The Deconstruction of 'tribe': Ethnicity and Politics in Southwestern Ethiopia*

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1. Introduction

In 1981, Charles Keyes noted: "The study of ethnicity has reached something of an impasse." (1981: 4). This judgment, echoed many times (cf. Young 1986: 473-74), still applies. The impasse seems to lie in the problem of constructing a general explanatory theory which interprets ethnicity (the awareness of group difference based on an idea of common descent and common culture) both as a 'primordial' sentiment as well as an emblem for concentrated group action in the pursuit of material interests. Usually, ethnicity is either treated as a constant, as an historical-cultural heritage on the basis of which an 'ethnic group' must act (the primordialist view), or as a variable, as a fairly arbitrary cultural emblem only, mobilized under the impact of competitive group struggle in conditions of social, regional or class inequality (the circumstantial or mobilizationist view). In the first case, the existence of 'ethnicity' as a 'cultural reservoir' is simply assumed, not explained; in the second case the particular emotional force and the reasons for the choice of (certain) ethnic symbols instead of non-ethnic is neglected.

Clearly both aspects are relevant. In empirical studies they are emphasized in accordance with the prediction of the observer. But despite probing analytical reviews (McKay 1982, Young 1986), major syntheses (e.g. Horowitz 1985) and occasional new openings (cf. Bentley 1987), the basic problem of what might be the most parsimonious explanation for the maintenance, resurgence and saliency of ethnicity remains rather untractable.

A way out of the 'impasse' - which cannot be explained away by referring to the eclectic, dynamic, fluid character of ethnicity and ethnic identification - might be sought in a more systematic infrastructural approach. The primordial pole cannot be neglected, but has more to do with psychology; i.e., with the study of the ethnic sentiments and affective codes of ethnic behaviour on the level of *individuals*. The collective aspects of ethnicity can, in the last instance, not be explained by it.[1]

I plead here, on the basis of an Ethiopian example, for a *'political ecology'* oriented approach to ethnicity. The assumption here is, that groups based on, or acting on the basis of, some ethnic or 'tribal' identity must be seen as located in a wider environment of competing groups of different composition, especially in areas where state influence is relatively weak. The environment is to be seen as a composite

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of ecological-economical conditions and of political conditions in a wide sense: power balances between groups determine the degree of success of groups in maintaining solidarity and achieving results. This can be applied not only to traditional situations in 'pre-literate', 'non-western' societies, but also to groups in complex urban environments (cf. Nagel 1986 for a recent example). The approach is not new, based as it is on the influential work of, e.g., Eric Wolf (1982) and others, but it has not yet been applied on a wide scale in the field of ethnic studies.

The main problem of the approach is of course the integration of the factor of 'culture' into such a political ecology model, without *a priori* assuming it to be explanatory (cf. Friedman 1987: 115 and Wolf 1982: 387 on the role of culture). This approach will not deny the relevance of the cultural content and psychological force of ethnicity, but argues that it is mainly secondary - and to be explained within a historical, political-economy oriented framework. A political ecology of ethnic groups or of what were known as 'tribes' (cf. Fried 1968, 1975 and Southall 1970), of course interprets the formation and existence of such units as the result of more encompassing processes of resources competition and cultural/political domination.

In this paper I intend to clarify, in a general manner, the ethno-political situation in Southwest Ethiopia from the perspective outlined above. As ethnic labels and stereotypes are frequently used by various groups, I have to return to the traditional problem of what so-called 'tribal' relations and ethnic labels represent, in order to shed light on developments in the 'native' (Ethiopian national and local) discourse on this matter.

2. "Deconstruction"

My title uses the fashionable concept of deconstruction, derived from the post-structuralist school of textual criticism (the concept was introduced by J. Derrida, fruitfully used by Barthes and Greimas, and imported into anthropology and the social sciences in general by an increasing number of post-modern or 'experimentalist'-oriented scholars).[2] Deconstruction refers to an analytical moment of dissection of cultural phenomena and performances as 'texts', as discourses with an unconscious logic and with certain conventions of style, presentation and 'argument'. Cultural products - ideas, theories, ideologies, poetics, and literary expression itself, as embodied in texts and manners of speaking - are seen as historically specific, unstable, culture-bound phenomena. The conventions and the preconditions of their construction are targets of the analysis. Thus, it can be made clear how 'texts' and discourse do mean a lot more than they ostensibly say, dependent on the historical, socio-cultural or class setting of the writer/speaker/performer. They reveal hegemonic structures and power differences enacted not only by material but also by rethorical means. (This approach is more radical and contexualist than Levi-Straussian structuralism, focussing on the codes, messages and underlying logical structures within cultural texts, ultimately derived from the binary classificatory mechanism of the human brain).

A deconstructive analysis is useful in the case of the official Ethiopian post-revolutionary discourse on ethnic relations in the country, as it is dominated by a specific rethoric of national development and 'ethnic unity in diversity'. We will have to consider this with regard to the 'nationalities' policy of the country's political elite. One must, in order to explain the continued and often contradictory use of ethnic labels, or ethnic policy itself, deconstruct the contexts of production of this discourse and the socio-political relationships of the groups using it. Terms like 'nation', 'tribe', 'people' or 'nationality' are 'appropriated' by different groups in different settings to give them their own meaning, governed by conceptions of inclusion and exclusion. Also in the Ethiopian case, one may discern two main levels of discourse: that of the state and its political elite and administrative bureaucracy (especially of interest after the 1974 Revolution and the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1987), but also that of the various 'native' groups found in the Southwestern Ethiopian region to be considered here.[3] Deconstructing the discourse and frames of reference on tribes or ethnic groups is a precondition for understanding what is actually happening. This does *not* mean that in social scientific explanation our work is complete when we have deconstructed (as seems to be the suggestion of most post-modern critics), or that the textual metaphor of culture is wholly plausible as a culture theory. But the deconstructive mode illustrates a new way of practicing what in the Frankfurter school was called 'Ideologiekritik', relating it not only to its societal context, but also to the inherent limits of text and discourse production as a socio-cultural phenomenon.[4]

A basic assumption in the following (more specifically ethnographic) account is that the conventional approach to areas like the Ethiopian Southwest, until recently resulting in a series off classical ethnographic monographs, should shift to a more regional-comparative view, emphasizing the historical links between the various ethnic formations and the processes conditioning them. One must recognize the problem this poses in terms of individual field research, but it is first and foremost a question of a shift in theoretical perspective.

