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# Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa

## Volume I: Ethiopia and Kenya

Edited by Günther Schlee  
and Elizabeth E. Watson



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# The Fate of the Suri: Conflict and Group Tension on the South-West Ethiopian Frontier<sup>1</sup>

*Jon Abbink*

## Introduction

The Suri people in south-west Ethiopia are one of the minority groups (numbering about 28,000 people) that under Ethiopian electoral law have automatic representation in the Ethiopian House of People's Representatives because they do not form a unit large enough for an electoral constituency. Since 1995 the seat for the Suri had been occupied by Guldu Tsedeke, a promising young Suri man and well accepted among the people themselves. He was re-elected with a large majority in May 2000 as an independent candidate (i.e. not affiliated with the ruling party). In early January 2002, this MP was killed in a shoot-out in Suri country, when he had gone with a few friends to negotiate with a wanted Suri murder suspect. This was also the man who shot him.

The death of Guldu Tsedeke, a major Suri figure and the first one to more or less successfully mediate politically between the modern Ethiopian state and Suri society, is a starting point of my chapter discussing group tensions and conflict in the poly-ethnic Ethiopian Southwest. The case – to which there was no political background – is indicative of what I see as a serious crisis in a society that has not yet come to terms with itself – or with the problems posed by the era of authoritarian state formation and of locally manifested globalization. Here I focus not only on the state impact on local societies but also on the ramifications of changing alliances and identifications among and within the groups themselves. A debate on such changing realignments of small and 'peripheral' groups in 'ethno-federal' Ethiopia is timely and challenging (see James et al. 2002 for a recent collection on this topic). In the southern Ethiopian regional state there are, besides a few large groups like the Sidama, Wolayta, Gamo and Gurage, dozens of such numerically smaller groups that

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1. The author and editors wish to express their gratitude to the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, and to the Taylor and Francis Group (London), for their permission to use a paper published in the journal as the basis for this chapter.

form an essential part of the dynamics of the multi-ethnic heritage and current politics of Ethiopia (see Abbink 1998b).

In the past fifteen years or so, a notable increase of violent local group conflicts was evident in south-west Ethiopia, as incidents were recorded not only between certain ethnic groups and the state (as with the Hadiyya, the Maale and the Me'en), but also among and between groups, for instance Anywaa ('Anyuak') and Nuer, Gedeo and Guji, Bodi and Dime, Mursi and Ari, Boran and Hamar, to name but a few. A number of these conflicts – which left many hundreds of people dead – relate in part to customary patterns of rivalry and raiding that existed in the past (see Fukui 1979). This link, however, is always made by government administrators and power holders to excuse their own inaction or inability to de-escalate the problems. It does not provide an explanatory argument for current fighting and the new forms it takes. First, the nature of conflict has significantly changed: more arms are involved, more people are being killed and the rules of engagement are changing and those of reconciliation deteriorating (see Young 1999; Abbink 2000c; Tronvoll 2001). In addition, the army or police in Ethiopia are rarely sent to contain the problem, and people know this, so the fighting escalates. Thirdly, partly due to post-1991 state policies, there is an essential difference in the conceptualization of and response to conflict. Current group differences and disputes are now referred to, including by many local people, as being 'ethnic'. This line of thinking is predictable and easy to resort to but, as a kind of cultural-essentialist argument, it is not convincing. People seem to fall unwittingly into the trap of adopting the state-sponsored discourse on ethnicity. While not denying the great importance of ethnic belonging and its social, emotional and cognitive roots in the *habitus* of people, I contend that it neither constitutes people's entire social identity nor provides a full explanation of their behaviour and their choices.<sup>2</sup>

The basic theoretical question is always how and why conflicts of interest come to be seen exclusively in terms of 'ethnic antagonism', and whether it is helpful to act on such a perception. Cultural-essentialist views have been discredited in anthropology for quite some time (for a good historical discussion, see Kuper 1999). So this chapter ties in with a theoretical debate on the dynamics of ethnicity and conflict, a field where several theoretical traditions dominate: the resource competition theory (see e.g., Markakis 1998; Homer-Dixon 1999); symbolic theories referring to pre-existing cultural differences (the Geertzian approach in anthropology); and perhaps theories of hegemonism as a sociocultural phenomenon. I would opt for the last line of thought, but would plead for extending it with what I would call humiliation theory.<sup>3</sup> Here, prestige, honour and identity issues are seen as cultural or social constructs, which, though based on material differences and

conflicts of interest, are the cultural-psychological models on which humans act and which become engaged in inter-group relations. Often images of stigma are involved: perceptions of low status that structurally attach to certain communities (for a pioneer study, see Goffman 1963). The above models of and for action are related to questions of belonging, autochthony and survival, and as such are obviously also important in the dealings of local groups with the state. Especially in this context, where a new hegemonic state project is in full swing in southern Ethiopia, there is a need for a systematic analysis of the construction and dialectics of humiliation in the settings where it is produced.<sup>4</sup>

Among the disturbing local conflicts in southern Ethiopia one can now also reckon those between the Suri and their neighbours. In these conflicts, no political-ideological agenda is evident. They are about survival, resources, local rivalries and prestige. In this intricate dialectic, seen from the Suri viewpoint, there are several categories of problematic outsiders with whom they have differences. First, the Suri distinguish between the Dizi, the Me'en and Ethiopian government representatives, and a second category of people whom they consider to be their 'real enemies', like the Nyangatom, the Toposa (in Sudan) and the Anywaa. Quite another third category includes people related to them through language, culture, marriage bonds and ritual relations: the Mursi and the Baale (which is not to say that they don't have problems with them).

In what follows, I briefly discuss the various levels of conflict and see whether there is a process of identity (re)definition and of (re)alignments going on, and whether there are prospects for a more peaceful development, whereby issues of sharing – of resources, peacemaking procedures, ideas of development – can be encouraged. On this basis, it is possible to venture an answer concerning the future identity and patterns of alliance of minority groups like the Suri. The question is urgent because people are being threatened, wounded or killed, almost on a daily basis, and there is a deep feeling of insecurity in the Maji area.

