The concept ethnicity has been variously defined by different authors (e.g., Schlee 1994; Eriksen 1988:127-145). In their definitions each author emphasises different aspects. For instance some (e.g., Wallenstein 1984:53, especially Dittrich and Radtke 1990:37) stress the economy as an identifying characteristic while others (e.g., Dench 1986:28; Cohen 1985; 1986; Boon 1982) regard social factors as equally important. A number of cultural attributes, e.g., language, tradition, as well as territory have been variously suggested as composing it. But Horowitz (1985:50) maintains that it is not the attribute that makes the group but the group and group differences that make the attribute important. However, a group becomes meaningful only when the interaction of its members occur within a culture (Eriksen 1988:127-142). So it cannot be treated as a separate entity from the cultural system that binds it together. What is relevant, therefore, is the cause of ethnic identification and what is responsible for it. Other dimensions of ethnicity manifestation have been mentioned. Among these characteristics are the shifts in identification (see Horowitz 1985:57, 65; Schlee 1989:7, 166; 1985:28), external features (Leach 1954; Horowitz 1985:43), and also subjective and objective identifications (Horowitz 1985:40; Dench 1986:159). Schlee in his recent study (Schlee 1994:132f) has considered the visible and non-visible criteria of ethnic identity. He discusses the impact of "visibility" on the likelihood with which a cultural feature becomes an emblem of ethnicity.

According to him both "objective" or "reality" features and "consciousness" must be taken into account when investigating ethnic identity. While I agree that a single criterion for identity is still elusive, the use of common beliefs on similarities between groups as an indication of group identity is still as debatable as attempts to see similarities in material culture between two groups as a factor indicating common ethnic identity.

The abundance of literature on theories of ethnicity attests to the significance and relevance of ethnic studies in the development of world’s peoples. The disintegration

* Summary cf. sup. Schlee, pp. 191-200
of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia; and the unification of Germany are some of the recent ethnic based developments, which have a powerful impact on the political and economic development of Europe. The role of ethnicity in politics is equally relevant to developing countries where the course of progress has been interfered with through the intervention of ethnic factors. Accordingly ethnicity is an important variable in political aspects of development in third world countries. This is particularly demonstrated by the situation in Trinidad and Mauritius (Simmons 1983) where institutional politics is largely organised along ethnic lines, particularly in the voting, internal organisation of parties and general political organisation. Eriksen (1988) has argued that it is impossible for a politically oriented individual to disregard the ethnic dimension in politics in Mauritius and Trinidad even if one prefers to do so. Attempts to transcend the ethnic dimension through the formation of broad nationalist coalitions have been in vain. In Mauritius and Trinidad such coalitions eventually broke up and both the politicians and the electorate immediately fell back on an ethnic perception in politics and its subsequent organisation was related to such perception (Eriksen 1988:139).

Accordingly, ethnicity is one of the most important criteria for collective social distinctions in daily life and its distinctions are rooted in perceptions of differences between lifestyles and other cultural manifestations. According to Eriksen (1988:139-140) ethnicity remains a dominant principle for cultural differentiation through which agents routinely ascribe their own experiences of cultural incompatibility.

It is therefore evident that ethnicity is significant and relevant to socio-economic and political processes in the recent history as well as the current developments in Africa. Recent history of Africa knows many devastating conflicts whose causal agents are analytically attributable to the problems of ethnicity. The Igbo-Nigerian war, the Ogaden war, the shiSha menace in the North East Province of Kenya and many others are some of the cases in point.

The contemporary Kenyan political development is a good example of the extent to which ethnicity affects political processes in a country. Like the cited Mauritius and Trinidad, ethnicity is a “master variable” in Kenyan politics. Here institutional politics is organised mainly along ethnic lines. This refers both to the internal organisation of parties whose executive committee members are mainly drawn from the ethnic groups from where the founder and chairman belongs, e.g., the FORD Kenya based on the Luo, the Democratic Party based on the Kikuyu and Kenya African National Union based on the Kalenjin and other minority ethnic groups, and the voting pattern which is also ethnically based.

