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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.¹ 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.² 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

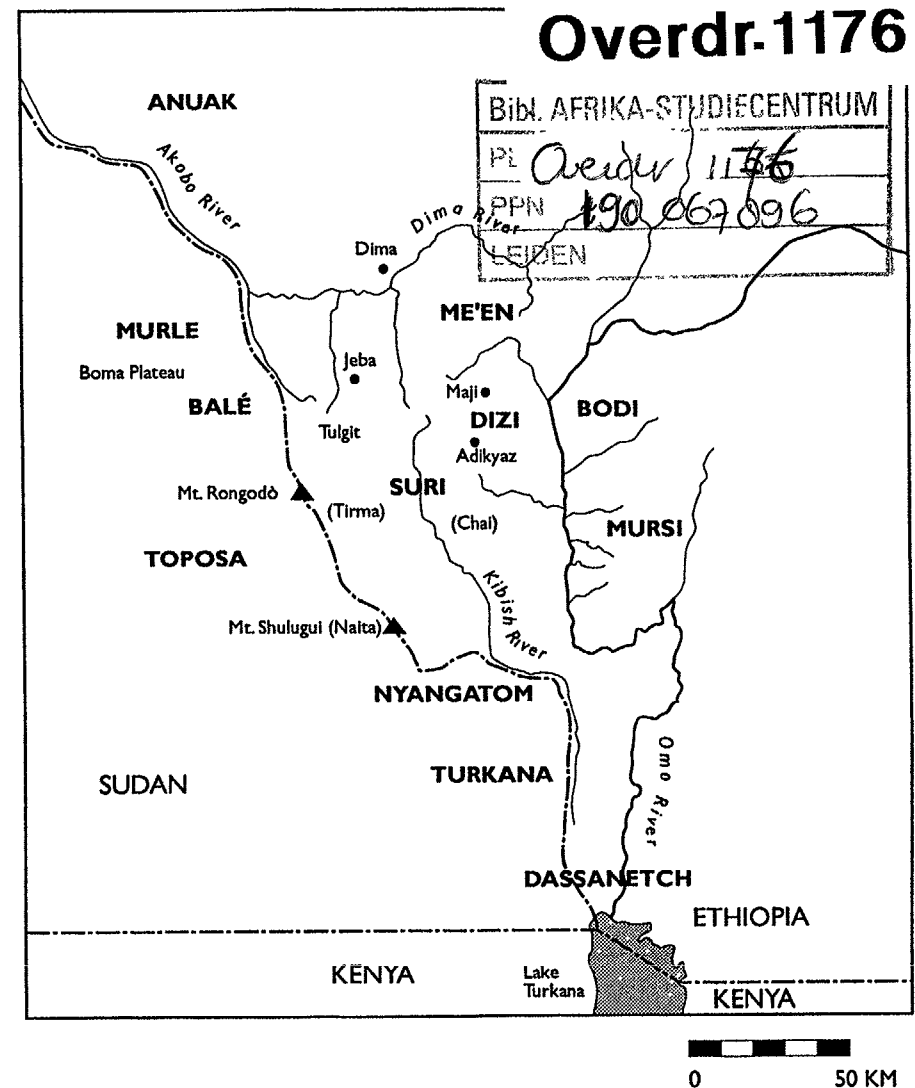


FIGURE 1 The Suri area and its environs

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 Jeba 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, 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).

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 collected the grain and went back to their homes. There is no doubt that many lives were saved by this operation and, as in the Mursi case described by David and Pat Turton (1984), no long-term dependency relationship was created.

When, after some months, the relief operation ended, conditions in the Suri area were much the same as before the crisis: crop yields were poor, stock-wealth was down to less than three animals per household head and wild plant and game resources outside the National Park area were being seriously depleted. There were some unsuccessful attempts by the RRC and WVI to 'rehabilitate' sections of the

population, including the introduction of sedentary agriculture in the Kibish area and the transportation, in 1985, of about 500 people outside the Suri area to be 'trained in farming' (Abbink 1992). The fact that, between 1985 and 1990 about 85 per cent of these migrants returned to their home areas is an indication of the success of Suri efforts at self-rehabilitation over those years.

INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT, 1984–91

During roughly the same period that famine struck the Suri, they were involved in a violent conflict with their southern neighbours, the Nyangatom. From the side of the Nyangatom, this conflict can be attributed to (a) the need for new grazing areas due to high population growth and pressure on their traditional land from the Turkana of Northern Kenya and (b) the availability of new weapons (mainly AK-47 automatic rifles but also some rocket launchers and M-16s) as a result of the Sudan civil war. The Nyangatom obtained these weapons from Sudanese government forces (via their friends and allies the Toposa, of Equatoria Province, Southern Sudan) or from illegal arms traders. Recently they were reported to have gone as far as Malakal in Sudan to get free weapons and training from government forces (Serge Tornay, personal communication).

Their increased fire-power gave the Nyangatom a decisive edge over their traditional enemies, the Suri (or Nyikoroma, as they call them). A period of 'hunting' of Suri by Nyangatom began, causing not only many deaths but also the loss of large numbers of cattle and small stock and of traditional grazing areas around Naita.³ One might argue that this conflict was the prime cause of famine because it undermined the traditional coping mechanisms of the Suri (including the sale of cattle, hunting and gathering and short-term migration). They were forced to

concentrate in larger, more easily defended settlements which resulted in the relative depletion of bush resources (for firewood, building, and fencing compounds) and lower crop yields (because of shorter fallow periods). In 1986–87 the threat from the Nyangatom finally forced the Suri to settle, *en masse*, in their present area in the Maji foothills.

Despite the fact that most of them have now (1991–92) lived here for five or six years, they see themselves as living in exile from their homeland, Shulugui (Mt Naita), where, they say, their most important rituals should be held. Although they insist that they will eventually return, they are also aware that it may already be too late for this. In any event, the northward push of the Suri into the fringes of Dizi (and probably Me'en) territory will continue, whether or not any of them settle permanently in the highlands.

FROM STARVATION TO SURVIVAL, 1988–91

At the time of my first visit to the Suri, in February 1988, they were still suffering from the effects of the drought and famine. By late 1991, however, they had substantially recovered from the crisis: many more young children were in evidence, they had large fields of ripening sorghum and maize, their cattle numbers were greatly increased compared to 1985 and there were some returnee migrants from Sudan among them. Another indication of their regained strength and self-confidence was that almost every adult male carried an automatic rifle, the new symbol of male power and status. Next to the Nyangatom, the Suri were now the best armed group in the area. The secret of this recovery lay in the increased exploitation of a single resource: gold.

Dizi and Anuak have obtained gold by panning in the upper Akobo (Dima) area since at least the time of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935–41). The Suri

say they became familiar with the practice about twenty years ago but that, until recently, they have had no incentive to engage in it to any significant extent. Not only is the work hard, requiring several weeks stay in a kind of no-man's land, but they have no use for gold within their own society. It was only external demand, from traders in Jeba and Maji, which finally persuaded them to take up gold-panning in the years of the drought. They soon found it profitable. It provided them with cash for buying tools, food, cattle and, later on, weapons. For 4.5 grams of pure gold (the result of a few weeks' work) they received, in 1986–7, about 300 Ethiopian birr. With this they could buy one big cow or bull, or two heifers. By 1991 the price of gold had risen by about 15 per cent.

After 1986 there arose something of a Suri 'gold rush' to the Akobo area. The gold was not only sold to town-traders but also used to buy Kalashnikovs from the Anuak (who had obtained them from Sudanese army depots). The main use made of the gold was to invest in cattle and guns: the two items which would enable them to re-establish their traditional economy and reinforce their hold over their traditional territory. But their newly acquired weapons also enabled them to attack the Dizi, on whose land they had been encroaching since 1985. In 1991 they launched at least four big raids on Dizi settlements, killing close to 100 people. In 1992, Suri youths killed several Dizi chiefs and, randomly, defenceless girls carrying water or fire-wood and men returning from their cultivation sites. Gold, then, enabled the Suri not only to survive their subsistence crisis but also to achieve a new position of power in the Maji area. No government forces, whether before or after the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991, were able seriously to threaten their position.