### Suri Society and Economy

The Suri live in a sensitive border area of Ethiopia and Sudan, which has been a major venue for arms, cattle, slave and ivory trade in the past (see Garretson 1986). Even in recent years, Suri have purchased or traded arms from across the Sudanese border, and Ethiopian lands are subject to frequent raids from Sudanese ethnic groups like the Toposa, who wreak havoc among Suri cattle herds and have forced them to migrate to the north-east. The presence of an Ethiopian *Fet'no Derash* army contingent – a 'rapid reaction force' of about fifty to sixty soldiers – dispatched by the central government a couple of years ago, ostensibly to 'protect' Suri from attacks from neighbouring troops and keep the peace, has not made much impact. It seems more concerned with gathering intelligence and keeping the Suri in check, rather than moderating the actions of foreign invaders.

2. Which await investigation and evaluation in a comprehensive, critical manner, despite the spate of papers and articles published in recent years. The emphasis has been on formal political developments and policies, not on their effects on and 'appropriations' by ordinary people.
3. There is a growing body of literature on this theme. But a systematic theory linking psychological, social-structural and cognitive aspects is still underdeveloped. For a very interesting study, see Miller 1993.

4. This is not to say that people who are 'humiliated' are always right in the factual or moral sense; we are analyzing the social fact of people reacting in such terms to intensifying contacts, challenges, conflict, and hegemonic state policies.

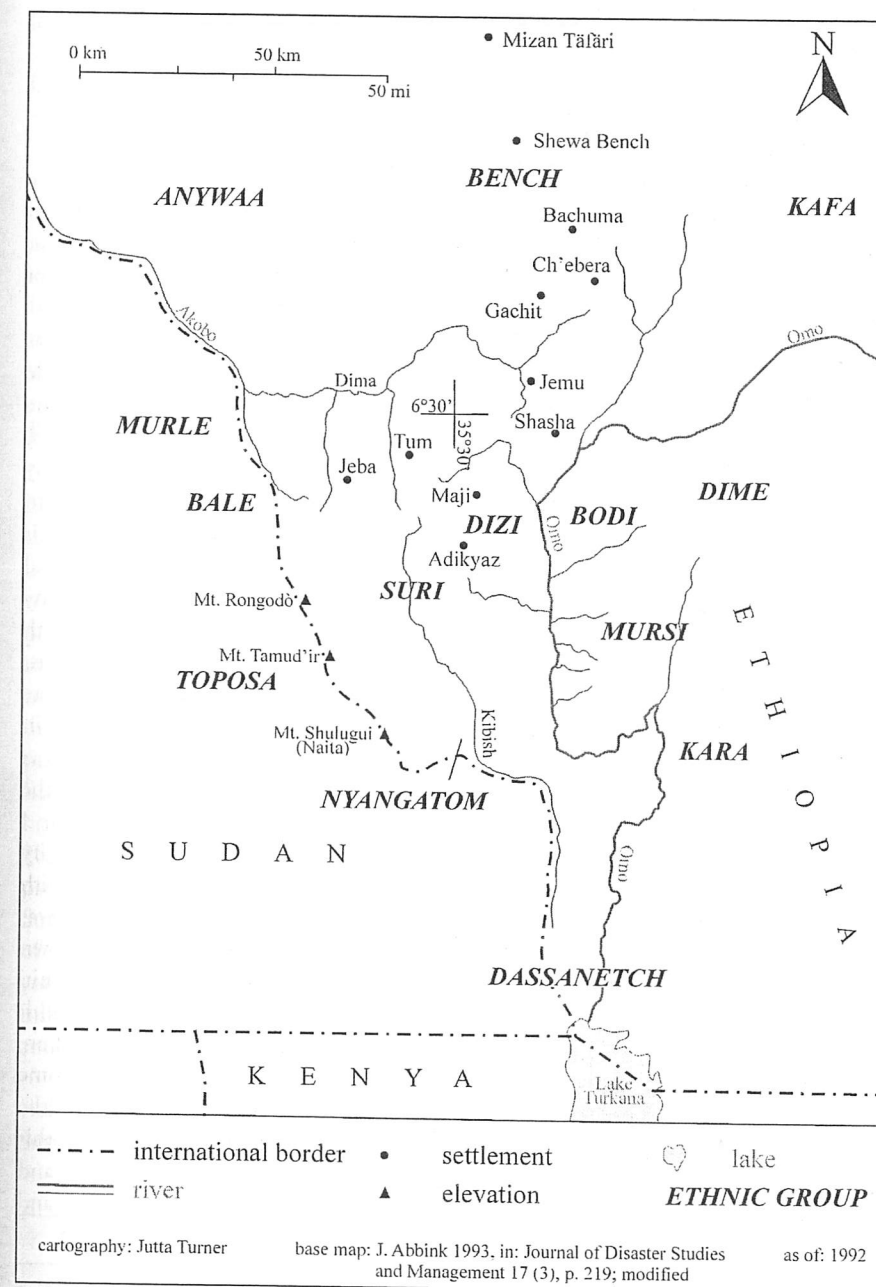


The Suri are an ethnic formation that, according to their oral tradition, emerged some 250 years ago in the Sudan-Ethiopia border area. Historically, the Suri were located around the Shulugui mountain (also known as Naita) on the border with Sudan, an area now occupied by the Nyangatom. Here their most important ritual places are located: the burial sites of their ritual leaders (the *komorus*) and the places of initiation of age-sets (done about every twenty-five to thirty years). Suri also used to get several vital ritual materials (plants, ritual paint, coloured stone) from this area. The Suri see this place as the 'stomach' (in Suri: *kyengo*) of their country; it forms the core centre of their cultural space, and now is also a *lieu de mémoire*. Their area of settlement is now about fifty to sixty kilometres to the north, close to the Dizi mountains and the western Akobo valley (see Map 1.1).

