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THE ELUSIVE CHIEF: AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP IN SURMA SOCIETY, (ETHIOPIA¹)

Jan Abbink

Introduction

This chapter makes the point that for an understanding of the social reproduction of authority and hegemony of state structures, an analysis of local mechanisms of politics, governing and control is necessary. In a process of social reproduction one notes the mediation and articulation of the national and the local, where chiefs, as joints of authority and policy, may play an important role, but in very different shapes (see Fisiy 1995): chiefs and local leaders may be elusive in more than one respect.

From recent scholarly discussions it is evident that a study of local forms of authority and chieftaincy in Africa has renewed theoretical and practical relevance. In the search to discover short-cuts to development, the interest of governments, NGOs and the development community in local chiefs is also growing due to their being perceived as new focal points to enhance legitimacy ('democratisation') and as mediums of social change in African societies.

Processes of political and social change in the African post-colonial polity are, however, problematic and contradictory. On the one hand we see efforts at

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'democratisation' and popular participation in politics, but on the other, a delegitimation or breakdown of central state power, often followed by simply an adaptive transformation of autocratic elite rule. The first development was often followed by the second. Within both these processes, there has indeed been a resurgence of these local traditions of "chieftaincy" in its many forms. Local chiefs (who often have historical and cultural referents, which does not necessarily mean that they are always 'legitimate' because of these referents) have often taken the chance to secure a role within the new political space, or have stepped into a vacuum of power left behind by a retreating central government. The administrative competence and local acceptance of these newly emerging chiefs is, nevertheless, disputed. In the local arena, instead of being hereditary or chosen standard-bearers of cultural traditions and democratic ideals, they are often political agents in their own right and act with a degree of opportunism, geared to their own contemporary interests². In the intersecting domains of the local and the wider national or transnational setting, they are contested because many of them are new civil servants appointed by the central government to bypass 'traditional' or customary chiefs, and act often as power brokers and political entrepreneurs.

The diversity of local leadership in Africa is great, but its wider potential seems limited: a comparative study would suggest that the resurgence of chiefs, e.g., as 'democratic counterpoints', is most likely a temporary phenomenon. The resurgence may only be an adaptive transformation, and does not in itself reflect an ongoing democratisation. It can also easily relapse into new forms of local despotism.

I will discuss recent developments of local authority and 'leadership' in a society in southern Ethiopia where any form of hierarchical chieftaincy proper was not present. The intention is not another effort to explain the 'survival' of chiefs in the post-colonial state structure, or to gauge the potential of chiefs to become focal points of 'democratisation'. It is primarily to examine the nature of 'authority' in a non-state social formation and to highlight aspects of the transformation in patterns of local leadership in twentieth-century Ethiopia. There are several small-scale societies or social formations in this country that defy cherished models of political authority and chieftaincy. They nominally pose a challenge for the central government and its effort to redefine state-society relations in the aftermath of a period of dictatorial state-communist government from 1975 to 1991, although as relatively autonomous political structures they will most likely face co-optation or demise. A comparison with other forms of local authority and chieftaincy from various areas of Eastern Africa may help to assess the specificities of the Surma and Ethiopian case.

The nature of local authority and the scope and range of local government with and through 'chiefs' is also widely misunderstood in the global game of development

² Some after independence retained a new 'chiefly' position which was instituted by the colonial state.

undertaken by foreign donor-countries, due to the institutional and ideological constraints inherent in the effort itself. While this state of affairs cannot be easily remedied, it might at least be advisable to develop and stimulate a critical sense of what the local views and aims are, and to find out at what point external meddling should stop to let the local society develop its own path of change.

Ethiopia, while being a country of great diversity in ethno-cultural groups and customary political-legal traditions, has not figured prominently in scholarly discussions on African chieftaincy. This may be due to various factors, but a very important one is the absence of a colonial legacy in politics and law. This has prevented the problematic of 'indirect rule', etc. which has been the issue of a voluminous literature on West and Central Africa, and has also retarded and significantly modified the impact and pace of globalising forces on this country. Ethiopia also had an old indigenous state with its own legal and political traditions of, and solutions for, local governance. There is, nevertheless, potential comparative relevance to a study of chiefs and political authority in Ethiopia. The ethnographic literature on the dynamics of chieftaincy and local leaders in Ethiopia is fairly rich, although theoretical reflection is scarce: there are no systematic comparative studies of transformations of local authority and leadership in Ethiopia as there are for the ex-colonial regions of Southern and Eastern Africa.³

This chapter takes one case for special consideration: the Surma (also known as Suri) of south-western Ethiopia, a society where 'chiefs' in the proper sense of the word are lacking,⁴ but where the nature of the polity and of its ritual leaders can be compared to that in other areas. It should be noted that the Surma area has been one of instability and violence in the past eight years, with hundreds of people killed in either inter-ethnic conflicts or government punitive action. An analysis of the local constructions and dynamics of authority, leadership and state power may reveal some of the reasons.

