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# Making Sense of Past, Present and Future. Images of Modern and Past Pastoralism among Nyangatom Herders in South Omo, Ethiopia

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Received: 10 March 2018; Accepted: 13 April 2018; Published: 19 April 2018



**Abstract:** This article asks how Nyangatom pastoralists currently make sense of the past, present and future of their pastoralist livelihood. Nyangatom pastoralists, like all agro-pastoralist groups in southern Ethiopia, are faced with enormous structural changes in their immediate surroundings, primarily due to large-scale industrial agriculture and a government policy encouraging them to be sedentary. While the impacts have been discussed elsewhere, thus far little focus has been placed on what images of the past, present and future these changes create among the Nyangatom. This article pays attention to these changes by highlighting the results of a larger qualitative study. It becomes evident that discourses of modernity and culture are translated into the everyday lives of Nyangatom herders. While the past is constructed as a cultural/traditional time by the older generation, an image of modernity shapes the present life of younger generations. The administration plays a contradictory role in transmitting modernity ideals. The future of the Nyangatom is envisioned as a modern pastoralism, yet there is general pessimism with regards to pastoralism persisting.

**Keywords:** pastoralism; Ethiopia; South Omo; Nyangatom

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## 1. Introduction

Pastoralism in Ethiopia is practiced on more than 62% of the national land categorized as arid or semi-arid rangeland [1]. There are about 10 million pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in Ethiopia, which is about 15% of the Ethiopian population, with their numbers rising and their rangelands decreasing [2]. Most of them live in the lowlands of Ethiopia.

Globalization and its inherent commercialization and commoditization processes are affecting pastoralist livelihoods in Ethiopia in numerous ways. Even though pastoralists have always been involved in trading, exchanging and bartering, the pressure to diversify their livelihood has never been as strong as now [3]. This is likely to increase in the coming years in Ethiopia due to the government strategy to encourage pastoralists to “pursue sedentary life with diversified and sustainable income” [4] as well as pressures related to large-scale agricultural development. Yet there are no numbers on how many pastoralists receive some form of income from their livelihood and how many are still self-sufficient.

Scholars have argued that increasing commoditization and privatization processes are changing concepts and systems of production, consumption and distribution in pastoralist societies. Anthropologists highlight how the symbolic meanings of objects are also changing due to the changes in the pastoralist livelihood [5].

The Nyangatom woreda, home to the Nyangatom pastoralists in Ethiopia, is located in the Lower Omo Valley which is situated in south-western Ethiopia in the Southern Nations and Nationalities Peoples Region (SNNPR). The SNNPR borders South Sudan in the west, Kenya in the south, the Ilemi

triangle (a region claimed by Ethiopia, South Sudan and Kenya) in the south-west and the Ethiopian regions Gambela and Oromia in the north-west and north and east.

As the name proclaims, the SNNPR is the most ethnically and culturally diverse region of Ethiopia, and 56 ethnicities live within it. Of these, 17 groups are pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. Originating in the central Ethiopian plateau, the Omo River runs across the SNNPR before spilling into Kenya's Lake Turkana [6]. The Omo River is very important for the pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in the region, structuring wandering paths and flood retreat cultivation in accordance with its annual flooding. The pastoralists and agro-pastoralists living in the SNNPR include Hamar, Kara, Mursi, Nyangatom, Bodi, Tsemai and Dassanech, among others.

The Nyangatom live mainly in South Sudan and Ethiopia along the northern part of the Ilemi triangle. In Ethiopia, they inhabit the eastern side of the Omo River and the northern part of the seasonal Kibish River. Their population is estimated to be 30,000 in Ethiopia and a similarly high number in South Sudan [7]. The administrative center for the Nyangatom woreda is Kangaten, which is located on the eastern bank of the Omo River and has just been connected to the other side by a bridge and is urbanizing rapidly. Their mother tongue is the Nyangatom language.

