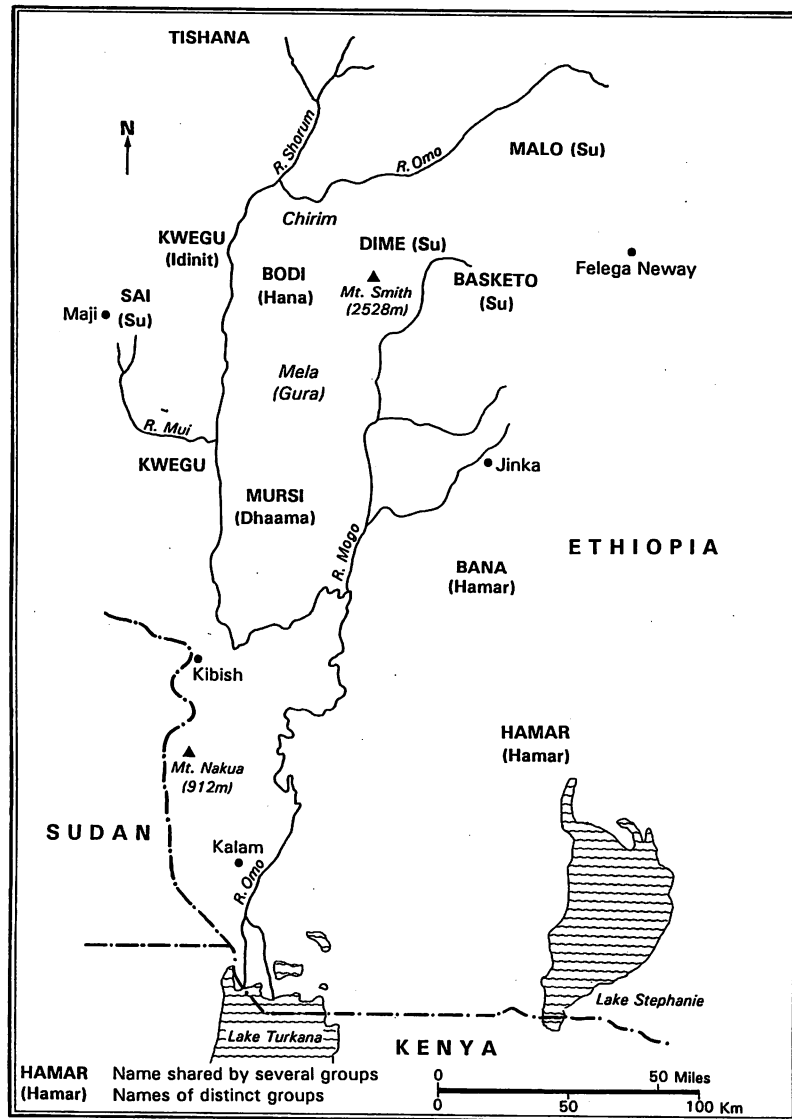


2 Conflict & Ethnic Interaction: The Mela & their Neighbours

*KATSUYOSHI FUKUI



Map 3 Distribution of the Bodi

There have been a lot of arguments concerning the definition of the ethnic group. Most of the relevant studies focus on classification and typology in an attempt to provide a universal definition. For example, in a typical effort, Isajiw (1974) lists more than 10 cultural attributes, including language and religion, as the basis for ethnic group classification. However, shared cultural attributes cannot form an ethnic group, unless its members also share what Ri (1985) calls the 'we consciousness'. It is quite natural that the consciousness of 'they' is a prerequisite for the existence of 'we'. These two kinds of consciousness are not permanently fixed in contradistinction. It is clear for our own knowledge of ethnogenetic processes that 'we' sometimes involves those who were once 'they' but were incorporated.

The question, then, is how 'they' are incorporated into what becomes the 'we' with a modified composition. Under what circumstances does such a process occur? I presume the answers to these questions may reveal some fundamental elements in the nature of ethnogenesis. To begin with, we must deal with the issue of ethnic boundaries that divide 'us' from 'them'.¹ In this chapter, I will try to account for the formation and transformation of ethnic boundaries in the case of the Mela-Me'en (Bodi) in the Omo valley of south-western Ethiopia (Map 3). Particular attention is paid to conflict, because it is among the most important aspects of ethnic group interaction in this region, one which can affect group identity as well as territory (Otterbein, 1973).