This is clear from the outcome of the recent multi-party General Elections which showed exclusive support by the electorate for the parties led by members of the ethnic groups to which each section belongs. For instance, with very few exceptions all the winning FORD Kenya members of parliament were Luo, while almost all Democratic Party winners were Kikuyu. Kenya African National Union captured nearly all the
seats in the Kalenjin predominated districts. In this regard it is difficult in any analysis of Kenyan politics to disregard ethnicity. Attempts by Kenyan politicians to transcend the ethnic dimension by forming broad based coalitions have failed to produce any meaningful results. Noteworthy is that all political parties in Kenya are formed under the slogan of Kenyan nationalism. Ethnicity also pervades other spheres of Kenyan national life. This includes the composition of the cabinet and the appointment of leaders of important institutions in the country. Most of these are done in an effort to maintain ethnic balance rather than professional suitability, or it can also reflect the need for loyalty to the position of the ruling clique who believe that they can only trust members of their own ethnic groups. The ethnic dimension also intervenes in education and distribution of industries.

In view of such a role of ethnicity in Kenyan national life a study of many aspects of ethnicity and ethnic related issues is quite relevant to the understanding of the development processes. Meriting examination is the relation between the various ethnic groups within ethnic boundaries (as used in Barth 1969). Rural western Kenya presents an ideal situation for the study of such a problem because the area is inhabited by peoples speaking languages of two distinct language families that have historically interacted among themselves for a long time. This has created situations that can be examined for theoretical benefit.

Therefore, this paper enquires into the nature of ethnic relations between the Bantu and Nilotic peoples within ethnic boundaries, and the interethnic dynamics that are necessary for assessing aspects of ethnicity in Kenya that have received less attention of scholars.

The paper begins with two assumptions, namely that radical cultural changes within an ethnic territory principally emanates from the peripheries of an ethnic group and, that being so, the centre of an ethnic territory is the most conservative part of an ethnic community. This assumption is, in a way, related to a variant of classical historical school current in America during the early part of this century and advocated principally by Clark Wissler and his associates.

The second assumption is that the Nilotes (not the pastoralists as such) are more conservative than the Bantu when viewed from the standpoint of cultural change. This means that contact between the Bantu and the Nilotes led to the latter influencing the former in critical aspects of cultural life (see below). Since both the Nilotes and the Bantu combine pastoralism and agriculture with the former inclining towards pastoralism and the latter towards agriculture in the past, conservatism is not attributable to the traditional mode of economic existence.
Critical elements of a community's cultural life

When two ethnic groups come into contact with each other, certain cultural items are exchanged faster than others. In West Kenya rapid changes have occurred mainly in material culture depending upon the advantage a people derives from adopting new items or techniques in replacement of the traditional ones. It is thus not accidental that there have been substantial changes in housing, implements used in domestic life, agriculture, clothing and other domains. There have been exchanges in objects of material culture among peoples of West Kenya at all times by inter-ethnic trade and through other relations. On the relation between the Abaluyia and the Luo for instance, a number of technological ideas have been interchanged (Odak 1971:16-26).

However, the extensive change that has occurred in technology and its products does not in any way correspond to changes in ideological culture. On the contrary, one can with reason assert that ideological culture is the most conservative as it remains unchanged long after drastic transformation in material culture. That is why customs relating to the use of a house current when people were building traditional houses are still being practised, albeit in modern form, in relation to modern houses. Among the Luo, for instance, a mother-in-law does still not enter the son-in-law's bedroom. Such aspects of ideological culture remain because the latter is the force uniting individuals together in a society. Among the many conservative elements of ideological culture are initiation systems, attitudes towards economic life, marriage and funerary practices, birth and rituals. Since these are so important aspects of societal life, a change in them is critical for the existence of a people as an independent entity. Accordingly, I regard a people as conservative or otherwise depending upon whether or not it retains critical traits in ideological culture. The extent to which the Nilotes and Bantu of West Kenya retain these traits will determine the direction of cultural change in the event of interaction between clans of the two peoples. It will also determine the degree of conservatism in different sections of an ethnic territory. Ideas in this direction come from examination of interactions within areas of ethnic contact.

The Luyia/Luo boundary

The Luyia/Luo boundary is inhabited by the Luyia and Luo clans in mixed residence (Odak 1971). Here the two groups of clans have from time immemorial interacted among themselves thus providing opportunity to use this as a case study of the nature of interactive relations involving the Nilotic Luo and the Bantu Abaluyia.