Ethiopia wants to stop importing sugar. It also wants to increase its production seven-fold in order to eventually export half of the total amount of sugar. All of the "additional land" for sugar plantations is situated in South Omo and alongside the Gibbe III dam by which it shall also be irrigated [8]. The Ethiopian Omo–Kuraz Project [9] states: "The project will have a total area of 175,000 hectares of land for its sugarcane cultivation. This wide area will get its water supply from the Omo River through a diversion weir which is under construction with 381 m width and 22.4 m height." Sugar cane is a crop that requires a lot of water. The sugar plantations will, therefore, further exacerbate water scarcity issues. The currently constructed and future plantations are all located on sites that are crucial for local pastoralists, including the Nyangatom pastoralists. The Gibbe III dam is a highly disputed and politicized megaproject. It is the third in a series of hydro-dams constructed in recent years. Upon completion, it will be the tallest dam in Africa, with the biggest hydroelectric power plant attached to it. The tentative completion date of the dam was 2015, but heavy delays have characterized the project thus far. Gibe III was designed to produce electricity and export half of the power to neighboring countries. Construction began in 2006, and as the NGO International River writes, included "flagrant violations of Ethiopia's own laws on environmental protection and procurement practices, and the national constitution" [6]. The Gibe III dam is also a cross-border issue, as Kenya's World Heritage Site Lake Turkana is affected. According to estimates, the water level of the world's largest desert lake will drop by two meters in the first year already, its salinity levels will increase and negatively impact the fish stocks of the lake [6]. Therefore, a political dispute between Ethiopia and Kenya has arisen, with Kenya asking for compensation for the impact of Gibe III. This dispute also affects Ethiopia's pastoralists such as the Nyangatom. As Ethiopia prefers not to challenge Kenya on the cross-border pastoralist conflicts between the Nyangatom and the Turkana, the Nyangatom are left without governmental recognition of cases of cattle raiding and killings which happen on a regular basis. Faced with the very rapid transformations of their livelihood highlighted above, Nyangatom pastoralism in Ethiopia is under real threat.

What has not been looked at thus far is how—confronted with these facts—the Nyangatom pastoralists create different images that characterize the way they make sense of their past and their future. After presenting the methods that lay the foundation of this article, I discuss how the past is constructed as the "cultural times". This will be followed by ideas about the future, "modernity" and how that links to Nyangatom culture. Afterwards, I discuss the Nyangatom's hope for a compromise between modern and cultural identities. I also discuss the role played by the employees of the local administration, which still consider themselves pastoralist. This includes the analysis of symbolic meanings of objects and practices that are changing due to the changes in the pastoralist livelihood.

## 2. Methods

This article is based on empirical qualitative research done throughout my time as a PhD fellow. Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and self-reflexive process which was supported by atlas.ti to analyze interviews and develop codes and categories. In my empirical research I combined open-ended interview techniques with participatory observation techniques. I did formal and informal interviews, used exploratory research techniques including informal focus-group discussions, and analysed research diaries made in the course of my field work. I kept adjusting my ideas in the course of the process, re-interpreting my work as I went along. The basis for this article are eight formal interviews with elderly male and female Nyangatom and four interviews with members of the Nyangatom administration, all male, as well as numerous background and informal participatory observations and informal interviews. I concentrate on the inclusion of field material (interview segments) that was collected and analysed between 2011 and 2015 in the Nyangatom woreda.<sup>1</sup> All names are anonymized in order to protect the privacy of my interviewees.

In the analysis, I focused on the categories that evolved naturally from my empirical material. Here, I used classical data analysis approaches such as that of Mayring [10] and Quinn Patton [11], where categories are built through the inductive analysis of the data. Mayring's data analysis classically comprises 8 steps which, however, I did not follow strictly but instead combined with grounded theory analysis techniques [12] where I gradually viewed my data and related the content to these categories, which often led to a re-adaptation of the categories or the creation of new categories altogether [13,14].

With regards to language, I was not able to translate the interviews myself. Even though I did learn some local vocabulary in order to engage in polite small talk, no interview was possible without a translator. My translator was a local educated Nyangatom working for an international organization who had already accompanied some researchers in their field work and was thus experienced with different research techniques as well as translation-related issues. We reflected on each interview afterwards, which served to clarify the content of the interviews as well as ensuring a cooperative working atmosphere. Even though, or maybe because, his English was not the strongest, I always felt like he did his best to translate as close to Nyangatom as possible as well as explaining or paraphrasing symbols that I would not understand after the interview. In the transcription, I left the English the way it was, as that seemed most authentic to me and, upon editing request, adapted small parts for general understanding. I then used footnotes for clarification.

With regards to his influence on the work, I had the impression that he was respected by the pastoralists and also did not have any relevant political associations, as he was working for an international organization at that time. Yet with his modern clothing and education he represented a pastoralist who has "left the culture". Needless to say, matters might have been said differently to me if I had conducted the interviews by myself.

Underlying the idea that power and knowledge are inseparable, science has, on many occasions, not been neutral but has served to legitimize power structures within society [15,16]. Gender studies has spent a significant amount of time developing methodologies that place the analysis of power structures, e.g., between "the researched" and "researcher" within research as opposed to rendering it invisible [16]. Accordingly, the way the researcher moves within the research field is also political. Even the manner in which research is conducted influences and often legitimizes already existing dimensions of power.

