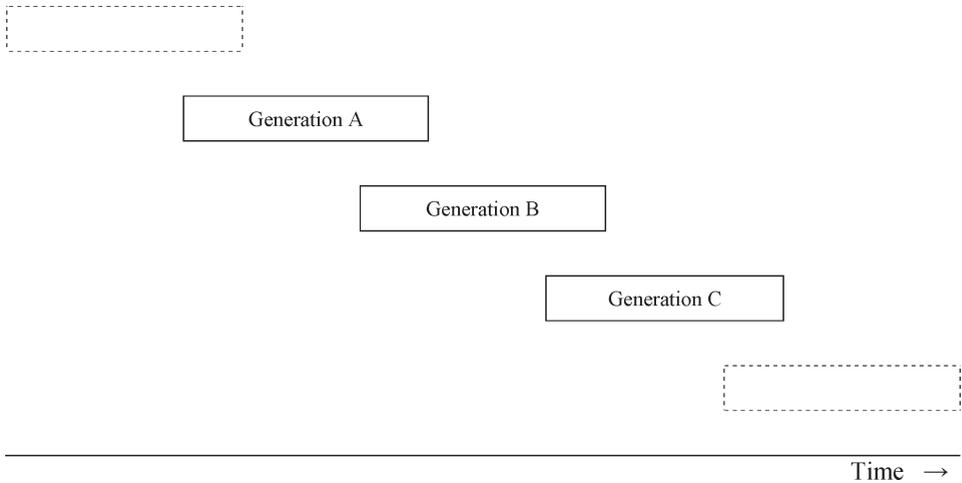


Fig. 3 Overlap in age of generation-sets.

This overlap in age is what makes generation-set systems complicated. Demographically, generation-set systems have, as Neville Dyson-Hudson (1966:202) has put it, “a degree of built-in malfunctioning”, and there has been an argument in the literature, that from the demographic point of view, caused by this age overlap, generation-set systems would inevitably collapse.¹⁵ Computer calculations (cf. Müller 1989) show that generation-set systems are relatively stable from the demographic point of view, but in fact the age overlap increases slowly but steadily, and if people would not take action at some point it would indeed cause problems. In addition, my field data indicates that there are also external causes like droughts, which affect the proper functioning of the generation-set systems. But all over East Africa these systems still function in one way or another. Their formal layout, however, is quite different, and I have argued (Müller 1991) that they all may have derived from a basic layout. To me it seems to be evident that people at different times, in times of crisis, have made changes to adjust their system to current needs. One example, the Toposa case, will be shown on the following pages.

¹⁵ Cf. Peristiany 1951, Jensen 1954, Dyson-Hudson 1963, 1966, Stewart 1977, Spencer 1978. For an exhaustive discussion of this topic, cf. Müller 1985.

The Toposa Generation-set System

Below, the layout of the Toposa generation-set system is shown in a graphic way. For reasons of convenience, the time axis has been changed from horizontal (as in Figure 3) to vertical.

Figure 4 shows at the top extinct generation-sets as they are remembered by informants and those generation-sets presently existing. Ngibokorá are the fathers of Ngitukói, Ngitukói are the fathers of Ngipyéi, and so on. There is one striking feature in the diagram: The sons of Ngibokói are split, and this schism continues into the next generations, causing what we may call two generation-set lines. It is exactly this splitting-up of a generation, which will be at the focus of our interest. We shall return to this later, after some additional information.

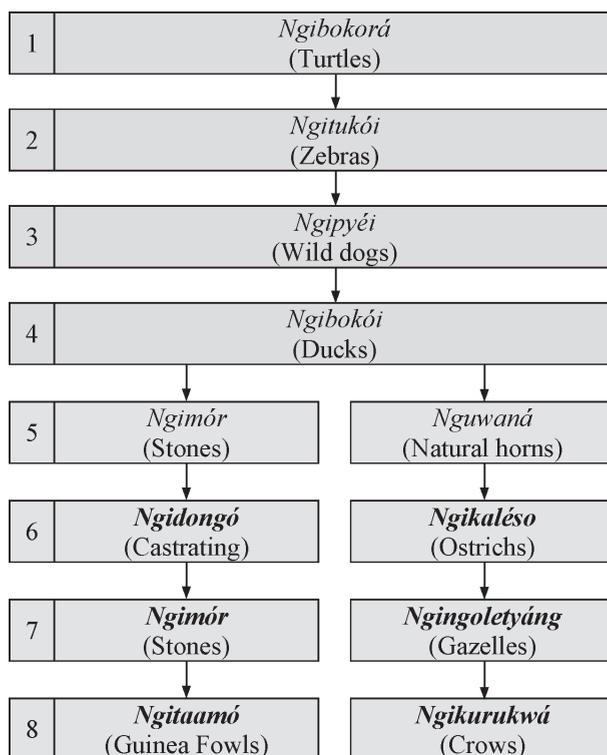


Fig. 4 Toposa generation-sets (bold: generation-sets in existence).¹⁶

¹⁶ In 2006, there were also sons of *Ngitaamó* and *Ngikurukwá*, but in small numbers only, they have not yet really emerged in the public, and my informants had different views on whether they would be re-united into one generation-set or the division of generations should be maintained.