Within this area two languages are spoken, namely the Lunyole dialect of the Luyia language and the Seme, Kisumo, and Gem dialects of the Luo language. But the degree of competence and command of one or the other language depends upon the clan to which an individual speaker belongs. Thus, all the Luo clans, whether surrounded
by the Luyia in a village or otherwise, speak the Luo language, but there are Luyia clans which do not speak the Luyia language having opted for the Luo language wherever the majority of the people within a village are Luo. However, a village with a majority of Luyia clans speak the Luyia language. Again all the Luyia clans of the area speak the Luo language but hardly any Luo speak Luyia, although some will understand but without the ability or willingness to speak. Again, the Abaluyia have a positive attitude to the Luo language and that explains the former’s inclination towards speaking it; but the reverse situation is hardly true of the Luo attitude towards Oluluyia.

Accordingly the Luo never bother to learn, let alone to speak it. In this connection Akong’a (1992:180), noted “the dominance of Luo language and culture when they (i.e., Luo, O.O.) come into contact with non-Luo communities.” In fact, he continues, “when one goes to the border areas between Siaya (Luo area, O.O.) and Busia (Abaluyia area, O.O.) on the one hand and Siaya and Kakamega (Abaluyia area, O.O.) on the other, a very interesting linguistic phenomenon is observed. While on the Siaya side of the border the Abaluyia will speak Luo, but when the Luo cross the boundary into Busia or Kakamega, they insist on speaking Luo language. However, the people actually residing along the border understand and speak both languages, since there is intense intermarriage, especially between the Abaluyia women and the Luo men.” Furthermore, Okoth Okombo (1922:199) writes that, “Perhaps because of the status of Dholuo as a lingua franca of the Lake Region, there are more Luyias who speak Dholuo than there are Luos who speak Luyia.” What Okoth does not say is why the Luo language has attained such a status and not Oluluyia whose speakers are numerically predominant in the lake region (Kenya Population Census, 1989). The explanation consists, I think, in the Nilotic Luo conservatism and the economic, political and social factors that I shall discuss below.

The traditional Abaluyia initiation rites involved male circumcision while the Luo removed six lower teeth for the same purpose. But all the peoples of the area—whether Luo or Abaluyia—until recently removed six lower teeth as a form of initiation, but none circumcised. In economy both peoples are mixed farmers although the Luo had a pastoral past (Nyabundi 1992:62). Nevertheless strong attitudes towards the cattle still remains among the Luo. Of late the Abaluyia clans have increasingly adopted this strongly pastoral outlook. This is seen in their value of the cattle as an item of ritual, bride-wealth transaction and in other social activities. Marriage and funerary rituals, as well as ceremonies relating to birth, planting and harvesting are some of the ideological cultural traits where similarity exists among the Luyia and the Luo but on the bases of the latter’s ancient tradition.

This is seen as well in the area of marriage where a Luo woman married to an Abaluyia man practices Luo marriage rituals just like an Abaluyia woman married to a Luo man is expected to undergo Luo marriage rituals. In other words, the Abaluyia rituals are irrelevant when marriage involves a Luo partner. Again the naming system in the area takes Luo traditional practice. Most Luo names start with “O”, for the
male, and “A” for the female which are given according to the time of birth as well as other phenomena related to belief systems of the Luo such as dreams and ancestors.

The direction of marriage was hardly reciprocal. While the Luo boys married Abaluyia girls, the Luo girls did not choose Abaluyia boys for marriage (Odak 1990a).

Even if a Luo boy married an Abaluyia girl as a first wife, he had to add a Luo girl as a second wife for the Luo would not regard as enough a marriage to a Luyia without a Luo. The reverse is not so among the Abaluyia to whom the Luo girl hardly went for marriage. On the other hand, an Abaluyia man would not mind marrying a Luo girl, if possible. Thus, the Luo girls who, for some reasons, are rejected by their community as unmarriageable or those whose husbands are dead and who cannot find a husband among the Luo before undergoing cleansing rituals can be married by the Abaluyia. Sometimes one of the latter is invited to undertake with the widow a cleansing ceremony before a Luo would dare to take such a woman for a wife. On occasions an Abaluyia man could be treated by the Luo in the same way as Jamwa or Jakowany (Akong’a 1992:189) that is when he could be called upon to perform ritual functions considered by the Luo to be below their status or polluting. For example, he would be given a heifer or goat to perform ritual coitus relating to removing the pollution of death when the household head was absent or the context required an outsider. The Luo cannot do that among the Abaluyia clans.