Consciousness of 'we' among the Mela-Me'en

The Mela population of about 2500 live scattered in a wooded savanna area covering more than 2000 square kilometres. Linguistically they belong to the Surma group of the eastern Sudanic branch in the Nilo-Saharan language family. The Mela are one of seven sections of the Me'en ethnic cluster. Of these seven, the Mela and Chirim are collectively called Bodi by outsiders, while the other five are called Tishana.² The Mela raise cattle and goats, and also cultivate sorghum and other crops. Cattle are particularly important, not only in their economy, but in the ethos of their society and world view. It is not too much to say that they cannot perceive their existence without cattle. Cattle are also the object of interethnic raiding and are the direct cause of most conflicts in which the Mela are involved (Fukui, 1979).

The Me'en are the largest unit sharing 'we consciousness'. When they say 'we, the Me'en', the implication is that other groups in the vicinity are regarded as enemies and despised. In a different context, it can connote human in contrast to animal, though I experienced this only once during my stay with the Mela. When I was doing research in folk classification of animals, a man said to me: 'We, including you [the author], are Me'en [human beings],' in contrast to wild beasts. However, consciousness of shared identity hardly ever unites all the Me'en in practice. Reviewing oral tradition for the past few hundred years, I found not a single occasion when the Me'en took action in unison.

Sections of the Me'en sometimes form alliances against other ethnic groups. There were occasions when the Mela and the Chirim united in interethnic clashes. This sort of alliance can break down easily. In 1976, while I was in the region, the Mela were about to attack the Chirim on account of a dispute over the distribution of cattle obtained in a joint raid.³ This shows that relations among Me'en sections are complicated and fragile. Each section has its own history and relationships with neighbouring ethnic groups, and a different pattern of fusion and fission resulting from conflicts with them.

The Mela are the largest unit in which the 'we consciousness' translates into collective action. While they are divided into two territorial units called Hana and Gura, each with its own chief (*komorut*), the Mela have a very strong corporate identity and constitute a solid group in conflicts. By analysing the historical process of Mela formation, it is possible to identify certain basic ethnic group characteristics.

First, however, mention should be made of Mela's relations

with the Ethiopian state. Although they live within the boundaries of that state, the Mela have little consciousness of Ethiopian identity. Largely because of their geographical isolation, they have had few contacts with the state in the past 100 years. But they did come to realize its power to oppress and learned to be submissive.⁴ The execution of the leader of a Mela rebellion a generation ago was a lesson for them. About 20 years ago, a police station with 30 men was set up in Melaland to maintain security, but ethnic conflicts continued despite its presence. More recently, famine relief supplies have reached the region under the auspices of the Ethiopian government. Nevertheless, the Mela still have little grasp of the nature and magnitude of the state to which they belong.

Conflict and the Mela

Violent conflict is a dominant feature of Mela life. During my stay with them, the Mela were said to have killed several hundred people belonging to other ethnic groups. From a Mela perspective there are two types of ethnic conflict (Fig. 1). One is between groups of equal status. Enemies of this type are called *baragara* (enemy) and are similar to the Mela in their subsistence economy and the pivotal role of cattle. Included in this category are their Mursi neighbours to the south, who are also Surma-speakers, and the Hamar, who are Omotic speakers and live to the south-east beyond an uninhabited plain about 50 kilometres wide. The Hamar are an eternal enemy, and between them and the Mela there are no means of settling conflicts and making peace. The Mela do not journey to Hamarland to attack, but when attacked by the Hamar they put up a good fight. The last battle between the two took place in 1961, when the Mela allied with the Mursi to repel the Hamar. The Mursi are an occasional enemy, and in their clashes with the Mela women and children usually are not harmed. They have a tradition of conflict resolution, and once peace is restored the Mela and the Mursi visit each other and exchange cattle. During 1973-5, the annual toll in lives taken in Mela-Mursi conflict was about 15.