Their society is an agro-pastoral adaptation to a savannah lowland area of insecure rainfall. Suri have mixed origins, with ancestry from neighbouring groups such as the Dizi, Me'en and Baale and perhaps others in Sudan (Murle). The two subgroups of the Suri – called Tirmaga and Chai – again have diverging origin stories. The language of the Suri is a Nilo-Saharan one ('Surmic' subgroup) and very different from that of most of their neighbours. (Only Baale and Mursi have a similar language.) The Suri are also historically related to the Didinga, Narim and Murle in Sudan.

Suri form a kinship-ordered society, with an important role for patrilineal clans (for marriage exchange, ritual functions). Political authority is vested in a senior age grade of elders, and in a ritual leader without executive power, the *komoru*, a function embodying values of community peace and communication with the supernatural. Territorial organization is in the form of villages and of trans-clan herding units with cattle camps. Suri economic activities are rain-dependent cultivation, panning and trading of alluvial gold and especially livestock herding. The management and expansion of cattle, which are individually owned (although lineage agnates have a claim to it as well) but herded collectively, are the generative social mechanism and ideal in their society, explaining much of Suri behaviour. Cattle take a prominent place in daily life as a medium of exchange, as well as in cultural representations. Historically, the Suri have always practised cultivation and herding as complementary activities. In addition, they practised hunting and gathering.<sup>5</sup> They also trade, on a small scale, livestock, pottery, gold and game products with the people around them, including the highland villagers. They are therefore partly dependent on contacts with these neighbouring groups, more than they would like to admit.

In a cultural sense, Suri are acutely aware of their being different from other groups. They also cherish their virtually autonomous situation in a marginal border area. They never felt stigmatized or inferior. Their cattle-herding way of life is preferred by them above what they see as the dull and toiling farming life of their highland neighbours like the Dizi and the villagers in Maji. There is an enduring resistance among the Suri towards becoming settled peasant cultivators as the Ethiopian government would like to see. Suri cherish egalitarianism and personal



Map 1.1 Approximate location of the Suri and other groups in the Omo and Akobo valleys.

5. The Suri until recently intensively hunted in the nearby Omo National Park (buffalo, hartebeest, giraffe, antelopes; some species, such as elephant and rhino, have disappeared).

independence. Women are prominent in social life and can own cattle and small stock, but never participate in herding.

There is a discourse of 'culture difference'<sup>6</sup> between Suri on the one hand and Dizi and other highlanders on the other, which has become more influential in the past years. Suri express disdain for the 'short-statured, toiling highlanders' and for the absence of any aesthetic body culture among them. They see no charm in a lifestyle without ceremonial duelling and, above all, without cattle and the entire cultural complex related to it (naming, cattle songs, dietary customs, ceremonial initiation, etc.). The cultural representations involved here also constitute Suri notions of personal dignity and achievement.

The Suri always show strong group pride and as a rule shun the highland areas and state control as much as possible. They have some respect for the Me'en people and for the Nyangatom, although the latter are their traditional enemies. The greatest contrast and antagonism that they experience are with the agents of the state. This dates back to the moment of their incorporation into Ethiopia in the early twentieth century. In the imperial era they were seen as roaming nomads in faraway border areas, without much interest to the state. Under the Derg regime this perception did not change much, despite the new revolutionary rhetoric of equal rights, as they were considered part of a 'primitive-communal' society with many 'harmful customs' and a lack of education and knowledge. The actual contacts with the government were not conducive to development and rapprochement. The last army post in the Suri area was abandoned in 1988; the two primary schools were closed shortly after. In the later years of the Derg, the Suri became embroiled in conflicts of various kinds with virtually all of their neighbours: Me'en, Dizi, Anywaa and Nyangatom. There was only an uneasy alliance, or at least tolerance, with the Mursi on their eastern border.

Under the EPRDF (*Ehadig*) government, the Suri were redefined as a minority in need of development and education, but continued to be seen as a group with 'harmful customs' and a violent record. Their agro-pastoral way of life was considered to be inefficient and backward. Suri at present have been given their own *woreda* (district) within the Bench-Maji Zone, and virtually no non-Suri lives within its borders. Since 1994, there is a local 'Surma Council' (*Surma Mikir Bet*) with eleven Suri members, with a changing membership. The places on this council are coveted because of the government salary they bring. The *woreda* has some government offices in the small village of Kibish, near an old airstrip dating from the late 1960s when several foreign missionaries were living there (see Tornay, this volume). Non-Suri don't like to serve in this Zone and especially in the *woreda*, and it is not without risks either. In the past five years, several police officers, teachers and

agricultural agents have been killed in shoot-outs and brawls in the Suri area, not to speak of local Suri, Me'en and Dizi people. Transport facilities are bad, the climate hot and malarial, and remuneration is not noticeably higher than elsewhere in the country. The only attraction is that it facilitates (illegal) trade in alluvial gold (sold in Addis Ababa), which the Suri pan from local rivers and sell locally to outsiders.

In the last decade, the groups in the Maji area were more drawn together in a common political arena, confronted with a new regional policy and a formal recognition of 'ethnic rights' by the new government. But this has led neither to visible socio-economic improvements nor to a more peaceful settlement of disputes. In some cases even the appeal of people to their own presumed ethnic identity and rights has tended to reinforce conflict, and in some respects becoming 'too equal' with others has generated more problems itself.