The Kuria/Maasai, Kuria/Luo boundaries

The Kuria, who border with the Nilotic Maasai to the southeast and Nilotic Luo in the west of West Kenya claim common origin with the Bantu speaking Gusii neighbours. Accordingly, they have many similar cultural features. Such claims of ancient relationship do not include the Nilotic neighbours with whom intensive interactions have occurred for a long time, which account for similarities between these neighbouring groups in major items of ideological culture. According to Abuso (1980:42-43) the Kuria borrowed from the Maasai the age-grade system, love for the cattle and the main physical characteristics of pierced and long hanging ear-lobes. The latter is also an ancient Luo custom. Both the Luo and the Kuria languages are spoken at the border areas by the Luo and Kuria alike. But while the Kuria clans almost invariably know the Luo language, the Luo do not easily learn the Kuria language. In other words, the situation along the Luo/Luyia border is repeated along the Luo/Kuria border in language and it is repeated in the border areas between the Kuria and the Maasai where the Kuria tend to know Maasai language while the reverse situation is rare.

But knowledge of Maasai and Luo languages by the Kuria becomes less and less as one moves from the boundary areas towards the centre of Kuria country, so that the Kuria clans deep within Kurialand know nothing of Maasai and Luo languages. This
situation also refers to other aspects of culture (Odak 1990b:14-37). In other words, in theory and in practice, foreign influences come into Kuria culture from the peripheries.

The Luo/Suba boundary

Another area of great interest which manifests the nature of historical relationship between the Nilotes and Bantu is the southwest of the Nyanza Gulf and certain adjacent islands within the Lake Victoria. This is the land of the Suba, a Bantu speaking people whose history and certain aspects of culture have received attention of several scholars (Ogot 1967; Ayot 1973; 1992). The Suba have a common language and identify themselves as one people and occupy a common territory.

They are found in Kaksingiri, Gwasi and Gembe (or Kasigunga) and also in Rusinga and Mafang’ano Islands. Bordered by the Nilotic speaking Luo, the Suba traditionally had a fishing economy which, together with the livestock and agricultural products, for long had been the objects of trade with their neighbours, the Luo (Kenny 1979:97-107). Like other Bantu they are mixed farmers combining both agriculture and livestock keeping.

The long period of economic, historical and cultural ties the Suba had with their neighbours led to intermarriages and other contacts which created a situation where certain of the Suba clans have lost their original Suba culture based on a Bantu language in favour of the Luo culture (Ayot 1973). All the Suba peoples speak the Luo language and only the Suba in Kaksingiri, Gwasi and Mafang’ano Island speak both the Luo and Suba languages with differences in mastery depending upon the location of the clan relative to the periphery. Even in the latter areas, particularly among the younger generations, there are clans with persons who can only speak the Luo language and not Suba. But as a rule the Luo people within the periphery do not understand anything of Suba just like the Suba in these areas, particularly those in Gembe and Rusinga.

The Suba have also adopted many aspects of the Luo ideological culture, especially norms, values and customs. The nature of the relationship between the Suba and the Luo is graphically illustrated by the marriage relations between them. A Suba woman married to a Luo man normally goes through Luo marriage rituals, and a Luo woman married to a Suba man will also follow the Luo marriage rituals. This situation is reminiscent of the Luyia/Luo aria where Luo marriage systems take an upper hand. Suba genealogy involves deliberate efforts by elders to connect it with the Luo although without any evidence for such a relationship. Despite the cultural assimilation, the Suba still regard themselves as a distinct ethnic group apart from the Luo, although this is done where advantage is to be derived from such self-identification. Nevertheless, it is generally prestigious for the young generation of the Suba to identify themselves with the Luo.
The Luyia/Kalenjin boundary

To further illustrate the relation between the Bantu and Nilotes, we take the border area between the Tiriki, a Bantu speaking Abaluyia tribe and the Terik, the Nilotic speaking Kalenjin tribe. Again, here the Abaluyia clans of Tiriki live together within Nyang’ori and Tiriki locations. My own enquiries here agree with Were’s (1967:74) findings that the original clans which make up what is to-day the Abatirichi (Tiriki) tribe came from diverse Abaluyia clans, all of which ultimately came from Busoga in eastern Uganda. Some Abatirichi clans came from Asembo in Luoland where they were joined by the Nilotic speaking Kalenjin tribe, the Terik whose ethnonym they took (Sangree 1966:xxix) after having undergone mutual ethnic intermingling, thus evolving a distinctive tribe. Although the majority of those inhabiting both Tiriki and Nyang’ori locations are the Tiriki, Sangree (1966) states that the Terik were the original inhabitants. However, as the Abaluyia clans migrated in mass into the area, the Terik crossed to Rift Valley from Western Province to settle within the land of the Nandi, a Kalenjin tribe.