3. The Maji Sub-province, Southwest Ethiopia

Maji-*awraja* (sub-province) is an area of c.2600 sq. miles in the Kāfa Administrative Region of Ethiopia. In 1898 the area (see map 1) was incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire by Emperor Menilek II. The town of Maji was established in the territory of the Maji-Kuri chiefdom of the Dizi people. Small colonies of soldier-settlers from the north established themselves among the local population. The latter consisted of politically decentralized groups of transhumant pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, and agrarian cultivators. These groups were linguistically either of *Surma* stock or of *Omotic* stock. The linguistic classification does of course provide only a first clue to the historical process of ethnic formation in this area. A linguistic group is not an ethnic group.

Historically, the *Omotic* groups are descendants of indigenous agricultural populations. They were probably settled in Southern Ethiopia well before the influx of Semitic (Amhara) and Cushitic (Oromo) speakers. The *Surma* group is an off-shoot

of the East Sudanic language family (within Nilo-Saharan, which also includes Nuer, Dinka, Anuak and other Nilotic languages) and perhaps related to the proto-Nilotes of several millennia ago. They originated as transhumant cattle herders in the southern Sudan, and have moved gradually, via the Omo Valley, to the southern fringes of the Ethiopian highlands. This large-scale movement, still continuing today, is the broad framework for much of the change in ethnic formations in this area over the past century-and-a-half.[5] This migratory movement has been aptly characterized by one of the participant groups as "looking for a cool place" (as noted by Turton 1987), i.e., searching for higher ground with more reliable rainfall. This movement has an ecological demographic momentum of its own, and has thus led to the emergence of various 'ethnic units' in the process. This happened in the absence of any centralized political control.[6]

In the Maji area, representatives of both these two language groups are found: the Gimira and Dizi are Omotic speakers (cf. Lange 1975; Haberland 1981, 1984). The Tishan-Me'en, Chai, Zilmamu (or Bale), Tirma and Suri (the latter two groups also confusingly called Surma) are members of the (Southeast) Surma group. These are very general ethnic labels, and the significant fact here is that the various groups often use a *different* name for any other group, while *within* the groups there is also differentiation in self-identification.

After its annexation by Menilek's forces, the Maji area saw not only an influx of soldier-settlers but also of traders, concession hunters, and political entrepreneurs (cf. Garretson 1986). This was the beginning of economic exploitation by an 'imported' feudalist class, superimposed upon the indigenous population. It was to have far reaching effects on the latter. They had to perform labour services and to provide slaves or other tribute in goods; their economic organization, even their subsistence base was threatened; their settlement pattern disrupted. The arrival of this new, politically dominant group of Northerners (mostly Amhara, but later also Oromo and others, often 'Amharized'), creating its own predatory political niche in the Maji area, evoked resistance from the 'native' groups (called *Šanqila* or 'blacks', 'slaves' by the Northerners) as a result of the increased competition for local resources, cattle, grain, gold, and of course labour. in this process, the groups came on to take a more pronounced 'tribal' or ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Northerners and surrounding groups (cf. Garretson 1986, and Abbink, forthcoming).

The ethnonyms still in use in the Maji area thus primarily reflect a history of politico-ecological conflict between various groups of different composition, not a smooth transference of cultural heritages within well-defined 'tribes'. This is despite a popular local image to the contrary. Besides, the meaning of these group labels for the groups themselves is rather vague and ambiguous. We will come back to this later.

4. First Level Construction of 'tribe': the Local Picture in Maji

I now skip a detailed discussion of the 'feudalist' era (from the early decades of this century up to 1974) and start from the current situation in Maji, in order to

analyze 1) the conditions of reproduction of the perception of group boundaries and 2) to gauge the effects of State discourse concerning the 'nationalities' in fringe areas such as Maji. I first continue discussion of the local scene, i.e., the 'emic level' of ethnic classification. I will restrict myself here to four groups: Dizi, Tishana-Me'en, Surma (or Tirma[7]) and the Northerners (or 'Amhara').

When moving about in the Maji area, one constantly hears people use ethnonyms to classify others, whether accurate or not. All four groups have their own cognitive image of the 'significant others', based on often fairly ambiguous behavioural clues. These clues are taken from several domains of socio-cultural life; language, mode of existence, patterns of customary violence (raiding, manslaughter) between groups, intermarriage and/or sexual contacts, dietary customs, outward appearance (as evident in, e.g., clothing, hairstyle, body markings), ritual behaviour, ideas of personal valor, material culture, and dance and song style.

There is an unquestionable historical basis for group differences. It goes without saying that the various groups in the area have been formed as a kind of *geo-ethnic* unit in conditions where state influence was largely absent (the South Sudanese area in medieval times and after). They can be seen as socio-cultural adaptations, developing their own language varieties and cultural styles, neither imposed, nor emerging as 'secondary phenomena' (Fried 1975). But their 'illusion of permanence' Turton 1979: 138) should of course not delude observers. Political-ecologic factors determine their existence, change or migration.