Conflict with agricultural peoples on the highland is of a different kind. The Mela show no mercy to the people who are collectively called Su, and who are not regarded as *baragara* because they are not of equal status. Whole settlements of Su have been wiped out in Mela attacks, with minor losses for the attackers. Such one-sided and large-scale violence prompted an

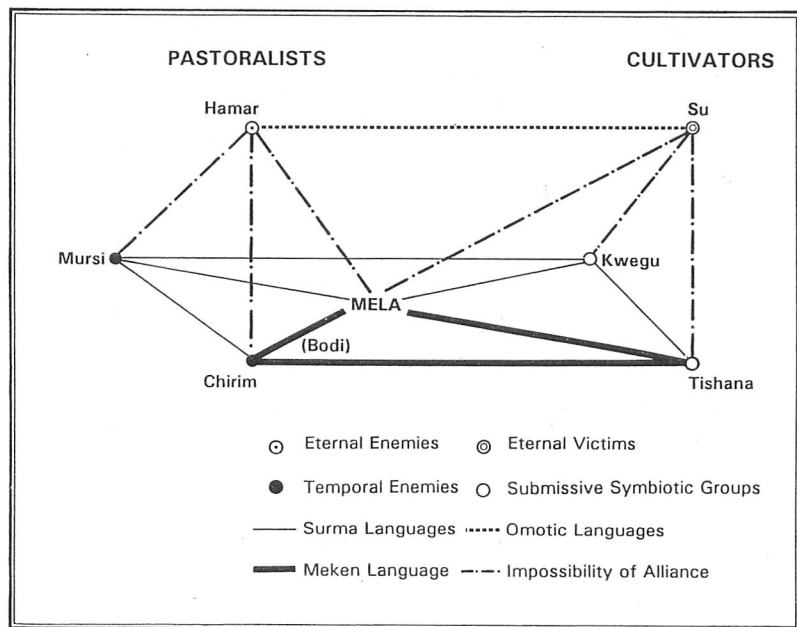


Figure 1 Group interaction and the Mela

American linguist, H. Fleming, working with the Dime, a Su group, in the late 1960s, to appeal to the Ethiopian government to save the latter from annihilation.⁵ As a result, eight Mela leaders were imprisoned, but the Mela continued attacking the Su in different areas.

Group relations and conflict

The Mela call their enemies *baragara* and their allies *nganiya*. In order to see what factors determine in which of these two categories a neighbouring group is likely to fall, I shall compare types of relationship and affinity between groups, ranging from commonality of language to peace-making ceremonies. For example, the linguistic relationship between the Mela and the Su is the lowest, for they belong to different language families; their cultures also differ considerably; Mela culture being centred on cattle, while the world of the Su is crop cultivation, including ensete. However, the Mela have historical links with two Su

groups. According to tradition, the chiefly lineage of both Mela territorial units, Hana and Gura, came from the Sai 10 generations ago, and even now the Mela chiefs visit the Sai chiefs to perform a ritual. Oral tradition also has it that another Su group, the Gerfa, was once conquered by the Mela.

Concerning intermarriage, the Mela have no such link with the Mursi, the Hamar-Banna or the Su, including the Sai. Concerning their chiefs, the Hana and the Gura chiefly lineages split only five generations ago. In this respect, the connection between the Mela and the Kwegu derives from the fact that, having been conquered by the Bodi once, the Kwegu are still regarded as their clients (*gaima*), although the actual relationship is one of symbiosis. Among the Mela, territory is divided among chiefs, and no trespassing is normally allowed between groups — save between the Hana and the Gura, and then only among individuals.

Between groups that do not share a territory there is a stretch of uninhabited land, which may be called a natural barrier and whose size seems to correspond with the frequency of conflict. Thus, a small barrier of this kind separates the territories of the Mela and the Chirim. Young cattle-herders in Hana go to the Chirim border in order to find good grasses and to have a cattle camp there. There is a stretch of uninhabited land 10–20 kilometres wide between the Mela and the Mursi, and this widens when there is conflict and the Mela try to distance themselves from the enemy. It almost disappears when they are on friendly terms. The width of the no man's land between the Mela and the Hamar is about 50 kilometres.

The possibility and nature of alliances are another indicator of group relations that have a bearing on conflict. For instance, the Mela and Mursi form temporary alliances only against the Hamar. Although they both make war against the Su, they never operate jointly. Another indicator is the treatment of women and children in war. In Mela-Mursi clashes women and children are not harmed, unless they interfere in the fighting. In contrast, women and children are not spared in fighting between the Mela and the Hamar, or the Mela and the Su, with the exception of the Sai and Gerfa.