Ethiopia's multi-ethnic polity

Ethiopia is a country of growing importance, with the third largest population in Africa. For historical reasons, Ethiopia was and is often considered as 'not quite Africa', both in the West and in Africa itself (see Teshale 1996). The image goes back to the medieval European representation of Ethiopia/Abyssinia as a legendary Christian state 'surrounded by Muslims' (The Muslim expansion in the early Middle Ages had cut off contacts with the West from the tenth until the early fifteenth century). In colonial

³ Dopham & James' pioneering book (1986) is an outstanding exception, but has not led to many follow-up studies.

⁴ This chapter is based on fieldwork among the Surma, Me'en and Dizi peoples done in the years 1990-1995.

Africa, the country retained its prestige as one of the oldest independent sources of African culture. Partly, these views were based on the ancient independent state tradition of Ethiopia. At least since the first century BCE, a central state was known the Ethiopian highlands (Aksum). It was centred on a monarchy buttressed by a universal religion (Orthodox Christianity, since about 340) and on a politico-religious literary and juridical tradition (in the Ge'ez language). The presence of an indigenous state is indeed important in comparing patterns of chieftaincy and leadership in Ethiopia with those of other areas. The Ethiopian monarchical state was long confined only to the central highlands, some 45% of the present state territory. In the areas incorporated since the late nineteenth century - mostly low-lying pastoral areas - other forms of governance and authority were dominant. There were, for instance, segmentary societies (Somali), age-grade societies in the east and south (Oromo, Konso, Darasa, Sidama), small-scale 'divine kingdoms' as well as democratic assembly-societies (in the Omotic-speaking areas, see for instance Abélès 1983, Bureau 1981), and hierarchical chiefdoms in the central and southern regions (See Todd 1978, Haberland 1993). The diversity was staggering and posed a challenge for the centralising empire-state of Ethiopia and its socio-cultural order in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the pre-modern era, central state rule (either in direct or in tributary form) was already contested, even in the various core regions of Ethiopia like Tigray and Begemdir, without, however, losing its organising and normative force. On the southern periphery, elite-strata of the Oromo people, which had substantially expanded into the highland areas since the mid-sixteenth century, were partly incorporated into the state elite, whereby ethnic identity as such was not a prime criterion. In addition, several Oromo kingdoms emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, inspired by elements from that central highland state tradition. Northern monarchical traditions may also have had a defining influence on the smaller kingdoms in the Omotic-speaking areas in the South (see Haberland 1965; 1981).

Ethiopia was never colonised - it was only occupied for five years by Fascist Italy in the 1930s - and thus did not receive the direct impact of colonial judicial and political administration⁵. But the imperial-type government under Haile Sellassie (r. 1930-1974) showed some structural similarities with a 'colonial' government, imposing alien rule and a tributary economic system on subject groups, not least in the southern, recently incorporated, areas. The imperial regime could, in a radical view, be labelled as a form of internal colonialism. Many ethnic groups in Ethiopia saw significant, often dramatic, transformations under the Empire state. Nevertheless, core elements of their traditional ideas of authority and local governance were often maintained, in ideology and collective memory, if not in actual form then often in dormant state.

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The case of Eritrea is different: there the Italians established a colony in 1890 which lasted up to 1941. Colonial administration and thinking made a deep imprint in Eritrean society, still noticeable today.

The period after imperial conquest of southern Ethiopia since the 1880s created new patterns of local leadership, often in the form of a combination of direct rule (the state appointment of military chiefs as governors), and a version of indirect rule (naming local chiefs from an ethnic or regional group as government liaison men). If the indigenous structure did not have an institution that could be called 'chieftaincy', one was imposed from above. Often, local people with a feeble prestige or power basis in their own society were appointed, which led to predictable problems of representativeness and manipulation, known from the Western colonial systems elsewhere in Africa. Hence, the *cultural articulation* of these two traditions of authority and leadership - the central and the local - was complex and varied across groups. Seen from a political-anthropological perspective, Ethiopia was a social 'laboratory' for political-legal experimentation. It yielded continuities in local leadership where elites were maintained, though co-opted or where neo-traditional chiefs emerged from the local society. But it yielded also ruptures where imposed state administrators and non-indigenous rule were introduced.

From the late nineteenth century up to the present, Ethiopia, though with an underlying political culture of authoritarianism, moved through three fundamentally different political systems (apart from the Italian intermezzo of 1936-1941): feudalist monarchy (up to 1974), state-communist centralist republic (1974-1991), and an ethno-regional federal republic (since 1991). In the present study, the question is to what extent these different types of governance and authority structure have had a transformative impact on traditional forms of chieftaincy and local leadership. This question has great relevance, because the local appropriation and re-creation of ideas and practices of national governance and state 'legitimacy' can prove decisive for the social basis and political stability of a regime.

