CHAPTER **7**

Who Are the New Natives? Ethnicity and Emerging Idioms of Belonging in Africa

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As people, goods, and information circulate more intensively across the world and as a market-based culture of consumption now dominates local lives everywhere, it appears that tribes, ethnicity, indigeneity, chiefships, and other nativist kinds of attachment to regions and locales are condemned to disappear. Globalization, it is commonly thought, means that these modes of autochthonous belonging along with their diverse cultural practices are on their way out. Incompatible with the promises of modernity, the argument goes, they will be abandoned and forgotten. In the best case, they might be recorded and remembered, boxed up as heritage and tradition; that is, relegated to modernity's domain of collective memory.

Since the nineteenth century, social scientists often bought into – and perhaps helped shape – this widely popular modernist narrative. They imagined history as a unilineal path to emancipation, a path along which tribal, ethnic, and so-called kinship-based societies would sooner or later give way – for better or worse – to social and political "progress." Indeed, anthropology's own *raison d'être* rested for quite a long time with "salvaging … distinct cultural forms of life from a process of apparent Western homogenization" (Marcus and Fischer 1986, p. 1). And, when such modes of identity and belonging persisted despite industrialization, urbanization, and social reforms, their lingering appeared exceptional, generating new political anxieties and scholarly conundrums. In sociology, for example, "ethnicity" gained conceptual currency – in the work of Glazer and Moynihan (1963), among others – at a time when, in the 1960s United States, ethnic groups failed to assimilate, raising concerns

over their incompatibility with meritocracy.[1] So too, in Africa, anthropologists sought to understand why, by the mid-twentieth century, tribal or ethnic attachments did not disappear once people migrated to towns.[2] Many studies of tribe, ethnicity, and culture have been therefore animated by an unquestioned anticipation for the demise of such categories of identification and belonging.

Counter to this modernist teleology, what we witness in the present, in Africa and elsewhere, is hardly what has been expected. Over the past few decades, following state decentralization, a push for democratization, and the aftermaths of neoliberal economic reforms, there emerges a new quest for the local, the ethnic, or the autochthonous as apparently primordial and, therefore, more authentic and more stable bases of belonging. In the face of circulations of money, goods, labor and economic possibilities that are unpredictable, some people now seek a sense of permanence in trying to close off social worlds, to "return to their roots," as it were, and to claim rights and resources through identities they see as immutable. In *The Perils of Belonging*, Peter Geschiere (2009) argues that, since the 1990s, African (just like European) countries have attempted to exclude "foreigners" within their boundaries from the full rights of citizenship. At the same time, Geschiere shows, because development funds, NGO networks, and market ventures now bypass the state altogether, a turn to ethnic regions, traditions, and chiefships, among other things, "seems to be a logical consequence of a drive towards decentralization" (2009, p. 21). This turn to the local, the regional, or the autochthonous takes different forms. These include claiming land and heritage; investing in kinship and ethno-regional relations; returning to the native village to build a house or to be buried; identifying, naming, and excluding strangers; waging wars; and doing business. Far from being a regressive step into modernity's past, this turn towards the local is a way to produce and preserve meaningful attachments and to build futures from within current political and economic predicaments. New claims to ethnicity, culture, and local belonging then are not rejections of globalization, modernity, or the market economy. Rather they constitute distinct ways to define positions from which people hope to benefit more fully from market ventures, citizenship, and the promises of modernity. Globalization, we should remember, is not synonymous with cultural homogenization; quite the contrary: it *is* the regeneration of diversity by new means (Appadurai 1996). Therewith, local belonging and ethno-cultural identities are always emerging in new forms, in unexpected places, even as their global trajectories are more and more interconnected.

Commodities, media, development, finance, and activism are some of the new global means through which people can reinvent themselves as subjects of locality, tribe, ethnicity, culture, or indigeneity. Let us take media and commodities, for example. As part of the famous Nigerian Nollywood film industry, a growing market of ethnic-language movies now caters exclusively to speakers of Hausa and Yoruba, both at home and in the diaspora (Haynes 2016; Tsika 2015). So too are ethnic-language gospel or hip hop recordings in South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya. Meanwhile, numerous ethnic groups from around the continent have entered cultural tourism to market their art, songs, dances, and bodies to foreign visitors (e.g. Kasfir 2007). Herein, as Christopher Steiner (1994, p. 91) argues, "ethnicity functions as a form of commodity – which can be packaged, marketed, and sold to foreign buyers." Furthermore, performing their ethno-cultural identities for foreign or local markets, performers may also constantly rediscover themselves *as* ethnic, and find new value and meaning in their ethnicity.

In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) argue that, with late capitalism, ethnicity becomes more prevalent rather than disappears. But now ethnicity regenerates itself, along with the cultural difference for which it stands, by circulating in the market. In the absence of other resources, many people turn to selling their culture. As a Tswana elder rhetorically asked the Comaroffs during their fieldwork: "If we have nothing of ourselves to sell, does it mean that we *have* no culture?" (emphasis in the original, 2009, p. 10). In turn, culture is now oftentimes branded, copyrighted, and owned as property (Brown 2003; Chanock 2000). Meanwhile, by selling ethno-cultural performances and artifacts or, for that matter, natural resources available in their territories, people may access material means for sustaining social attachments that they associate with ethnicity and culture. The market economy now rejuvenates local identities and belonging. But it also transforms the way in which ethnicity and culture work in the present. As ethnic entrepreneurs, for example, organize themselves to benefit from various resources, their collective identities look more and more like corporations, their cultures like commodities, their chiefs like CEOs (consider the example of Bafokeng, Inc., an ethnic mining company in South Africa; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, ch 5). Unfolding at this juncture between commodification and incorporation, the Comaroffs argue, the marketing of ethnicity "has both insurgent possibility and a tendency to deepen prevailing lines of inequality, the capacity both to enable and to disable, the power both to animate and annihilate." (p. 139).

These processes, to be sure, pose new challenges for citizenship and state sovereignty. On the one hand, ethno-cultural commodification and incorporation or the current turn to the local can easily undermine national belonging. In some contexts, for instance, transnational networks of activism and development have offered formerly marginalized groups a new platform for empowerment and for drawing sovereignty away from the state, as it were. Consider the example of Maasai in Tanzania, who, increasingly since the 1990s, asserted their *indigeneity* – a category hitherto less commonly employed in Africa – as they opened NGOs and joined transnational networks of indigenous rights. In *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous* (2011), Dorothy Hodgson shows how claiming resources from international donors, Maasai crafted new ways of empowerment and new means of pursuing development in regions long marginalized by the Tanzanian government. Maasai's engagement with indigenous politics was relatively short-lived and benefited primarily educated elites. But, seen from a different angle, indigenous politics temporarily allowed some Maasai to gain power and recognition, thus challenging their position within the state's older geopolitical order (pp. 212–123). Such subversions of state power may – and often do – take a violent turn. In Kenya, for example, so-called vernacular radio stations rejuvenate a sense of pride in ethno-regional identities and threaten national politics with the logics of what some Kenyans call "tribalism" (meaning, here, loyalty to ethnicity rather than the nation as well as xenophobia along lines of ethnic identity). This was the case recently, following the 2007 elections, when some vernacular radio stations incited specific ethnic audiences to violence (cf. Lynch 2011, ch 6). In this sense, regions and ethnic groups may often pull sovereignty away from a state that is already weakened by foreign debt and structural adjustment programs.

On the other hand, states now often reassert their power precisely through ideologies of autochthony and culture. Since the 1990s, in Mali, for instance, the government

has supported a television channel that broadcasts "local culture" – that is, traditional dance and songs. Called *Terroir*, or "from the earth," the program conflates national belonging with a generic notion of "local culture" – rather than, say, ethnicity – thus depicting various groups as horizontally integrated in the nation-state, and depoliticizing their social and cultural differences (Schulz 2007). States may thus reinvent themselves through business with cultural capital (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, ch 6) or through a nationalist rhetoric of autochthony (Geschiere 2009, ch 6). But their sovereignties may as well crumble as formerly marginalized groups take similar routes to empowerment. The ensuing contradictions transform the sentiments and semiotics of belonging and citizenship, state power and the myriad sovereignties emerging at the local level.