The origin of the Terik is not clear, however. But investigations I carried out in Nyang’ori location show that there is no consensus among the elders as to where the Nyang’ori people came from. Whatever the situation, the relation within the common border of the two tribes (Abatirichi and Terik) was not different from what the situation was between the Luo and Abaluyia border where political, cultural and economic factors characterised the interaction between the groups. In Kapkerer and Kapsenger sub-locations of the border where the Terik clans still live in admixture with the Abaluyia clans, Terik language, initiation system, funerary and marriage practices predominate over the Abaluyia, although the Abaluyia clans are the majority. Again here we notice a repetition of the situation in the Luyia/Luo and Maasai/Kuria boundaries.

The Terik dominance of almost a total Abaluyia clans’ social life is based principally on the ancient adoption by the Abaluyia tribe, Abatirichi of the Kalenjin age-grade organisation (AGO) and abandoning the ancient Abaluyia heritage in this domain. AGO affects, directly or indirectly, most of the major kinds of social activity in Tiriki and Nyang’ori locations e.g. social groupings, rankings, statuses and roles. AGO institutions are manifest in everything from the largest tribal and clanal activities to intra-familial relationships. Most traditional judicial, military and ritual activity and clanal territorial groupings were closely related to AGO.

Furthermore, rituals related to different customs and the internal structure related therewith, the inter-clan relations as well as land ownership were all influenced by the AGO adopted from Terik by the Abatirichi. Hence, as indicated, the AGO, a borrowed trait, affected the whole social life of the Bantu Tiriki tribe.
Accordingly, the lives of the Abaluyia Tiriki was thoroughly modified in favour of Nilotic Kalenjin culture, even though the donors, the Terik, are a small tribe compared to the borrowers.

The cases cited above are enough to illustrate my thesis that in areas of ethnic contact involving the Bantu and Nilotes, the latter almost invariably dominate in major themes of ideological culture. The situation appears to be true even outside West Kenya, as attested by the relation between the Nilotic Maasai and Bantu speaking Agikuyu (Ngagwa, 1992). This is seen in comparing the material and other traits on the basis of data collected by Leakey (1977), Hobbley (1971) and others.

Peripheral cultural dynamism and internal conservatism

The cited examples show that ethnic peripheries are more receptive to change and are the zones where changes from outside find their way into an ethnic group. Assuming a uniform dynamic cultural process covering a whole ethnic group, the peripheral areas would be expected to add to the latter stimuli emanating from without. The peripheries will thus have more force and energies than any part of an ethnic territory. But not all changes coming from the peripheries equally affect different points in an ethnic group. The already mentioned Luo cultural influence in the Luo/Luyia ethnic boundary is limited only to south and southwest Bunyoro locations. As one moves northwards deep inside the heartland of Buluyia (the land of the Abaluyia people) the Luo cultural influence diminishes until a point is reached where such an influence is almost non-existent. The same is true of other communities. We have, for instance, cited the Suba among whom Luo influence is greatest and noted that the peripheral locations of Gembe and Rusinga have almost become completely assimilated to Luo culture. However this conception of peripheral dynamics and internal conservatism within an ethnic territory is more manifest in large ethnic communities, e.g., the Luyia, the Luo and the Kalenjin. On the other hand, if an ethnic group is small, external influences spread rapidly to cover the ethnic community as a whole. This explains why whole ideological cultural systems as initiation rites, attitudes towards pastoralism have infiltrated Kuria, Suba, Tiriki and other smaller groups.