As the Surma, like the dozens of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, form part of a larger whole, we first sketch the Ethiopian administrative context.

Ethiopian local administration

Under the Ethiopian imperial system until 1974, one principle was paramount: loyalty to the emperor, as the unifying political figure and source of divinely ordained power. The personal bond was important: primarily, *people* had to be controlled. There was some measure of administrative decentralisation and delegation of power but this never significantly affected the hierarchical power structure ultimately controlled by the emperor (see Abera 1968). Over the years, the structure became increasingly autocratic. Emperor Haile Sellassie had initially been a moderniser, intent on bringing modern education, economic development, a nation-state and an efficient central-state bureaucracy to a country where the regional nobility and provincial war-lords and settler-communities in the conquered south were traditionally strong. Their position was

based on hegemonic land-tenure, buttressed by hereditary rights or resulting from confiscation. In the South there was also that of free-holds. The possession of (claims to) land provided the economic pillar of the 'Amharised' gentry in the pre-revolutionary system. Haile Sellassie, as long as he could not or did not carry out a fundamental land reform, had to leave the elites in the core regions of the empire (like Tigray, Gojjam, Begemdir, Jimma and Wollo) a substantial amount of autonomy, as long as they recognised him as the sovereign. This highly patrimonial structure was characterised by a very slow rate of change, and a continued subjugation of the peasantry in a crippling tributary system.

Another feature of the imperial policy was that national integration and socio-cultural assimilation of the many ethno-cultural groups and religious communities came only in second place (Clapham 1975: 77), after the overriding aim of political-economic control. The different cultural commitments of these local populations were to a large extent respected, or just ignored. Only when entry into the *national* echelons of power was aimed at, an assimilation to the dominant Amhara cultural style was necessary (language, religion, manners). In the southern provinces, which had only been part of the empire since the late nineteenth century, there were many smaller decentralised societies, but few powerfully entrenched provincial elites of nobles which the monarch had to reckon with.⁶ In these areas, often seriously disorganised after the destructive conquest, a new structure of authority was instituted. As the hereditary chiefs or kings were often initially removed, representatives of the new stratum of the military and settler groups⁷ were appointed as administrators. Their rule was based on the control of resources and local labour power. This was the infamous *gäbbar*-system: every northern soldier, settler or administrator received a number of local people as his *gäbbars* or tributary retainers, who had to work on his land, fetch fuel wood, do maintenance work, deliver tribute in kind, etc. This system was a heavy burden on the local population, undermining their own productive capacity. It led to abuse, over-exploitation and impoverishment. Its abolishment in 1941 did not give an immediate improvement of the lot of rural people, because most land in the South remained in the hands of a minority of big landlords.

Alongside this first layer of political-economic control, the second one was allowed to exist: that of local, indigenous representatives. These people were of lower rank, placed under the governor or district administrator and acted a liaison-men for their own

⁶ The case of Eritrea is different: there the Italians established a colony in 1890 which lasted up to 1941. Colonial administration and thinking made a deep imprint in Eritrean society, still noticeable today.

⁷ Now well-known by the term *neft'ennya* (i.e., gun-bearing settlers), although here was a wider assortment of people like traders, craftsmen, shopkeepers, farmers, bar-keepers, etc. which came in their wake. In recent years, the term *neft'ennya* has become an unspecified term of abuse used in all kinds of contexts

society. Under the *ancien régime* (up to 1974) there were several of such positions, two of which are important in the region to be discussed: the *balabbat* and the *chiqa-shum*.⁸

The *balabbat* (literal meaning: 'one who has a father', i.e., a recognised genealogy indicating his status as a 'big man') was the legitimate claimant or owner of a certain territory, and confirmed in his position by the administrators. He could be a clan elder, a spirit-healer, a ritual leader, or a traditional chief or king of a certain ethnic group.⁹ Later the word simply came to mean 'big man' or leading, wealthy figure in the local community, i.e. also outside the ethnic group in question. In the Maji area there were even several Amhara *balabbats*, who had assimilated to local society, although they stood above it in rank or cultural prestige. In the government structure, the *balabbat* had no legally well-defined administrative tasks, although he was held responsible for order and for the political compliance of the local community. He often became more dependent on the central authorities than on his own community.