The turn to the local, the desire to reclaim power, and close off certain autochthonous polities is accompanied by attempts to securitize morality, cultural values, and social reproduction. That is, as a condition for more durable, more meaningful belonging, people attempt to protect, rescue, and rehabilitate the moral fabric of the social totalities – whether regional, ethnic, or national – of which they imagine themselves to be part. Precisely because the turn to the local is about a strategic repositioning amidst global circulations of commodities, people, and ideas, it also raises new moral concerns. How – people wonder – can they protect values they regard as local or autochthonous from what they perceive to be the "perversions of globalization"? Politicians, religious leaders, and other charismatic figures bank on this populist longing to secure morality. This partly explains why, in recent years, panics have emerged on different scales – ethno-regional, national, and continental – over the push of activists to legalize homosexuality, prostitution, or abortion, but also over declining marriage rates and other challenges to normative forms of family and reproduction. In the name of autochthony, dominant discourses on the continent have depicted homosexuality, for example, as "un-African" or "against African cultural values," sometimes legitimizing violent interventions to repress or eliminate queer subjects. Most importantly, this attempt to securitize the social allows different groups to reassert sovereignty – often by means of policing and militarization – by promising to prevent "cultural pollution" or the intrusion of detrimental "foreign" elements (whether people or values). Accordingly, exercising sovereignty means securing social reproduction (precisely in places where the material means of normative reproduction are often lacking) and protecting the moral foundations of "society." Governments, local administrators, NGO workers, chiefs, and village elders often collaborate, compete, or collide with one another as they all attempt to secure morality. This, of course, is not new. Morality has long been at stake in such relations of belonging and citizenship. But, in the present, the logics of moral securitization have, if anything, intensified. They have also been coupled more strongly with policing, militarization, media scandals, and various invasive interventions meant to "rescue" citizens (Amar 2013).

These emerging forms of belonging, their complex links to older notions of tribe, ethnicity, and culture, and their relations to the state and the global market pose a new set of challenges to anthropologists: What can current dynamics of belonging in Africa reveal about the future of nativism, autochthony, or ethnicity, on the continent and beyond? How, concretely, do nativist idioms play out in different contexts and what are their material and ideological effects? How can anthropologists explore these new

historical developments to understand their stakes and potentials more fully? And what can we learn from the work of earlier generations of anthropologists studying the social and political bases of belonging in Africa?

This chapter offers a set of preliminary reflections on these questions. To begin with, I suggest that it is helpful to think of belonging as involving at least two sets of forces: on the one hand, it entails the ways in which people imagine, negotiate, and actualize attachments to each other and to the wider world. These include forms of intimacy, kinship, and social reproduction that everyone pursues, in one way or another, to build a future and be part of different imagined collectivities. On the other hand, belonging involves the strategies of power – how the state and the market categorize, control, and commodify various populations.[3] Of central importance therein, I suggest, are formations of *alterity*, that is, various representations that assign racial, ethnic, or cultural Otherness to a specific category of people. Alterity circulates, in different forms (including media, commodities, and scientific discourse), in the arenas of the state and market and sets the parameters from within which subjects can act in recognizable ways, make claims, and produce value. Understanding these two elements as co-constitutive of each other, I argue, requires that we bridge post-colonial critiques of race, ethnicity, and culture with a deep ethnographic understanding of belonging, relatedness, and social reproduction. Drawing on my ethnographic research in Kenya, I show how social and cultural phenomena emerging at the intersection of attachment and alterity can inspire scholars to conceptualize local belonging as not merely about tribe, ethnicity, or culture. Rather struggles over belonging also give rise to complex concerns with temporality and historicity, objects and materiality, pollution and sexuality, bodies and borders, and much more.

To notice these wider implications of belonging, I suggest, requires that we also recapture a certain holistic aspiration that once characterized older anthropological approaches to political organization and social relatedness in Africa – a certain desire to understand attachment in relation to vast and diverse domains of social life. Such a holistic approach – however utopian, and totalizing it may seem (especially *if* regarded as an authoritative standpoint rather than an aspiration) – shows that belonging is always more than a simple matter of either inclusion or exclusion. It also prompts us to reflect, as we shall see, on the varied *intensities*, *magnitudes*, and *breadths* of local attachments and the complex ways in which they are produced and contested.

ATTACHMENT AND ALTERITY: A MATTER OF THEORY

To focus on the recent rise of nativist belonging in Africa is, to some extent, to walk in the line of fire. One risks reinforcing what anthropologist Archie Mafeje (1971) called "the ideology of tribalism," that is, a longstanding colonial *and* anthropological obsession with "tribes" (but also their occasional substitutes: ethnicity, culture, locality) as primary categories of identification on the African continent. For a long time, this obsession, as Mafeje argues, has obstructed other forms of relationality – say, for example, class and the state – and has worked ideologically both to enable and to occlude practices of racial hierarchization and exploitation. It is important therefore to reflect critically on when and how the object of anthropological inquiry might be itself

a product of global white supremacist ideologies. However, to dismiss any scholarly interests in emerging forms of nativist belonging as examples of an "ideology of tribalism" is to miss out on the very historical developments of the present. It is also to confuse the new turn to the local with a simple *re*turn to archaic modes of identification and attachment (and this, even though people themselves often depict their ethnocultural identities as unchanging). What we need then, along with a critique of alterity, is to pay close attention to how people live their lives *through* and *around* notions of tribe, ethnicity, and culture. In short, this requires reconciling post-colonial critiques of alterity with an ethnographic focus on what it means to belong to the land or to be a "native" in any given place and time.

Rather than see ethnicity and culture as sociological analytics that correspond to unquestionable realities and objectively identifiable populations, since the late 1970s, post-colonial theorists described them as discourses of power with important roles in the global politics of inequality, marginalization, and exploitation. Stereotypical invocations of ethnicity and culture conceal differences within groups of people and overemphasize the differences between them to divide populations and hierarchically structure their access to capital. In this sense, as Edward Said (1978) argues, the Other does not exist as such, except as an object of knowledge in the discourse of power.[4] Building on Said's insights, Homi Bhabha (1994) shows how, race, ethnicity, and culture, as objects of discourse, enable forms of sovereignty and subjection and legitimize unequal access to material resources (see also Comaroff 1987; Wilmsen and McAllister 1996). "The objective of colonial discourse," Bhabha (1994, p. 101) argues, "is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction." In this sense, representations of the Other are not disconnected from the people and places they describe, but have myriad material effects in shaping subjects and objects (Bhabha 1994, pp. 102–103).