The members of the four groups singled out for attention here all have a composite picture of the 'Others' (with which they interact in several settings) on virtually all the points mentioned above. A systematic, complete picture of these images per group would be revealing, but cannot be presented in the context of a brief article.

a) The Tishana-Me'en

The Tishana-Me'en (c. 40,000) are shifting cultivators in the highlands north of Maji town. They traditionally live in corporate groups around a certain patri-lineage or patri-clan segment (called *du'ut* or 'seed'). They are related to the more transhumant pastoral Bodi-Me'en, east of the Omo River, with whom they share their language and occasionally intermarry. The Tishana see the Bodi as the "real Me'en", because of their having a more cattle-oriented culture. They themselves keep only small numbers of cattle. The Tishana are in fact an 'amalgam' of different smaller populations and are not all 'descendants' of Me'en-speakers or of Bodi having migrated across the Omo into the highlands (cf. Abbink forthcoming).

Since the conquest of the area by the Amhara, the 'Tishana' (a name given to them by the latter), have put up the most tenacious armed resistance to the Northerners, and were long feared in the Maji area as killers and raiders. They now have lost much of their prowess and in their turn see the pastoralists as their enemies

- as they occasionally suffered from raids from Bodi and from Surma. The Tishana view the Surma (also a more pastoral group, living southwest of Maji town, see below) equally as 'traditional enemies' (*baragara*, an Amharic loanword), with whom intimate relations can hardly be maintained. They see them - predictably - as 'dangerous and wild'. As a Me'en informant stated: "We don't marry them, and we never will. If we touched their women they would kill us, as we would kill them if they came for our women". This was said by a northern Me'en.

The Me'en describe the Dizi, a cultivator group in the mountainous area around Maji town, often in a rather condescending, scornful way. The Dizi have never been pastoralists, but are descendants of the old pre-Amhara agrarian culture in the area, although there are traditions stating that they have an historic connection with medieval immigrant Tigray people from the North. The Me'en see the Dizi, whom they often raided in the past, as agrarian rustics, not valuing cattle, and 'not able to fight' (Cattle remains important for Me'en with regard to bridewealth and various life-cycle rituals).

The Me'en are aware of the significant difference between them and the 'Amhara', or Northerners in general. They see them often as a nuisance: Northerners have disarmed them, prohibited traditional ritual customs, forced them into unprofitable contract sales of grain or other foodstuffs (coffee, *teff*, corn) at prices below those offered in Maji market. The perceived economic, cultural and religious differences prevent intermarriages with Amhara. The Me'en also know that the Amhara see them as 'backward', not only on account of their customs, but also because of their using hoe and digging stick instead of the ox-drawn plow in agriculture.

On the basis of the *economic* and *political* dealings with the groups around them, the Me'en use a scale of ethnic labels suggesting more or less clearly defined boundaries, which are not found in reality. The scaling itself is completely dependent upon which Me'en-person is speaking. While a northern Me'en will adamantly deny the possibility of marriage with a 'wild Surma', a southern Me'en may in fact encourage it (for a very material reason: higher cattle bride-wealth, quicker pay). A southern Me'en may scold or despise the Gimira people and their customs; a northern Me'en may already be 'Gimira' himself. The boundaries are not only fluid, they are, in the last instance, determined by the political-ecological conditions of social interaction in similar niches. The undermining of 'boundary' and so-called 'ethnic-identity' became clear to me when I was, one day, feverishly noting down the details of a chiefly burial procedure among the Me'en, presented to me as 'typical Me'en custom'. Halfway through, I suddenly realized, disappointed, that they were giving me the She-Gimira procedure. Nevertheless, my informant insisted that the Me'en did it like this.

As it is with Gimira, so it is with Dizi: there is a fair amount of intermarriage and mutual 'acculturation' in the border zone, so that in spite of a cherished idea of the Me'en, a clear 'boundary' with this group does not exist either.

Me'en have not escaped the impact of Amhara material culture and customs. Indeed several Me'en have clear aspirations of becoming 'like the Amhara' and have quickly adopted clothing, new crops, tools or other material items.

b) The Dizi

The Dizi, according to inflated statistics of Maji *awraja* (1986), numbering some 50,000),[8] are a people long settled in the area (cf. Haberland 1983, 1984). They have an old and traditionally richly diversified agricultural system. The Dizi (their self-term; in the past they were often called Maji) are settled in the mountainous area around Maji town, in 22 separate groups. They were organized in chiefdoms, the centres of which were the Maji mountain and in Adi-Kyaz, south of Maji. The paramount chiefs (called Maji-Kuri and Adi-Kyaz) are now ritual figures, without real political influence. Because of their essentially sedentary nature and their lack of access to fire-arms, the Dizi were hardest hit by past feudalist oppression after 1898. This decimated their population and all but destroyed their society (cf. Haberland ibid. and 1981).

Before the Amhara arrived, the Dizi lived in an uneasy alliance with pastoralist Surma groups, who entered the surrounding lowlands, probably centuries after the Dizi chiefdoms had developed (cf. Haberland 1983: 253, note 90). The Tishana-Me'en, whom the Dizi call *Surbm*, were also feared, because of their cattle and slave raids (cf. Garretson 1986: 206). The Dizi still reckon with the unpredictable, though incidental, killings and attacks of the Me'en and Surma on them (Surmas have to prove their personal valour to fellow Surmas on some occasions by killing a non-Surma). As a rule, the Dizi see the Surma and Me'en as 'blacks', 'wild people'. Formally, the tensions have ceased. Several Surma groups are affinally linked with the Dizi (including with the chiefly family); another Surma territorial group even traces its descent to a Dizi forefather (see note 10). There are also ritual friendship bonds (*laale*) established between Dizi, Surma and Me'en individuals.