Male Toposa are born into the generation-set below their fathers, and each generation-set consists of a number of consecutive age-sets. I shall use the English terminology, as in the Toposa language there are no analytic terms for either “generation-set” or “age-set”. The only generally accepted term is *nyanakét* (pl. *nganaketaá*), which can be translated as “suckling group”, i. e. boys who have suckled their mothers’ breasts during the same time (on average three years).¹⁷ Several (around five) consecutive *nganaketaá* are put together into one age-set. All *nganaketaá*, age-sets, and generation-sets have distinctive names, generally derived from wild animals, from cattle colours, or the shapes of their horns. The name of a generation-set is normally equal to the one of its first and oldest age-set, or it is the name the generation-set has acquired at *nyasapán*.

Nyasapán is a succession ceremony where entire generation-sets are initiated and promoted to the highest rank in the Toposa society. At any one time, only one generation-set can be in this position. When they retire, their sons will be promoted and have *nyasapán*, and so on. Formerly, i. e. in the early times of the generation-set system when the overlap in age between the generations was not as marked as it is now, *nyasapán* meant being promoted into the status of grown-up men, being allowed to marry and having all the ritual, social, and political power. There was, however, already some age overlap, and *nyasapán* was eagerly awaited by those men of the successor generation who were already old – some of them even had died already before achieving the highest status, and they would exert pressure in order to make *nyasapán* happen for them, thus being allowed to marry and set up families. As the few remaining men of the “outgoing” generation did not want to lose their privileges, there was strife for quite a while until the remaining members of the older generation became too few and too weak to defend their position, retired, and gave *nyasapán* to their sons.

Some time ago, with the growing age overlap and the increased number of “over-aged”, i. e. older men in a lower generation-set, the Toposa have disengaged a man’s personal standing from his membership in the generation-set system. He may marry and have a family regardless of his set membership. Today, all existing generation-sets (bold in Figure 4) have their elders. But still, being an elder of the highest generation-set gives extra prestige, and the most venerated men and having the highest ritual standing today are the oldest men of the initiated *Ngidongo*¹⁸ and *Ngikaléso*.

When *nyasapán* takes place, all members of this generation are initiated, be it old men or just newly-born babies. Everyone has either to be present or at least be represented by a symbol, normally a stone – stones play a prominent role in Toposa belief, as already mentioned above. *Nyasapán* is obtained from the fathers’ generation-set. In

¹⁷ Some Toposa use words like *nyadí* (a line in the *nyakirikét*, the ritual meat feast), *nyakión* (the “table” made of leaves in the *nyakirikét*) for generation-sets, *nyetwál* (division) or *nyasepíc* (group) for age-sets, but none of these terms are accepted all over the area. *Nyanakét* is sometimes also used for age-sets.

¹⁸ However, for reasons which cannot be laid out here, some *Ngidongó* have not been initiated.

practice, representatives of the generation-set in question go to the river Loyoro, to the area where the Ngikor live, one of the Toposa local sections who are said to have brought the sacred stone and the *nyasapán* from Karamoja. Bulls are speared in favour of the elders, and the initiands, among other ceremonies, are smeared by the elders with *nyakujít*, the cleansing content of the bulls' stomachs. Then they all go home and extend the *nyasapán* they have received to their brothers who had not been present in the ceremony at the river Loyoro.

When a generation is initiated, i. e. receives *nyasapán*, no members of the "outgoing" generation can be initiated any more. But because of the age overlap between generations, there are still children born belonging to this older generation. These would then be "downgraded" one generation and be initiated together with their succeeding generation.¹⁹

Ngibokorá

Ngitukói

Ngipyéi

Ngibokói

Ngimór – *Nguwaná*

Ngidongó – *Ngikaléso*

Ngimór – *Ngingoletyáng*

Ngitaamó – *Ngikurukwá*

Toposa generation-sets

In most societies, there is a conflictual relation between fathers and sons, and an emotionally close relation between grandfathers and grandsons. Among the Toposa (and most of their neighbours), this is institutionalised in the form of two alternations. Toposa generation-sets are

alternately and additionally called *Ngimór* (Stones) or *Ngirisáe* (Leopards). Generation-set names of one alternation should (theoretically) be of similar animals. In some instances, a generation-set is only known by the name of its alternation – see the generation-set list on the left. *Ngimór* are "right" and *Ngirisáe* are "left", that is, in their traditional meat feast *nyakirikét* where people sit in a half-circle, they sit according to their alternation, with the oldest man at the right or left end, respectively, and the others in descending order of their age. In daily life, alternations do not have much relevance, whereas generation-sets and age-sets are omnipresent and important features.

Whenever males gather, may it be for entertainment, ceremonies, discussions, meat-eating, cattle-raiding, war, or defence, they would do this within their group, and, depending on the occasion, it would be their age- and generation-sets ordering and grading and also uniting them. It has to be mentioned that often in practice, and sometimes confusing for the outsider, age-set and generation-set names would be used interchangeably. Men tend to aggregate in their age-set, if enough members of this age-set are around, but it would still be in the minds of the people that a certain age-set is part of its generation-set, and, thus, if only one age-set is present, it can be referred to with its age-set or generation-set name.