Alterity works herein at multiple scales of references – simultaneously and relationally. First, "Africa" itself represents a discursive category of global geopolitics with significant effects on how people on the continent envision lives and futures (Mudimbe 1988; Ferguson 2006). As Achille Mbembe (2001, p. 2) argues, "it is in relation to Africa that the notion of 'absolute otherness' has been taken farthest." Africa, as a concept, makes "a polemical argument for the West's desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world." The name of the continent – at once a geographic and racial category of alterity within a global context of white supremacy – shapes the parameters within which at least some Africans live their lives (Pierre 2013). According to James Ferguson (2006, p. 5), there is an illusion of facticity in the category of Africa. Africa is "a category through which a 'world' is structured – a category that (like all categories) is historically and socially constructed … but also a category that is 'real,' that is imposed with force, that has a mandatory quality; a category within which, and according to which, people must live." Throughout Africa, for example, some middle classes, urban youths, and professionals now seek to distance themselves from nativist types of belonging, identifying instead with the broader categories of Africanity or African culture, as part of newer registers of Afropolitanism or Pan-Africanism.[5] Meanwhile, in a global geopolitical context – including the African diaspora – the category of Africanity may also perpetuate a condition of alterity, while also representing a source of empowerment, emancipation, and collective pride.[6]

Second, ideas of Africanity also create the conditions of legibility and authenticity for more specific national, ethnic, regional, cultural, or tribal identities on the continent. Within African states, hierarchical orders of ethnic, regional, or cultural categories have long sustained unequal access to power and wealth. In Kenya, for example, since the country's independence in 1963, ethnic divisions inherited from the British colonial administration shaped access to welfare, land, and wage labor, and informed electoral practices based on patron-client relationships. National development discourses also iterated this hierarchy of ethnicities. Ethnic groups such as Maasai, Samburu, Pokot, Turkana, and Somali appeared as radical cultural Others, while other ethnic groups seemed more developed and modern and, therefore, entitled to power. Between a more general African identity and more specific national, ethnic, or regional identities, alterity then works on multiple segmentary scales wherein, as Sara Ahmed (2000, p. 44) argues, some "others" are always more invested with Otherness than "other Others."

Understanding the different scales of alterity – the different representations that project Otherness broadly across Africa – is important for grasping how social, political, and economic life plays out on the continent. A critique of alterity alone, however, is not enough. In this context, we must also ask: What kinds of futures are possible under regimes of alterity? How do the concrete ways in which post-colonial subjects imagine and craft belonging allow them to position themselves in relation to – and perhaps affect and alter – representations that seek to imbue their collective identities with Otherness? And how do the concrete ways in which this turn to ethnicity and autochthony plays out in specific contexts reproduce or undermine older categories of alterity? What we need then is more than a simple critique of Othering representations. What we need is "thick description" – to use Clifford Geertz's (1973, ch 1) phrase – of what belonging means, what objects and relations it entails, and how it is created and contested, at multiple levels, at any given time.

Anthropologists have long been interested in how people form collective identities and how they organize social life in relation to their identities. Early on, some anthropologists saw the names of "tribes" as "totemic" representations, that is, as ways in which people classified the relations between different social groups (Lévi-Strauss 1963) or as modes of representing the collective life of a group (Durkheim 1926). Others saw tribes and tribal identities as functions of political organization and economic production (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). Such identities, they argued, were often fluid, adapting to various ecological, economic, and political contexts (Leach 1954). What is more, for British structural-functionalist anthropologists, the condition of collective belonging permeated social life. Representations and practices of collective belonging were created and contested, in various ways, through relations of descent and marriage, ritual and religion, production and exchange, individual and collective authority, and so on (e.g. Goody 1969; Lienhardt 1961; Turner 1969; Wilson 1959). In this sense, as Grinker, Lubkemann, and Steiner (1997, p. 64) argue, "Various institutions, whether belief systems, economic or political systems, were analyzed to determine how they contributed to the maintenance and perpetuation of the society as a whole." While many of these anthropologists denaturalized the idea of "tribes" as static entities (e.g. Evans-Pritchard's theory of the Nuer fission and fusion), they often reduced belonging to a set of structural processes that enabled "social systems" to function. They did not attempt

to understand local social worlds in terms of the wider contexts of colonialism and industrial capitalism in which they existed (Asad 1973; Kuper 1973; Moore 1994). However, unlike following generations of anthropologists, these early anthropologists, most of them Africanists, were much more committed to exploring how collective identities and belonging unfolded *on the ground* in economic practices, social life, kinship, ritual, marriage exchanges, intimacy, etc. Because they claimed to study "whole societies" – impossible as this might sound today – they were often able to explain how the most diverse practices, both mundane and ceremonial, fit into a specific cultural logic of belonging. And, while their modernist claims to totalizing knowledge remain problematic, their holistic aspirations – again, *as* aspirations and *not* as epistemological entitlements – remain, I think, admirable. It is such ambitious ethnographic aspirations that are necessary for "thick descriptions" of how people presently live with alterity.

For anthropologists, the notions of tribe, ethnicity, and culture represented, for a long time, analytic categories that corresponded to a certain social reality. But, more and more, throughout the past few decades, debates over the definition of these terms led to growing disenchantment with their analytical value. In the mid-twentieth century, as anthropologist began focusing on urbanization in the colonial context, they gradually abandoned the notion of "tribe." This term, some argued, assumed that African societies were unchanging, thus failing to make sense of their growing integration into colonial empires (Ekeh 1990; Gulliver 1971; Helm 1968; Kopytoff 1989; Southall 1970). Meanwhile, "ethnicity" allowed anthropologists "to see transformation and diversity as well as continuity and similarity" (Grinker, Lubkemann, and Steiner 1997, p. 68; see also Grinker 1994, pp. 11–12). The anthropologists of the Manchester School, for example, argued that ethnicity was "a category of interaction in casual social intercourse" (Mitchell 1956, p. 42) that is, it was *performed* in specific situations, often in towns, for various purposes (Cohen 1969; Epstein 1978; Gluckman 1958). In his classic study, *The Kalela Dance*, Clyde Mitchell (1956) shows how an urban performance worked to re-classify vast ethnic forms of identification in relation to their new relevance in the context of a mining town. Similarly, in *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, Abner Cohen (1969) argues that being Hausa in the Nigerian city of Ibadan, during colonial times, was a way of organizing social life in relation to trade. In Ibadan, migrants from Hausaland had to learn all over again how to perform being Hausa, if they were to benefit from ethnic monopolies on trade in the city (for discussion, see Banks 1996, pp. 32–36). And if, for the anthropologists of the Manchester School, ethnicity was much more about contextual claims and performances, it was also about African lives under colonial domination.

Yet just when anthropologists had begun improving their analytics, those very same terms came to circulate widely in the world, turning from *etic* into *emic* constructs. Take, for example, "culture." Whereas, in British anthropology, ethnicity was about processes of classification and boundary-making, the concept of "culture" in American (Boasian) anthropology spoke of more substantive difference. Early American anthropologists studying in Africa – including Melville Herskovits and Darryl Forde – focused more on the ethos and cultural substance of particular areas and groups (Moore 1994, pp. 11, 38). And it was something akin to this notion of culture – as ethos and essence – that has eventually gained a life of its own, outside anthropology (Visweswaran 2010, ch 2). "The cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism's erstwhile

victims," Marshall Sahlins (2000, p. 474) argues, "is one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the later twentieth century. 'Culture' – the word itself, or some local equivalent – is on everyone's lips … all discover they have a 'culture'." So too, an essentialist or primordial notion of ethnicity also became widely popular throughout the world (Campbell 1997). Culture and ethnicity, in this sense, have long been folk terms across the world – terms that, rather than explaining things, require themselves explanation. To understand how these terms are used in different contexts, scholars of belonging must then build on post-colonial critiques of identity and alterity while using ethnography to reveal what roles these terms (and others) play in imagining and actualizing belonging.

The fact that people throughout the world now understand themselves and are seen by others as *having* an ethnicity or a culture does not determine what concretely they will do with those categories – how they will imagine and actualize social attachments. Diverse forms of social life, with their own histories always come into play, in any given context, to shape how people claim belonging and how they position themselves with an outlook to regional, national, and global arenas of influence. It is then through deep ethnography that we can see such processes more clearly and theorize present uses and abuses of alterity.

ENCOUNTERS WITH ETHNICITY AND BELONGING: NOTES ON FIELDWORK

When I began doing research in Kenya, in 2005, ethnicity was not a topic that could be avoided. Whenever the country made it into the international news, what was noteworthy were outbursts of ethnic violence or "tribalism" that allegedly deterred from the building of a genuine democracy; how tribal warriors fought with state military forces; or how the government distributed resources along nepotistic lines based on ethnicity. A certain "ideology of tribalism" – to use Mafeje's (1971) concept – has continued to dominate international reports on Kenya and, for that matter, many other African countries. International media have long sensationalized a certain spectacle of violence on the African continent. And ethnic loyalties and archaic tribal hatreds have offered easy explanations for events that otherwise seemed irrational to outsiders. In Kenya, I learned that things were more complex, to be sure. While many men and women refused tribal identifications, what Kenyans called "tribalism" – that is, loyalty to one's ethnic group coupled with hostility towards others – was part of a more complicated picture in which class, land politics, labor markets, and development resources were vigorously debated. While more and more people claimed ethno-cultural belonging in various ways, many others saw such claims as a threat to national, middle-class values.