As Do Mar Castro Varela [17] argues, the researcher tends to gain prestige by conducting research, while the "objects of study" generally suffer a loss in terms of energy and time invested. Being shaped by these strands of research, I was acutely aware of aspects of power and prestige within my research procedures due to European and white privilege. Needless to say, I sometimes felt uncomfortable in

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the interview excerpts can also be found in my dissertation Blau, J. (2018: forthcoming).

the interview situation with pastoralists confronted with my own positionality and the issues with it. Amina Mama writes about intensified objectification here:

“The danger of such work is that of our intensified objectification, to use Fanon’s term. By this he meant the process by which our reality is constructed by others (oppressors in the colonial and neocolonial contexts), to serve their psychological and political needs, and then projected on to us and internalized. In a context where our own interpretations and accounts are as yet largely unpublished, others become the experts on us, and this monopoly on knowledge about us must be seen as imperialistic. While some of this knowledge may be well researched, much of it is partial and particular, and does not serve our interests as a group, or our psychological and intellectual development. All that imperial feminism has meant here, is that it is European (and North American) women’s preoccupations rather than those of men which have come into vogue [18].

Below I outline a few dealings I found with these issues. I was also influenced by the research of Nadig [19], who writes about how transferences by the community of research can always be informative about certain conflicts within the community of research and vice versa. In that sense, I attempted to use all the projections that were made towards me for my research and vice versa to assess my own projections.

In line with Tuana’s [20] concept of “location for the text”, which argues that one always needs to critically assess whom a text addresses and whom it speaks about, I emphasize the incorporation of many segments of my interviews in the hope of transmitting how the larger sense of pastoralists losing their livelihood to modernity translates into the everyday. While there remains a strong and fundamental asymmetry between me as a white researcher using my findings for an international academic audience, I intentionally include as many ‘voices’ as possible as well as making my discursive interactions transparent. Keeping in line with Schutte’s cautioning that perfect translations are not possible between culturally differentiated subjects, I have refrained from structural language corrections within the translations of interviews that were made by the translator that I worked with and insist that element of incommensurability always remains [21]. This includes sticking to terms such as “cultural” and “modern” not because of academic discourses but because they emerged out of the data. It implies making texts as understandable yet keeping them as authentic as possible.

### 3. The Past Was the Cultural Time

For the Nyangatom pastoralists, modern life is seen as something coming “from the outside”.<sup>2</sup> Outside here refers to a blurry mix of Ethiopian highland urban culture and “Western” practices. By contrast, the Nyangatom speak about their customary habits as cultural habits. The word for cultural in Nyangatom language is “Etal”, which my translator insisted to be the same as culture even though in some instances traditional seems fitting as well. Upon asking him what the difference is between cultural and traditional, he said:

**Translator:** “Traditional doesn’t fit to the meaning of the Nyangatom. And I don’t really know the real definition of traditional, I only know it when it goes with the sentences, for example: ‘do it in a traditional way’ so is this the same as ‘do it in a cultural way?’ Or they are different? That is why I don’t see the real meaning and the difference.”

In trying to stay as close as possible to the local language and its translation, I am therefore using the word cultural. Just like the idea of modernity, my emphasis is on the way the Nyangatom use and interpret this word. While members of the older age sets<sup>3</sup> describe themselves and their practices

<sup>2</sup> “Brackets” refer to codes that were developed during data analysis, many of them in vivo codes.

<sup>3</sup> The Nyangatom organize themselves according to age sets which structures roles, responsibilities and rights within the community.

as cultural, they portray the younger generations as tempted by modernity. This coincides with any description of life in the past being highlighted as the “cultural time” and the future foreseen as a “modern life”. Customary habits remain, in that sense, with the elderly generations. The past is also constructed as the time of the “real Nyangatom life” and the future as a distortion of that through modernity. This is often illustrated through a depiction of the everyday.

**Lokamusio** (male, elder, pastoralist): In the past we did things differently. Normally the Nyangatom, they have a special way of sleeping. You sleep and then the stick<sup>4</sup> will make you sleep a deep sleep but also wake up in the night and see what is going on. But nowadays the children do not want to take this one anymore. They are sleeping deep sleep like the women do ( . . . ).

The past is seen as a time in which even sleep was “better, more pastoralist”. Waking up in the night or sleeping lightly is a responsibility of the male herders in order to watch out for theft and threats by wild animals. Modernity is described as changing this everyday practice with men not taking this responsibility as seriously anymore. Older generations become the practitioners of pastoral obligations and therefore need to make a point of preferring it and thereby safeguarding it. This can be seen in how Nakaale finished her interview with me.

**Jill:** *Thank you so much. I am finished with my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?*

**Nakaale:** (female, elder, pastoralist): No ... there is not . . . (silence) Hmmm . . . (silence)

You know there is something that I would like to add. Most of the time what I like is the cultural things. I don't want to cook my porridge with the modern pot, I want with the cultural one. Even if you don't put salt or something, it tastes good with the cultural pot. And there is the transportation, if we want to go far, far away we want to put our luggage on the donkey. And then these things are good. You know instead of sleeping on the ground, I saw that yesterday he (Note of author: referring to a young male herder) was sleeping on a mat. That is not good for me, it is burning me. It is good to sleep with the skin. And then you look good, like a pastoralist, and then you put your leather here and butter there and it is a good look, the cultural look.

