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**Cross-ethnic clan identities among  
Surmic groups and their neighbours:  
The case of the Mela**

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**1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In 1989, the German anthropologist Günther Schlee published an interesting and innovative study on *inter-ethnic clan identities* among Cushitic-speaking peoples in the Northern Kenyan, Ethiopian, and Somali borderlands (Schlee 1989), which threw a new light on the nature of *ethnic identity*. Based on fieldwork among various groups in this region (Boran, Gabbra, Somali, Rendille, Sakuye) he noted that people often saw their clan identity – based on a putative group descent line – as much more functional and pervasive than ethnic or “tribal” identity. Across the ethnic groups “... a dense web” of clan ties existed (Schlee 1989:2). Observations on the primacy or durability of clan ties were also made by other researchers, among them David Turton in his work on the Mursi (1993:174; 1994:20). This idea undermined the (mistaken) assumption that ethnicity or ethnic ties are

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stable over time; instead they are the issue of shifting political contacts (cf. Schlee 1989:5), and not established by cultural, linguistic or genetic criteria. Clan identities are much more reliable evidence of common origins than ethnic identities.

In their field research among Southwest Ethiopian Surmic peoples and some of their neighbours, the authors of this chapter have also been surprised by suggestive trans-ethnic clan links across groups. It seems, for instance, that the clan name "Mela" now appears in several adjacent ethnic groups. That is, there are people who claim origins or clan membership as "Mela", but who may claim an ethnic or linguistic identity as Me'en, Chai, Tirma, or Majangir (all members of the Surmic cluster of the Nilo-Saharan language family). Some observers (e.g., Muldrow 1976, see below) have also suggested that among the Omotic-speaking Dizi people such an identity might exist.

Members of this Mela clan share a patrilineal identity based on descent through the male line, and which reaches beyond their "ethnic" or "nationality" identity. However, the full extent of these ties is not yet known – partly because some clan names may have changed and because of distinctive processes of assimilation. But there are at least a few suggestive connections between these varying, now widely dispersed, groups.

We intend to look here at some of these connections, based on the case of the "Mela". The clan name Mela (or a form very close to it), is found among at least two ethnic groups. This label is not similar to any known ethno-linguistic unit, but seems to be a clan name only. More important, however, is the related fact that the trans-ethnic Mela clan identity points to other connections between these ethnic groups in terms of migrating clans or lineages which have been *absorbed* into an ethnic group, often to a remarkable extent. The fact that the Dizi have produced groups which were absorbed into the Surma and both the Bodi and Tishana Me'en (originally all agro-pastoralist lowlanders) may come as a surprise in view of the big linguistic and cultural differences and the present state of enmity between them (cf. Abbink 1994 and the chapter on the Chai in this volume).

This phenomenon of trans-ethnic clan identity is different from that of members of one ethnic group being absorbed into another ethnic group but retaining their original ethnic identity as a clan identity within their new host group. For example, some Murle people have become absorbed into the Nyangatom, but their clan identity is counted as "Murle" (Tornay 1981a, 1981b). Such situations have also been described among the Dassanetch (Sobania 1978) and Mursi (Turton 1979). Both in this case and in that of a group still existing under its previous "clan name", there is a very significant extent of absorption and assimilation. The retention of the

ancient clan name in itself does not predict any corporate identity or exclusive position, although Schlee's work has shown that such a clan identity can indeed be maintained in a meaningful manner, e.g., in terms of ritual identification and activities, occupational specialisation, or the simply inferior status of "immigrant groups" among the larger host populations. The Surmic groups and their neighbours seem numerically to have been too small to allow such differentiation. Furthermore, their origins can be traced only with utmost caution.

## 2. General location of groups and clans

Muldrow (1976:603) described the ethno-linguistic situation in the Maji area of southern Ethiopia as follows:

In times past, intertribal movements have taken place which make it possible for a single individual to identify himself with two or more tribes, though he may speak only one language. For instance the Mela clan of the Me'en tribe has sections in both the Dizi and Surma (also known as Chai) tribes.<sup>2</sup> All trace their origin to a common ancestor whose descendants split three ways. One group went into the Surma area and through intermarriage became indistinguishable from them in language, appearance, and custom. Another group so intermingled with the Dizi tribe that they have become indistinguishable from it except that they still maintain their clan ties across three tribal boundaries.

While this statement is fascinating, it is also speculative, and based on unsubstantiated or incomplete information (the author was at the time not in a situation to gather systematic data on the subject). Certainly the intermingling described has been occurring (and still is) in terms of cultural borrowings, economic practices, or intermarriage. But in our recent research, much more has become clear about the actual clan and lineage structures of the peoples in question and about the alleged trans-group identities or nomenclatures. Thus, some of Muldrow's remarks have to be qualified. First of all, as a general point it is important to recognise that the Dizi *don't have* patrilineal descent groups such as clans. Consequently, they don't have names for such corporate identities based on unilineal kinship. Their system of kinship is based on the kindred, on bilateral descent lines reckoned through the mother and the father. Dizi "clans" or lineages can thus never have migrated or dispersed as such towards other groups, and certainly not with the retention of a "clan name". The Dizi groups which migrated away consisted of families around a certain local leader or chief

<sup>2</sup> The "Surma" mentioned by Muldrow are not only the Chai (formerly called "T'id" in the travellers' literature and by the local northerners) but also the Tirma. Incidentally, the term "tribe" is now no longer used in anthropology as a meaningful concept.