If we assume that a *nyanakét* ("suckling group") has an age span of around three years, and an age-set is composed of five *nganaketé*, then an age-set would have an

¹⁹ I also found some traces of "upgrading", but my evidence for this is still scanty.

age span of around 15 years. If a generation-set had six age-sets, it would cover an age span of 90 years. This, however, is only an approximation, as the Toposa do not operate their system with fixed numbers or have it governed by certain time intervals as other ethnic groups do – in its most intricate form the Borana with their *Gada* (cf. Legesse 1973) system.

The Toposa generation-set system is not governed by a set of fixed rules but reflects the social relations within the Toposa society, and these are never just simple, as anywhere else. There is harmony but also strife and stress, especially between older and younger men, as has been mentioned above, and a few more examples will be given below. Tension exists between members of different generation-sets but also within the same generation-set or even age-set, and my argument is that these tensions shape the very layout of the Toposa generation-set system – and at the same time the conflicts between old and young are channelled and neutralised by the “system”.²⁰ To illustrate this, we should look into how new generation-sets and age-sets emerge.

When the sons of a certain generation “A” are born, they are, as long as they are young, referred to as “sons of A”. When the sons of A become numerous enough and the oldest of them are youngsters, the elders will decide to give a name to this generation, and henceforth they will be known as the generation “B”. Thus, a new generation-set has emerged.

For an extended period of time, the new generation B would not be sub-divided into age-sets, there would be just this young generation called B. However, as Tornay (1981:164, 1995, 2001) has already pointed out, there is always strife in such a group as the older ones would try to control the younger ones and also harass them, boss them around, and if the group is becoming too big, the youngest would even not get their share of meat in the meat feast *nyakirikét*. The young ones would then try to break away, forming a group of their own with their own name. If they are not strong enough in numbers, they may not succeed immediately. But after some time of turmoil and stress, when they have grown in number and become stronger, their fathers would also be keen to settle the situation, and they would be allowed to form their own age-set with its own name. And, of course, this process of fission would continue throughout the generation, as long as members of this generation are born.

I have found evidence for this, for example, in the Riwoto section of the Toposa. Here, inside the *Ngingoletyáng* generation a group calling themselves *Ngikosowá* tried to break away from their older brothers but were forced to return. Some years later they tried it again using a different name, *Ngikunikó*, and this time they succeeded.²¹

²⁰ I am using the word “system” a bit hesitantly, as in common understanding it suggests some stable state of affairs. However, as systems theory tells us, systems can also be quite flexible. And they are the more stable the more flexible they are – rigid systems break easily. The system presented here actually is flexible.

²¹ In other parts of the country, both *Ngikosowá* and *Ngikunikó* exist, *Ngikuniko* being a split-off from *Ngikosowá*.

The above explains why the name of a generation-set and its first age-set is equal, and at the same time it shows how new age-sets come into existence: by fission caused by strife and conflict. New age-sets are not created after a certain fixed time span, but they come into being as the result of conflict situations within the society.

<i>Ngibokorá</i>
<i>Ngitukói</i>
<i>Ngipyéi</i>
<i>Ngibokói</i>
(old) <i>Ngimór</i> – (young) <i>Ngimór/Nguwaná</i>
<i>Ngidongó</i> – <i>Ngikaléso</i>
<i>Ngimór</i> – <i>Ngingoletyáng</i>
<i>Ngitaamó</i> – <i>Ngikurukwá</i>

Toposa generation-sets

Contrary to age-sets, new generation-sets do not emerge through conflict. Every male Toposa simply belongs to the generation-set following the one of his father. But we have already seen that the generation of sons of *Ngibokói* and the following generations are split into two; not just the usual division into age-sets but a split of the generation.

The explanations for this split brought forward by the Toposa themselves were differing. I was told that there was quarrelling

at *nyakirikét* about the meat. This seems to be a standard explanation (cf. Lamphear 1976:29) for such stress. Another explanation brought up was a not specified problem between the *Ngibokói* and their older *Ngimór* sons. And finally, the most frequent reason given was that the young *Ngimór*²² were not reasonable, did not want to go to the cattle camps, preferred to dance, and abducted the girls whom their older brothers wanted to marry. The older *Ngimór* fought and chased away their younger brothers, and when their fathers wanted to settle the fight and expressed their sympathy for the younger ones, the older brothers even quarrelled and fought with their fathers, leaving a deep rift between the two groups. I was also told that *Ngibokói* decided never to give *nyasapán*, the initiation into the leading status, to their older sons *Ngimór*. Let us assume that there is some truth in all these versions. But just quarrels between older and younger men is not unusual in this society, and they do not justify such a fundamental and extraordinary event as the unheard-of division of a generation-set and the refusal of a generation-set to give *nyasapán* to their sons.

The argument of this paper is that the generational split was a deliberate act of social system engineering.²³ In order to understand why and how, however, we need some more background information.

The Toposa Ethnogenesis and the Generation-set System

It has already been mentioned that some hundred years ago the Toposa split away from the Karimojong in what is now called Uganda and migrated to their present hab-

²² Later called *Nguwaná*.