Nakaale also stresses how sleeping in her way is still good for her. She highlights how one looks beautiful as a real pastoralist and how being connected to the ground actually makes one look like a proper Nyangatom. This is a very literal depiction of something coming “in between” the former and the current livelihood of pastoralism. Toro also speaks of another everyday practice, eating. Milk, the essence of cattle herding, features heavily in the diet and is sometimes referred to as the “pastoralist gold”.

**Toro** (female, elder, pastoralist): They (author's note: pastoralists in the past) had a good-looking style, a good posture because of the milk. A real pastoralist has to eat porridge with milk, has to eat porridge with butter, has to eat several types of meat, like there is the fresh meat, there is the dried meat, there is the meat mixed with butter, in the pastoral way of life. But now if you could travel somewhere . . . then there is porridge, but there is no salt, there is no butter, just simply . . . they will eat simply like that. This is why I generally say the past pastoralist was better. Now it is mixed up, with the changes. Now the things are changed with Nyangatom.

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<sup>4</sup> Some Nyangatom sleep with a stick in their hands and/ or with their head on a wooden stool.

The disorder within livelihood and cultural practices is perceived and described through the changing of recipes. Older pastoralists speak negatively about modern foods and also consider the weight gain of the younger generation as a consequence of new eating styles. Just like the sleeping habits, transformations in eating as an intrinsic everyday practice characterizes the depth of the structural changes and the way they are being evaluated. Some interviewees like Toro also make a particular point of highlighting that they “used to look different” and in fact were more beautiful.

**Jill:** *How would you describe the situation of women specifically?*

**Toro:** You know, I compare again with the past. When we were married, luckily I was married in the good times, when a married woman had four leather skirts reserved, she had decorations to put over her head, and she had feathers, rings everywhere, and butter here, good and shiny beads.<sup>5</sup> Then she was healthy, she could jump. Whenever she moved, you could say: “There is a real Nyangatom woman”. You know there was something, if you make a hole here (author’s note: by the teeth) and then you put decoration on. And then she would have the small chains on the ears (author’s note: earrings).

Then even their husbands would have metals up to here (author’s note: bracelet), they would be very nice, because this showed that he was a rich man. And then whenever he would come home, he would do this (shows a movement of bracelets rattling), so that he comes home. The woman, they could work with a lot of things, milking the cow, a lot of joy with the women. And while she would do that, the husband would make a sound.

Everyone, even the children, were happy.

But right now, the men are moving without having this one (author’s note: bracelet), the women stopped wearing skirts—look at me now, I am not wearing one and nothing could make me decorate myself with the skirt, with the cattle. Now everyone is moving about without having these cultural attributions.

And now even the husbands of the Nyangatom, they don’t wear feathers, they don’t wear skirts, nothing.

You know, this is because they were right, they had cattle, their cattle were productive, they could produce butter and milk, and so they were sitting as a rich person, the past ones, but now ... Maybe you will interview some of them, they are working hard just to survive. They don’t have any decorations, they don’t even look like pastoralists. So these clothing styles are mixed. I can say that the past and now is not uniform.

This quote of Toro’s illustrates many in-depth matters which can be examined. The “cultural look” is what made the Nyangatom “real and beautiful”, and this realness is in turn related to gender. As also stressed in the first interview segment, “real” men and women are those older ones, those that still know how to be pastoralist. This is in line with a societal organization in which the oldest have the most authority and responsibility. But it also means that young people’s gender roles are weakening or degenerating in the eyes of the older generations. The richness of wearing cultural attire is, furthermore, connected to an understanding of wealth: whereas the older generations see being a real pastoralist—to look, sleep and eat like a pastoralist—as a wealthy man/woman, the younger generations seek wealth elsewhere and start to view pastoralists as poor and deprived in a way that was not evident before. In that sense, it is a confrontation of value systems in which the modern choices of the younger people are not seen as relevant for their parent generation. The mix of clothing, like the mix of recipes, symbolizes a mix-up of livelihood strategies. Yet it is clear for everyone that the “modern life” will be the dominating paradigm for the future.

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<sup>5</sup> Butter is also put on the bodies for skincare and beauty.

#### 4. Modernity is 'Coming Inside' Pastoralism

**Jill:** *How do you see the future of your children?*

**Lokamusio:** Nowadays the children have their own thoughts. Sometimes I compare the life and say: Maybe this life is pushing the people towards modern life. People like Etuk (note of author: points to my translator) go to the village and then everybody wants to be like him. So in this case, I do not know. (silence)

So I can say, like my wife told you, some of my children are in school. Sometimes in the break they come back home, and then the ones that are left at home will start mumbling: "I should go to school". So I must say: "If they quit pastoralism, they quit". Then me as an old person I have to take care of the cattle. And then maybe the cattle will be disappearing. Because I will be dead and they will be in school and there will be no one to take care of the cattle.