Mechanisms for conflict resolution are yet another indicator. In cases of homicide between Hana and Gura, the two sections of the Mela, the issue is settled by paying compensation in cattle. It is not as easy to settle such an issue between the Mela and the Chirim. Homicide involving Mela and Mursi can evolve into a blood feud and even into war. However, there are also a search for resolution and a mechanism for concluding peace. There is

no such mechanism between the Mela and the Hamar. Conflict with Su living near Melaland can be resolved, but only government intervention can settle conflict with Su who live farther away. Finally, there is the peace-making ceremony. This is performed when the prospects for peace are good, and the sacrifice of a white ox is its main feature.

It would seem from the above that there is a correlation between commonality of clan, intermarriage and bond links on the one hand, and conflict on the other. Clan commonality expresses an element in the historical formation of groups, while their present link is represented by intermarriage and bond links.⁶ Among groups with such connections, conflict, when it occurs, is subject to resolution, and alliances are formed against a common enemy. It appears also that groups which share a language are able to perform peace making ceremonies. In contrast, the Mela have no means of seeking peace with the Hamar, whose language is completely different, without the intervention of a third party. The same holds true for most of the Su.

Conflict is unlikely to develop between the Hana and the Gura, although they are now under different chiefs. Thus, even though it consists of two distinct political units, the Mela (Hana-Gura) is the largest unit within which conflict does not occur. Bodi is the collective name for the Mela and the Chirim, as I explained before, and outsiders see them as one ethnic group sharing a language and culture. Nevertheless, the Chirim are a Mela enemy, something which may be explained by the fact that they have a low clan commonality. The traditional enemies of the Mela, they say, are the Chirim, the Mursi and the Hamar. A common feature of all three is that they are all pastoralists. Mela's enemies share the same world with them. In their strategy of conflict, the Mela always strive to maintain a balance of intergroup relations. For example, at the end of 1975 they performed the peace-making ceremony to end a war against the Mursi, and in February of the following year they launched a large scale attack against the Su.⁷

Historical background of the Mela

The data included in this section are derived mainly by tracing the location of tombs of clan ancestors mentioned in oral tradition. Clan elders are well informed about the location of burial places of their ancestors, and tracts of land are named after some natural feature or cultural association.⁸ By matching movements

referred to in tradition against such place-names, it is possible to trace the course of Mela territorial expansion. Although pseudo-historical statements may be included in this account, nevertheless it can serve as the basis for reconstructing Mela history, as Buxton (1963) also assumed in connection with the Mandari. Present-day Mela (Hana and Gura) comprise three population strains which have been assimilated over the years. These are: (i) the earlier indigenous population; (ii) the Saigesi and other clans whose ancestors are believed to have conquered the present territory of the Mela; and (iii) groups of people who immigrated into the territory over the years.

The indigenous population is said to have included the Idimit (Kwegu), the Oimulit and the proto-Mela. The Kwegu were engaged in hunting-gathering over a larger area than they occupy today. Two of their clans, the Solgut (Kudhun) and the Gali, merged into the present Mela. The Oimulit raised cattle and goats on the plain, before they were driven by the ancestors of the Saigesi to the Hamar country, and are said to be the ancestors of the Hamar. Only a few Mela are knowledgeable about the Oimulit, who are said to have merged into the Mela. One the other hand, most Mela are well informed about the proto-Mela, or the 'true Mela' (*Mela chim*). They consisted of three clans: Mineguwa, Ajit (Elma) and Kilingkibur. The Mela say the present Melaland belonged to them. The Mineguwa's seasonal movements took place between a place called T'eba during the rainy season and Mungur in the dry season, both of which are located between Gura and Mara. The Ajit (Elma) moved between Wora near the Elma River during the rainy season and Buchuwa at the junction of the Elma and Mago rivers in the dry season. When the ancestors of the Saigesi conquered these areas, the Kilingkibur fled to Hamar and Karo territory, while the other two clans, Mineguwa and Ajit, merged with them.

The first Saigesi invaders were led by a man called Delkaro, son of a chief called Dobulkama from Sai near Maji. They moved into the Mara area at the present northern boundary of the Mursi territory in search of pasture for their cattle. At that time, Mara belonged to the Kwegu, and the Mursi lived in a place known as Lukui in the lower part of the Omo. The Kwegu attacked the Saigesi and killed Delkaro, whose followers belonged to four clans: Timbach, Gilgu, Limech and Golme. They buried Delkaro at a spot called Lechelugu, and a bull with a *seroji* (mixed colour) hide was slaughtered. There was no chief for one year following the death of Delkaro. The following year, Dobulkama from Sai became chief, only to be rejected soon afterwards by the group.