Nowadays, the Dizi regard themselves as more similar to the Amhara/ Northerners than to the Me'en and Surma. They share an agricultural tradition and are sedentary; and, as we saw, the Dizi also trace some of their traditions back to the Christian North. They intermarry with the Amhara occasionally; not only women, taken as temporary wives by the Amhara, but also some Amhara women with Dizi men. Of all the groups in Maji, the Dizi are also most clearly influenced by Amhara material culture and customs, and perforce have oriented themselves more to the 'Amhara model' of life including family relations, adherence to Orthodox Christianity, agricultural practices, etc. They also tend to share their view of the Surma and Me'en as rather 'uncivilized, uncontrollable people'.

c) The Tirma or Surma

This is the least known and, in objective terms of economy and political organization, most independent group in Maji *awraja*. They are transhumant pastoralists, with a disdain for the agricultural way of life. They only cultivate some corn and sorghum in a slash-and-burn manner, gather wild edible roots, honey and other small items, practice some hunting and mine some gold from the tributaries of the Akobo River. The administration has not really been able to reach them yet; only one primary school, a few police posts and mobile veterinary clinics have been established (for a population variously estimated between 8,000 and 30,000). Although the Dizi, Me'en, and the Northerners speak of the 'Surma', there are four distinct territorial groups, including some hardly known ones (like the Bale and Suri). It is thus certainly not a homogenous 'tribe', although these Surma-speakers all share the above-mentioned mode of subsistence in the savannah-like, semi-arid niche of the Upper Kibish Valley up to the Sudanese border (see map 2).

The Surma look upon the Dizi and Me'en with a mixture of contempt and indifference. They only have commercial relations with them in Maji town, where they buy and sell livestock, and get their supply of vegetables and household utensils from Norther traders.[9]

As we have seen, Surma behaviour toward the Me'en and especially the Dizi is ambivalent; they still see them as targets for occasional attacks, the object of which is to steal some heads of cattle or a gun. However, the increased control and new sorts of sanctions from the government (e.g. hostage-taking) have strongly reduced these attacks. The affinal bonds with the Dizi chiefly family (see above) might be interpreted as part of a Surma political strategy to maintain a link with the highland society.

The Surma avoid the Northerners as much as possible. In the period after the Revolution, they were not receptive to the messages of the revolutionary 'cadres'. When the latter urged them to give up 'primitive' customs related to burial and sacrifice, they are reputed to have answered: "We will accept that if you will give up those things [pen and paper] and your habit of writing down everything.' They have, as already noted, also rejected all agricultural development schemes (theirs is one of the few areas in Ethiopia where there have never been 'peasant associations').

However, the biggest problem for the Surma at present is not their relationship with the Dizi or Me'en or Northerners, but with another pastoral population, the *Nyangatom* (or Bume), who count ca. 5000-6000 people. These pastoralists (an offshoot of the Karamojong-cluster) are the 'arch-enemies' of the Surma and are nowadays heavily armed because of their connection with Southern Sudanese rebels. The possession of modern automatic weapons has entirely upset the balance between the two formerly equally strong groups. The Nyangatom could recently increase, by unprecedented violent means, their cattle herds (by raiding), and thus also extend the boundary of their grazing areas. It is true that in this case they have been reacting against the pressure from the Dassanetch (to the South), but their

perception of the intrinsic advantage of the use of (in this area heavy) arms such as the AK47 *Kalashnikovs* and occasional handgrenades, should not be underestimated. The result is the abolishing of the tacit agreement governing the symbiotic use of the land and its resources by them and the Surma.[10] (The Maji *awraja* administration had difficulty in admitting the gravity of the situation: in a conversation with the deputy administrator in 1988, the Nyangatom were said to live outside the boundaries of the *awraja* and of no concern to the Maji authorities[11]).

Important to note here is that this very process - in fact only the latest instance of the larger migratory movement alluded to on p.6 - may force the Surma to seek refuge in the higher areas, closer to Maji. It can already be noticed that they seek more contacts with the Dizi and with the local administration, and the Northerners in general. This will of course stimulate social change and might lead them either to give up their transhumant pastoralism, or to specialize in other activities such as gold-mining[12] in order to survive.

Despite the rethoric, the boundaries between these four groups are not clear (see also Muldrow 1976: 603). Me'en speakers for instance may in a cultural sense (ritual, life-cycle ceremonies) hardly be a 'Me'en' as defined by southern members of this group. There is intermarriage and cultural 'shading into each other' between the Surma and Me'en in the areas bordering their respective territories. In the case of the Gimira-Me'en contacts, this degree of intermingling has gone much further; ritual and dietary customs are taken over, agricultural techniques, and religious practices. This process is determined by the *converging* exploitation of a largely common ecological-economical niche, covering the territories of both groups. (The same goes for the Dizi and the Me'en, and for some Me'en and Surma. On the other hand, the Tishana-Me'en have definitely distanced themselves from the pastoral Bodi-Me'en, although they share language, some ritual, and historical origins. Significantly, were it not for the stronger presence of the Ethiopian police, the Bodi would certainly raid the Tishana more often).

d) The Northerners

One cannot really define this group as an 'ethnic group' either, although a majority of the 'non-native' population in the Maji area is descended from the Amhara *nāfṭāñña* (armed settler) families or traders (also Oromos). This category now also contains state and party officials, administrators, agricultural and veterinary assistants, nurses and teachers. They live in the few government settlements spread out over the sub-province and are often posted there for a short period.

