Famine, Gold and Guns: The Suri of Southwestern Ethiopia, 1985–91

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Over the past few years, the Suri have lived through a deep ecological and social crisis without substantial external aid from either the Ethiopian government or international aid agencies. They have experienced drought, cattle disease and an increasing level of violent conflict with their neighbours, leading to the severe disruption of their traditional agro-pastoral subsistence system and settlement pattern. Through migration, the exploitation of gold resources and investment in automatic weapons, however, they have managed virtually a full recovery of their economy and society.

The Suri, who number about 28,000 and are made up of two sub-groups, the Tirma and Chai, live in Kafa region in the far southwest of Ethiopia. They practice shifting cultivation, transhumant pastoralism and hunting and gathering. Their area is one of the most inaccessible and neglected in Ethiopia: there are no government offices, no public services, no roads and no police or army posts (Figure 1).

Their territory is a semi-arid lowland plain, covering about 4400 km², and between 500 and 1000 metres above sea level. Annual average rainfall (less than 1000 mm) is insufficient for intensive, permanent agriculture and even (as the drought and famine crises of the early 1980s testify) for regular reliable cropping by shifting cultivation. The soils, although fertile, are mainly rocky and unsuitable for plough agriculture. The vegetation consists of bushland thicket, wooded grassland and some riverine forest along the Kibish River. The tsetse fly is not widespread and conditions for cattle-keeping are good.

Game animals, which were once abundant, have been greatly reduced in numbers by ferocious local hunting.

THE 1985 FAMINE

Since the early 1970s the Suri have suffered a number of setbacks to their subsistence economy. Epidemics of cattle disease, including anthrax (probably introduced from Sudan), made large tracts of their traditional grazing area around Mt Naita (called Shulugui by the Suri) and along the Tirma Range a danger zone for herding. Drought caused severe crop failure and cattle losses, especially among the Chai, a Suri section living east of the Kibish River (Turton, 1984, p. 187). Since 1968 they had also been prevented from hunting in the Omo National Park, which was patrolled by game guards who were, until recently, better armed than themselves. They say they were defenceless in a double sense: not only did they lack food reserves but they also had too few weapons to raid their neighbours (principally the Nyangatom to the south) for cattle.

The crisis reached its zenith with the drought and famine of 1984–5, which informants describe as their worst period in living memory. Traditional coping mechanisms (intensification of hunting and gathering, emergency sale of livestock and raiding) proved inadequate and there were so many deaths that most corpses were simply covered with branches and leaves and left unburied. No doubt disease was an...
important contributory factor to the death rate, as De Waal found in his study of Darfur (1989, p. 7), but it is impossible to make an accurate assessment of this.

Several Suri groups migrated northwards to the Tulgit area, southwest of Jebra town, drawn both by the town itself and by the prospect of new grazing and cultivation areas. Around 1000 Tirma (the Suri who live west of the Kibish) crossed into Sudan to exchange cattle for grain with the local inhabitants (Bale and Murle) and to find new cultivation sites on the southern fringes of the Boma Plateau — an identical move to one they had made earlier this century. Under similar pressure, the Chai moved closer to the Maji foothills, turning traditionally regarded as belonging to the Dizi, who live on the Maji plateau. An additional reason for this northward movement of Suri was the military threat from the Nyangatom (see below).

The authorities in Maji eventually notified the Government’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) which set up a famine relief programme together with the non-governmental organisation, World Vision International (WVI). Planes landed at a small airstrip in the Kibish area (constructed by missionaries during the 1960s) and sacks of grain were distributed to the Suri. No relief camp was set up: the Suri, into territory traditionally regarded as belonging to the Dizi, who live on the Maji plateau. An additional reason for this northward movement of Suri was the military threat from the Nyangatom (see below).

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and Pat Turton have described such a pioneer move by a section of the Mursi, who settled as cultivators in the Mago valley at the end of the 1980s (1984). At present, however, this settlement has largely been abandoned, most of the migrants having returned to the lowlands. The Suri, like the Mursi, will be very reluctant to lead the life of settled farmers, especially if they have the option to strengthen their foothold in the pastoral economy. It should be recognized, moreover, that this attitude makes good economic sense since the growth potential of their herds enables them, in good years, to create substantially more wealth than is possible for the Dizi or Me’en. In addition, their new weapons have given them easy access to game meat from the Omo National Park (since the game guards fear their fire-power) and to the gold, the exploitation of which they have tried to monopolise.

SOME SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS

At the height of the famine, as resources available for sharing declined, solidarity between agnates, clan members and fellow villagers broke down and domestic units became more isolated from each other. A division also occurred within domestic groups, as men and women operated more independently of each other. Related to this were changes in the organization of labour, most of which proved to be short-term. Male household heads became more mobile, going hunting, visiting the relief distribution point, selling cattle, begging for food (e.g. among the Dizi) and panning for gold. There was little opportunity for clearing and planting, since most of the seed grain had been eaten. Women and young children spent much time gathering famine foods.