### External Conflicts

In southern Ethiopia, the Suri people have an exceptional place. Living in a remote border area as largely autonomous agro-pastoralists, they have built up a reputation of trouble and violence among their neighbours. Suri feel that they are masters in their own land – the lowlands south-west of Maji town, extending into Sudan – and they recognize no overlords. They know that the Ethiopian government and its army are powerful, but also that it is difficult for the state to control the Suri in their own remote lowland region. Not all Suri pay taxes, nor is it possible for the government to maintain a strict monopoly on the use of violence. The Suri self-perception of independence and autonomy is the basis of their vigilant self-defence and of their preparedness to use force. In this, they are not exceptional compared with many other East African pastoral groups. The nature of the pastoral economy almost by definition brings them into conflict with neighbouring groups, notably the Nyangatom and Toposa. But in the past there used to be social contacts with these groups, bond partnerships, some trade and a code of fighting.<sup>7</sup> All this is now rare: Nyangatom and Suri do not meet, except for some of their young (zonal) leaders in Awasa (the capital of the Southern Region) when they are called there to attend policy meetings. These young leaders, who are drawn into the agenda of the ruling party, do not have much influence yet on the rank and file of their peoples, although in recent years the zonal and regional authorities have been able to call peace meetings (2006–2007).

At present, group relations in the Maji area are still marked by tension and violence. This holds for: (1) Suri – Nyangatom (aim: territory, guns, cattle); (2) Suri – Toposa (aim: territory, cattle); (3) Suri – Anywaa (aim: gold, money);<sup>8</sup> (4)

6. The term 'culture', as relevant in the local discourse on group relations and enmity in the Maji area, refers to nothing else but the socially constructed and inherited repertoires of difference – in lifestyle, cognition and values of honour, identity or dignity – between human groups. (Locally, in Amharic, people talk of *dānb*, not *babil*. *Dānb* means 'the rules', 'the customary ways of doing things'; *babil* is song, dance, theatre, etc.: the non-problematic, folkloristic culture.)

7. Which included the giving of coded warnings before an impending cattle raid, no burning of pasture, no poisoning of wells, no killing of cattle, no raping and killing of women.

8. Anywaa were not 'traditional enemies' of the Suri. Incidents with the Anywaa have occurred over approximately fifteen years in gold-panning places on the northern fringe of the Suri area and also in Dima, a frontier town on the River Akobo where the gold is sold. Since 2000, the town is part of the Gambela Regional State, where Anywaa are powerful. In Dima, visiting Suri are frequently robbed of their gold and money. Anywaa, because of their alleged deviousness, are seen by many Suri as their worst enemy.

Suri – Dizi (aim: territory, cattle, girls, clothes, money). To a lesser extent the Suri have problems with the Me'en people, who live on the escarpment east of the Akobo valley and Maji (see Map 1.1). The aim here is also to get cattle, guns or girls.

In the conflicts with these groups there are obvious material interests (see above), but also immaterial ones like 'prestige' and fighting feats to attain 'status' within their own peer group. I do not elaborate on this, but it is an element not to be neglected in a complete analysis of Suri (and other groups') violent performance. In their conflicts with Me'en, villagers and especially Dizi, the aim is also to intimidate. In their confrontations with the Toposa, Nyangatom and often also Anywaa, the Suri are usually the losers. I shall comment on two of the most important conflictual relations: between Suri and Nyangatom and Toposa; and between Suri and Dizi. I shall also discuss in more detail the relations between the Suri and the state.

### *Suri and Nyangatom and Toposa*

The Suri call both the Nyangatom and the Toposa 'Bume'. These are two allied peoples and speak the same Para-Nilotic language.<sup>9</sup> Since the mid-1980s, they have been encroaching on Suri lands. Nyangatom have driven the Suri out of their core area at the Shulugui (Naita) and the T'amudir hills and usurped their best pastures and waterholes.<sup>10</sup> Before the early 1980s, the Nyangatom (some 13,000) were at the receiving end of Suri violence. The Toposa (about 75,000 people) were located further west in Sudan and, before the 1980s, were not much engaged with the Suri. The migration of Kenyan Turkana up north, as well as the chaos of the Sudanese civil war, has pushed the two groups into Suri country. In the early 1990s, the Toposa obtained a regional edge as they were formed into a so-called 'tribal militia' and were well armed by the Sudanese government. Toposa raids occurred almost every one or two months in Suri country. Due to the change in alliances, there is now a pressure on Suri 'resources' related to the pastoral economy that was never there before. But it is not only resource pressure that causes problems for the Suri way of life. The Chai Suri (the largest group) have been robbed of their prime ritual places around Shulugui (see above), and also feel thwarted and impoverished in a cultural sense. Indeed, when talking about the recent past, almost all Suri recall with nostalgia the life at Shulugui and in public debates and private conversations express their frustration at not being able to go back. Only in 2007 a period of *détente* started, with a number of successful peace meetings between the three groups, both in Ethiopia and Sudan. They were held under the auspices of the zonal authorities and seem to have notably reversed enmity, opening up possible new alliances.

9. According to Bender (1976: 59) these languages belong to the Eastern Nilotic branch of the East Sudanic subfamily of the Nilo-Saharan language family (Editors' note).

10. The original, rather fluid border between 'Bume' and Suri ran from below Mt. Shulugui to the River Omo, up to Kara country. For about the last ten years it has run from Mt Rongodò to the Dirga Hills, just south-west of the River Omo bend near the Mursi area (see Map 1.1). The Suri have also lost virtually all of their transhumance pastures in Sudanese territory.