I decided to work in northern Kenya because I was fascinated with how Samburu, a people long venerated and vilified for their cultural difference, have turned that very difference into a source of spectacular wealth. Ethnicity and cultural difference played a significant role in how Samburu were governed in both colonial and post-independence Kenya. As cattle pastoralists, they were marginal to the British colony; colonials thought them more "primitive" than horticulturalists and agriculturalists, their land too dry to generate any immediate profits. Meanwhile, some of their customs – warrior age grades, among them – seemed dangerous to colonials who made

much effort to suppress them. Following independence, Kenyan political elites invoked the same Samburu alterity to defer infrastructural development and welfare services in the region and alienate land and livestock from Samburu.

But Samburu soon learned to benefit from the cultural Otherness that foreigners assigned to them. By the 1950s, they were already playing in Hollywood movies as "primitive African tribesmen" and appeared on numerous postcards and in many coffee table books. By the 1970s, they also participated in Kenya's booming tourist industry, performing traditional dances and selling souvenirs to foreign visitors (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Kasfir 2007). Upon my first visit to the area, I learned of an interesting trend that had developed as part of this context. Young Samburu men initiated as part of the warrior age grade – or, so-called *morans* – had been migrating to coastal beach resorts, not only to dance for tourists, but, more importantly, to find European women for transactional sex. Since the 1980s, many European women visiting Kenya desired such relationships with Samburu and Maasai "warriors," because they saw these men as more authentic, more in touch with traditional culture than other Kenyans. Because of the substantial amounts of money received from their foreign partners, some of these men returned home to become some of the richest in their district. They built houses, bought cars, started farms and businesses, campaigned in politics, and married several local wives. In Samburu, people gossiped extensively about these men, while also admiring their wealth and power. I wanted to understand how the tourist commodification of "warrior's" ethnic sexuality shaped what it meant to belong in Samburu.

When I began my long-term field research in Kenya, I imagine my study as one focused primarily on ethnicity (and perhaps also sexuality). But, over the years, I was drawn into studying more and more domains of social life in terms of how they related to the commodification of ethnic sexuality. For example, as young men returned with money to their home communities, their money became an object of salient social anxieties. People worried that money that originated in sex could undermine life force and collective wellbeing. But, in a context of rampant unemployment, declining cattle economies, and abject poverty, many also devised new ways to access this money. My book, *Ethno-erotic Economies* (2017), describes how the ensuing contestations of this money gave rise to new forms of gender, age, generational relations, kinship, as well as novel notions of space and time. I argue that all these domains of social life constitute belonging and that, in the end, belonging is about much more than ethnicity.

What I learned working in Samburu was that understanding ethnicity in the present – its relation to citizenship and the market, its implications for belonging – meant that one had to become familiar with vast domains of social life in any particular context. In that sense, ethnic violence itself, as Vigdis Broch-Due (2005) argues, must be understood through the thick social relations in which it unfolds. It represents a mode of claiming belonging and identity and appropriating vital forces in the face of growing experiences of disconnection, loss, and exclusion (often perpetuated by the retraction of the state and a shifting NGO scene).

In the following sections, I draw on my ethnographic work in Samburu to suggest that belonging is, among other things, about a dialectical relationship between a vast array of intimate forms of sociality and global and national forms of regulation through alterity. Here, as we shall see, ethnicity might not always be visibly at work, though its

logics may shift messily to affect other domains of social attachment. From this vantage point, ethnic boundaries are not just about the margins of a population, about clear-cut principles of inclusion and exclusion, but may also permeate desires, subjectivities, bodies, and everyday life in most unexpected – and sometimes, contradictory – ways. Conflicts over belonging, then, do not always pitch, in any simple way, ethnic groups against each other, but may involve complex tensions and contradictions along lines of age, gender, generation, wealth, residence, and more.

Incest and Incorporation: Belonging as a Dialectic of Sociality and Power

Belonging is not simply a matter of what our interlocutors *say* it is or *imagine* it to be. Neither is it merely a matter of categories and techniques used by those in power to control, regulate, and subordinate marked populations. Rather it is about an interplay of the two *and* the various outcomes of such interplay. Careful ethnographic attention to this interplay reveals unexpected idioms through which, say, ethnic and regional belonging are generated. Consider the following example from my fieldwork, where moral concerns about intimacy coincided with political forms of mobilization meant to turn the ethnic region into an ethnic corporation.

In 2010, while doing fieldwork in villages on the Leroki plateau, in Samburu District, elders spoke to me worriedly about a particular kind of sexual relationship that, they thought, had become prevalent recently. Some young men and women, they said, had sex with each other without regard for the fact that, by descent, they belonged to the same *ntipat* (pl. *ntipati*), that is, lineage or subclan. An *ntipat* is a group of families – sometimes as many as 200 or more – that trace common descent, through men, to a shared ancestor up to 10 or 15 generations back. Several *ntipati* form a clan (*lmarei*, pl. *lmareita*). By local custom, members of the same major lineage classify as siblings and must, under all circumstances, avoid each other sexually. While young, they may have sex with members of other lineages within their clan, but never with one another. For purposes of marriage, however, people must marry outside their clans. Expectations of sexual avoidance become herewith even more expansive, as suddenly all clan mates figure as one's own siblings (Spencer 1965, p. 112). It is no surprise then that, elders were utterly distressed as, in recent years, some men and women of the same *ntipat* ran off, had children with each other, and married while in towns, to avoid being separated by kin. Elders spoke of such relationships as *surupon* or incest. "This thing is killing Samburu people," an elder told me. "If you don't have that respect for your kin and clan, nothing will be there."

One event, that same year, helped me understand some of the stakes of such intimacies. In a village where I was working, Baba Nasieku, a man in his fifties, announced he was going to drink poison after learning that his daughter had become pregnant in boarding school by a young man of their lineage. Elders held Baba Nasieku down and sat by him for several days to deter him from committing suicide. It was not the fact that his daughter became pregnant, my informants insisted, that drove the man to want to kill himself. School pregnancies were quite common in Samburu and throughout Kenya. Although parents and teachers condemned such pregnancies, the shame was but temporary. But a pregnancy that resulted from incest was another

matter altogether. It was held to bring not only divine punishment, but also more lasting shame. Baba Nasieku worked as a policeman in Nairobi. Rather than move to the city, he preferred to live and raise his children in his rural home. He was also relatively wealthy. He owned cattle and, unlike most locals, also had money to pay for his children's high school education. His respectability and his ability to build a future in his village depended on how he attended to and invested in local expectations of belonging. So, Baba Nasieku found it difficult to bear the shame of his daughter's pregnancy. Things got worse when elderly women helped the girl abort. The dead fetus would not come out and the girl almost died. This, to many of my interlocutors, was proof of just how unpropitious incest was. So, following this incident, village elders decided to take strict measures. They asked the boy who impregnated "his sister" to pay a fine of 40,000 Kenyan shillings (about US$400) to Baba Nasieku – an exorbitant amount for a rural family. Then, they also convened a meeting with the newly initiated age set of young men, promising to curse them if they slept with girls of their lineage in the future.