As Lokamusio describes, modernity is perceived to be like a magnet, symbolized by certain people who encourage others to go to school and quit their previous lifestyle. It is understood through items such as mobile phones and clothing like jeans and shirts. It attracts the younger generation away from the cattle. Having no one to take care of the cattle any longer means the end of pastoralism.

**Nakawo** (male, elder, pastoralist): But here in Nyangatom we are backward. Now everyone wants to be in the new things, fast fast. Nobody gave us a background in these things. Now the fashion came and everyone wants to be modern.

The Nyangatom, older and younger, who are still practising pastoralism, tend to label themselves as backward. By doing so and constructing the past as the time of the real pastoralist, they are situating themselves in the past; thereby foreseeing the end of their livelihood and devaluing it. "Fast, fast" here indicates the quick changes of a livelihood strategy from one generation to the next. Fashion is hereby very symbolic, as it is a literal depiction of the physical attributions of Nyangatom becoming invisible. With Western clothing, it is harder for locals to understand which pastoralist group/ethnicity people in South Omo identify with.

The key driver of modernity, however, is not perceived in fashion or food but in school.

**Ngaye** (male, middle-age, pastoralist): But I fear that our children will be educated, some of them will be even missionaries, some of them will be this or that. So I do not know about our cattle. I am afraid that this pastoralist life, it will not continue. But maybe we will see with time. If their time is good, let it be. But what I see myself is that school is put into the mind of the people.

Education plays a special role in the immersion of the Nyangatom pastoralists into sedentary livelihoods. Training for older age sets is provided by the government as well as elementary and high school for the youth where more than half the Nyangatom population now attends. Once a child is sent to school, they "will become modern", meaning that they will adopt the habits discussed here. For a while it was predominately boys that were sent to school, but female attendance is increasing.

**Jill:** *So how do you see the future of the Nyangatom?*

**Toro:** You know, the school, let me start with the school ... the school is built beside the village ... in every village you can find a school. And then the government officials, they would come and say: "Take your child to school". Most of them are in school now. There is a lot of training being given to the pastoralists. Like for example, us now, we are going to have a "harmful traditional practices training". And you know, it's not only me, it is all of the pastoralists. The training will continue like this. And the school is there. And our trained officials, they are dressed well and they want to educate themselves. So in the future, I do not think pastoralism will exist.

The government is rapidly building schools and enforcing training programs in the Nyangatom woreda with lasting impacts. The children's school education prevents them from acquiring cattle-herding skills in as much depth as their parents' generation did. As Toro highlights above, it is also about introducing new value sets and practices among people, such as eradicating some of their habits labelled as harmful/traditional. Linking the words harmful and traditional also seems to coincide with the idea that traditional practices are backward, as mentioned earlier. They create a devaluation in which the traditional gets associated with harmfulness and thus is in need of transformation

**Lokeyn** (male, middle-age, pastoralist): During our fathers, our fathers are very great in looking after the cattle. During the time, they transfer this to us. They have been keeping things like that. But nowadays the school thing came and everyone is going to the school. Even my children. They refuse suddenly . . . and go to school. Whenever you want to take him back, the government says: "No, let him stay". So I think either the animals, sheep and goats will be finished by selling or finish with this environment, because no one will take care of them. So this is Etuk's (author's note: my translator) generation. If they are happy to look after the cattle, they are happy. If they are happy to go to the school, this is their problem. But in our case, we have been taking care of our cattle since our fathers. Etuk's generation, they want to go to school, they want to be educated. So I do not think the cattle will be surviving. They will not survive. Even the animals will not survive.

As one can see in this quote, the relationship between schooling and the end of pastoralism is clearly stressed. Yet the Nyangatom also have visions for compromises in which their livelihood can continue somewhat, despite the challenges to it.

### 5. Hoping for a Compromise, a Mix between Modern and Pastoral

Many of the Nyangatom I interviewed nevertheless dream of a future in which they can take the best of both past and future livelihoods. This is described as a life in which modernity and the "cultural" combine to benefit the pastoralists. A lot of parents have compromised by sending half their children to school and keeping the other half "in the village".

**Nakawo:** In fact I was in Yabello <sup>6</sup>. There were a lot of pastoralists from the world that shared a lot of information. So I heard in the world there is someone who builds this kind of house (note of author: makes a drawing in the air that is meant to illustrate a more urban house), but he has cattle, sheep and goats and camel. And then the person who was like this was a herder, and educated. He goes to school and then looks after the animals. So they are sharing the culture, the traditional and the modern one.