In these conditions it is highly unlikely that the Suri will voluntarily make the transition to sedentary agriculture. David

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 Omo lowlands.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 some 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 (*bara* or *kumin*) and junior men (*tegay* and *roa*). 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. Their mediatory services were still called upon (for example, at public meetings) but their authority, already limited in the traditional system, was reduced to nothing in the years of crisis.

This can be illustrated by one of the central rituals of the Suri, ceremonial duelling (*sagine*). The main contestants in duelling are young unmarried men of the *tegay* age-grade coming from different settlements and/or clans. They use wooden poles (*dongen*, sing. *donga*) made of *kallochi* (*Grewia mollis* Juss.), between 2.10m and 2.40m long. Several matches and return-matches are held over a period of a few months every year. Bouts are short and have to be supervised by referees (*odda*). One might argue, in classical functionalist terms, that these contests provide a 'safety valve' for internal tensions between village communities, allowing young men, eager to start life as independent household heads, to show their strength and virility in a socially acceptable manner. There is

certainly more to it than this, although it is true that the level of violence within Suri society itself (assault, theft, murder, etc.) is relatively low, such behaviour being reserved for outsiders.

The important point here is that the institution of *sagine* has undergone changes in the past 5 or 6 years. Firstly, the frequency of the contests has much increased. They are now held almost every two to three weeks over a period of three to four months after the main sorghum harvest (September–November) and sometimes even after that — for example, at the time of the first heavy rain, in April/May. Secondly, the control of the elders (including the *komoru*) and of the referees over the participants has declined. Nowadays, the young men prolong 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 past four years⁶) 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.

CONCLUSION

The Suri have survived their crisis because of the fortuitous availability of a resource which could be used to generate investment in the pastoral economy. It might be suggested that this is an atypical case, from which general conclusions cannot be drawn — after all, how many people have gold in their 'back yard'? On the other hand, there may be equivalent resources available to other groups, in similar crisis situations, which are completely absent for the Suri — such as wage labour on plantations and in cities.

In any case, the Suri continue to be a highly vulnerable population. Their main problems are (1) unreliable rainfall; (2) competitive relations between demographically expanding ethnic groups in an area with finite and limited resources; and (3) external threats due to large-scale regional conflicts spilling over from adjacent areas (Northern Kenya and Southern Sudan). State power being virtually absent in the area, local conflicts are increasingly played out at the local level through force of arms.

As traditional mediatory channels through established ritual mechanisms — for example, between Suri and Dizi — have lost their importance, so a policy of consensus between ethnic groups has given way to one of confrontation. This in turn has cut off, or at least seriously impaired, trade and exchange relations, forcing each group to rely on its own resources and to aim at self-sufficiency. These developments are not simply the result of a deterioration in the natural environment, since earlier conflicts were more or less contained and brought to at least a temporary, ritually sealed conclusion. What is decisive about the present situation is the uncontrolled spread of powerful modern armaments, creating an unpredictable and insecure political environment. Since the problem of arms proliferation cannot be solved easily, the resultant instability will continue, for the

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;
- recognising the importance of the gathering of wild vegetable products to daily subsistence;
- recognising 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 weary 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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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 and Housing Census Commission, 1990, p. 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 conversation in Addis Ababa in January 1991.

4. This is revealed in the two most recent films on the Mursi (Woodhead, 1991a, 1991b).
5. After the Kibish food distribution point was closed, the Suri obtained food from a camp established by the UNHCR for Sudanese refugees at Dima on the Akobo (Dima) River.
6. Based on field census data, 1991.

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