But the matter was far from being settled. Lterian, a man in his early sixties who lived in the same village told me that his son had run away to Nairobi with a woman of his own linage with whom he now had a child. He had pleaded with his son to terminate his relationship. But his son refused. He told his father that he loved his partner and was not willing to leave her. Like many school-educated, town-dwelling youths, Lterian's son reasoned that such expansive sexual prohibitions were exaggerated, outdated, and incompatible with the "modern" livelihoods they desired. Such youths identified more with the lives of Kenya's cities and middle classes. Indeed, by 2016, the Kenyan government decriminalized sexual relationships between biological first-degree cousins, thus restricting the definition of incest further to only immediate filial and sibling relationships. Accordingly, by civil law, any relationship outside the nuclear family was not considered incestuous. This, in turn, solidified the longstanding conviction of town dwellers and middle classes that extensive sexual and marriage prohibitions between collateral kin were unnecessary. These perceptions also fueled conflicts between youths and elders, between those who sought to belong in rural areas and those who imagined or pursued livelihoods elsewhere.

Incidents of incest between members of the same lineage or even marriages between clan mates were not new as such in Samburu. Men and women often told stories of how incest was discovered, in previous generations, as the cause of different people's deaths or diseases. In recent decades also, elders of the Masula clan – the most populous Samburu clan – had relaxed expectations of clan exogamy, sometimes turning a blind eye when members of the clan's respective sub-sections married each other. Why, then, were elders suddenly so concerned about incest? What prompted them to reiterate exogamous ideals and sexual prohibitions, in a time when middle-class Kenyans and the state sought – quite to the contrary – to loosen these prohibitions by narrowing them down to the nuclear family? Elders held that incest had severe consequences for both a person's and a community's ability to reproduce and grow. They certainly also felt that incest had become more prominent in the present (since the initiation of the new age set of young men, in 2005). But then, many other customs changed and new normative forms emerged. Why could sex within the lineage not cease to be incestuous and why did it have to be prevented now?

To answer these questions, I wish to turn for inspiration to an earlier time of anthropology, the 1950s, when questions of incest and descent had been central to what scholars understood as the "political organization" of African ethnic groups. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, incest everywhere was the prohibition *par excellence* – the foundational taboo that brought human society into being. Critical of Lévi-Strauss's (1969) universal definition of "incest," Jack Goody (1956) urged ethnographers to pay close attention to how sexual intimacies that come to be classified as incestuous, in African contexts and beyond, may affect the political order and social structure of a particular society. In an essay entitled "A Comparative Approach to Incest and Adultery," Goody (1956) argues that what counts as incest at any given point in time not only varies, but also reflects what elements of the social structure are central to the maintenance and reproduction of a particular society. Goody urged anthropologists not to impose *a priori* Euro-American notions of incest onto different contexts, but instead to examine contextually "the system of prohibitions as a whole in relation to the social structure" (p. 304). Ultimately, for Goody, incest prohibitions were about anxieties over behaviors that could affect key criteria of belonging. Working among the patrilineal Nuer of southern Sudan, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1951) argued that sexual and marriage prohibitions solidify a sense of unity among lineage members, their sense of distinction from other categories of kin, thus reinforcing the political structure of the tribe (a structure based, in part, on a system of segmentary descent). But such prohibitions also work to encourage people to seek partners in another section of the same tribe, thus multiplying ties of alliance and mutual support within a certain tribe. From the vantage point of contemporary anthropology, such so-called structural-functionalist argumentations may seem reductionist, because they cannot explain the complex affects, desires, and ideological layers of collective anxieties surrounding incest. But such arguments may inspire us to understand why certain intimacies suddenly seem so transgressive and threatening by looking at how people imagine political belonging at particular moments in time. So, what, if anything was happening on the political and economic arenas in Samburu District at that time?

With state decentralization and the rise of new forms of entrepreneurialism and commodification, clans based on patrilineal descent started to play – once again – central roles in formal politics. Following the adoption, through referendum, of a new constitution in 2010, the Kenyan state took important steps toward the decentralization of the government. Up to then, the government had appointed administrators for each province and district in the country. Under the new legislation, the hierarchical system of provinces and districts would be replaced by independent counties, with their inhabitants now electing their own political leaders. Samburu had long felt alienated by foreign leaders – first British colonials and later administrators who came from other parts of the country and belonged to other ethnic groups. Because the new constitution allowed Samburu – for the first time ever – to appoint their own leaders, many now envisioned enthusiastically new possibilities of economic and political empowerment. Not unlike ethnic groups in South Africa, Tanzania, Mali, or the United States, Samburu hoped to run their future county like an "ethnic corporation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). In the absence of natural resources and agricultural land, they would draw on longstanding colonial stereotypes of Samburu cultural Otherness to venture into safari and cultural tourism. Attracting foreign investors, they hoped to develop their infrastructure and pursue gainful economic development.

Rural elders were cautious, however. They realized that a new local elite of edu-cated, mostly town-dwelling Samburu could empower itself at their expense. Therefore, they turned to clan politics to seek ways to recirculate resources and power more widely, across different socio-economic strata. In early 2011, all over the dis-trict, male elders held secret clan meetings to discuss ways of revitalizing clan soli-darity and participate in politics more efficiently. If everyone in a clan agreed to support a set of political candidates during elections, they stood higher chances to be elected. Large clans, like Masula, capitalized on their demographic advantage, hoping to elect one of their own in the position of the county governor. Smaller clans built alliances with each other, hoping to push forth their own candidates. During this time, ritual competitions and ceremonies allowed elders to revitalize identification along relations of patrilineal descent and to encourage people to take pride in their belonging to the clan (Meiu 2016). In the context of this new clan politics, elders suddenly and explicitly invoked incest as a particular threat to their political goals. At a meeting of the Masula clan in early 2011, one elder pointed out that "for a long time now, Masula have been marrying other Masula." "This must stop," he said. "If we are to be the leading clan of Samburu, to regain our strength, we must be sib-lings again. And siblings cannot sleep with or marry each other." Among other clans too, elders put preventive curses on anyone who, in the future, would engage in sex with patrilineal kin or marry members of their own clan.

It is important to note that, for rural Samburu, *surupon*, or incest is of more than one kind. And some forms of incest are considered more dangerous or unpropitious than others. For example, relations between parents and children, a man and his father's co-wives, a man and a woman who are in-laws, or between kin groups related through the payment of blood wealth (for homicide), all may classify as *surupon*. The worst form of incest, informants told me, used to be that between the sister's daughter and the mother's brother. This kind of incest was said to cause the cows of the moth-er's brother – which he probably received as bridewealth for his sister – to lose their calves, defecate their insides, and die. Meanwhile, other intimacies between relatively proximate collateral kin, such as those between a man and his mother's sister's daughter, did not classify as incest at all (for the latter belongs to her father's clan, a clan to which the former has no kinship relations). Despite this wide and complex array of possibilities of intimacy and incest, why did a particular kind of incest involving "brothers" and "sisters" of the lineage and clan suddenly become so threatening?

Elders, I suggest, were quite instrumental, if only for a while, in trying to suppress this particular kind of incest. They hoped to be able to participate actively in the politics of the new ethnic county-*cum*-corporation, an inclusion they envisioned through the revitalization of descent-based clans. Here, incorporation in the sense of becoming a market-based company informed the rejuvenation of "corporations" of an older kind. For rural elders to participate more fully in this politics of ethnic county, their clans had to act as what anthropologist Meyer Fortes (1953), drawing on Max Weber, called "corporate groups." A corporate group, according Fortes, is a social group which, in relation to other groups of a similar kind acts as what "might be described as a single legal personality – 'one person' as the Ashanti put it" (p. 25). Or, like Samburu put it, as "one flock" (*mboo obo*). In other words, although corporate groups might be differentiated internally, externally they must seem undifferentiated. In some instances, this older notion of corporate group now transformed itself

through market incorporation. In the northern town of Baragoi, in Samburu, the subclan of Surtoi (within the Masula clan) registered as a private organization or "self-help group," hoping to engage in microfinance projects and insurance schemes. In this context, a preoccupation with incest worked to solidify a distinction between different patrilineal groups. It also worked to bring various descent groups together through marriage as bases for the future ethno-corporation.