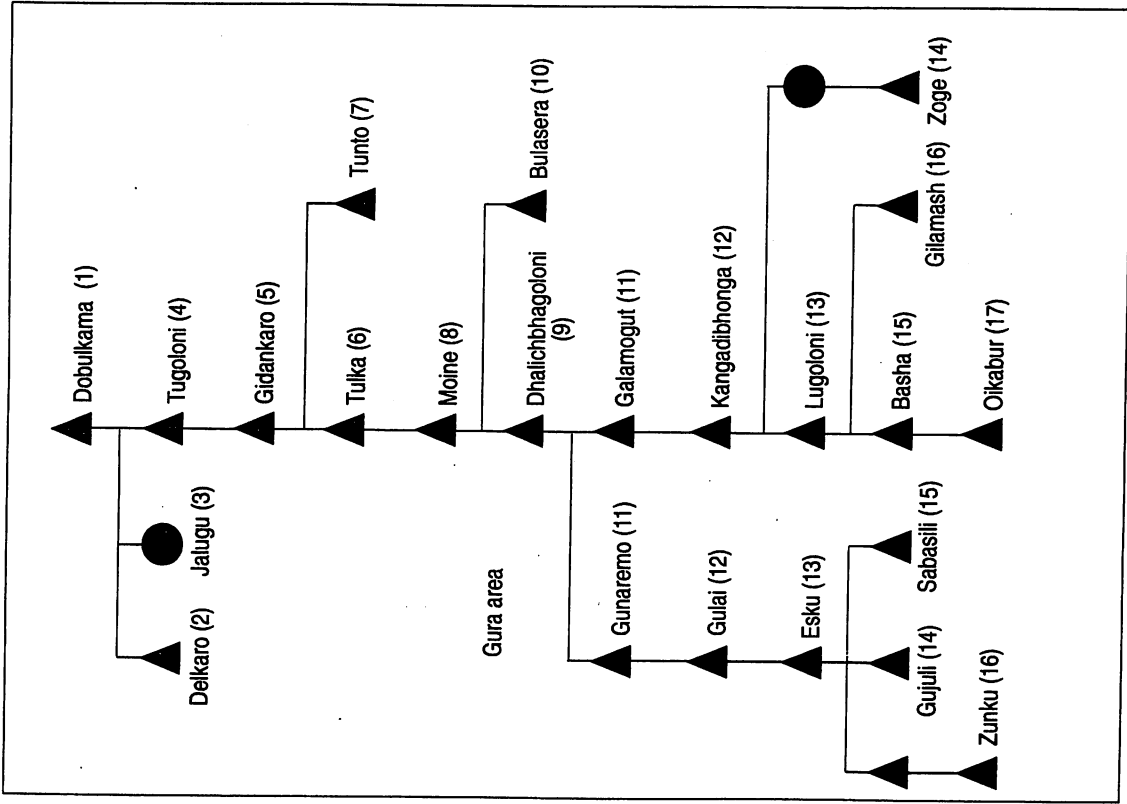


Figure 2 Genealogy of Mela komorut (Saigesi clan)