But in fact they can be seen as a separate group vis-à-vis the others, with a specific settlement pattern and social structure, and its own sources of income and power. There is little intermarriage with members of surrounding groups and little convivial social interaction in general. They have a fairly uniform view of the local populations as groups in need of development, civilization (*silit'ané*), and education

(*timihirt*). Economically, this of course means giving up pastoralism and hoe and digging stick agriculture and adopting plough agriculture, settling in villages, market integration. Politically it means the abdication of traditional chiefs as ritual authorities, re-organization in *ḳebeles* and peasant associations, and further disarmament of the people (Me'en and Surma carry spears, knives and old Italian or Austrian guns). Culturally, it means the abandoning of 'wasteful' ritual customs and traditional religious notions; literacy and schooling in Amharic; less polygamy and discouraging 'excessive' bridewealth exchanges, etc. The different groups are seen as 'backward'. In this respect, the Northerners are inclined to think in terms of an opposition between 'us' and 'them' (all other groups; in feudal times - but also now - referred to as *Šanqilotch*). Nevertheless, they do use the main ethnic distinctions mentioned. Indeed the local administrators in areas like Maji have, some years ago, received instructions to gather information on the 'traditional culture' of the 'nationalities' in their districts and to send the reports to Addis Ababa.

This brings us to the wider Ethiopian context and the discourse which defines the 'civilizing' or 'development mission' of the Northerners in the Maji area. Partly on the basis of revolutionary state policy their own politico-ecological niche is defined.

5. Second Level of Construction of "tribe": the State Discourse and Revolutionary Policy

Ethiopian revolutionary administration was late in fully establishing itself in areas like Maji. The first signs of radical political change were brought by units of political advisers or "cadres" in the years after the 1974 revolution. These groups, acting with a good degree of autonomy, tried to instantly 're-educate' the local people and to reform the traditional 'tribal' (kinship) modes of production among the local population as quickly as possible. They told people to give up their 'primitive', 'bad' customs, and 'unproductive' behaviour. Part of their effort was to try to eliminate the traditional ritual chiefs and/or landowners (Amh: *balabbats*), and the folk-healers and 'witch-doctors'. They often dishonoured these leaders on purpose, by taking away their age-old symbols of leadership (certain bracelets, necklaces and certain spears), by forcing them to break dietary and other taboos and by confiscating their possessions. Thus, with forceful means, they caused social upheaval and internal conflict in the communities. Also according to local informants, this often led to excesses: theft, blackmail, destruction of valuable cultural property, arbitrary imprisonment, and worse. In the late 1970's this changed. The revolutionary process was institutionalized within the framework of peasant associations, *ḳebeles*, youth and women's associations.

In the "Program of the National Democratic Revolution" of 1976, issued by the *Dergue* (the then ruling Provisional Military Administrative Council), Ethiopia announced a *nationalities policy*. The right of formerly oppressed minority groups would have to be guaranteed on the basis of equality of the groups and of respect for their culture and language. This Program laid the foundation of the policy measures adopted and to be carried out in the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, so named since September 1986. The new constitution, issued a year later, also has some

articles on nationalities policy. Two aspects are relevant: the hot political issue of 'regional autonomy' (which has led to the drafting of a new map of 'autonomous' and 'administrative regions', but which will not be treated here) and the question of the actual implementation of the nationalities policy in the case of the smaller groups like the ones mentioned above.

In the Constitution,[13] one reads that the "...equal development of all nationalities shall be guaranteed in accordance with the teaching of Marxism-Leninism" (article 33). Article 35 states that the "...historical identity and class unity of all nationalities who have for centuries lived together bound by blood, common customs and history, under one state administration, shall be encouraged". One can see how problematic this article is for asserting the 'nationalities' in the Maji area: the state administration is very recent (some 90 years at the most), some groups spread out over two or three states; the ties of blood' are dubious, and what 'class unity' in this respect means is puzzling.

My point is that the realization of the rights to"equal development of their culture and dialects" (article 34) is problematic in the revolutionary context of present-day Ethiopia, which has adopted a far-reaching socio-economic development programme destined to entirely restructure rural society (see below).

Ethiopia has now designated 74 nationalities (Amh: *behérésäb*) on the basis of research work of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN), a politically oriented research body directly responsible to the *Workers' Party of Ethiopia* (the socialist unity party in the country). Some years ago, the ISEN has drawn up a provisional *map* of the nationalities of Ethiopia. It has already been scrutinized and criticized in an interesting paper by anthropologist Jacques Bureau (cf. Bureau 1988). In fact, this map does not differ from the ethnographic maps popular in anthropology some decades ago (cf. Murdock in his book *Africa*, 1959). It is of interest to consider the manner in which this state document reflects the ideas and discourse of the leading groups in Ethiopia on the 'tribes' or 'ethnic groups' in their country.

What does such a political map express, and in what way does it correspond with reality? For this map, and for the Constitution, the definition of a 'nationality' is based on four points: it must have a) a common language, b) a common culture and historical unity, c) a common territory, d) 'limited economic autonomy' (cf. Bureau 1988:2). these criteria echo the old definitions of 'tribe' used in anthropology, the unproblematic use of which has been cogently criticized by Fried (1975), Southall (1970) and others: 'tribal' groups are not fixed, unitary or bounded units with an immutable cultural profile or neat territorial boundaries (see also Wolf 1982:387).

The ISEN map (late 1985) thus lists 74 groups, neatly defined in their respective territories. In the Maji area, the map designates as nationalities the Me'en, the Bensho (part of the 'Gimira' peoples), the Dizi, the Surma, and the Suri; not the Northern 'immigrants' (see below). There is of course an obvious problem with such an exercise: the drawing of such a map is based on one historical moment in time (as Bureau 1988 noted), a 'freezing' of labels. It also omits reference to the politico-

economic dimension affecting group relations, and does not reflect the actual composition, varying degrees of self-identification, and social dynamics of groups. The classification has an obvious *prescriptive* dimension: they are defined from above.