But elders might have also been strategic in another sense. Stereotypes of sexual promiscuity and incest proliferated in the discourses of the state and the Kenyan middle class when describing rural Samburu. Several NGOs now worked in Samburu – often under the leadership of middle-class Samburu families, seeking to rescue young rural girls from teenage sexuality. These development workers – along with journalists and activists on a national level – critiqued rural Samburu for allowing young girls to have sex with "kin." Here, middle-class Kenyans strategically used an expansive notion of kinship to delegitimize teenage sexuality through images of incest. But such discourses also undermined the collective respectability of Samburu in Kenya. Elders tried to foreclose such stereotypes and gain respectability on a wider national scene at a time when they hoped to venture into business with a world beyond the local.

What we witness here then is a certain dialectics of sociality and power with several effects: reclaiming elders' power; control over poor youth and women; repositioning oneself within the nation, etc. Unlike structural-functionalists, I do not see these panics over incest working mechanically – in a Durkheimian sense – to reinforce solidarity. The outcomes of these concerns with incest and the desires of incorporation were hardly those that elders foresaw. But, inspired by the attempt of structural-functionalists to understand sociality with an outlook to its broader implications, we can map a set of political aspirations of belonging here: to belong meant to fix things intimate, to fix and stabilize prohibitions that people themselves understood as cornerstones of sociality and the polity. Incest, in particular, fascinated anthropologists and psychoanalysts for generations; it was the ultimate origin of the social contract. A focus on incest vis-à-vis incorporation also demonstrates how belonging is not merely a matter of inclusion or exclusion, outsiders, and insiders. Rather it is also about complex tensions between the young and the old, men and women, rural elders and urban middle classes, the wealthy and the poor. What it means to belong – ethnically, culturally, or to a place – is defined through contested ideas of propriety, propitiousness, morality, and respectability.

PLASTIC PANICS: SPECTRAL BOUNDARIES AND THE MATERIALITIES OF BELONGING

Belonging varies widely in its material and ideological expressions. Yet in many contexts it seems to be tied, in one way or another, to the idea of the *boundary*. Imagined boundaries – cultural, moral, linguistic, and territorial – are central to how people represent ethnic identity and belonging to themselves and to others. In Africa, ethnic boundaries are inherited, in part, from colonial definitions of "tribes" and administrative strategies of dividing African populations within discrete regions since the late nineteenth century. But the idea of the boundary has also informed how people have attempted to articulate principles of inclusion and exclusion, stabilize criteria of social

attachment, and access resources. Thinking of how people imagine, make tangible, and sustain boundaries is important for understanding how recent turns to autoch-thony, ethno-regionalism, and ethno-incorporation play out on the continent and globally, in the present.

Boundaries are not simple lines drawn in space and maintained in time. They are not merely about walls, fences, rivers, ditches, or other kinds of concrete or unseen borders. Even when people represent them thus, the socialities of boundary-making are not to be confused with their material representations. Neither are boundaries about rigid and unbridgeable cultural and linguistic differences. Frederik Barth (1969) argued that ethnic boundaries can persist despite the flow of people and goods across diverse territories and despite otherwise minimal cultural differences between them. "Categorical ethnic distinctions," Barth suggested, "do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (1969, pp. 9–10). To understand how ethnic groups sustain a sense of identity, Barth suggested, anthropologists must focus less on the group's "internal composition" and more on people's practices of "boundary maintenance." For Barth, such practices take place when different ethnic populations or individuals encounter and interact with each another. Or, in his own words, they take place at "the margins."

However, rather than assume *a priori* the idea of ethnic groups as sociological unities or modes of collective consciousness, we must interrogate further how certain subjects and populations are *ethnicized* in the first place. In this sense then, the "mar-gins" that Barth talked about suddenly seem spectral – neither here nor there, shifting nervously across diverse domains of social life, always contested, always about more than one thing. Boundaries then can be at once about bodies and polities, objects and desires, affects and anxieties, purity and pollution, the everyday and the extraordinary. Boundaries, one may argue, are therefore *plastic* in more than one way. They take dif-ferent forms at different times, sometimes seeming solid and uncompromising, at other times surprisingly malleable and open to reinvention.

I began reflecting on the complexity of ethnic boundary-making while trying to understand a set of social anxieties I had encountered in Samburu, during my field-work. At the core of these anxieties was – as it happens – plastic, a material substance with significant moral connotations that, as we shall see, at once threatened and rede-fined ethno-regional belonging. I first encountered the adjective "plastic" in the phrase "plastic boys," a category of masculinity in the town of Maralal, the headquar-ters of Samburu District. So-called "plastic boys" are men, between the ages of 20 and 40, who acquire ethnic artifacts – calabashes, wooden stools, headrests, etc. – which they sell to foreign tourists and travelers. At the same time, they sell shoes, clothes, and all kinds of "plastics" (or, commodities made in China) to locals. The social cate-gory of the plastic boys emerged in the 1980s as impoverished Turkana and Ilgira families, who had lost their cattle to raiders in lowland areas, sought refuge in Maralal. Soon, their sons took to the streets of the town in search of a living. Town-based middle classes despised plastic boys, who they perceived as unattached paupers who did not build families or seek normative respectability. Speaking of plastic boys was also a mode of ethnic differentiation. Most plastic boys were indeed of Turkana or Ilgira ethnic origins and therefore minorities in a district where Samburu claimed to

be the autochthons. But why were they called plastic boys? And what is the relation between plastic and how people perceived these men?

While the noun "boy" was certainly a way to infantilize these men, by denying their claims to social adulthood, the adjacent "plastic" tells a more complex story. The presence of plastic in northern Kenya grew spectacularly in the last two decades. A traveler returning to the district in the early 2000s, after several years of absence, wrote: "It is tragic to see how much inroad plastic has made into Kenya. Fifteen hundred feet before each village the first signs of it appear: starting with just pink, blue or clear plastic bags hanging on the shrubs, but then the nearer we get the worse it is. There are plastic bottles impaled on virtually every thorn on every bush" (Hofmann 2006, p. 13). Plastic was suddenly everywhere: in shops and homes, on bodies and streets. On the one hand, plastic was seductive. Beads, cups, jerry cans, basins, stools, and shelves of plastic were relatively more durable than wooden ones. They also came in diverse, light colors and were more enchanting to the eye. Plastic beads produced in the Czech Republic, for example, became one of the most common element of Samburu traditional dress. On the other hand, people worried that – suddenly overabundant – plastic became polluting. Their worries echoed in part those that drove state and NGO environmental initiatives. For the past 10 years, for example, the Kenyan state discussed banning plastic bags to prevent their catastrophic impact on the environment. Meanwhile, foreign NGOs initiated all kinds of events in Samburu, involving rural women in cleaning the immediate environs of their village of plastic residues.

In the face of this growing prevalence of plastic in their lifeworlds, locals developed their own understanding of plastic, its material and symbolic qualities. Generally, they worried about the substance's potentially polluting effects on their ability to reproduce, grow, and sustain normative social attachments. But they also used the category of "plastic" to describe objects, persons, styles, and processes that they feared and disavowed. Thus, a set of panics came to surround the idea of plastic in Samburu. First, there emerged prophesies on the evils of plastic. In rural areas, young girls, who claimed to have visited *Nkai* (God), returned with prophetic messages for their communities. Few of these girl-prophets knew each other. But their teachings were uncannily similar. And they all had something to say about plastic. For example, they urged people to abandon bodily decorations and household objects deemed of plastic (cf. Straight 2007, pp. 39, 63). "Girl-prophets say women should stop wearing all these plastic beads and return to the old *mporo* beads," one elder told me. "God says that it is this plastic that is preventing women to give birth." Another elder heard a girl-prophet say that "women should stop milking the cows in plastic jerry cans or else cows will stop giving milk. To milk in plastic is to curse your own cows. It is to show them disrespect. So, God will punish you for it." Albeit contested, the teachings of these young prophets circulated widely in the district (see also Straight 2007, pp. 31–41, 60–63).