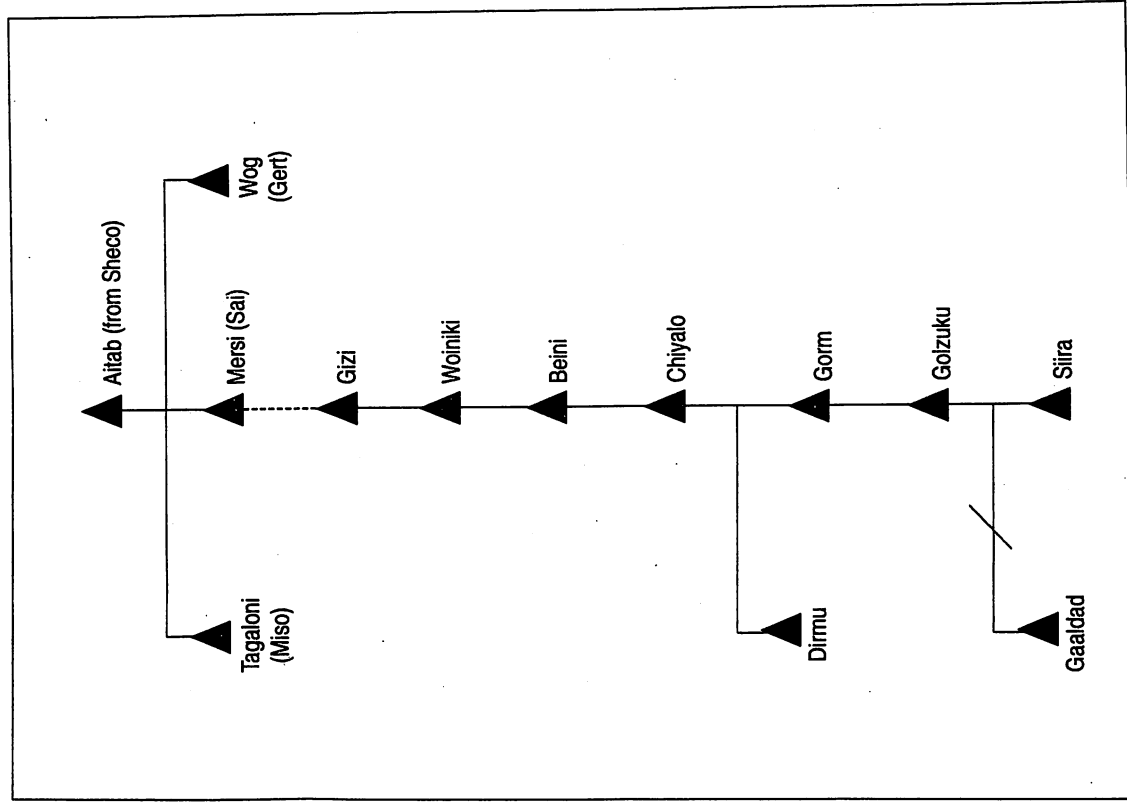


Figure 3 Genealogy of Sai komorut (Saikiyasi clan)

Then Delkaro's younger sister, Jalugu, was installed as chief. She and her group stayed at Lechelugu for three years and at Kologa for four years. There were constant disputes among them. Before long, Delkaro's half brother, Tugoloni, came from Sai, and there was talk of making him chief, but he refused. Jalugu tried to move into Mara with her followers and drowned in the Omo River during the rainy season.

Those who stayed in Lechelugu were often attacked by the Kwegu, and asked Dobulkama of Sai for help. After three days, he arrived with his younger brother Gartaso. Dobulkama advised them to return to Sai, but Tugoloni refused, and decided to settle in the Mara area along with Gartaso, their families and their livestock.⁹ There they were joined by those who had stayed behind in Lechelugu, as well as by two clans, Gula and Marka, who came from Sai. On the fourth day after they arrived, they slaughtered an animal to install Tugoloni as chief (*komorut*). Seven days later, they attacked the Kwegu in Mara, Hana and Sigidan in the northern Omo valley. They killed some, and captured others, whom they exchanged for cattle with the Gabiyo-Me'en to the west of the Omo. The descendants of the Kwegu, who became clients (*gaima*) of Tugoloni, remain in Sigidan to this day.

Gartaso died of sickness at Talba towards the lower part of Hana. Tugoloni and his group attacked the Mursi and moved into Zingei on the lower part of the Mara River. Then he moved to Oso (Saala) in the middle section of the Mago River, and then to Tutubach in Gura. He finally died at Dhaama in the Hana area, and his tomb made of large stones is at a place called Chobur near Dhaama. The descendants of the Saigesi (Ulkui) continue to pay visits there to make offerings of cow's milk and blood, tobacco and coffee at the tomb of their ancestor Tugoloni. Tugoloni's eldest son, Gidankaro, succeeded him. After his installation, Gindakaro, who had been born at Oso, moved to Tekawoch in Gura and then to Ch'ao near the Oso, and died of sickness at Chamowa in Gura. Tulka, his eldest son, succeeded him and was killed by foreign raiders in the Oso. His younger half-brother, Tunto, succeeded and moved to Gorku in the Hana area. He had six wives, though his period in office was short, and he died at Jomeli at the lower end of the Hana River.