²³ In a similar way this has already been postulated by N. Dyson-Hudson (1966).

itats. Resulting from this migration, the Toposa still have a strong feeling of unity. Even today, when asked what makes a Toposa, they would often answer that it is the belonging to those people who have migrated together. The exact time of this migration is not quite clear, and estimates vary, but the fact as such is still a source of corporate identity. It is also remembered that they have migrated in two main wings, one arriving more from the West and the other one more from the East. Still today, the Toposa perceive themselves as belonging to either the Toposa of the West (*Ngitoposa kalo to*) or the Toposa of the East (*Ngitoposa kalo kide*). It is said that the Toposa migration has started from the Karimojong cattle camps. Most probably all similar migrations among the neighbouring ethnic groups have started in this way – the same is known of the Turkana, for example. This needs some elaboration.

As already mentioned above, the traditional social system of the Toposa can rightly be called gerontocratic. The elders exercise the overall authority, and the young often feel oppressed and deprived. This has been discussed elsewhere, and we do not need to dwell on it here. However, the fact is important that there is conflict and stress between the old and the young. If there was not the strong belief in the curse of the elders, it may have happened more often that the young warriors at the cattle camps would have run away with the cattle and their girls and would have founded a new community at a distant place, now being themselves at the top of the hierarchy.

This is exactly what happened in the Toposa case: There was a wide-spread drought in Karamoja, and in the cattle camp, young people, most probably of the *Ngibokorá* generation-set, did the unthinkable: they speared and ate a certain ox called Loyongolem (“with a big hump”) – at least that is the explanatory version recalled by some elders (Lopim 1996:4). Whatever actually happened, there was strife between the elders and their sons, the elders cursed them, and the sons went off with part of the cattle and their women. It must have been a huge cattle camp with far more people than a group that could eat one ox. Historically, it seems to be clear that the to-be-Toposa took off in several streams and by different routes. They must have migrated all around the area, coming as far as Mount Mogilla in what is now northern Kenya and also to the mountains in the very East of what is now south-eastern Sudan. This mountain range is generally referred to as Moruakipi, the ‘mountain of the water’, but it is also said that this is a distortion of Moruangipyéi, which means ‘the mountain of *Ngipyéi*’, i. e. the mountain formerly populated by the *Ngipyéi* generation-set. If the available information on Toposa generation-sets is correct, this process of migration must have taken three generations and thus around 150 years.²⁴ Apparently it was only the sons of *Ngipyéi*, the *Ngibokói*, who finally settled in the present Toposa habitats.

²⁴ On the duration of a generation see Müller (1989:85).

<i>Ngibokorá</i>
<i>Ngitukói</i>
<i>Ngipyéi</i>
<i>Ngibokói</i>
<i>Ngimór</i> – <i>Nguwaná</i>
<i>Ngidongó</i> – <i>Ngikaléso</i>
<i>Ngimór</i> – <i>Ngingoletyáng</i>
<i>Ngitaamó</i> – <i>Ngikurukwá</i>
Toposa generation-sets

The way this ethnogenesis took place had a fundamental impact on the generation-set system of the Toposa.²⁵ As laid out above, all generation-set systems have a built-in problematic feature, i. e. the overlap in age of adjacent generations. Now, when the young *Ngibokorá* broke away from the Karimojong, with only two generations being in existence, i. e. the *Ngibokorá* and their children, the demographic overlap was reset to zero. Thus, demographically the system must have run smoothly. But as the *Ngibokorá* were at odds with their fathers, they had a problem of legitimacy. When they had broken away from their people, they were cursed by

their fathers and thus they were not likely to receive *nyasapán* from them, i. e. they were not initiated into the position of being the legitimate leaders of the Toposa. This continued for the next two generations, the *Ngitukói* and the *Ngipyéi*. It was only the fourth generation, the *Ngibokói*, who were able to make peace with the Karimojong. It was some of the Ngikor territorial section and from the Ngiraanga clan who went there, received *nyasapán*, and they also brought the sacred stone to its present location.²⁶

Conflict, Drought, and Social System Engineering

I would not describe the Toposa as an extremely conflict-ridden society. But, of course, they have their troubles. I have already mentioned the rivalry between the old patriarchs and their sons over the family herd for dowries and the conflicts inside age-sets, which lead to their fission.

As a matter of fact, the Toposa history started with conflict in the very beginning. The existence of the Toposa is a result of stress between Karimojong elders and their rebellious sons. There is only a fragile balance of power between elders and their grown-up sons. When the young men are in the cattle camps, they have all the means to start a new life independently from their autocratic fathers, and it is mainly the belief in the elders' curse that keeps them connected to their group. Other factors, however, may override the power of the curse, and in the Toposa case this seems to have been a prolonged drought period.

²⁵ Except for some ex post explanations, it is not precisely known how and when they acquired their new name.

²⁶ I also encountered an alternative version that it was the *Ngibokói* who split off and brought both the Stone and the *nyasapan*. This issue needs further enquiry as well as the entire matter of the Toposa split-off and the connected "migration trauma", Toposa identity, and the role of the Sacred Stone. This, however, does not affect the argument of the present paper.