Second, even as many men and women remained skeptical about the teachings of these girl-prophets, they were nevertheless concerned about the effects of the growing prevalence of plastic things on their bodily and collective wellbeing. In rural areas, the Maa adjective *plastiki* (also known as *lpirai* or *lkasukui*) marked kinds of objects that could not embed themselves in families and homesteads, perpetually remaining in a state of non-belonging. For example, people believed that, unlike calabashes and

gourds made of wood, plastic basins, jerry cans, and buckets did not take on the bodily substance, "dirt" or "smell" (*latukuny*), of a family and, therefore, if thrown out carelessly, would not jeopardize the owner's wellbeing to sorcery, whereas other objects did; gourds and wooden objects, for example, were, in fact, embodied extensions of people and families (cf. Straight 2007, ch 4). Its inability to affect its owners in negative ways, one may argue, was a positive aspect of plastic. However, many Samburu saw it differently. Unable to attach itself, plastic, unlike other household objects, would also not enable its owners to sustain wellbeing, grow, and thrive. Although locals contested what objects actually counted as *plastik*, things deemed of plastic not only remained unanchored in kin relations but also threatened the life force (*nkishon*) of families and lineages.

Third, rural young women also worried about condoms and their occasional substitutes, plastic bags, as potentially polluting substances on their bodies. With the rise of NGO-driven HIV/AIDS-prevention campaigns since the 1990s, youths were taught about the importance of wearing condoms. Some young men were so worried about contracting HIV that they would use plastic bags when condoms were not available. Many young women, however, refused to have sex with condoms or plastic bags – both known as "things of plastic" – because they worried that these objects could get stuck in their bodies and "block their wombs." Plastics, they thought, endangered their ability to have children in the future. Like sexuality, now, plastic was seductive, enticing, and available through the market. But it also carried the risks of disease and depletion.

These panics about plastic were driven by a certain nostalgia for a time before plastic arrived, when life had not yet been threatened by the substance's nefarious effects. Though never fully renounced, plastics became things against which people had to position themselves and craft propitious belonging *in a relation of opposition*. Yet what was the opposite of plastic? What was being protected from plastic? What boundaries were redrawn by keeping plastic out? And how did these taxological boundaries relate to how people crafted ethno-regional belonging? "Plastic is something foreign," a Samburu man explained to me. "It's not part of our tradition. Because you don't own things of plastic … They don't belong to you as it were. But, you know, a calabash, even when it breaks, you can never burn it or throw it outside [the compound]. If you burn it, it will affect you. You can even die. But plastic, even if it was used for milking, you can go ahead and burn it. Plastic is just something which came late and doesn't have any value for people, because it is not theirs. They don't own it. But if you let a calabash without milk in it for too long, and it begins to crack, that calabash will curse you and your whole family." Notice here an axiomatic distinction between, on the one hand, tradition, culture, and calabashes, and on the other hand, things of plastic which are new, foreign things, that do not belong to the people, remaining dangerously detached.

Because plastic spoke of a form of non-belonging (or delayed or suspended belonging?), it also provided locals with an idiom for reflecting upon how different individuals or groups succeeded or not in negotiating respectable and propitious social attachments to their ethno-region. For example, in Samburu villages, I encountered the phrase "plastic warriors" (*lmurran leplastik*). Young women used this phrase to describe young men who adopted "foreign," urban styles of clothing, including pants and shirts. I soon learned that the phrase was highly insulting to the men it

described, for it questioned their belonging to their rural homes. The phrase eventually grew out of use by 2010 or so (replaced now by "digital warriors" [*lmurran digital*], a phrase that praised the sophistication of young, educated men). But, for a short time, the phrase "plastic warriors" kept these men at a distance, questioning their respectability and prompting them to adjust to others's moral expectations. For to be attached to the ethno-region meant also maintaining elements of style that sustained older social relations rather than threatening them.

So too with plastic boys, these were young men who were themselves perceived to be foreign, without any legitimate claim to belonging in Samburu. Not only were most of them not descended from Samburu, but the livelihoods they desired for themselves were not in tune with local expectations of respectability and morality. "We call them plastic boys," one Samburu NGO worker in Maralal explained to me, "because they hang around like that, with no families, with no purpose. They just run after the whites to sell things to them, and then they drink that money. They are just like that plastic, that garbage, those thrown-away plastic bags that you see everywhere and that doesn't belong anywhere." What is more, plastic boys were perceived as key agents in the replacement of life-giving local culture with dangerous foreign commodities; for they sold calabashes, gourds, and other cultural artifacts to make money and access foreign commodities. Poised between different worlds, plastic boys sought the best of each, yet – so it seemed – attached themselves to neither, while continuing to be present in the landscape of an otherwise ethnically marked district. Plastic boys were aware of the disregard villagers and other town dwellers had for them. One of them told me in English: "When people say: 'Ah, plastic boys,' it means they have degraded you. That is to say, you are just [of] lower dignity. You are someone who is just running, running [without a purpose]."

Here plastic threatens the body proper and moral personhood and, through them, the polity as a whole. Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) argued that perceptions of pollution and transgression of bodily boundaries are often considered threats upon the social order – the body politic – itself. A concern with individual bodies and communal bounds work together, because "pollution ideas can distract from the social and moral aspect of a situation by focusing on a simple material matter" (2002, p. 139). The point here is not that plastic panics regenerate boundaries, but that they sustain, across different social levels, a concern with boundaries, with limits that are at once moral, material, and ideological and that are about the imagined essences of belonging and ethnicity. Jean and John Comaroff (2015, pp. 93–95, 101–105) encountered a similar panic in South Africa's Cape Town region, a panic based on the metonymic relationship between the pollution of the natural environment and the influx of foreigners. There, they argue, panics about a new "alien" species of plant that spread out rapidly over the Cape, allegedly causing the fires that destroyed vast expanses of terrain, paralleled social anxieties and xenophobic affects over Africans from Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Mozambique who had migrated to work in South Africa. Similarly, in Kenya, raising questions about bodies, herds, and populations affected by plastic opens the limits of ethnic subjectivity and belonging to questioning and renegotiation. What is happening here is not that old borders are retraced, but rather that boundaries are traced in new ways, in more than one way, and in the process new kinds of subjects emerge – subjects with a visceral sense of the limits of their belonging. These subjects then share experience and ethnic identity because of their

common predicaments in relation to the foreign, the polluting, the impure. This boundary-play, if you will, is an experimental exercise with the limits of belonging. It is, in a way, playing with fire. Here, in Mary Douglas's ([1966] 2002, 138) words, "the whole complex of ideas including pollution and purifications becomes a kind of safety net which allows people to perform what, in terms of social structure could be like acrobatic feats on the high wires. The equilibrist tries the impossible and lightly defies the laws of gravity. Easy purification enables people to defy with impunity the hard realities of the social system."

The idea of boundary is then a fetish. Like any fetish, it occludes the history of its own production (in a Marxian sense). But, like any fetish, it is also generative of desires, affects, and bodily orientations, in short, subjectivities (in a more Lacanian sense). Boundaries – whatever material forms they may take – are, no doubt, permeable, never done-deals. But they are also political projects that are always in the making, always plastic. Precisely because it is so hard to tell who or what belongs or does not (as criteria of belonging are always dialectical syntheses of the past and present), the criteria of belonging are shifting, simultaneously infusing with preoccupation and surveillance all kinds of domains of everyday life. It is at certain moments that energies, affects, and desires mount to make a sense of boundaries imperative. But these boundaries associated with race, ethnicity, and culture are also paradoxes of subjectivity (constitutive of the internal life of the subject). They are not merely about foreigners – as a delineated population – but also about the foreign, as a substance at once material and ideological, within bodies, families, and spaces. Subjectivities are projects in the making; social actors must always make sure to avoid that which would delegitimize their claims to belonging and pursue those things which affirm their attachments. A focus on objects, materiality, and pollution makes boundaries more complex. Anthropologists have long understood ethnicity and belonging as complex processes of moral categorization of substances and objects (see, among others, Hutchinson 1996; Shipton 1989; Steiner 1994). As commodities cross imagined boundaries threatening the body social with pollution, the quest for boundaries becomes a quest for purity, vitality, futurity, and reproductive power.