(see below). Secondly, the Dizi did not – as Muldrow suggests – absorb a Mela group from the Me'en "tribe" (sic) but the other way around: part of the Mela group within the Bodi-Me'en traces descent from a Dizi chiefly group. (This is clear from the work of Fukui and, more recently, from that of Deguchi 1992.) Thirdly, the line of dispersal is not uni-directional, from one group to the others, but also in reverse order.

Thus, the groups in which some common clan identity is found and where extensive inter-group migration has been taking place over the past centuries are (at least) the Me'en, Dizi, Chai, Tirma, and Majangir. In this chapter, we will treat only a few of these connections.

### 3. Me'en origins and the Dizi connection

Analysis of local oral traditions seems to suggest that the Mela originated among the Me'en, an agro-pastoral group living in the lowlands along the Omo river. Fukui (1979, 1988, 1994) has written of the Mela among the Bodi section of the Me'en (who count about 3500 to 4000 people):

Members of the Mela sub-group take pride in their own identity and stress that their ancestry are different from Tishena and even from those of the Cirim sub-group. (Fukui 1979:149–150; the Cirim are the other part of the Bodi section)

The Mela are one of seven sections of the Me'en ethnic cluster ... They are divided into two territorial units called Hana and Gura ... [t]he chiefly lineage of both Mela territorial units, Hana and Gura, came from Sai 10 generations ago, and even now the Mela chiefs visit the Sai chiefs to perform a ritual. (Fukui 1994:34, 37)

The Sai are the Dizi group living on the Sai mountain east of the town of Maji. It is an ancient Dizi chiefdom. The Sai are obviously *not* to be identified with the *Chai*, who are part of the Suri or Surma agro-pastoralists in the lowlands east and southwest of Maji. What is interesting is that the Bodi Me'en have come to adopt members of the chiefly line of the Sai Dizi (that of a man called Delkaro, a son of the Sai *kyaz* Dobulkama, the incumbent chief, most likely in the early nineteenth century) as leaders within their own society. This was perhaps because of the latter's recognised powers of rain-control and their sacrificial services provided to the Mela (an idea still present among the Tirma and Chai vis-à-vis other Dizi groups). As Fukui said, one of the constituent units of the Mela were "the Saigesis<sup>3</sup> ... whose ancestors are believed to have conquered the present territory of the

Mela" (Fukui 1994:39). The Sai are the group "from where the *komorut*<sup>4</sup> ancestors are said to have migrated" (Fukui 1994:45), that is from the Dizi area (Fukui consistently calls them "Su", which is the name of the Bodi for the Dizi but also for other agricultural highlanders bordering them (like Dime or Aari), and curiously enough does not once mention their self-term "Dizi").

In claiming that the Mela were originally a Me'en clan Muldrow was right, although we have to note that in actual fact the Mela were made up of several elements (cf. Fukui 1994:39): (1) the indigenous population to the area east of the Omo River (which comprised the Idinit or Kwegu; the Oimulit); and the "proto-Mela" (although this must be a term of Fukui's, not of the Mela themselves). These are also called the "real Mela", or, in Me'en: the *meela chim*, consisted of three clans: the Mineguwa, the Ajit and the Kilingkabur); (2) the group coming from the Dizi: "... the Saigesis and other clans" (Fukui 1994:39); (3) the groups of additional immigrants over the years (ibid.).

The reference to the "true Mela" as being indigenous is very interesting, confirming that the Mela did indeed originate in a Me'en area, despite the fact that the present Me'en Mela chiefly lineages partly contain people from the Sai Dizi. Among the Sai in the Dizi highlands, however, there was *no* "Mela clan".

Muldrow also noted that the Mela spread from the Me'en to the "Surma" or "Suri" (Chai). This is a second claim which stands to be examined.

### 4. The Suri connection

The people variously called "Suri" (usually called "Surma" by the Dizi and other Ethiopians) comprise three groups: the Chai and Tirma, Southeast Surmic speaking groups, and the Baale (or Baleethi), speaking a Southwest Surmic language, much closer to Murle. On the basis of our recent fieldwork on ethno-history and clan names in the Maji area, it can definitely be said that among none of these three groups exists a clan named "Mela" (see Abbink, forthcoming). However, there are other connections, perhaps now disappeared under the surface of conscious clan history. For instance, the followers of Delkaro, who came from Sai and were absorbed into the Mela (see above), were said to have been of four clans: the Timbach, the Gilgu, the Limach, and the Golme. These clan names have not been found among the Dizi, who, as has been said, have no clans, but some of

<sup>3</sup> Plural of Sai.

<sup>4</sup> *komorut* is the Me'en word for 'ritual leader'. The Tirma, Chai, and Mursi have almost the same term: *komoru*.

them can also be found among the neighbouring groups: Timbach (pl. Timbá) is a clan name among Tirma, Chai, Tishana Me'en, and Mursi (as well as among Mela and Chirim), while Limach (pl. Limá) is found among the Tishana Me'en (cf. Abbink 1992:356).