Tulka's eldest son, Moine, was installed as *komorut* and moved to Kanchuwa in the Hana area and then to Kelechuchu in the same area. His burial place is not known. Dhalichbhagoloni, Moine's eldest son, was born at Moizui in the Hana area. After he succeeded his father, he moved to Jakuku and Delmagoloni and finally died at a place called Selo; all these places are located

in the Hana area. He is said to have been a great *komorut* with five wives. His descendants are called Biologu, after the name he bore as a young man. After Dhalichbhagoloni's death, his younger brother, Bulasera, succeeded him, but his period in office was short. He was succeeded by Galamogut, Dhalichbhagoloni's eldest son, who moved near Dildi to the west of Bol (Gerfa), which is the southernmost village in Dimeland. His older half-brother, Gunaremo, fought against him and became *komorut* of the Gura area, thus splitting the group into two sections. The Gura *komorut*-ship has been retained by Gunaremo's agnatic line to the present day. Galamogut died at a place named Lalanyu between Hana and Gura. As his eldest son had died previously of sickness, his second son, Kangadibhonga, succeeded, and later moved to Alumu in Chirim country and raided for cattle. Afterwards, he moved to a place called Suluchu near Sigidan in the Kwegu area, and eventually was killed by Esku, who later succeeded to the Gura *komorut*-ship.

Religious and kinship strategies for merging populations

The oral tradition cited above forms the basis of present-day Mela ideology. The office of *komorut* passes through the agnatic line, but only sons born from five particular clans qualify for installation. These clans are Timbach, Mineguwa, Ajit, Gali and Gerfa. Among these only one, Timbach, originated in Sai, having migrated with Delkaro, the first Saigesi invader. The others are clans whose ancestors belonged to peoples conquered by the Saigesi. Two of them, Mineguwa and Ajit, belong to the group called 'Mela *chim*' ('true Mela'). A fourth, Gali, is one of the clans of the Kwegu, and the Gerfa belong to the Dime group of hill farmers. Girls belonging to these clans decorate themselves with the same red necklace, called *gala*, that the *komorut* wear.

The position of mothers and sons relative to the office of *komorut* is illustrated in the case of a recent *komorut* in Hana. His first wife belonged to the Ajit clan, one of the clans that qualify for office, but she died after giving birth only to a daughter. Had she given birth to a son, he would have become *komorut*. His second wife belonged to the Dombuloch clan, ancestors of which had migrated from Sai, and her son was rejected by the Hana people. His third wife belonged to Ajit, and the *komorut*, named Oikabur, was her eldest son. He was installed as *komorut* in January 1974, but died in 1976. His younger full brother succeeded him and is *komorut* now. The fourth wife belonged to

Gulach, a Chirim clan; therefore, her son, though older than Oikabur, did not qualify for office. The fifth wife belonged to Gali, another clan that qualified for office, and her son was nominated to become *komorut* before Oikabur, but died soon afterwards.

The Mela still identify with Sai, the ancestral land of the Saigesi clan, which played a central role in their history. After the installation of a new *komorut*, he and his followers travel to Sai near Maji to perform a ritual together with the chief of the area, who himself claims descent from the same line as the *komorut* of Melaland. Interestingly, a headman of the Kwegu also participates in the ritual. They slaughter a male calf and purify each other with its blood. Cows are presented to the Mela, and the Kwegu headman, who is called the *gaima* of the *komorut*, drives the cow back to Melaland.¹⁰ When they reach the *komorut*'s compound, they slaughter another male calf and purify the necklace stones they brought from Sai. Cows brought back from Sai are called *bheliyach*, and their milk is used in rituals to confer fertility on humans, animals and plants. The *komorut* sprays such milk over his cattle every morning, and over his followers during rituals held on special occasions — for example, when they are preparing for a fight.

The undercurrent of population movements

It is obvious that an ethnic group is not a separate and impervious unit, but one that is in a constant state of flux in relation to its neighbours, merging with one, separating from another, over the course of time. Such population movements are reflected in the group's historical consciousness and ideology. Whether the Saigesi conquest is a real historical event or merely a myth, it is the corner-stone of Mela ideology. It explains why the putative descendants of those who are believed to have come to conquer Melaland continue to return to the 'home country' to demonstrate their historical lineage. The cows they bring back reaffirm not only their ethnogenesis, but also their subsequent integration and expansion into the Mela.