Drought is the major stress factor for the Toposa and their neighbours. As a Turkana has put it:

“The drought is always, even long years ago. The livestock dies of drought, even people die because of the drought. (...) During the drought we eat [wild fruits as] Edapal, Edung, Ebei, Elamac, Ngitir [... and others]. That is the food of the Turkana. (...) A long drought comes, and all of the livestock dies. Even before our fathers this happened. When it rains, it rains heavily. (...) Long ago, some years, all livestock got finished. People went to Marille [Dassanetch], they went up to Dongiro [Nyangatom]. They ate their sleeping hides, they ate the leather of the donkey carriers. Drought comes and passes.” (Icum in Lopuseki, 2. 7. 1987)

Drought is part of the people's lives, and they face it almost every other year. Once every seven to ten years it is a disaster, bringing life almost to an end. Normally, people are able to cope with it, but there are also centennial catastrophic droughts that override any coping strategy. It is these drought catastrophes that also have an impact on the generation-set system, in an indirect way.

During a catastrophic drought, most of the people's animals would die. Thus, when there are no animals available, no animal bride wealth can be raised by young men, which is, however, essential for an orderly marriage among the Toposa and their neighbours. But young people would not stop making love and begetting children, and the non-existence of bride wealth animals would maybe even encourage promiscuity – there would be no other way anyway. This would continue for many years until the herds would be rebuilt and bride wealth could be given again, resulting in proper marriages. In the meanwhile, the children born out of wedlock would be deemed to be the offspring of the girls' fathers, as explained above.

A young man would normally have sex with a girl of his own generation, i. e. her father would be a generation above him. If the girl would now have a boy, this boy would become a member of the generation-set below his social father but not below his procreator, i. e. the boy's generation-set would be the same as the one of his physical father. This has consequences for the generation-set system. In the Toposa case, I found that one of these catastrophic droughts occurred at the time when the *Ngibokói* were young, and for quite some years their physical sons were paradoxically, in generation-set terms, again *Ngibokói* instead of *Ngimór*. *Ngibokói* had produced *Ngibokói*.

I would like to support my argument with findings I have made among the Turkana. When looking at both the Turkana and Toposa generation-sets on a parallel time scale, we find a striking correspondence, as three of them are equal in time and name. This is not surprising considering that both ethnic groups are split-offs of the Karimjong, most probably at the same time and most probably for the same reason, an extended drought. What makes Figure 5 so useful for us is that we are able to time-correlate events in the Turkana and Toposa societies.

According to Turkana oral tradition collected during field work in the 1980s, during the time of the Turkana *Ngipyéi*, there was a severe drought during which almost

<i>Toposa</i>		<i>Turkana</i>
<i>Ngibokorá</i>		<i>Ngipalajám</i>
<i>Ngitukói</i>		<i>Nginyá</i>
<i>Ngipyéi</i>		<i>Ngipyéi</i>
<i>Ngibokói</i>		<i>Ngiputiró</i>
<i>Ngimór</i>	– <i>Nguwaná</i>	<i>Ngimór</i>
<i>Ngidongó</i>	– <i>Ngikaléso</i>	<i>Ngirisáe</i>
<i>Ngimór</i>	– <i>Ngingoletyáng</i>	<i>Ngimór</i>
<i>Ngitaamó</i>	– <i>Ngikurukwá</i>	<i>Ngirisáe</i>

Fig. 5 Toposa and Turkana generation-sets.

all the animals in the wider area died. And during my 2006 research I found evidence that the same happened to the Toposa *Ngipyéi* who lived close by at the same time. There is evidence (cf. Müller 1989:137) that the younger *Ngiputiró*, the sons of the Turkana *Ngipyéi*, were affected by this situation in the same way as I have described for the Toposa *Ngibokói*, as there were no animals available for bride wealth and entering into proper marriages. There was unrest and stress between the *Ngiputiró* and the following generation-sets, and it was reported that the *Ngiputiró* changed the whole generation-set system. In an act of deliberate social system engineering, the *Ngiputiró* solved the problem in an elegant way when they decided to abandon the hierarchic system of generation-sets and retain only the two alternations, *Ngimór* and *Ngirisáe*. Henceforth, in Turkana society *Ngimór* and *Ngirisáe* would be equal, and they would sit together in *nyakirikét*, the oldest men of both *Ngimór* and *Ngirisáe* in the centre, and in descending order the *Ngimór* to the right and the *Ngirisáe* to the left. Hierarchy in the Turkana system since then is not any more attached to generation-set affiliation, it has become only a matter of age (cf. Gulliver 1958, Müller 1989).

Ngibokói, the Toposa generation-set corresponding to the Turkana *Ngiputiró*, were reportedly beset by the same problems: drought and a consecutive muddle in the generation-sets. But apparently they did not apply the same social system engineering as the Turkana did, with fatal consequences, as stress built up to a point when people even killed each other. At this point they were forced to take action, and they did. They found a different solution than the Turkana, and they allowed the generation-set of their sons to be split into two, thus separating the two warring groups of older and younger *Ngimór*.