It is, furthermore, significant that the classification of nationalities has been made without any reference to the preference of the ubiquitous group of government and party officials, administrators, Northerners, etc., who do *not* belong to the 'nationalities' drawn on the map and assigned to their specific territories (unless we assume that members of the nationalities have filled all these administrative posts). The essential power factor is thus left out (though necessarily so, in view of the particular criteria used). But everyone knows that the political ecology of nationalities is now in a process of far reaching change. 'Traditional' identities, settlement patterns and social organization, formerly dependent on a degree of environmental specialization and relative isolation from encompassing state arenas, have eroded significantly. The various groups can no longer be considered in isolation: the political-ecological infrastructure has already been decisively affected and restructured by the Ethiopian State itself.

The interesting aspect to follow now would precisely be the evolving pattern of interaction of this politically and culturally dominant elite and the designated nationalities, within the new political-economic context of revolutionary Ethiopia.

The drawing of such maps, the talk of 'nationalities' as fixed cultural entities, may thus have the effect of diverting critical attention from the actual integrative processes and the shift of group-labels under the impact of radical socio-political change itself. The basis of the continuity of the 'nationalities' is in fact slashed away by these processes; unless one sees the folkloristic enactment of culture difference as evidence of their healthy existence. This is already foreshadowed in such facts like the following. In Maji town, a Culture Committee has been founded, which must inventarize and now and then organize shows of ethnic dances and songs of the groups in Maji *awraja*. It is notable that the Me'en dances presented in Maji (e.g., on the *kibrä-bä'al* some years ago) before an audience of non-Me'en and state officials, were very *different* from those performed within their own group, at ritual occasions like first-fruits-ceremonies or burials. Thus, they appear to have been stylized or adapted for the occasion.

More important to mention is the predictable effect of villagization and resettlement schemes: intended as ethnically mixed settlements, these new villages will not reflect the continued existence of the original nationalities (cf. Articles 34 and 35 cited above), but lead to populations with a new, transformed, socio-cultural profile.

We see here the paradox that while the constitution pleads for a recognition of the nationalities and their languages and cultural traditions, the possibility to enact these rights is becoming increasingly irrelevant, not only politically, but also socio-culturally. Some further examples of this process: literacy campaigns are never conducted in the local languages, but in Amharic. School education is in Amharic. Agricultural programmes stimulate the abandonment of traditional production systems,

modes of social cooperation and technology. Political and ideological reforms aim at replacement of the traditional power structure (or what is often wrongly conceived as such - cf. the case of the attacks on the *ritual* priest-chiefs of the Me'en) and the traditional religious conceptions and rituals. In short, every effort is made to further dissolve the 'kinship mode of production' (cf. Wolf 1982) and its cultural concomitants, which it is assumed, prevent market integration and increase of productive output.

Hence we see that the Constitution guarantees the right to cultural expression, recognition of language use and of own territory, etc. while at the same time, Government policy has set in motion a large-scale process of development and ethnic integration (the resettlement schemes, villagization, agricultural schemes, also planned and partly in progress in the Maji area) which will actively undermine the local enactment of rights and principles set out in the Constitution. This is perhaps the inevitable contradiction presently besetting the 'ethnic policy' of the country (especially in areas such as Maji), based on the tension between declaration of rights and actual economic and policy measures. It may lead to enduring problems in the case of the large nationalities, like the Tigray, the Oromo, the Somali or the Afar, but will result in increased 'homogenization' and assimilation in the case of the *smaller* groups like the Me'en, Dizi, Surma, etc., too small to oppose undesired developments.

The structure of resource competition in the Maji area is now significantly altered, the native groups being incorporated into a framework of one agricultural surplus-producing regional unit, designed by the politico-economically dominant group.

6. The Paradox of Change: Ethnicity as Construct

In southern Ethiopia we see the interpenetration of divergent images of 'tribe' or 'nationality', emanating from the level of the diverse groups themselves in defining each other, and from that of the state administration. One can certainly speak of the diverging labels having 'migrated' to various contexts of construction (cf. Marcus 1988:10), such as: the different parts of the group itself, the other groups, the local administration (Maji *awraja*) and its components, and the national administration (ISEN, Ministry of Culture, Planning authorities, etc.). The authority, so to speak, of the groups themselves in defining their identity and culture is decisively subverted by the appropriation of the identity labels by the ideological discourse of the state. They are now inscribed in this discourse and will continue to figure as 'tribal' labels in national policy. The effort to implement this policy on the basis of such a classification may serve a laudable aim: the final recognition of rights long denied in the past, but we have seen that, in practice, the *criteria* on the basis of which the groups were accorded their identity as a 'nationality' are being targeted for radical change. Its agent is a national-based administrative group which has decisively entered into the field of power relations between the indigenous groups, carving out its own niche and shaping its own, purportedly 'trans-ethnic', identity in 'articulation' with that of the nationalities. If ultimately, the only thing that remains of these nationalities is their folkloric aspect (see p.12), this may mean that they have all but dissolved as groups, under assimilatory pressure. Notwithstanding this, in a later phase of history these

cultural shells, labelled as such by the state, may again become the basis for larger ethnic units in a political-ecological sense described above (e.g., a 'Surma group', or a 'Gimira group', in Maji and Kāfa *awrajas* respectively). But this will primarily depend on the success or failure of the socio-economic transformation of the South Ethiopian countryside and on changes in the national political landscape, and probably *not* on the resurgence of common primordial 'feelings of belonging' which have too often been posited as 'moving forces' of ethnicity. In future analyses, it will be interesting and relevant to follow this concrete process of change of ethnic group identity, as expressions of shifts in the balance of material interest within a political framework.