The *chiqa-shum* (literally: 'mud chief') was a government-appointed chief of a certain rural area or a village (nominally under the *balabbat*). Although the incumbents got this position either by inheritance, by nomination or by election within the local community (Berhane 1969: 36), the *balabbat*-appointment was not always a logical extension of the local leadership pattern based on indigenous socio-cultural ranking. Among the Me'en people, for instance¹⁰, none of the five traditional *komoruts* (headmen, see below) ever took up the position of government chief; only some of their subordinate 'chiefs' did so. The mud-chiefs, while having no military or judicial powers, were to keep law and order, organise collective works and allocation of land, and communicate government laws and directives to the rural populace (Berhane 1969: 38).

For more *nomadic* people like the Surma, however, the *balabbat* and the *chiqa-shum*-positions were largely irrelevant. The government never succeeded in involving the nomadic groups in the administration. It contented itself with maintaining contacts with what it saw as 'traditional leaders' necessary to keep local peace, start mediation in disputes with farmers, and get the taxes (ibid., p. 39). In most nomadic-pastoral areas,

⁸ The other two were *melkegna* and *g^wult-gejj*, both military administrators in conquered or expropriated areas (see Berhane 1969: 40-41).

⁹ The political system of the Ethiopian empire also knew a complex range of *honorific* political titles, but these did not have any relation to political functions actually exercised. They were only evidence of a recognition of a person by the Emperor for past achievements or loyalty. Such titles, like *dejazmach*, *gerazmach*, *kenyazmach*, *balambaras*, or *fitawrari*, were derived from ranks in the old imperial army and were given to people of all ethnic groups throughout Haile Sellassie's reign. It does not predict an actual power position. Even among the Me'en and Surma in remote southern Ethiopia one came across a few persons with such titles.

⁹ For instance, the Dizi paramount chiefs and the kings of the Maale, Dime or Gofa peoples were called *balabbat*.

¹⁰ A group of ca. 60,000 shifting cultivators living north of Maji town who linguistically and culturally have much in common with the Surma.

police or army posts were established, but these had virtually no impact on the structures of daily life.

In the days of the military socialist regime from 1974 to 1991, called the *Dergue*, the political structure changed significantly, with more direct influence from the state. First, the *balabbats*, *chiqa-shums* and religious leaders were thoroughly delegitimized, stripped of power and prestige, banned or executed. Local organisations called peasant associations took their place (see below). Within this new organisational structure, a pervasive politicisation of the countryside was achieved.

Under the ethno-federal structure after 1991, the political framework of peasant associations was maintained but reorganised along ethnic lines. Preferably (young) people from the dominant local ethnic community could be appointed as chairmen. In addition, ethno-political parties were set up for virtually every ethnic group in the South (i.e., dozens of them) under the guidance of the governing national party, and all appointments on the district and regional level (recruited from all the ethnic groups, and not primarily on the basis of educational achievement or experience) were channelled through them. Thus, state hegemony was, so to speak, defined and established through a discourse of ethnicity, stimulated and controlled by the central government.¹¹ (In this, it adhered to the view that a defusing of ethnic problems and domination of one group could only be achieved by explicitly recognising ethnicity, not suppressing it). In what follows, we describe the Surma political system and look at how the Surma moved through these three phases of political regime in modern Ethiopia.

The Surma polity and the Surma area

The Surma (some 26,000 people) are agro-pastoralists in Ethiopia's Southern Region, near the border with Sudan. Since 1898 they are formally part of Ethiopia, although they also lived in Sudan, where they had most of their grazing land. But the Surma have largely remained outside the political dynamics of twentieth-century Ethiopia, and could in fact remain a self-governing group, like before 1898. This was partly due to their perceived 'marginality' (see Donham & James 1986): they spoke a Nilo-Saharan (Surmic) language and not a Semitic or Cushitic one like the central highlanders; they were a non-literate, small-scale society, politically without a recognised, strong executive leadership stratum. They were also seen, by sedentary farmers and people in the villages, as "uncivilised nomads" in a remote borderland. Nevertheless, their area was not unimportant economically. Since the founding of villages in the Maji area since 1898, a profitable trade in ivory, cattle and slaves emerged, especially in the early

¹¹ Dominated by one party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, the former guerrilla movement that replaced the Mengistu-regime in May 1991. Its core is the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which has played a leading role in the reshaping of post-Communist Ethiopia.

1900s. Surma sold ivory and some other big game products (rhino horn, leopard skins, giraffe-tail hair) to northern Ethiopian settler-traders. They were themselves also raided by these village people, for cattle and for slaves, especially when the decrease of elephant herds caused a crisis in the ivory trade in the 1920s (see Garretson 1986: 206, 210). However, the Surma - being perceived as roaming nomads living in a border area - were never subjected to the *gäbbar*-system. They were pastoralists with transhumance routes going deep into Sudan and had a tactic of retreat every time a government patrol came along.

Under restored Ethiopian domination after 1941, the Surma nominally fell under the district administration in Maji village. Markets and market participation of Surma increased but remained biased and underdeveloped. As a source of ivory, cattle, or labour power (slaves before the war), the entire Maji area had dried up. The lack of economic integration of the Surma in the wider Ethiopian society is a major factor accounting for their continued political marginality until the 1990s.