Panics over belonging, in contemporary Africa and elsewhere, often turn to questions of pollution and purity, shifting between a wide array of objects. Take, for example, recent panics over homosexuality or women's sexual morality in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Cameroon, and elsewhere (Geschiere 2013; Msibi 2011; Thoreson 2014). Here, political and religious leaders posited various forms of belonging – national, ethnic, or regional – at risk of the growing "perversions of globalization," which threaten the very sense of authentic attachment. Like the panics over plastic I described above, here, too, boundaries of belonging are about many things – sexuality, gender, sovereignty, morality, commodity consumption – at once material and ideological, at once spectral and concrete.

Conclusion

As people throughout the world find new meaning in having a culture and an ethnicity, in being or becoming natives or autochthons, they inevitably seek to determine who belongs and who does not. Yet the social realities they inhabit often resist easy

classification. Throughout the past few decades, as the global circulation of people, goods, and ideas intensified, social realities also became more ambiguous, more saturated with blurred boundaries, contradictory claims, and uncertain attachments. In this context, deciding who belongs is no easy endeavor. Surely, a primordialist emphasis on blood has become, globally, a hegemonic principle of belonging (turning what had been a Euro-American cultural construct into a universal truth of identity). Blood has also conferred a sense of immutability on Africanity, ethnicity, other categories of alterity. Unquestionably, such categories and their longstanding colonial genealogies also shape the terms through which people may now claim political recognition, gain rights, and access resources in national and global arenas. But none of these strictures of identity and inclusion predetermine how, *concretely*, people craft belonging in any given place, at any given time.

Struggles over belonging pick up, objectify, invest in, and contest issues that may seem unexpected or even tangential to outside observers or skeptical insiders. I offered incest and plastic as two examples of objects and relations that come to congeal the stakes and dangers of belonging and ethnicity. Some of these objects and relations might have played important roles, in the past, in defining the membership of a specific group, as is the case of incest prohibitions. Others may have been adopted more recently, perhaps for their ability to congeal new claims and sentiments of attachment, as is the case of plastic. Regardless of their origins, however, in the present, such objects and relations offer new idioms through which people may contest belonging. They also demonstrate how what it means to belong to the land, to be born of a place, or to embody a specific collective identity is more than simply a matter of claiming such attachment. To belong in this way is also more than merely embracing the categories of alterity that the powerful use to mark and control populations. Rather new idioms – like incest and plastic – emerge out of the dialectics of alterity and attachment, as syntheses of current socio-economic transformations and older ideas and ideals of identity and belonging.

What we learn from such emerging idioms is, first, that the question of belonging is not always one of strict inclusion or exclusion, but often also one concerning the intensities, magnitudes, and depth of claims to inclusion. In other words, the question is not always *who belongs and who does not*? but also – importantly – *just how much does one belong*? And, who decides what the terms of belonging are? In this sense, struggles over belonging give rise to competing and, sometimes, contradictory projects to prove rightful attachment and to occupy positions of relative advantage as part of a future community of belonging. Preventing incest in the example discussed above was an attempt by marginalized, poor, rural Samburu elders to reclaim the authority to define the terms of their belonging, in a context in which educated youth and town-dwelling middle classes already reshaped kinship relations. To reinforce incest prohibitions associated with the lineage, elders threatened to curse disobedient clan descendants and, thus, to restore, revitalize, and transform ethnic belonging *from the inside out*. They sought to consolidate kinship attachments to more efficiently anchor their claims, as representatives of an ethnic group, vis-à-vis the state and the market. In this way, elders challenged other Samburu to demonstrate their devotion and investment in autochthonous attachments. So too did panics over plastic. While less tied to a specific set of subjects, these panics, originating in rural areas, congealed the inherent threat of both foreigners and foreign substances to the life-giving power of

local attachment. Panics over plastic spoke of anxieties over material and ideological pollution – a fear that, amidst rapid socio-economic transformations, one's ability to belong and thrive would diminish. Foreign commodities seem to have made moral, ethnic, and geopolitical boundaries porous. Attempts to purify the community – both domestic inventories and street socialities – of the "foreign" are now ritualized in an attempt to redraw borders, reassert a core of identity, and rejuvenate ethnic bodies. Thus, different idiom allow different social categories to intensify or heighten their claims of belonging and de-intensify those of others.

Second, emerging idioms of belonging also offer important insights into the shifting – sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting – limits of local attachments. It does not matter ultimately if people manage to get rid of either incest or plastic. In the cases described above, people did not. But the serious "play" that they are involved in as they objectify a problem, make it iconic of belonging, and then contest its meanings is generative of affects, orientations, and bodily dispositions. In short, it is generative of subjects. Subjects emerge by dealing with a set of idioms and needing to position themselves around them. On the one hand, as new, subversive forms of kinship – such as formerly incestuous unions within the lineage – become common, or as formerly polluting substances, like plastic, become too widespread to avoid, the limits of attachment expand. On the other hand, new idioms emerge to contract the limits of belonging in new ways and to establish new criteria of exclusion. Belonging is then more than inclusion or exclusion. It is about multiple, concomitant debates and struggles – some more salient than others, new ones imploding when older ones recede.

Anthropologists must pay particular attention to the different intensities, temporalities, magnitudes, and material expressions of belonging to capture its implications for the contemporary world order. For this purpose, a focus on ethnicity or culture alone is not enough. Indeed, I believe that, in a context in which the discipline of anthropology is growingly split up into myriad sub-disciplines, focused around ever narrower themes and topics, it is imperative to resist the consolidation of an *anthropology of ethnicity*. Generally anti-theoretical and empirically overinvested, a disciplinary reorganization around a topic as specific as ethnicity presumes, in fact, that we already know what ethnicity is before exploring any of its possible links to, say, kinship, intimacy, exchange, ritual, religion, sexuality, commodification, space, and time. Studies in the anthropology of ethnicity may revolve narrowly around inter-ethnic relations, ethnic stereotypes, or the regulation of populations through ethnic categories. Such foci renounce a holistic aspiration to understand how ethnicity might be about many more things than it immediately names. More specifically, it gives up any chance to capture emerging idioms of belonging that might animate and be animated by, as it were, the logics of ethnic identification, while remaining hidden to those interested in ethnicity alone.

The global turn to the local, to ethnicity, autochthony, and culture may reveal all kinds of unexpected things. But one thing is sure. The idioms through which people negotiate belonging are always shifting, emerging in new ways, away from, and sometimes back to older categories of alterity. Therefore, the very question that, in this context, is now on everyone's lips – *Who are the natives?* – must also take into consideration that the criteria and idioms for establishing belonging are ever changing. Who then, we should ask instead, are the *new* natives?

NOTES

1   For an in-depth discussion of the concept of "ethnicity" in American sociology, see Banks (1996: ch 3)
2   Anthropologists of the Manchester School focusing on the relation between urbanization and ethnicity include, among others, Cohen (1969), Epstein (1978), Gluckman (1958), Mayer (1971), and Mitchell (1956).
3   I am inspired here by the way Aihwa Ong (1996) and Mimi Sheller (2012), among others, have written about citizenship as a "dual process" or as simultaneously shaped "from below" and "from above."
4   For Africa, see also Christopher Miller (1985).
5   For a discussion of "Afropolitanism," see Mbembe (2007).
6   On the role of Africanity and African ethnicity in the diaspora, see, for example, Clarke (2004) and Apter (2017).

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