I found it difficult to understand what had actually happened at this time of stress when the set-up of the generation-set system went into disorder, and I reverted to a computer simulation of what may be called the “*Ngibokói* dilemma”. Figure 6 is based on the empirical data of Figure 2, which were repetitively applied, as described in Müller (1985).

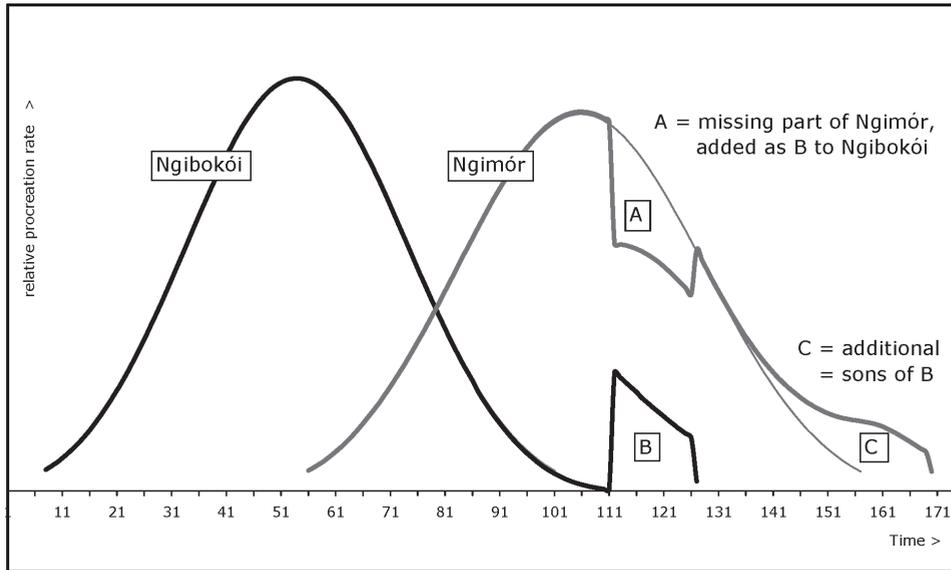


Fig. 6 The *Ngibokói* dilemma: computer simulation of births.

Figure 6 shows the births of *Ngibokói* and their sons *Ngimór* (years are relative, starting from 0). It can be clearly seen how the two adjacent generation-sets overlap in age as well as the outcome of the drought. The younger *Ngibokói* produced illegitimate²⁷ sons who, instead of becoming *Ngimór* (A), also became *Ngibokói* (B). By this, the life time of the *Ngibokói* generation was extended by around 15 years, assumed that this was the period during which illegitimate children were produced. This of course effected also the following generations. In the first place, it changed the composition of *Ngimór*. Normally, the children of A would have been the next generation (not shown in this diagram), but as A/*Ngimór* had become B/*Ngibokói*, their children became C/*Ngimór*. The composition of *Ngimór* has thus changed drastically; in their middle part members are missing while the youngest part has been increased and extended. We shall see that this is exactly the problem leading to the conflict.

Let us now have a look at the living members of both generations. The horizontal time axis shows the age of the generation-set members living at the specific time (t).

I have chosen a point in time when the above described changes in the set-up of the generation-set system started to lead to conflict and stress.

The strife between the *Ngibokói* and the older *Ngimór* started at about the time displayed in Figure 7, when the “original” *Ngibokói* (without B) were old and very few in numbers, and under normal circumstances the generation-set of *Ngimór* would

²⁷ Expression used by Turkana and Toposa.

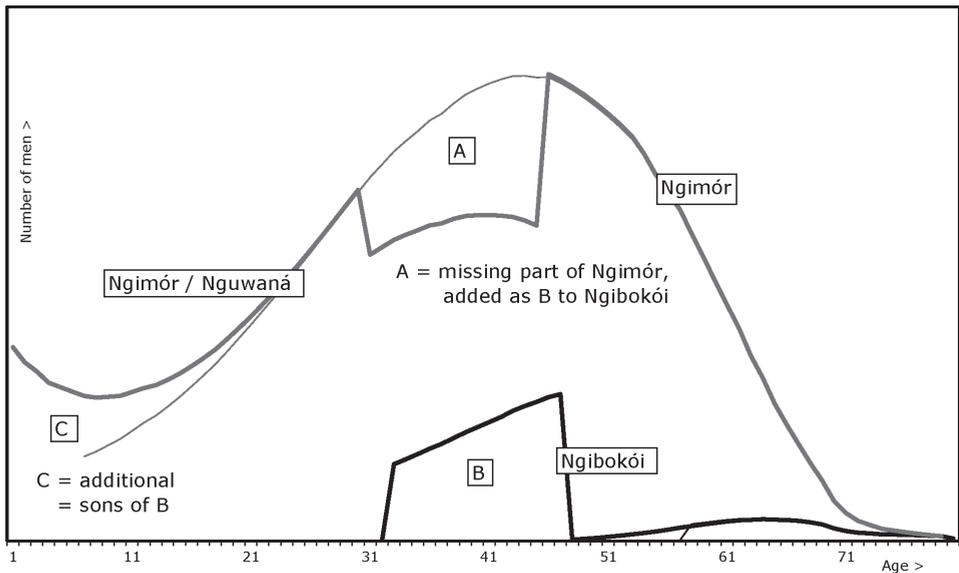


Fig. 7 Conflict constellation between *Ngibokói*, older *Ngimór*, and younger *Ngimór* at t.