The structure of 'authority' among the Surma

The Surma are a segmentary society, based on strong ideas of equality and balance between individuals and territorial sections. They do not know the chieftaincy as an institution of hierarchical political authority. Surma have no persons with executive functions, redistribution rights and judicial authority. But they are not 'leaderless'. Authority among them is not a question of 'governing', but of debate, of 'coming to terms with each other' in dialogue. Through this, the right course of action and a balance between diverging interests are negotiated. The unifying institutions whereby this authority is constructed are two: a 'reigning' age-grade of elders, and a ritual leader or figurehead, called *komoru*.

The age-grade system is well-known from many other East African pastoral societies: a division of men in formally distinguished grades to which access is given by ritual means.¹² The Surma distinguish four grades: the first two, of the children and the youngsters (or 'warriors'), the other two, the grades of the 'junior' and 'senior elders'. The third grade of the junior elders, called *rora*, is the one with active political authority. This grade is initiated roughly every 20-25 years and bears a collective name. In public debates - the assemblies of collective decision-making - the members of this age-grade are dominant. In a strict political sense - e.g., decisions taken for the

¹² Political-public functions are a domain of males. Women had no separate age-grading system, but derived status from their husbands' position. There is no historical record of female *komorus* either. For an exhaustive discussion of the age-grade system among the Nyangatom, an agro-pastoral people neighbouring the Surma, see Tornay 1986 and 1989. These works also contain very fruitful theoretical reflections on the importance of age-grading as an alternative political system.

'common good' of the people - the age-grade might be said to have the dominant political influence. The second element in the political system - and the more important one for the purpose of this chapter - is the *komoru*. There are at present three *komorus* among the Surma. The word *komoru* has an elusive character and challenges any translation. 'Chief' is not really the right word, because the person with this role has no executive, enforceable power over others. Although he is seen as being *barari*, i.e. having a certain supernatural power, or charisma in its most basic form, he is not a hierarchical authority figure with executive powers. He does not distribute land, dispense justice, or impose sanctions. The translation given by Turton (1973: 328) as 'priest' comes close but has some unintended connotations: there is no well-defined supernatural belief structure of which the *komoru* is a custodian, and he is not officiating in institutionalised religious services. The *komoru*-position has perhaps more elements from that of the 'earth chief' among several Central African peoples (see below). He is not allowed to leave the territory that is nominally his. One might also call him a 'headman'.¹³⁾

The actual function of the Surma *komoru*¹⁴ comprises several things:

- * rain control,
- * acting as ritual 'war leader': giving orders to start it (auspices) or giving advice (and blessings) on raiding and battles with enemies,
- * initiate mediation and reconciliation among Surma groups,
- * act as 'sacrificer' at certain social and ritual occasions (although never at funerals),
- * ritually initiate fields for cultivation,
- * participate in intestine divination,
- * give ritual and protective blessings for cattle and people,
- * sum up public debates and articulate the consensus reached.

We see that in all this the *komoru* is both a guardian or role-model in the social order of the Surma, and a 'ritual conductor' of supernatural force coming from the Sky-God (*Tumo*) through and to beneficial forces like rain and fertility, directing it to people and cattle (see Turton 1975: 180). Once the Chai-Surma *komoru*¹⁵ briefly summed up his 'job' in the following manner: "Do you see the sky, with God, up there?" he asked, raising his hand towards the sky. "Do you also see the earth here, with the village, the people? I am between them, I must take care that they come together." The *komoru* is a normative figure, and as such universally respected. A *komoru* gets his position by a combination of ascriptive and achieved criteria: he comes from one of the old Surma

13 In the definition of Harris (1988: 356). In his work on the Anuak, Evans-Pritchard (1940: 47-48) used the term 'headman' to describe the *kwai ngom*, the 'father of the land', although these people had the Anuak nobles (*nyiye*) above them as leaders.

14 Having explained it here, in what follows I will use the word *komoru* as the untranslated noun.

15 The Surma have two sub-groups, called Tirma (with two *komorus*) and Chai (with one). The *komoru* of the latter, known as Dolloté V, was one of my key informants.

clans, he must have intelligence and charisma, be a good public speaker and should not show an impatient or aggressive character. He is selected by elders of the reigning age-grade, confirmed or elected by the people, and then ritually installed. After this, his position is unassailable, and he cannot be 'voted out of office' or deposed (except in case of mental illness or violent behaviour). It is important to note that the *komoru* is not a spirit medium and not an 'earth cult' priest', how much we might have liked to interpret him as such for comparative purposes. Both Turton and I consider him in a sense as belonging to a unique class of ritual headmen.