Nilotic conservatism and modernism

There are certain elements which come into an ethnic territory from the peripheries that may affect change. Among these is the conservatism of an ethnic group itself. Related to this is the thesis I am advancing here that the inter-ethnic relations in West Kenya that involve the interaction between the Bantu and Nilotes points at the latter as being more conservative and so not easily amenable to external cultural influence,
such that the Bantu are not slow at adopting Nilotic cultural elements and traits while the Nilotes are essentially slow in doing so in relation to the Bantu cultural elements and traits. If this is so, how do we explain it? In my view several factors seem to obtain. The first is the conservatism brought about by insufficient penetration of modern ideas. The other are political, economic and socio-cultural factors.

Among West Kenya peoples the Nilotes appear to be the most conservative. The Maasai and a large number of tribes of Kalenjin community have in comparison to Bantu been slow in changing to modern political and socio-economic systems, even though the modernisation process has gone on in Kenya for about a century. Even pastoralists – e.g., Kipsigis, Nandi – who have changed, have done so only recently and not holistically.

The question that arises is why they have been so late in changing, even though some of them, e.g., the Maasai have been in contact with foreigners long before many Bantu in West Kenya. A number of factors can be cited as the possible explanation if my hypothesis is anything to go by. The first is the cultural unity of a people and its demographic profile. A people united in most of its cultural elements and traits looks inwards for solutions to its problems. In this case the unity is brought about by the extent to which it depends on internal support for survival, thus leading to strict adherence to traditional values. This situation is evident in language as may be the case in other aspects of culture.

Kiswahili is a Bantu language which is the national language of Kenya, a lingua franca for the Nilotes and the Bantu of West Kenya. Ideally, being Bantu, Kiswahili would be expected to be more popular among the Bantu than the Nilotes for which it is essentially a “foreign” language. However, studies by Heine (1970) show that what is important is less of similarities or otherwise in structural characteristics of Kiswahili with that of Bantu or Nilotes but rather the demographic factors. That is to say, the larger the ethnic group, the bigger resistance to Kiswahili or any other cultural element from outside.

Thus, both Luo and Abaluyia, being large groups, prefer their own languages and so are not particularly enthusiastic about Kiswahili. On the other hand, small communities enthusiastically learn and indeed command Kiswahili so as to communicate easily with other groups, their number being low. Accordingly, the Maasai conservatism can be explained by its cultural unity as a people whose survival depends largely on adherence to its norms and values that have historically been so successful in enabling them to survive in the environments in which they find themselves. This could as well be the case with other Nilotes of western Kenya.

Political, economic and social factors could also explain the Nilotic cultural conservatism which has led to the Bantu borrowings mentioned above without marked reciprocation on the part of the Nilotes, especially within inter-ethnic boundaries. During the colonial era when the Abaluyia/Luo boundary was administered from Kisumu, the headquarters of Nyanza province, where the Luo are the majority, there
was systematic and persistent political domination of the Luo over the Abaluyia in areas of inter-ethnic contact. Here the local chiefs and administrative officials were the Luo who were always appointed so by the colonial administration by virtue of numerical dominance. This created into the local Luo populace the feeling of being a class of “rulers”, inherently superior to the Abaluyia. Otherwise, the belief would go, the colonialists would not have dared to successively without break appoint the Luo – a recognition of their superiority. Conversely, it created into the Abaluyia an inferiority complex similar to the mentality prevailing during colonial domination among many Africans in relation to European colonisers. Accordingly, Abaluyia regarded the Luo as of higher status.

Economic factors also played a role in intensifying the Luo negative attitude to Luyia. the density of population in predominantly Luo settled areas south of the boundary was low. This meant that each person possessed large tracts of land for keeping animals and cultivating. On the other hand, the area to the north inhabited predominantly by the Abaluyia clans had shortage of land. Here large herds of cattle could not be reared nor enough crops produced for consumption. So, the Abaluyia largely depended on trade with the Luo. Since trade was not that developed, the Luo had economic advantage and were thus considered wealthy.

Since cattle is the medium of bride-wealth transactions among the two peoples, the Luo with more cattle could afford to marry not only their own girls but those of the Abaluyia as well. Conversely, the Luyia could hardly afford marrying from Luoland where bride-wealth in cattle is high. So they could only marry their own girls. Also since the Abaluyia did not have sufficient food resources the Luo girls would not be willing to be married by the latter. The more so because the Luo norms accord dignity to a wife for whom more heads of cattle were paid as bride wealth. Coupled with this is the generally low prestige the Abaluyia had in the eyes of the Luo which I have implied earlier.