### *Suri and Dizi*

For about eighteen years, there has been a notable increase in violent incidents with the Dizi. Dozens of Suri and hundreds of Dizi (a population of some 26,000 people) were killed in armed incidents. Some of the worst of these were a massacre of forty-three Dizi people in the village of Kārsi, in 1990, as revenge for the killing of a Suri man in a fight with a Dizi, and a similar killing in Kolu in 1993, with thirty-five Dizi killed, including the chief of Kolu. The cold-blooded murder by Suri youngsters of three young women later in 1993 was also deeply resented by the Dizi. The same year the Suri raided the big Dizi village of Jeba and killed twenty-three Dizi and three policemen.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, attacks on Adikiaz, Jeba, Kolu and even the outskirts of Tum, the district capital, have left a few dozen people dead. The list is long, and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.<sup>12</sup>

The increased tensions with the Dizi (and also with the Me'en) are directly related to the breakdown of the Suri-Nyangatom relationship. It seems to be a simple case of displacement of aggression. No longer capable of properly retaliating and regaining their cattle from the 'Bume', the Suri seek replacement from the Dizi. As the Dizi are an ill-armed sedentary population<sup>13</sup> and have some cattle, they are an easy target for Suri raiders. Dizi do not venture into the lowlands in pursuit of the Suri. They are a very frequent victim of both cattle theft, raids on houses and ambushes on the roads.<sup>14</sup> In view of the past relationship between Suri and Dizi this development is surprising and alarming. The Dizi are ancient settled cultivators in this area with a hierarchical chiefly society. Suri arrived later from the south and entered into contact with them. Both Dizi and Suri traditions maintain that their leading families share common descent and cannot intermarry, although the common people could. Historically, both groups had a kind of ritual alliance whereby the Dizi chiefs were recognized as having rainmaking powers. In times of

11. Not only Dizi but also the Me'en have been victims of Suri raids, especially after the EPRDF regime made a major effort to disarm them. Me'en are locally seen as the best fighters. In late 2000 the Me'en in the Gesha and Kella areas had had enough of Suri attacks and ambushes and staged a carefully planned and well-organized retaliatory raid, whereby they took about 5,000 Suri cattle: one of the largest raids ever seen in the area. Some months later the Suri randomly attacked the Me'en area, killing thirty-four people, burning down 165 houses and taking away some cattle. The Me'en by that time were hampered by lack of weapons and ammunition. Government intervention or mediation failed.
12. A record kept of violent incidents with dead or wounded for the years 1990–2007 has at least one violent incident per month between either Suri, Dizi, Me'en, Nyangatom, Anywaa or highland villagers. I estimate the number of fatal casualties in these years to be at least 1,300, most of them Dizi. The total 2007 population of the groups combined is about 190,000.
13. The Derg government confiscated all their arms and the EPRDF regime only allows some militia to carry (registered) weapons. These are also of a lesser quality or older types. In contrast to the Suri, the Dizi are easily checked on the possession of arms.
14. An account on the plight of the Dizi, strongly written from their point of view and to be read cautiously, is the unpublished report of Addis Ababa University sociologist Abeje Berhanu, *The Dizi People and their Neighbours (a Report to the House of the Federation, Project on the Least Known Peoples of Ethiopia)*, Addis Ababa, 1999. See also Abbink (1993a).



drought the Suri went to the Dizi chiefs to plead and pray for rain, and a ceremonial sacrifice of a black ox was offered. When the Suri had a food shortage, cattle disease or other problems, they were permitted to enter the Dizi areas. Both groups still have economic exchange (cattle, pottery, iron products, grain, garden crops), but relations have steeply deteriorated in the last decade. For example, intermarriage has virtually stopped and the ritual alliance is no longer upheld. The Suri also see the Dizi as too closely allied to the state. Numerous efforts at mediation, including a few ceremonial reconciliation meetings – with a cattle sacrifice, cutting of the peritoneum and a joint meal – were tried in the past fifteen years, but none has lasted for long.

#### *Suri and the state*

Apart from the tension with neighbouring groups, Suri have serious problems with the state, which means in this context with local administrators and government agencies. This relationship has been tenuous for most of its history. Suri first met representatives of the Ethiopian state in the form of the imperial troops under Ras Wolde-Giorgis Aboyye in 1898, but did not enter into contact with them. The rule of Emperor Menilik II (1889–1913) condoned the autonomy of the Suri area, although Ethiopian northerners who came to settle in Maji and Jeba villages made excursions into Suri territory for hunting and trading and occasionally for raids. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, a cautious policy of rapprochement was started. Some administrative posts and primary schools were set up and, for a few decades, the Suri paid taxes. In terms of group relations, this period was relatively quiet, apart from the usual cattle raiding.

The Derg period is universally seen by local people as one of crisis and violence. The 1970s and 1980s, however, saw the emergence of wider regional tensions in northern Kenya and southern Sudan, as well as drought and food crises. In other words, certainly not all problems were due to government policies, although group relations between Suri, Nyangatom and Dizi deteriorated during the Derg era, and there was an increase in armed incidents. Government efforts to mediate did not succeed, and its drive to recruit local young men for the Derg army fighting in northern Ethiopia-Eritrea was deeply resented. Suri people were also victims of occasional violent reprisals from government forces, which deepened distrust towards the state.<sup>15</sup>

Under the EPRDF regime since 1991, efforts were made to mediate in local conflicts (see Abbink 2000c), in combination with an increased army presence in the area. The EPRDF forces in 1991 and 1992 took a cautious approach and tried to negotiate and create a dialogue with the people. They did not take punitive action after cases of Suri-Dizi violence (leading the Suri at first to qualify the soldiers as 'women', whom they should not be afraid of). But a series of incidents in 1993, in which Suri massively attacked Dizi settlements (in Kolu, Dami and Adikyaz) and,

more importantly, killed several EPRDF government soldiers in the Omo National Park and in Kibish, led to strong retaliatory action by the army. In a violent confrontation in late October 1993, an estimated 220 to 250 Suri, mainly women and children, died. Subsequently the violence diminished, but did not disappear. Suri antipathy and indifference towards the government (any kind of government) remained strong.

Since 1995 the Suri have had their own local council, and political co-optation and negotiation by the state continue with the gradual formation of a new group of young Suri leaders who have received jobs in the local and zonal administration. Even though they may be co-opted into a state structure where they have little real influence, Suri now do have some voice in the higher echelons of the state. They are formally represented in the local and regional administration and in the national parliament on the basis of an ethnic quota system. In this sense, their peripheral position as an 'ethnic minority' or 'nationality' has now become a kind of privilege, because other local people – for instance, the dispersed descendants of northern settlers in southern Ethiopia and living in the villages – are not politically represented.