If specifically compared to the leaders of territorial or earth and fertility 'cults' of Central or West Africa, on which there is an important literature (see Werbner 1977, Schoffeleers 1978, 1992, Tengan 1990, Zimón 1995), we see points of similarity but also of divergence. Similarity is found in the idea of 'fertility' as the leading metaphor; also in the ethno-territorial connection, i.e., the activity of the *komoru* on behalf of the Surma polity located in a specific territory. Third, the nature of authority in societies with an 'earth cult' is more ritual than 'secular' political, although it has political aspects in that the life of the local polity is regulated by it. All this holds, obviously, for the Surma *komoru*. Fourth, there may be an element of 'scape-goating' in the attitude of the Surma toward the *komoru*, which is a familiar trait also found in earth cults in central Africa, which show that the 'king' or the chief had to sacrifice himself for the benefit of the community (see Simonse 1992). As mentioned in a forthcoming article (Abbink 1998), the Surma know a 'blessing ritual' where they face the *komoru* in a threatening way as if to attack him. But actual death or injury is never inflicted on him. Perhaps it is a ritual act to challenge the *komoru*'s blessing and to divert the power which he has (via the connection with the Sky-God).¹⁶

The divergences between *komoru* and territorial cult leaders are more significant:

* Among Surma, there is no real 'cult' or veneration of the earth or of any supernatural powers/spirits belonging to the earth or of beings personified as guardians of the land (contrast Tengan 1990: 3; Simón 1995). There is only the Sky God *Tumo*, an abstract and remote divine force. There are *no shrines* of any kind.

* It is the guarding of a social order within Surma society, fostered and ritually controlled by the *komoru*, which is important, i.e. the behaviour of people living now, not of the ancestors or spirits of the land. It should also be noted that the Surma at present live in an area which is not originally their own; and although there is a cultural nostalgia for the place of origin which features as a topos in their collective memory (original land-right myths, burial places of the *komorus* and clan ancestors), their adaptation to the new area of settlement has shown that they are not completely dependent on the earth or territory per sé but more on the social and ritual order kept among the humans who inhabit it.

16 The neighbouring Mursi people have a very similar ritual called 'spearing the priest', described by Turton 1973 and in his later works.

* The Surma do not have a form of cult which can win 'adherents' outside the Surma community, and it is neither meant to deal with personal nor collective crises. The *komoru* is a mediator with divine/cosmic force on behalf of the Surma and other people who make their living in *that area*. Though this does not exclude the inclusion of new people into Surma society, this only happens in rare cases.

* *Komoru*-activity does not cover the complete 'flow of fertility'. For the enhancing of fertility through the flow of rain, the Surma are, interestingly, dependent on the neighbouring Dizi people, who may perform such rites for them in case of drought (though this bond has deteriorated in the past recent decade).

A more obvious comparison than with the 'territorial cults' of Central and Southern Africa would be that of the *komoru* with the 'spear-masters' and 'masters of the earth' among the Dinka, Nuer, Atuot, and other Nilotic peoples. These have, in critical historical junctures, assumed certain political-military roles, or at least provided inspiration for armed action. Examples are the prophet Ngundeng among the Nuer against the British colonialists in the beginning of this century (Johnson 1994: 199, 329), and the prophet Wutnyang Gatakek in the present Sudanese civil war (Hutchinson 1996: 340-341): but their authority is based on indigenous acceptance of their roles as spiritual, as providing the reference point for cultural core-values of the society. The same is true for the *komoru* among the Surma.

Local authority should also be seen in a regional context, as the various ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia are partly dependent on each other. There is a striking difference between Surma *komorus* and the 'sacred' chiefs of the neighbouring Dizi people. These chiefs, although they are also guardians of fertility and have priest-like functions, are well-defined political office holders, with their own ritual and administrative retainers, and have also a complex system of behavioural and food taboos separating them from the commoners (see Haberland 1993: 273-293).

Among the Surma there is also a more secular type of 'headman': the *gulsa*, who is a territorial or village leader. Although he is not 'appointed' by the *komoru* but elected by the local people, he derives his authority from the *komoru*, who gives him his blessing. A *gulsa* has no supernatural aura, and cannot perform all the above functions of a *komoru*, but he must maintain law and order in his name. If he transgresses his authority or rules by force he will sooner or later be removed, often by violent means.¹⁷

In sum, authority among the Surma is constructed on the basis of certain inherent qualities deemed present in an hereditary clan line and of a ritual division of labour (between age grades, and *komoru* and commoners). The nature of *komoru*-authority keeps him *out of* direct sphere of 'politics' and the fight over material interests. Within Surma society we thus find a balanced system of indigenous *consensus politics*, based

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This happened in late 1996 with an extremely violent local tyrant in a village in the Tirma area: he was shot dead in a brawl by some opponents, who were residents of his own village.

on a fusion of sacred and profane elements, and geared to maintain order in the cosmos (rain, fertility) and in the social domain (especially relations between the generations, clan-groups, and territorial groups).