Accordingly Luyia girls would be willing to be married to a Luo but not vice versa as both the parents (in cattle) and herself (in food and land to cultivate) would benefit in such transaction.

Because of the imbalance in economic resources possessed by the two groups the relations between their respective clans were influenced by economic forces which were based on the existence of certain common cultural features, including similarities in exogamic laws at family, lineage and clan levels; similarities in the norms regarding the choice of marriage partner; identities in marriage types and commonalities in the systems of bride-wealth transaction, all based on Luo cultural norms. In the foregoing discourse, I wish to further advance the view that the Luo Nilotes had advantages in the incidences of interactions with the Bantu, by examining the role of culture and other factors in determining the identity of a people, since such understanding would provide the perspective in which to view the Nilotic cultural conservatism.
Culture, identity and ethnic consciousness

In this section, I will discuss the relationship between culture and ethnic identity to emphasise the importance of ideological elements. The overall aim is to show why borrowing important elements of the latter by a group presupposes being culturally dominated by the people from which borrowing occurs. I also intend to examine the role of political and economic aspects of culture in influencing the general direction of borrowing of cultural elements in the process of interethnic relations.

Ethnic identity is a subjective phenomenon in the minds of those asserting it. To reinforce this notion reference is made to objective cultural reality of either material or ideological nature. As I have shown elsewhere (Odak 1989b) the Suba in Gembe and Rusinga who have been thoroughly assimilated by the Luo reinforce their Suba identity by pointing to the shrines and other immobile material culture elements which belong to them. They have changed almost all aspects of their original culture but still possess the Suba ethnic identity, although one might ask oneself what exactly this identification through a limited number of ideological elements means since it is the whole cultural system and not its individual traits or elements nor sub-systems which impinge upon the minds of the people to create identity.

Nevertheless, it is normally baffling to observe that a people who identified themselves with one group few years ago are now identifying themselves with a new group. Individuals can declare new identities during crises or in order to exploit advantages associated with such declaration. But when all is said and done, and normalcy returns so that there is no benefit to be derived or no crisis to cope with that generated such declaration, the original identities may regain acceptability. Several examples from western Kenya can be cited to illustrate this position. But the Suba case is the most glaring one. In the 1969 census the Suba declared that they were Luo. It was then advantageous to do so. But they shifted that identity back to Suba when identification with the Luo became not rewarding. In other words, they reverted to the original stable identity which will be asserted as long as there is no crisis. Another example is the Tachoni, an ancient Nilotic people surrounded by the Bukusu tribe of the Abaluyia who have conveniently asserted identity with the Bukusu but lately (1989) were registered in the census as an independent community within the Abaluyia.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between the Bantu and Nilotes of western Kenya in ethnic boundary situations and concluded that an ethnic group should be seen from two main perspectives with regard to its relation to cultural change, namely, the peripheral area (in relation to the centres of numerical predominance of an ethnic group) which is more dynamic and from where an ethnic group receives external
influences that move slowly towards the centre of an ethnic territory, the most conservative region of an ethnic group. But nowhere has it been said in the paper that without stimulus from the periphery an ethnic group cannot change. What is being contended is that admitting cultural changes occurring as part of the internal dynamic regularities within a culture, the stimuli from an ethnic periphery is an additional force accelerating changes in an ethnic group. In numerically large groups it takes a long time before all the stimuli cover the whole ethnic group since infiltration is generally selective and some elements infiltrate earlier than others.

The second contention of the paper is that, in a relation between the Nilotes and the Bantu, the latter adopt most of the ideological culture elements from the former. Although the Nilotes also borrow some elements from the Bantu, these are generally not fundamental as they largely hinge around material culture; that is to say, the Nilotes tend to borrow utilitarian rather than ritual elements and traits. This situation leads to the belief that the Nilotes are more conservative than the Bantu and their (Nilotic) societies being closed and largely un receptive to external ideas. This contrasts the Ban tu whose societies are open and comparatively dynamic.

This is explained by the political factors and economic disparities along ethnic lines as well as socioethnic asymmetry, the interethnic gradient, created by political economic and other aspects of culture.

Because most of the traits borrowed by the Bantu are within the sphere of ideology, they are fundamental in identity formation. But once an identity is formed it remains stable long after cultures have changed. This means that the Nilotes are generally responsible for triggering processes which eventually lead to changes in ethnic identities of the Bantu with which they maintain constant interaction.

References