#### **Internal Responses to Violence within Suri Society**

While the Suri have often inflicted untold suffering on their neighbours – like the massacres of Kärsi village in 1990 and Kolu in 1993, the gunning down of the young girls in 1993 in Adikyaz, the massacre in the Me'en area in early 2000 – the effects of such persistent violence bounce back and are felt within their own society. The dynamics of violence have an underestimated and unforeseen effect on the social structure of such small societies (see Hutchinson 1996, 2001; Elwert et al. 1999). Among the Suri, external crisis did not generate more internal solidarity against enemy groups; it seems to have had the opposite effect. First of all, the boundary between the two subgroups Tirmaga and Chai became more pronounced. Furthermore, Suri men fight among each other, over women, over cattle gained in a raid, over compensation payments, to settle scores at duelling places or while performing preliminary rituals for a raid. Often, excessive alcohol use (the local Suri beer *gèso* and *aragè*) is the trigger and, when automatic rifles are available, they are used. In all of such cases there are bereaved wives, children and parents, who mourn and demand redress (with the threat of vengeance killings always close). Empirical behavioural evidence, such as lower birth or child survival rates, family fragmentation, malnourishment, feelings of insecurity and grief, as well as effects like loss of labour power and loss of cattle due to more compensation payments to be made, reveal that the psychological toll of killing and death is high (see also Gray, Volume II). The frequency of grief inhibits people's long-term well-being and leads to what are called post-traumatic stress disorders. Married women especially have been increasingly voicing their concern and arguing with men over the new levels of violence.

The neighbouring Dizi, in their search for an explanation of Suri violence, often say that 'the Surma don't care about human life, it is nothing for them to lose someone'. But, as evident from often-heard private complaints, the Suri survivors do feel the loss and they do see the problem, but they don't know how to stop the

15. One notorious incident was in 1986 when the Maji administrator invited a number of Suri men to a meeting in Maji to resolve a case of cattle raiding. When they were gathered, he had them tied up and shot. A number of them died, the others escaped. Suri took revenge a year later with attacks on people on the roads near Maji, whereby a number of people were killed.

violence. The young men have guns, carry them around everywhere and use them. A reconstructed image of the Suri male as an independent, assertive, gun-toting person afraid of no one and with the capability to use force to realize his aims has settled in Suri society. This new 'masculine' identity, which reinforces gender oppositions and conflicts, is a far cry from the former Suri 'warrior' persona of the old days as someone who defended the herds, who respected a code of the proper use of violence and who did not kill women and children on raids. Suri elders and also the Chai *komoru*, who are aware of the tragedy unfolding among their people, disapprovingly cited to me a few years back the ugly incident of a mass killing by young herders of cattle captured by the Nyangatom. When the Suri saw they could not recover the animals taken by the Nyangatom, hoping to hit the retreating raiders between the animals, they machine-gunned a large number of the animals from a distance. This was an unprecedented event.

Violence as an almost daily occurrence, or the threat thereof, has imprinted itself on the minds of the young generation: children see their parents or relatives falling away and their households crippled by the loss of labour power, affection and social support. As Chisholm (1993) has pointed out, there is a strong negative impact of such life-history experiences. Some of the negative effects are visible in social life.<sup>16</sup> I briefly mention several domains.

The topic needs further research, but it can be said that, in the wake of the newly articulated ideals of individualized masculinity, kinship ties are getting weaker, in that people in trouble get support from their kin less easily. Also the pressure on the bridewealth system is increased: not only have guns entered the system as part of the deal, but also arguments about the exact division are more acute. There is a growing demand by 'wife-giver' clans to receive more and faster as well. Thus, affinal alliances are under pressure: husband-wife relations become more strained and a tendency for males to neglect spouses and children becomes visible. Women with children are forced to use staple grains (sorghum and maize) for brewing alcoholic *gèso* beer, often for sale, rather than for feeding their own family properly. The health and nutritional situation of Suri children is, as a consequence, often precarious.

Also clan and lineage relations are under strain. The customary requirement to pay compensation cattle in case of accidental or wilful homicide is increasingly contested. As a result, the threat of feuding between the group of the victim and that of the killer, which always used to be 'bought off' with the compensation payment, has correspondingly grown. There are many unresolved feuds today. Some of them even extend into the kin group of a ritual leader: one *komoru* called Wolezoghi (from the Muge'i clan of the Tirmaga) was killed more than a decade ago, but the case – in itself unprecedented in that a *komoru* was killed by a fellow Suri – is still not resolved. Agnates of both perpetrator and victim regularly kill a member of the opposing clan.

The crisis in the age-grade system, specifically that of the loss of authority of the reigning age grade of elders over the youngsters, was evidence of internal disarray (see Abbink 1994, 1998a). The core relationship between the grade of the unmarried

young men, the so-called 'warriors' (or *tègay*, i.e. uninitiated), and that of the junior elders, called *rórà*, was disturbed because of the younger grade getting weapons and venturing out on their own. Since about 1989, Suri males have obtained automatic rifles (M-16s, AK-47s, GM3s and others). This has had a big social impact (see Mirzeler and Young 2000 on the Karimojong). The youngsters could ward off claims of the elders, and even stall their own initiation, because the new age-grade identity would have meant a responsibility they did not yet want. They extended their period of youthful exploits, of which using a gun was a major one.

Ceremonial duelling events have become more aggressive and dangerous, as the duelling grounds are occasionally arenas for shoot-outs that have nothing to do with the duelling itself (see Abbink 1999, 2000a). Duelling is a strictly regulated male combat sport among Suri of different herding units.

The position of the ritual leader or *komoru* is still there, but he is less heeded than in the past. Among the Tirmaga, *komoru* authority is slightest. The Chai *komoru* Dolleti V, who died in July 2001, was an authoritative person and had at least some restraining influence. He was replaced by a 'caretaker' *komoru* – one of his brothers – but an official successor is not yet installed.