**Lokeyn:** The reason I put one in school and one in herding is because I thought that the school-goer will help me with two things, with the modern things. For example, if my parents are sick, then they will help taking them to the hospital. Whenever my cattle are sick, he will buy me the drugs for the animals. So I will use him as a help in town. If we are hungry, he can buy food, he can assist me with the money. Then the pastoralist son can help me with the cattle and with the cultural things. So both of them are useful for me. This is why I split them up, my sons.

**Lkiritto** (male, middle-age, pastoralist): I have two options. One: putting them in school; Two: sending them far away to mind the animals. I will be in the middle. For me, no matter for me, I will give them a role, benefitting from this one and then from this one.

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<sup>6</sup> Here, Nakawo is referring to an international pastoralist meeting that took place in Yabello, Ethiopia in 2006.

What becomes evident is that the idea of sending one child to school is nevertheless often evaluated from the standpoint of the pastoralist: An educated child could have money for medicines for the cattle. One could try to benefit from both, in order to maintain pastoralism. Pointing to this imagined future is not to undermine the hardship that the effort of even creating a vision creates for the Nyangatom pastoralists in the face of their current challenges. The interventions of modernity, be it through changes in food, sleep patterns, fashion, formal education or government policies in general, are experienced as an intrusion—as something that destroys the Nyangatom livelihood from “inside”.

**Lolamai** (male, pastoralist, herder, middle-age): “You know, it is hard for me. Because cattle is everything for me. And if I lose cattle, I do not know. Maybe I will advise my children not to lose the cattle. To have more than one life. To have modern life and pastoralist life together. Not to lose all the pastoralist life. Just to have it together. This is what I advise my children [ . . . ] You see, you are interviewing me. I am a herder. It is good. If you come again and interview my child, you will not get the information I am giving you. Never. Because the government is coming inside the pastoralists. Inside. This fashion, this modernization thing, is coming inside the pastoralists. Everyone wants to have mobile, wants to eat *injera* and foods like this, wants to wear clothes, everything is coming inside. So I am afraid that your child will not get enough information about herding from my child. I am afraid that my child will be, you know ... he will be in school, he will be somewhere. And then pastoralism is over, I can say like that. Maybe there will be someone. Maybe one of my children will listen to me and they remain as a pastoralist in a far place, far place. But most of them, I think, they will not continue this life.

In that sense, the hope of finding a way to adopt the modern life while at the same time sustaining what is important to the Nyangatom pastoralists must be understood as a compromise; as a hope in the face of challenges that are not perceived as resistible—and as a response to: “I am afraid that pastoralist life, it will not continue”. Some Nyangatom have also moved to South Sudan because they believe it is easier to continue a pastoralist life there than in Ethiopia.

## 6. Even the Administrators are Pastoralists

With the increasing number of educated Nyangatom men who work in the administration and are thereby seen as representing modernity, it was interesting to see whether they still considered themselves pastoralists.

**Jill:** *Do you have cattle also?*

**Administrator 1** (male, middle-age, formally-educated): Yes, I have. In my father’s place. I have cattle, sheep, donkey.

**Jill:** *Who is taking care of them?*

**Administrator 1:** My father. You know, because my father has five women, he married five women, my brothers are there. They take care for that. They come to me if they want medicine, anything for the car, I buy for them.

**Jill:** *Now I understand a little bit better. One thing that would be interesting for me, would you call yourself a pastoralist?*

**Administrator 2** (male, formally-educated, middle-age): Really. Definitely I am a pastoralist.

**Jill:** *So what makes you a pastoralist?*

**Administrator 2:** You know, I know even, not only here. From here to another side, we are known by pastoralists. I have animals like cattle, goats, sheep. So, in this case I am really a pastoralist.

Even formally educated Nyangatom possess cattle and small ruminants which some family members in rural areas are taking care of. They also consider themselves pastoralist. Yet, at the same time, those working in the administration (must) replicate the idea of “changing” the pastoralists.

**Jill:** *And how do you see the future of Nyangatom land use?*

**Administrator 4** (male, Nyangatom, formally educated): According to my personal aim, I wish, if I wish that all the Nyangatom area would turn to farming. Because as I told you in the first question, our aim is to change our community to live in a good situation. So, farming can change their lives. It can decide if they eat once, twice or three times a day. This is my personal belief. According to the government strategy plan, this is also their one point, their one aim for change. Also to use the Nyangatom land for investment, not by casting them from their area, not by ignoring their cattle: side by side. The government can use half of the land for investment and for factories and half of the land for pastoralists’ animals.