There is also one group among the Tirma which claims Tumura origins ("Tumura" is the ethnonym used by the Tirma and Chai for the Mela and Chirim, i.e. the "Bodi"). This group, now seen as a clan (in their language: *kèñò*, or sometimes also: *kabi*), is called Ingangané, and is said to be of Mela origins. They are also called *fiḅala*, after the local leader who led the migration from the Omo area to the Kibish region where the Tirma now live. Dizi and Tirma elders suggest that the Ingangané came to the Kibish area "... before the other Tirma arrived there". This group is now indistinguishable in language and culture from the other Tirma, and the fact of their different origins was not seen as anything special or surprising.

We conclude that while there is no group with a Mela clan identity maintained among the Tirma, people of that origin (perhaps mixed with others) have indeed settled among the latter.

## 5. The Majangir connection

The strongest and most intriguing trans-ethnic clan link is that of the Majangir and the Me'en, partly because they are so far removed in geographic and linguistic space from the other Surmic groups. Stauder (1970) found the Meelanir clan among the Majangir. The singular form of the word is actually *meelan*, *-ir* being a plural suffix. However, *-n* is very often a marker of singular in Majangir (Unseth 1988): e.g. *baajen* 'male member of the Baajer clan'. Though the *-n* in *meelanir* does not delete in the plural form as in the above example, there is a strong pattern in the Majangir language to suggest that the earlier root of the clan name was */meela/*. We see then that the linguistic resemblance between Majangir's Meelanir clan name and "Mela" is strong.

According to Stauder's sources (1970:107), the Meelanir do not claim indigenous descent from the Majangir, but are said to be descended from the Dizi (the Omotic-speaking group living to the south of the Majangir around the town of Maji). Stauder's account of the origin of the Meelanir tells of the finding of a baby boy inside a rock. This baby is said to be the ancestor of the clan, though he is not known by a personal name. Hoekstra reports that the Majangir believed that the Meelanir "had come from a rock and were the offspring of God" (1995:256). Unseth has elicited versions of the story that did not explicitly identify the Dizi as the source of the

Meelanir, but the stories all agree that the Meelanir clan had a preternatural origin and came from the south (toward Maji). One man interviewed during fieldwork and who was himself of the Meelanir clan, also told the story that the Meelanir are descended from a baby found inside a rock, far to the south.

It is not surprising to find a tradition explaining the separate origin of a "superior" clan, but it seems indeed likely that the Meelanir did have a non-Majangir origin. (Among people of the more than seventy other Majangir clans, such stories about the origin of any of them have not been found.) Neither have we heard any Majangir mention any members of the Meelanir clan *outside* of the Majangir people, but the Majangir with whom one of the authors have had contact lived quite a distance north from the Dizi, Chai (Surma), and Me'en.

Among the Majangir, the ritual priests (called *tapad'*) are always from the Meelanir clan. During fieldwork, informants told Unseth that the Meelanir clan is also distinguished by the fact that only members of this clan were buried in caves, while others were buried only in holes dug down in the ground. (This was done only in areas where caves were available; it was not a rigid requirement.)

## 6. Conclusion

Muldrow, writing about the Maji area (1976) mentioned the Mela in the area and hypothesised that the Mela of the Me'en, Dizi, and Surma all had a common origin. Geographically, it is not difficult to connect the Majangir Meelanir with these other groups, although much remains uncertain and the precise lines can perhaps not be traced any longer. They need, however, not be strict lines of consanguinal descent, but can be those of association and assimilation, thus fusing kinship ideas proper with those of geographical propinquity. That is, residence often determines, or at least redefines, "descent" or "kinship".

We have shown the existence of the Me(e)la clan name among at least two different groups, as well as complex affinal and migratory connections between four groups of two different major linguistic clusters. Their present geographical distribution is close enough to say that it is inevitable that there have been repeated contacts among these groups. This is nothing remarkable in itself: only the ease with which apparently different groups associate and sometimes fuse – facilitated by a tendency of cultural flexibility and economic-ecological pragmatism – may be noteworthy.

The discovery of trans-ethnic clan names among Surmic groups may raise many more questions: Are there other clans also dispersed among ethnic groups in this area? Is the Me(e)la clan found among any other ethnic groups in the area? Equally intriguing is the question of Mela origins and identity through time. They seem to have been around at least for several centuries. What distinctive features (if any?) did the Me(e)la clan have, apart from apparently being a chiefly clan? On what basis did they come to be a chiefly clan? What was the role of military conquest in this? More data on the present distinctive traditions, customs, or ritual and other powers, if any, of the Me(e)la among the various groups must be gathered before we can hypothesise further.

As a general conclusion it can be noted that the case of the Mela and other migrating groups in the Ethio-Sudan border area shows that ethnic identity among these ethno-political formations – unless rigidified by official political discourse or externally induced resource competition – is never as static as is often thought, and that people do not identify or define themselves exclusively, or even primarily, on the basis of their presumed “ethnic identity”.

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