It was inevitable that the northern settlers and the administration would take the *komoru* as the 'chief' of the Surma, and they tried to enlist them as government *balabbats* with administrative and representative functions. But as the political role of the *komoru* was always overestimated by the state administrators the *komorus* could never be relied upon as effective local leaders.

The Haile Sellassie era: administration at a distance

The Haile Sellassie era from 1930 to 1974 was marked by indirect rule over peripheral regions such as southern Käfa, home to smaller ethnic groups like Me'en, Surma, Dassanetch and Dizi. The town of Maji, the administrative centre of the region under discussion, was located in the Dizi country. In the years after the conquest of 1898, the Dizi people, a sedentary agricultural group, were strictly controlled under the *gäbbar*-system of forced labour corvées, tribute payment and slavery. Haberland has estimated (Haberland 1993: 11) that in the period 1898 and 1936 the Dizi were reduced to perhaps a tenth of their original strength. The northern settlers were centred in the handful of new villages in the highlands, from where they administered the surrounding countryside and the lowlands (cf. Garretson 1986).

The state was concerned with affirming its authority through the nation-wide establishment of the monopoly on the use of armed force and the imposition of tribute or taxes, the local northern settlers were to execute these twin aims. The contradictory aspects of this venture were obvious: the state needed the northerners - mostly Amhara - who had come as conqueror-settlers who nominally shared the Christian religion and the hierarchical political ideology of the state elite, but was keen to check their predatory use of force and their build-up of an autonomous provincial power-base. Before the Italian occupation, the local settlers always kept the upper hand in the exploitation of the Maji area.

In the Italian period (1937-1941), the old leadership structure dominated by northerners was replaced, and raiding for slaves and cattle was contained. Four army border posts were established in the Surma area to guard the frontier of *Africa Orientale Italiana* with British East Africa and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Contacts between Italians and Surma were superficial, although at least in one incident the Italians carried out a violent punitive action against them.

After 1941, the Ethiopian central government reasserted its authority, taking over the four Italian army posts and trying to improve the administration of one of the most

exploited and ravaged areas of the empire. Emperor Haile Sellassie made the Maji district an area to be directly ruled under the Crown (called a *mad-ber*), a kind of personal domain where he could bypass local settler-interests and experiment with administrative innovations. The emperor tried to get a picture of local concerns of the various communities beyond the northern settler-population. In 1951 for instance, he convened a big meeting of Käfa local leaders (especially the *balabbats*) in the regional capital Jimma. Although the Surma people did not participate, several Me'en leaders did.

Apart from the enforcing of law and order, the second core element of state hegemony was introduced: taxation. This was to replace the tribute extracted, often by force, by the village settlers in the days of old. From 1942 to 1968, the Surma indeed paid taxes in kind (a monetary value converted into heads of cattle), and for co-ordinating this, the Chai-Surma *komoru* Dollote IV (Wolekorro) had been appointed as a *balabbat*, although for practical purposes the government tax collectors worked through the village¹⁸ headmen. Haile Sellassie also tried (unsuccessfully) to start a 'civilisational offensive' among the Surma, by providing them with clothes, tools, improved seeds, and urging them to start plough agriculture.

Some trade posts had also been set up in the Surma area, settled by northerners. Trade (barter) of livestock and grain was the only meaningful contact they had with these settlers. The Surma were never involved in local administration. Three main reasons can be identified. First, administration was virtually absent: there were no government institutions or agents in the Surma domain. But second, and much more important, was the total lack of interest both of the settlers in involving them in it, and of Surma for dealings with an administration that did not bring them visible advantages. The Surma saw themselves as a separate political unit. This self-conscious attitude was maintained until this day. In terms of their segmentary political ideology, they differentiate themselves not only from their neighbour-peoples like the Nyangatom, Anywa, Toposa or Dizi, but also from the highland Ethiopians in general, whom they collectively call *Golach*. They see their own *komoru* as structurally equivalent to the emperor, or nowadays the prime minister (most powerful), of Ethiopia as a whole. This was illustrated in an incident of 1993, when, during a stalemate in conflict-resolution talks with soldiers of the new Ethiopian government, one Surma *komoru* broke off the discussion and said: "From now on I, as the one who talks for the Surma, cannot and will not deal any longer with small-time soldiers, but will only speak to Meles [the then Ethiopian president, J.A.] himself!" Finally, the political economy of land and labour exploitation after 1941, while not feudalist like the pre-war *gäbbar*-system, remained predatory and hierarchical; traders and district officials illicitly 'augmenting their income' dominated the scene. Surma were left alone and militarily kept in check if necessary. In cases of disputes or occasional violent incidents (such as cattle-raiding)

¹⁸ It has to be noted that the Surma are not identified primarily on the basis of village residence but on that of membership in a herding unit, but I refrain from elaborating this here.

between Surma and non-Surma, mediation talks were held under the auspices of the government with village chiefs. But the indigenous and state political traditions were not confronted head-on, and the Surma traditional leaders were not captured in a state structure, only repressively controlled.