Of course, conflict is not waged for its own sake, but for desired objectives. For the Mela, the principal objective is control of territory, but this is not simply a process of straightforward expansion. It may be comparatively easy to dislodge a few individuals from their land, but it is much harder to displace an entire population from its territory when the groups are evenly

matched militarily. It is better to compromise with one's opponent from a position of strength after a series of attacks.¹¹ The Mela strategy seems to be not simply territorial conquest, but to impose on opponents the status of *gaima* (client) and incorporate them by means of affinal kinship links.¹²

The conclusion of a Mela-Chirim conflict offers an illustration of this process. They fought for two years, nearly two generations ago, when Zoge, the present *komorut*'s grandfather's cross-cousin, was chief. The Chirim were forced to flee to Nyomonitland, beyond the Omo, where they stayed for three years. One evening a Chirim *komorut* came to the compound of the father of the present Hana *komorut*, who had succeeded Zoge in the mean time, and said: 'Now our conflict is over. I offer one of my daughters to you. I will be your *gaima*.' Afterwards, many Chirim came to cultivate the fields of the Hana *komorut*, and stayed for about three years.

Once another group is merged into the Mela as a client, the Mela do not attack it. The ethnic groups whom the Mela do not attack are the Sai, the Kwegu and the Gerfa. The Sai are one of the Su groups, from where the *komorut* ancestors are said to have migrated, as noted above. The Kwegu were the original inhabitants of Melaland and were conquered by the Mela, becoming Mela clients later. The Gerfa are a subgroup of the Dime, who live in the eastern mountainous area. According to Mela oral history, they also were conquered by the Mela, and have now become their clients. The Gerfa people sometimes join Mela attacks on the northern highlanders, as do some of the Kwegu. Though both the Kwegu and the Gerfa are sedentary groups, they join the Mela in attacks against other sedentary highlanders, in return for patronage and protection. The Mela trade their livestock products for the agricultural produce of the Gerfa. The Gerfa thus play an indispensable role for the daily subsistence of the Mela, especially in critical times.¹³ The repeated attacks in the past 30 years by the Mela against the other Dime cultivators may indicate that the objective of the recurring conflict is to reduce the latter to the same client status as the Gerfa and Kwegu. Raiding for cattle, therefore, is only one aspect of the conflict. Another, it can be said, represents the undercurrent of Mela expansion and an element in the process of their ethnogenesis.

Notes

- 1 That is, from the group, not the individual, point of view (Barth, 1969).
- 2 Bodi is the name given to the two subgroups of the Me'en on the east bank of the Omo, the Mela and Chirim, by the neighbouring agricultural people and the Ethiopian authorities. The Me'en themselves do not use this name.
- 3 Field research was done during thirteen months between 1973 and 1976, and for some weeks in 1989 and again in 1991.
- 4 Hana was divided into four *kebele* (administrative districts) when I visited there in 1989, but there seemed to be little government influence in the area.
- 5 Personal communication from Professor H. Fleming, whom I met in 1984 at the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, in Addis Ababa.
- 6 The Mela held a peace-making ceremony with the Mursi at a place within Mursi territory called Zinninya, which is on the southern side of Mala River, and slaughtered a white male calf. The ceremony was arranged through the Mursi's approach to a friend in Gura called Golondoli. After eight months the Mursi came to Melaland to slaughter another white male calf for peace-making.
- 7 The Mela attacked the Su several times in February and March 1976.
- 8 The historical background of the Mela is detailed in Fukui (1988).
- 9 I heard almost the same story about Tugoloni when I visited Sai in 1989. Sai people call the Mela *mela-kijyasi* and themselves *sai-kijyasi*.
- 10 I got the same information in Sai, but the former *komorut*, called Oikable, had died without visiting Sai. His younger brother, who succeeded him, visited Sai for the special ritual after he was installed in Hana.
- 11 Turton (1979), on the other hand, sees a territorial movement in Mursi-Bodi relations, as does Tornay (1979) regarding population movements in the lower Omo.
- 12 When I visited the Mela in 1989 and 1991, I found they had expanded into the eastern mountainous area that was originally Dumeland. But the hill farmers had not yet offered any gifts to the *komorut*, although they had provided him with beer and labour to cultivate his fields.
- 13 Most of pastoral peoples in the lowlands have a symbiotic relationship with some highland agricultural people.

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