7. Conclusion

To return to our original general problem, at present we still lack an adequate theoretical idiom to conceptualize, in an accepted, conventional manner, the processes conditioning ethnic naming and the political-economic embeddedness of cultural complexities (cf. Wolf 1982: 18, 425). The theoretical perspective on these matters has indeed shifted, but its explanatory *application* has not yet become paradigmatic. The lure of the traditional primordial-mobilizational dichotomy in ethnic studies is, because of its heuristic and descriptive advantages, still great (cf. also Young 1986).

But it would be advantageous for future anthropological studies of ethnic groups and ethnic relations, especially in politico-economic contexts of countries like Ethiopia, to focus primarily on the processes of infrastructural, political-ecological conditioning of ethnic labels and their symbolic use. To seek the explanation in their psychological, affective validity, which is at most a derivative from such a process, does not take us far enough.

The Ethiopian case summarily presented here may have illustrated the crucial importance of the political factor, impinging upon a traditional though, of course, dynamic system of ethnic group relations.

It seems clear that ethnic relations and changing ethnic identification of groups cannot be sufficiently explained within the narrative framework of an account of one bounded group. Indeed, the analytical endeavour of presenting a 'story' of a group, with a supposedly clearly identifiable culture and path through history, is in itself problematic. Studies in the vein can of course be justified as part-studies of certain aspects of wider processes, and will continue to be carried out. But, in the last instance, the attention should systematically be directed to such wider, encompassing processes conditioning the emergence of ethno-cultural formations within the ongoing historical dynamic. In this way, studies highlighting the intersections of 'part' and 'whole' promise to be of the greatest interest. For the Ethiopian region, one may think of examples like Donham (1985) on the Maale ethnic group, the studies contained in Donham and James (1986), or McClellan (1989).

Basically, the perspective advocated here also poses new tasks for ethnographic fieldwork as a research process: more emphasis on interdisciplinary work and team research would be necessary (cf. Salzman 1986: 529-30). Also, a more quantitative emphasis would be profitable, not as an end in itself, but as giving an essential supplementary data base. While one can indeed already note a growing concern with these matters, one may expect such a perspective to become more dominant and more conventional within anthropology, by nature the most interdisciplinary and comparativist social science. And because of the composite nature of ethnic phenomena (i.e., they can be 'deconstructed' in terms of political, economic, ecological-geographical processes and 'cultural' interpretations thereof by the concerned groups themselves), the perspective should be developed systematically in the field of ethnic studies.

Notes

1. Even the interesting study of Bentley (1987), applying Bourdieu's *habitus*-concept to ethnic behaviour, is concerned primarily with the individual dimension.

2. For a recent example, see Marcus 1988.

3. This article summarizes some findings of an ongoing research project on Southwest Ethiopian ethnic groups. Fieldwork among one group, the Me'en has just been completed (1990); work among a neighbouring group (the Surma) is envisaged in 1991.
A first version of this essay was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Phoenix, Arizona (December 1988).

4. Sound critical distance should be maintained toward the strong programme of deconstructionism, with its attack on the notions of scientific progress and the normative ideas of truth and rational discourse. For good critical evaluations, see Chr. Norris (1988) and John Ellis (1989).

5. I must limit myself here to the Maji area, but of course the process extends into all the bordering areas.

6. Referring to this movement, David Turton has lucidly analyzed the case of the Mursi (a group of Surma-speakers in the area east of Maji, across the Omo River), as one such 'temporary' ethnic formation (Turton 1979, 1987; also D. and P. Turton 1984).

7. I will use 'Surma' here, but these Surma proper (many call themselves Tirma) must be distinguished from the larger linguistic group of Surma (now perhaps better called - *pace* Peter Unseth - 'The Surmic Group').

8. Probably many Surma (Tirma) were registered as Dizi.

9. Like the Dizi and some Me'en, the Surma sell gold on the Maji market. They have their own mining places near the upper Akobo river. About this system of mining not much is known yet.

10. The pressures from Sudan, where many Nyangatom used to live, has also played a role in pushing them north, into the upper Kibish Valley. The Surma have made claims on the entire Kibish Valley and its southern foothills (one section of them traces descent from Gobitial, a forefather of Dizi origin!), despite the fact that the area (certainly that of the hills) has traditionally been Dizi territory. In the field, Surma men told me that the Nyangatom now also claim that the Kibish, up to its source, is theirs.

11. While in the field, however (late 1989), I heard that Ethiopian Army units had later carried out a brief punitive expedition against the Nyangatom, beating them back and warning them not to conquer the Surma area or kill and rob its inhabitants.

12. Such an increase in gold mining and selling could be noticed during 1989-90 in the Maji area, after the Nyangatom attacks and the severe drought problems of the Surma after 1983.
It also results in a northward movement of the Surma, beyond the Kibish Valley towards the Dima River, and brings them into conflict with the gold mining Anuak in the area.

13. Draft version (June 1986) cited here. This draft was circulated on a wide scale in Ethiopia during early 1987 and (with only a few changes) became the text of the officially adopted constitution of the PDRE in September 1987.