then have received *nyasapan* and have become the leading generation-set. Even under normal circumstances, this would have been a disputed issue for a while and a critical time when the overaged of the successor generation, i. e. the older *Ngimór*, would have exerted pressure to receive *nyasapan* and thus the highest status. Now, the situation was even worse. Physically, the older *Ngimór* were the older brothers of (A) who had instead become *Ngibokói* (B). Thus, the physically younger brothers of the older *Ngimór* had become their “fathers”, and although formerly illegitimate, they were holding the higher status in the generation-set system and blocked the way of the older *Ngimór* who were deprived of their promotion by a rule, which, in this case, gave the privileges to the younger men.

This situation even deteriorated over time, and after around 20 years all the original *Ngibokói* had died and only the “illegitimate” *Ngibokói* (B) remained – see Figure 8 below.

The *Ngibokói* (B) still had the highest rank in the generation-set system, and they were deemed to be the “fathers” of the *Ngimór*. However, the *Ngimór* between 50 and 65 did not really respect these *Ngibokói* because they knew they were originally their brothers. Apparently this was the strife between *Ngibokói* and the older *Ngimór*, which has been reported to me.

Another interesting feature can be seen in Figure 8. The original generation of *Ngimór* (slim line) is not only distorted by the missing A but also by C, the sons of B who originally would have been a generation behind *Ngimór*. As C are numerous, this changes the balance between old and young members of *Ngimór*. Thus, when we

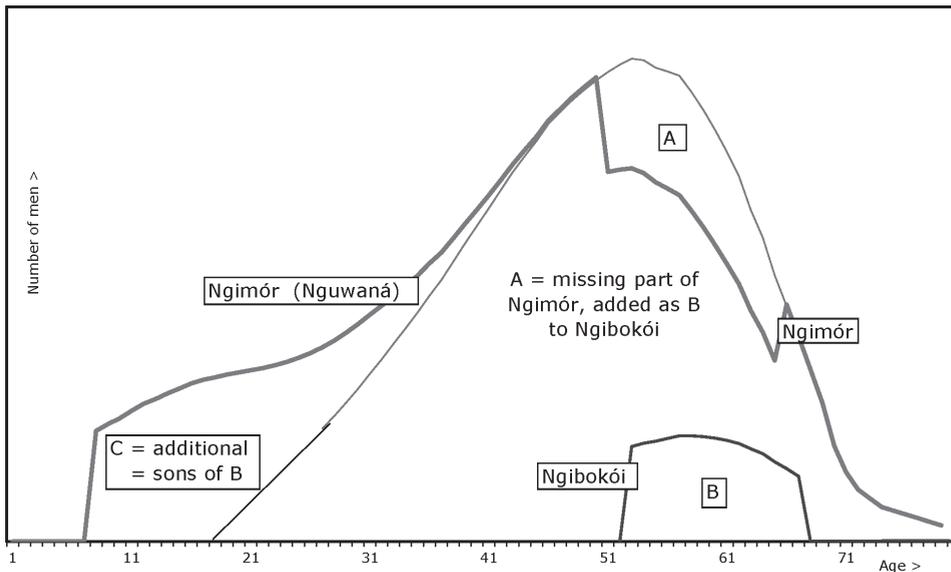


Fig. 8 Conflict constellation between *Ngibokói*, older *Ngimór*, and younger *Ngimór* at $t + 20$.

examine the relation between the older and the younger *Ngimór* (who later on would be named *Nguwaná*), we can extract the following facts from Figure 8:

- The older *Ngimór* (right) were relatively weak in numbers as they had lost A, who had become B.
- Somehow a line of division was already marked by the gap A within the generation-set of *Ngimór*, resulting from the illegitimate births who were held to be *Ngibokói* (B).
- The younger *Ngimór* (left) were relatively strong in numbers, as C, the sons of B, were part of them. Under normal circumstances, they would have been the next generation after *Ngimór*, and the fathers of the young *Ngimór* would all have been dead.

Above, I have already emphasised the fact that among the Toposa there was not only stress between fathers and sons but also between older and younger brothers, may this relation be physical and domestic or social and public in the generation-set system. Under normal circumstances, fathers control their sons, and older brothers control the younger ones. Now, the situation was different. The older *Ngimór* were relatively weak, and the young *Ngimór* were relatively strong, and according to the recorded information, the older ones found the younger ones immature and irresponsible. This is substantiated by the demographic facts, where C increases the numbers of the youngest *Ngimór*, which makes them stronger and more rebellious against their older brothers.

Here I have to insert an observation from the field. I was always puzzled by how “wild” young Toposa boys were. Apparently nobody tried to tame them or told them

to behave. But under the conditions of the Toposa life this seems to be logic; one cannot tell a boy or young man to behave and at the same time expect him to become a fierce warrior. It is always their older brothers who control the wild young men, and this is one of the above mentioned troubles within age-sets.