The idea of change is justified and explained by an improvement of the situation for the Nyangatom. However, from what has been described earlier, many of those still practicing herding see the change as defined by the governments’ strategy as a sign of more and not less poverty. The villagization strategy of the Ethiopian government is directly aimed at transforming the livelihood of pastoralists towards becoming settled, by “wanting to change them”. The strategy was still in its early stages during the time of my research. It was beginning to take form in the Nyangatom woreda through four established “villagisation” villages, with the relevant infrastructure officially consisting of traditional houses, access to water, schools and medical facilities. With these villages, each Nyangatom household is allocated their own piece of land of up to five hectares and additional land for cattle. The Nyangatom sometimes stressed how they were still waiting to see any changes themselves, as Toro and Lobuti illustrate:

**Toro:** So, we didn’t experience the sugar and some of the infrastructure. But we are waiting to see how they change. But the government officials, they say that it will change you. So we are waiting for it, whether it will change or not.

**Lobuti** (female, middle-age, pastoralist): You know, for me they have been telling me that whenever there is the sugar factory here, there will be given grazing land and irrigation. So if it is like this, we accept. Because if the sugar factory is not touching grazing land, and if there is additional land given to us for cultivation and irrigation, I accept that idea.

Whereas both the official policy of the Ethiopian government and the interviewed public servants reason that these changes will bring an overall improvement for the local population, the “Lands of the future network”—a network involved in critical pastoralist land-use research especially in the Horn of Africa—evaluates the Ethiopian government’s strategy as a voluntary, but actually forceful, policy and relates it directly to the sugar plantations as follows: “A good example of how not to go about the displacement and resettlement of pastoralists is provided by the river-basin development in Ethiopia’s Omo Valley. The Omo has long been seen as a river with an excellent hydropower and irrigation potential. It has been estimated, for example, that, once the river’s highly seasonal flow has been regulated by hydropower dams in its upper and middle basins, over 50,000 ha will become available in its lower basin for reliable large-scale irrigation development [ . . . ]. In fact, the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation has now begun developing an area more than three times this size, in anticipation of the completion by 2015 of the Gibe III hydropower dam. Known as the “Kuraz Sugar Development Project”, this will eventually equal the entire area currently irrigated in Kenya. Thousands of agro-pastoralists are already being evicted, by government fiat, from their most valuable agricultural land along the banks of the Omo [22]. As stressed in this depiction, the participation level in any of the changes involving the lives of the Nyangatom is minimal and coerced. The administration employees would rather insist on all the advantages being brought about. For example, they emphasized that the

infrastructure was one of the main advantages of the pastoralists living in the villages established through villagization.

**Administrator 1:** Actually in our woreda, we have the strategy to have the Nyangatom people come to one place. This is what we call villagization or re-establishment. Because of that, there is a kind of movement in our people. So they move from place to place. In this case, we want to have these people in one permanent place. But for the cattle and the goats, they can move like this, no problem. Because they have the young boys like this. So for the old women, they must stay in one place. Because when they stay in one place, the government will build the school there, a health centre there. Then they will give them the land for farming, yeah. The government will build all the infrastructure, even water, there. So this is our fast plan or strategy for them.

While my emphasis here is not on the assessment of the various “change agendas” taking place, I wish to highlight how the administration often spoke in contradictions. They would stress how Nyangatom cannot continue to live as they do, and yet make sure to reclaim their own pastoralist identity. They would speak about “these people” and yet insist that they were one of them. They would speak about themselves as part of the government and then insist on a distinction between their personal and the government’s strategy—as the job comes with a lot of conflicting demands on the individuals who, themselves, grew up herding. The administrators would promise prosperity through sedentarization, yet the pastoralists hold a different understanding of prosperity.

The underlying proposition of the public servants would often be that, whatever the government wanted, the local Nyangatom would eventually understand because it was “reasonable”. “Eventually they would like” whatever changes would be brought about, one just needed to “discuss”.

**Jill:** *How did they react when you spoke about the village?*

**Administrator 3** (male, Nyangatom, formally educated): Yes, they accepted very much, because, as I told you, we have a lot of infrastructure. You know, they cannot walk 100 km, 200 km, so, for them, we want them stay in one place. We let the cattle outside, we want the young people to move, no problem for them because of grass and water.

What seems important to highlight in this context is that the villagization villages were seen by the local population as something provisional. This becomes evident through phrasing which depicted other places as their home while officially living in a villagization village. Home was specifically the place where their cattle was located, as illustrated by this interview:

**Amareng** (young, female, pastoralist): You know, from X I moved first to Kangaten<sup>7</sup> first because I needed food. So I and my husband we settled here in some place. And then from here we shifted to Y (Note of author: villagization village).

**Jill:** *Why did you move there?*

**Amareng:** You know the people say that if you build a house, you will get food. And remember I came from X looking for food. So I say okay, there is something here. So let me move to these people and then make my house so I can get food.