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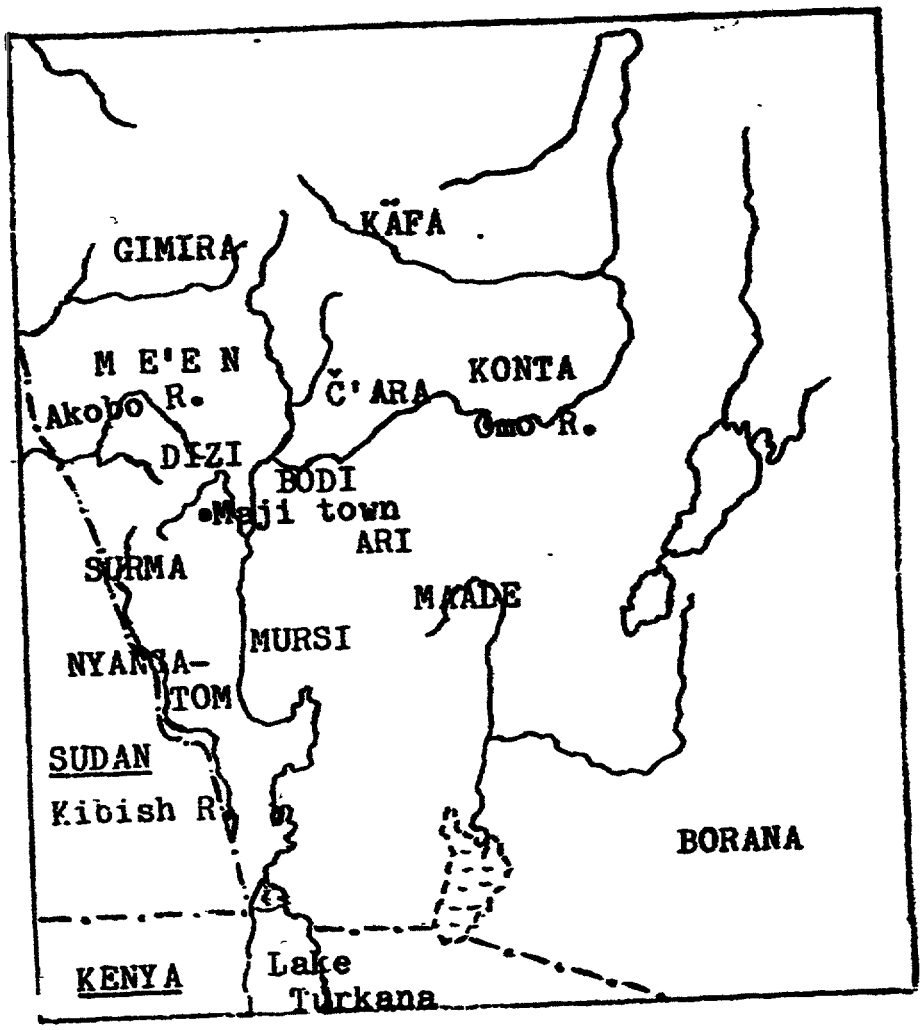
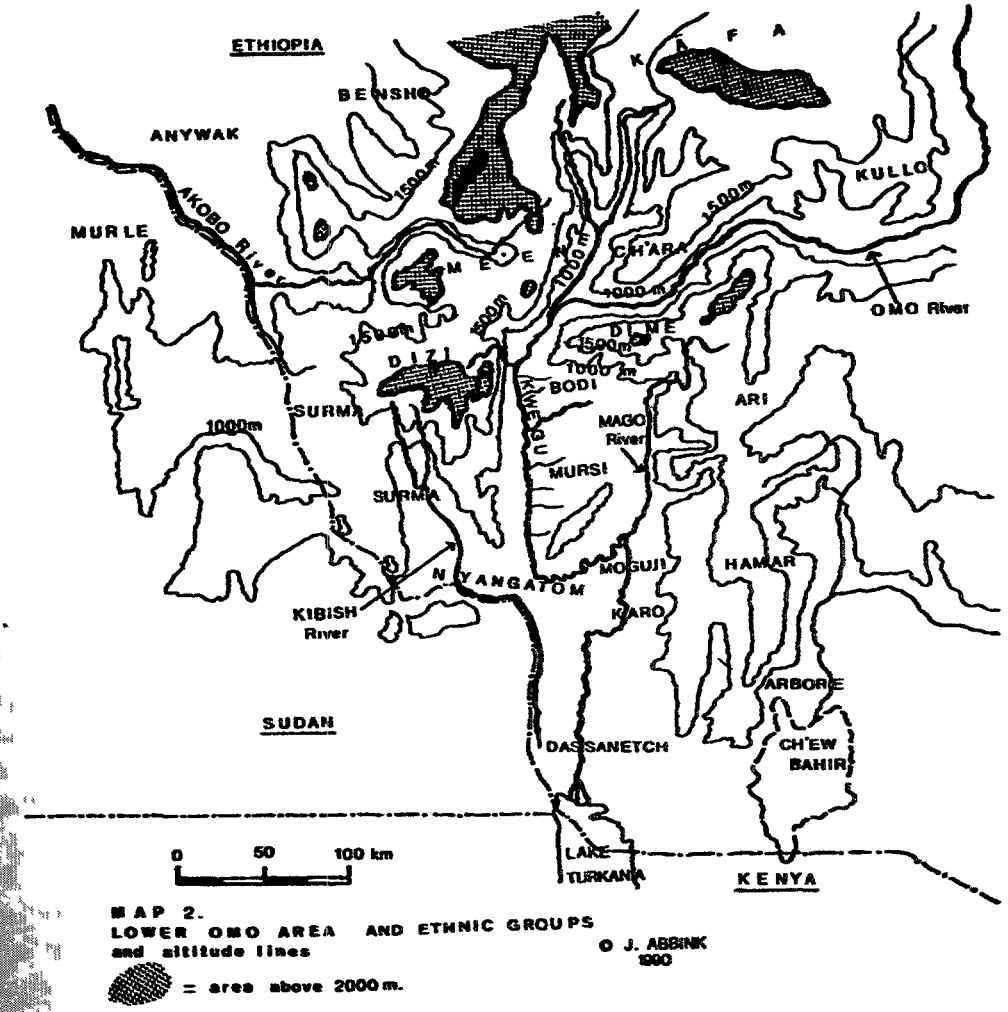


Map I Southwest Ethiopia and ethnic groups



Map II Lower Omo Area and Ethnic Groups and Altitude Lines