In addition, an interesting cultural phenomenon is that the force and relevance of Suri ritual in itself are contested. While Suri society is highly ritualized where all significant social relations and statuses are established by ritual acts, in recent years their force has been waning. This was most readily apparent in the decade-long delay of the initiation ceremony for the senior age grade (see Abbink 1998a: 341–42). Also the cleansing ritual for homicide when an enemy group member is killed – and which requires the sacrifice of livestock – is less strictly performed.

Among the Suri today there is a pervasive sense of disruption and disintegration created by internal violence. It is deeply regretted, especially by elder Suri, and is seen as more problematic than the external violence. Perhaps people now realize fully that their society had always been ridden by latent tension and strife between kin groups and individuals. The system worked when the authority and role of the leading age grade and the *komoru* were still respected. But, due to dramatic conflict between Suri and the neighbouring pastoralists (especially Nyangatom and Toposa), the new wealth through the gold trade and the unforeseen aggressive power of youngsters of the *tègay* grade, it crumbled. The aforementioned killing in 2002 of their MP Guldu Tsedeke was another, and most acutely felt, illustration of this crisis.

### Tourism and Missions

The story so far has made it clear that the Suri are not an isolated population but had contacts (though limited) within the broader regional setting and with Ethiopian society. At present they are caught up in an inexorable process of incorporation into a wider field of forces constituted by: (1) the regional-international conflicts in northern Kenya (Turkana-Nyangatom-state conflicts), leading to ethnic migrations to the north; and (2) the ongoing Sudanese civil war, leading to a flow of arms and ammunition and also to population movements; and (3) tourism and missionary influence. Here, I comment briefly on the latter. Together with the Mursi, the Suri are sought out by mainly Western tourists as one of the few 'really primitive tribes'

16. For a revealing analysis of similar dramatic changes in Nuer society, see Hutchinson (1996, 2001).



still to be found in the African countryside – they are advertised as such in certain travel agency brochures. The encounter with tourists is aggressive and abrasive: in the absence of a shared language or a mutual interest in each other's humanity and because the principle of reciprocity is flouted during these encounters, the meetings are abrasive experiences for both parties (see Abbink 2000b). The Suri do not really accept the tourists, and they try to exploit them. They have not developed a relationship of simple commercial exchange (of pictures, goods and cash), but reproduce, time and again, an emotionally charged confrontation where the Suri express their contempt for the foreign 'other'. The tourists in their turn want to see their 'authentic, primitive tribe' but rarely want to be drawn further into their way of life, except in the form of takeaway photographs. This situation of 'double refusal' is rare in Africa (see Abbink 2000b).

Since 1994 there has been a mission station in the small village of Tulgi, in the Tirmaga-Suri area, staffed by American and Ethiopian missionaries. They have a programme of education, agricultural instruction, infrastructure development, medical care and Bible translation. There is a local church with regular services. The missionaries teach by example, and in the past years a community of about 120 Suri converts has emerged. It is too early to say what the impact of the Christian mission will be on the Suri. A previous missionary effort in the 1960s evaporated in the 1980s under the Derg regime and has left little legacy. But in the field of Suri local leadership and cultural orientation there may now be significant changes in the making. Suri are also reflecting upon how the Christian belief will affect their traditional notions and rituals, to which they remain attached. However, the need for change is felt, and the attraction of the evangelical message of peace and reconciliation, as well as its promise of social and economic connection to a wider global community of believers, is recognized.

### A Non-adaptive System?

The Suri have a crisis between generations, an excess of small arms and a lack of internal peace between clans and lineages, and they live in permanent insecurity with regard to raiding threats, rainfall and food supply. They did not succeed in forging minimal alliances with neighbouring groups who share the natural and cultural space with them (such as cattle pasture, waterholes, forest items, game, cultivation sites and the old ritual burial and initiation places). Neither were they successful in getting the new regional government to take their problems seriously or to secure adequate representation on the level of the regional state (in Awasa). This is now improving, but the number of Amharic-speaking<sup>17</sup> or educated Suri is still very small. No doubt their being largely monolingual has inhibited communication with other groups, villagers and state agents.

So Suri society and economy are 'beleaguered': on all sides they are under pressure. In the south and west, the Nyangatom and Toposa are encroaching steadily and limit their pasture area. Most Suri herds (of both Chai and Tirmaga) have moved up north

into the less favourable western Akobo Valley and near the eastern flanks of the Boma plateau. In the east they are confined by the Dizi mountains and government pressure, in the north by the Me'en (Tishana), who will not allow them to move in. While the Suri make raiding incursions into both areas, territorial expansion, settlement or herding there is not an option. In this respect, Suri are in a very difficult situation.

Their response to crisis has been one of disengagement, militant self-defence and violent entrepreneurship (the youngsters). Suri fear the government threatening their cattle wealth and will not submit to rules and regulations that impair the state and growth of their livestock or their autonomy. It is also a fight for respect to be shown to their identity and way of life as they are now, to which they, as one of very few peoples in Ethiopia, were able to remain attached. Their remote and inhospitable environment has so far helped them to keep up this attitude, but as this natural space is shrinking they will be forced to consider other options.

In the past the various groups in the Maji region were loosely allied and had open boundaries. Groups coexisted in simultaneous relations of violent incidents (raiding) and peaceful exchange of goods. Persons had bond partnerships and could be adopted as members in other groups. For example, some Tirmaga-Suri clans have Dizi and Me'en ancestry. The existence of shared rituals and codes of violent performance about which informants talk when referring to the 'pre-Kalashnikov era' before the early 1980s suggests that there was a kind of regional 'ethno-system' that in some way prevented excesses of violence between groups (although this is not to suggest that Suri society was a harmonious, integrated society). Alongside the cattle raiding, homicide and armed clashes that occurred, there were accepted ways of resolving and compensating for them. This system is known from other areas in the Ethiopian south. At present, such a system – which, however, should not be idealized either – is lacking or at least in steep decline, and an alternative adaptation based on indigenous principles but geared to modern conditions is not yet in sight.