**Jill:** *So if you compared your life in X and in Y, what is good about life in X, and what is good about the life in Y?*

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<sup>7</sup> Capital of Nyangatom woreda.

**Amareng:** It's different here in Y. Back in X, we watered the animals, and some of the neighbors are different. Also the activities that I used to do there in X in the home, it is not normal to do those here.

**Jill:** *So maybe you can tell me about a normal day in Y from morning until evening?*

**Amareng:** You know, in the morning I wake up early and grind. Look at my hands, the hard skin. (laughter). You know you grind early in the morning, you fetch water, you make food for your husband. Then you collect some firewood. You make the house clean, you go from here to there, this is our normal work.

**Jill:** *But this is also what you did in X, right?*

**Amareng:** Yes, it is the same.

**Jill:** *So what is different now?*

**Amareng:** The one thing missing is the watering of animals, making fences for the animals, milking them. The activities with the animals are the ones missing.

**Jill:** *So do you like living in the new village?*

**Amareng:** I am not happy about living here. I will go back to my village.

**Jill:** *Why?*

**Amareng:** Or I will make two houses. One with my animals, so I can see how they are doing, and one here to this village.

**Jill:** *So what makes you not happy about the village?*

**Amareng:** Just animals. It is still living. No problem with that.

What Amareng describes is a situation in which a home is seemingly created in one place in order to receive food aid. But the place is not really accepted as a home or seen as a long-term residence, especially because it is not the place where animals can do well. This inner image can also be interpreted as an act of resistance, as it shows that government agendas are complied with for their own purposes/needs but not internalized or interpreted as the government would like it.

## 7. Discussion

As I have shown, the Nyangatom are in a process of deep structural change with regards to their life. This impacts the way they present and define themselves just as much as these identifications are fluid and contradictory. Lange, when looking at the philosopher Dussel, writes that: "modernity justifies an irrational praxis of violence, despite its ideal of a discursive community in which coercion is unacceptable". First and foremost, Europe understands itself as more developed, its civilization superior to others [23]. While the idea of Europe as the "modernity haven" is not applicable in a context in which the sedentary Ethiopian society and a more abstract idea of "Western" represents modern, what is applicable is the colonially charged discourse between modernity and how it is used discursively as a justification by the state to implement new ways of living as more "reasonable". What has also been shown is how this co-exists with notions of superiority of the modern, sedentary ideal. This notion in itself is contradictory, as coercion to the more "reasonable" will lead to subordination and, eventually, a sedentary poor, as is the case for many urbanized pastoralists [24]. Settling comes along with an arguably increased state of dependency on the state and the cash economy.

Barker speaks about the enlightenment ideal as an ideal of innocent knowledge: "an ideal that masks the instrumental role that development has played in maintaining global structures of

neocolonialism and dependency. Instead of progress and prosperity, much of the world has experienced profound poverty, growing income inequality, high debt burdens, and environmental degradation" [25]. In the Ethiopian case it can, however, also be seen that the extent to which the ideals about a somewhat enlightening modernity are internalized vary greatly and next to individual opinions, age plays a key role. Whereas some of the younger generation has internalized modern notions of prosperity and wealth, elder pastoralists reject them and actually view current and forthcoming lifestyles as poor, less beautiful, less cultural and even as reducing the possibility to be a "real man or real woman". Furthermore, pastoralists sometimes go along with administrative policies because they have no choice, yet reject their meaning—such as the meaning of home.

While one should not fall into the hasty dualism of the "good, premodern, traditional world (. . . ) and the bad, modern, industrialized world and the thoughtless" [26], this article has shown how both notions get internalized in contradictory ways within the everyday of a livelihood in transition. The everyday experience here is the site in which larger ideals intersect and compete.

## 8. Conclusions

The Nyangatom pastoralists of South Omo are faced with drastic structural changes in their lives and livelihoods. In this article, I have focused not on the transformational process of large-scale-agriculture or the government's sedentary strategy itself, but rather on the images that float especially among elder herders about the past, present and future of the Nyangatom. By showing these through segments of my interviews, I show how radical structural changes are translated into the everyday of eating, fashion and sleeping habits. The Nyangatom pastoralists already now position themselves in the past by highlighting that "real pastoralism" does not exist anymore. Modern life, especially through education, has come "inside pastoralism". The governmental strategy works discursively and actively by introducing discourses that devalue pastoralism, which are internalized, especially by the younger generation, but also show up in contradictory ways. Yet hopes and ideas of compromises between modern and pastoral persist and the Nyangatom already employ strategies to benefit best from both livelihoods.

**Acknowledgments:** For the conduct of this research, I have been funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation as well as the Freie Universität Berlin. Further acknowledgement goes to the Adventist University Friedensau for supporting my current research activities and Denise Erdmann for sensible editing.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results.

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