<i>Ngibokorá</i>
<i>Ngitukói</i>
<i>Ngipyéi</i>
<i>Ngibokói</i>
<i>Ngimór</i> – <i>Ngimór/Ngitomé/Nguwaná</i>
<i>Ngidongó</i> – <i>Ngikaléso</i>
<i>Ngimór</i> – <i>Ngingoletyáng</i>
<i>Ngitaamó</i> – <i>Ngikurukwá</i>
Toposa generation-sets

Apparently, the older *Ngimór* tried to control the young ones, but these felt they were strong enough to resist. In addition to their unusual numerical strength, they also had their fathers alive and present, who, under normal conditions, would all have been dead. This also increased the young men's self-confidence. No information is available as to which event triggered the outbreak of open hostilities, but we can imagine what happened when the quarrel went on. The young men did not care and even provoked their older

brothers, and when the *Ngibokói* tried to settle the fight, they may have been told by the older *Ngimór* that they should keep quiet as they were illegitimate bastards and only tried to protect their own offspring.

Ngibokói must have been deeply offended. Now the older *Ngimór* had trouble on both sides. They were at odds with *Ngibokói*, and in addition to that, the younger *Ngimór* broke away and called themselves *Ngitomé*, an alternation name they borrowed from the neighbouring Jie (cf. Lamphear 1976:41 ff.), and their *Ngibokói* fathers tolerated it or even supported the move. Thus, both the young *Ngimór* and the *Ngibokói* were agents of social system engineering.

Ngibokói were so much offended by the *Ngimór* that they decided they would never give *nyasapán* to them. Time passed, and the *Ngitomé* demanded to have *nyasapán* as they had not done anything wrong. But in the meanwhile, the *Ngidongó*, sons of *Ngimór*, were already old and also insisted to get *nyasapán*. In East Toposa they were denied it, being sons of the banned *Ngimór*, but in West Toposa they were given *nyasapán*. Only one generation, however, can have *nyasapán* at a time, and thus it was decided that *Ngitomé* would be downgraded and put together with *Ngidongó*. This shows how flexible the Toposa handle their system. It was only at this *nyasapán* that the *Ngitomé* acquired their name *Nguwaná*. Sometime in the first half of last century, around 1930 or before (King 1937:70), *Nguwaná* gave *nyasapán* to their sons *Ngikaléso*, who are the leading generation-set up to the present. They have not yet retired and given *nyasapán* to their sons although this is long overdue²⁸ – but this is a different issue.

²⁸ More than 20 years, according to my calculations.

Conclusion

One particular feature of generation-set systems of the Toposa type and the major difference to pure age-set systems is the fact that consecutive generation-sets overlap in the age of their members. In former times, the age overlap between generations has been reset to zero now and then when a group of young men split off from their fathers and started a new entity, like the Turkana and Toposa did. Since long, this reset has not occurred any more and is unlikely to happen in the future under present conditions of increased population density and state-controlled borders.

On the one hand, the overlap in age between adjacent generations is a dynamic force in a generation-set system without fixed time intervals, as the overaged men of the successor generation exert pressure to make the succession happen in time, before the older generation has died out. On the other hand, growing unrest between adjacent generation-sets is fuelled by the age overlap as it increases slowly but steadily and may even be enforced by factors from outside the system. One factor, a centennial drought, has been demonstrated here, but there may be others like schooling, labour migration, etc.

The findings laid out here may add to conflict theory (cf. Elwert 2001, Schlee 2000, 2002, 2006, Strecker 1999), as under certain circumstances conflict may not be the deviation from an otherwise stable state of affairs, but may be part of and a constituting factor for the layout of this social system. In this case, certain conflicts are channelled by the system, and if for some reasons these conflicts grow significantly beyond the usual level and become unbearable, people are forced to act and apply social system engineering, i. e. they change the rules and/or the layout of the system.

We have seen that the Toposa generation-set system may serve as a good example for a social set-up where

- internal stress shapes the layout of the system: splitting up of age-sets, and where
- people even change the system layout in response to stress: division of generation-sets.

The stress leading to the break-away of age-sets from their older brothers is caused by internal factors, i. e. harassment of the older towards the younger ones and their trying to control the wild young men, and, on the other hand, by challenging the authority of the older ones by the youngsters, and by the competition for resources among older and younger members of the same age-set.

What is true for age-sets is also true for generation-sets. The older members of a generation-set control the younger members by their greater authority and sometimes also by physical force. Under normal conditions this apparently works, but there may be instances when the overall circumstances are such that the power relations are thrown off balance. In the example described here, the stress leading to the break-up and division of a generation-set was triggered by an external event, a centennial drought. One can imagine other triggering forces, but it seems likely that they would

also come from outside of the society as the generation-set system's only problematic aspect, the age overlap between generation-sets, increases only very slowly, and critical points are not self-evident. Whatever the challenges were, generation-sets in East Africa have survived for hundreds of years, as apparently people have constantly altered their shape in response to ongoing challenges, and we can see the results in form of a variety of different layouts of generation-set systems in East Africa and elsewhere.

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