The intensity of trade with highland villagers increased after 1985. The Suri took goats and cattle, to exchange for grain, and gold, which was bought by traders in Maji and Jeba. This increased market exchange did not, however, have the effect of integrating the Suri into the regional money economy. They used it to funnel resources back into their own society, rather than as a means to acquire other commodities (apart from those of salt, razor-blades or cloth). Nor was it used as a means of exchange or ‘saving’ within their own community. Its main use was as a medium for dealing with outsiders.

A more long-term effect was a change in the balance of power between the generations, that is between the elders (bami or komin) and junior men (tegay and rora). Although the three komoru, or ritual leaders, of the Suri retained their prestigious hereditary position, their effective influence over the everyday affairs of the community had declined. Their advice about raiding, the location of new fields and settlements and the occasional government directive was listened to but not seen as particularly binding. This led to inter-community rivalry which shows itself in duelling contests. Finally, the control of the elders (including the komoru) and of the referees over the participants has declined.

Nowadays, the young men prolong the contests as they like; the members of a ‘losing’ team may grab their Kalashnikovs and start shooting (not always in the air) to show their frustration. The elders complain that the contests have lost much of their former attraction.

The increase in the number of contests may be due to underlying causes, such as (a) increased pressure on Suri society from the Nyangatom, which has made them nervous and aggressive but unable to vent this aggression against the Nyangatom without risking certain death; and (b) population growth (at least 3.5 per cent per annum over the last four years) and increased pressure on subsistence resources, which has led to visible environmental degradation. Settlements are situated much closer together than formerly and people are therefore brought into closer and more competitive everyday relations.

This leads to inter-community rivalry which shows itself in duelling contests. Finally, the fact that young men have taken over the sagine proceedings is a sign of their newly acquired power-base within Suri society. Gold-panning has made it possible for them to assert their independence from their fathers and older relatives at an earlier age.
forseeable future, to exacerbate the over-
exploitation of a dwindling resource base by
increasing numbers of people.

A general point to emerge from this
article is that disaster-affected populations
should be given a chance to develop their
own responses to subsistence crises, and
that external aid should be geared to such
indigenous responses (Turton 1984). This
does not mean that they should be left to
sort out their problems entirely on their own
but that their view of the situation should
be taken into account at the outset, including
any inclination they might have to reject
external aid if it involves too many compromises or concessions. They will
remain in the area after the relief workers
have left and the general level of socio-
economic development and the cultural and
political context will be largely unchanged.
A sustainable development program must
therefore be based upon concrete knowledge of these conditions. In the case of the Suri this would mean, more
specifically:

— recognizing their wish to maintain their
pastoral economy;
— making the provision of veterinary services an integral part of any aid
programme;
— taking into account their seasonal
transhumant movements;
— recognizing the importance of the
gathering of wild vegetable products to
daily subsistence;
— recognizing the central role of women in
most subsistence activities;
— ensuring that any development of
irrigation agriculture (along the Kibish
river) is focused on crops familiar to the
Suri; and
— in the long run, improving transport,
educational and medical facilities to
enable them to participate in the national
economy.

But one should not expect too much of
such ‘development’ schemes. Based on
their past experience of state intervention
in their affairs, the Suri are wary of outside
interference of any sort and, in addition, are
contemptuous of the peasant culture of the
Dizi and other highlanders. Having now a
power-base which gives them a great deal
of autonomy, it will be difficult — though
not impossible — to discourage them from
attacking outsiders (such as travellers and teachers), raiding members of neighbouring
groups for livestock and from hunting in the
Omo National Park. If ‘development’ means
giving up their self-won independence and proudly maintained
culture, they will probably refuse it,
preferring to rely on their own resources in
times of crisis, even if the human costs are
high.

Notes
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of Sciences (K.N.A.W.), Amsterdam, for the
research funding which made my 1990/91
fieldwork among the Suri possible.

1. They are popularly known as Surma (e.g.
Beckwith & Fisher 1990, 1991) but, although
this name is known to them, they more often
refer to themselves as Suri when talking to
outsiders. Amongst themselves they use the
self-names ‘Chai’ and ‘Tirma’.

The population estimate is based on a
field census carried out in 1991/2. The local
administration, in Maji, has no census data
on the Suri. During the 1985 famine, World
Vision International (referred to later in the
article) estimated the population at 35,000 —
almost certainly an over-estimate. The 1984
census of Ethiopia (Office of the Population
33) treats the Suri and Surma as separate
groups and gives their combined population,
based on a sample, as 16,426.

2. See Turton (1987) for an account of the
effects of the Omo National Park on the Mursi.
3. Some of this information was confirmed to me
by Serge Tornay, the leading anthropological
authority on the Nyangatom, during a

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