In addition, the Ethiopian state has not succeeded in replacing the previous system with one of equitable dispute resolution or legal redress. Its policies are highly prescriptive, are imposed and rely on the ultimate use of force. As we know, the post-1991 regime started a policy intended to empower local 'ethnic groups' by engaging their representatives in local-level government, self-administration and education, although state agents retain control and follow their own agenda of political co-optation. The state is working through (self-created) loyal ethnic elites connected to the regional and national level, and is not aiming at grass-roots decision-making. The Surma Council is thus also – predictably – used as a conduit for implementing national policy (in the same way that the previous regime used the districts and peasant associations).

### Conclusions: Changing Alliances?

The question as to the future fate of the Suri is a relevant one. If they do not succeed in the rehabilitation of their social relations and in restoring their measure of unity as a group under new local leadership, they will have a hard time surviving as a pastoral economy and as a people. Their economic base and their autonomy, not to speak of their group pride or identity, will come under great pressure, and they will

17. Amharic is the working language of the Southern Regional State.

remain a pawn in other people's games, including more powerful neighbours and, of course, the state authorities.

To summarize, the forces of change that reshape their society at present are: (1) persistent tensions and violent exchanges with neighbouring groups; (2) the Protestant mission, introducing the globalizing narrative of Christianity and trans-ethnic solidarity; (3) the slowly expanding system of state political surveillance and local/zonal administration and of education (primary schools); and (4) material and infrastructural developments: the need for periodic food assistance and disease control, trade needs, monetization and the opening up of the area by new roads. The simple fact of a new access road to the Suri area will have major consequences. A major all-weather road was completed from the town of Mizan Tāfāri to Tum, the *woreda* capital of Surma and Dizi, with extensions planned further south to the Nyangatom area. This will do more than anything to 'open up' further the Suri area to external influences – state representatives, traders, missionaries, 'development' people and tourists – and will include the arrival of AIDS.<sup>18</sup>

So the Suri will not be left alone. Their area has a strategic position along an eighty-kilometre stretch of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, and a growing economic relevance because of the gold trade, game resources and the potential of tourism in the two national parks (Omo and Mago Parks, developed with a major EU-sponsored initiative in the past years). While there is no doubt that Suri society and identity will be vulnerable to the hegemonic projects of the various categories of stakeholders, they will be forced to redefine their role in the region and to survive as agro-pastoralists through the forging of partnerships and alliances with other groups in the Maji region. This area remains a vast realm of several ethnic/social groups that are mutually dependent.

There is no doubt that these various hegemonic processes will reproduce the images of backwardness and 'primitiveness' about Suri among the various parties, most notably tourists, developers and the state. A cultural boundary of difference, if not condescension, will be confirmed. A significant indication here was the prohibition by the Ethiopian authorities of Suri ceremonial duelling a few years ago because it was 'too violent'. For the Suri, such a prohibition – which was not heeded – is a humiliating gesture. It foreshadows a complex, evaluative debate about 'good and bad culture', and also about the right to continue valued traditions that define people's identity vis-à-vis others. Due to the 'collectivization' of identity and of political rights in Ethiopia, these issues will be even more contested in ethnic terms. The ethnic administration model in Ethiopia, both rhetorically and practically, is thus crucial in reshaping perceptions of the importance of culture difference, redefining group relations and creating new forms of collective self-consciousness, whether these are based on the 'facts' or not.

To a large extent, Suri chances lie in exploring and building alliances and shared concerns with other groups in the Maji area: Dizi, Mursi and Me'en foremost, as they had alliances in the past and are interdependent today. Such a block of more than

140,000 people might try to develop joint efforts around local problems of resource sharing and economic activity, hold periodic consultations, start projects of phased disarmament and enhance mutual cultural exchange (e.g. joining each other's collective rituals, which in fact was regularly done in the past). This is a daunting task ahead in view of the current tensions and distrust, but only then will these groups be meaningful vis-à-vis other regional players. The Ethiopian state should play a backstage role: not impose its model of 'development' and authoritarian political power, but only facilitate and work towards partnerships on the basis of equity, investments and a working legal structure. While such an approach would be in line with its officially declared policy of 'ethnic rights and autonomy', it is likely that the state will continue interfering and prescribing governance, 'peace' and 'development' in its own characteristic way. However, on the level of the newly emerging local elites (of Suri, Dizi, Me'en, Nyangatom, etc.), co-opted by the federal state, such new understandings of shared interests and cooperation may eventually be built, perhaps with the help of the emerging 'trans-ethnic' Christian community. Among the various ethnic groups, innovative leadership and the restoration of channels of peaceful negotiations and reconciliation rituals are necessary for it to happen: this means looking for continuities amidst change, and there are signs that this is indeed tried.

Currently, the small-scale societies in south-west Ethiopia are in a process of transition from ritualized, kinship-ordered social structures to territorial ones, partly defined by economic processes and by state bureaucratic discourse. This transition will lead to fragmentation and dispersal and to horizontal realignments among social strata of various ethnic groups and to normative pressure on their cultural traditions, thus subverting the model of ethno-cultural identity and organization that was proclaimed to be the future of the ethno-federal state. Trans-group alliances between group elites, based on concrete common interests and compromise politics and in tune with the cultural commitments of the ethnic groups' rank and file, will be a way forward. But this chapter suggests that social and political conditions at present are not conducive for these kinds of alliances to happen soon. As the killing of Guldu Tsedeke has shown, some of these small-scale societies in this area are not even at peace with themselves and have to solve their own specific problems of leadership and economic adaptation in order to establish such alliances.

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18. Once this disease enters the ethnic communities in the Maji area, disaster looms for them because it will probably spread rapidly.