The Surma and the Dergue: efforts at incorporation and transformation

In the era of the *Dergue*, the revolutionary government that came to power after 1974, things changed radically. In the emerging revolutionary discourse of socialist-communist Ethiopia, the Surma were a 'primitive-communalist' society, the lowest stage on the evolutionary ladder, and as such presented an ideological and developmental challenge to a regime committed to the 'overthrow of the ruling classes' and to socialist-collectivist development. This paragraph is partly based on Abbink 1994a, where the case of the Me'en people is discussed in more detail.¹⁹

Compared to the *ancien régime* of Haile Sellassie, the Ethiopian revolution brought a policy of recognition of the existence of ethnic groups or 'nationalities' (the old Stalinist term). This was, among other things, the reason for the founding of the "Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities" in 1983, a political research bureau directly responsible to the government. Also, in some speeches and declarations of the leader of the *Dergue*, the 'right to self-determination' was rhetorically granted. But the underlying aim was always unity at all cost, and the development of the nationalities should be in terms of a 'progression toward socialism'. This implied a ruthless attack on traditional elites based on the control of land.

In 1975, after the Proclamation on the 'public ownership of rural lands' of March that year (which slashed away the power-base of the land-owners and the Church by declaring all land state property), the first 'development through co-operation' campaign (*zämächa*) started. 'Cadres', urban students and other leftist officials came to the countryside to 'lead and instruct' the population about 'socialist reform and reversal of oppressive structures', and to institute new local administrations. For these revolutionary cadres - young people freshly trained in Marxist thinking - all the *balabbats*, kings, land-owners and hereditary leaders of any kind were the oppressive ruling classes, which should be neutralised. This campaign reached the Me'en and Surma areas in 1976. But among the Surma, and among similar groups such as the Me'en (see Abbink 1994b) these cadres met with problems.

The first recorded contact (in 1976) of the cadres and students with the Surma was immediately after they disembarked from the aeroplane after landing on the bush

¹⁹ This paragraph is partly based on Abbink 1994a, where the case of the Me'en people is discussed in more detail.

airstrip in the Surma territory. At the first meeting convened (with some Tirma and Chai), there was total misunderstanding. The cadres had difficulty in explaining their mission, and not only because of language problems. There were no land-owners or identifiable 'chiefs': they could not trace private property (because land was common free-hold based on actual use), and they could not maintain that the 'producers were divorced from their means of production'. An oppressive land-owning stratum could not be identified; there were no classes in Surma society - except age-classes, but that was not what the cadres meant. Surma elders and *komorus* were not ostensibly different from average Surma, and the cadre question as to "who were the *balabbats*" was initially not understood by the Surma.

The revolutionary officials then chose for a developmental and 'ideological' offensive, e.g., by ordering the Surma 'to start wearing clothes', to settle in one place and practise plough-agriculture, to tone down their ceremonial duelling contests, and to stop wearing the characteristic big Surma female lip-plates and ear-discs. The response was one of incomprehension. One Surma elder said that they "... would give up their own customs when the visitors would give up circumcision, or writing down everything in their notebooks." A few subsequent meetings were held but were largely fruitless. The cadres left, and, also for practical reasons (no food, no facilities, the threat of malaria), did not return. Interestingly, the Surma also did not take the visitors very serious. They knew that Haile Sellassie had been deposed, but saw that in the subsequent turmoil no new, legitimate leadership of Ethiopia had been formed. In the group of young cadres, they did not see a worthy equivalent to their own *rora* elders and *komorus* with which to deal on an equal basis. This scepticism remained vis-à-vis all subsequent local administrators.

More than had ever been the case in the Haile Sellassie era, the local administrators and Ministry officials in the period of the *Dergue* were people coming from outside, trained in Marxism-Leninism. They organised the peasantry in 'peasant-associations', a new form of collectivist units of rural producers, instituted nation-wide. Its chairmen were local people, often scions of important local families. They made *balabbats* and *chiqashums* redundant. In addition, it was not uncommon for *sons* of the traditional rural elite, whether 'Amhara' or of indigenous ethnic groups, to become a cadre for the government.

For minority ethnic groups, especially when a part of their traditional authority structure was still intact on the eve of the revolution (as among the various ethnic groups in the Maji area, like Surma, Dizi, Me'en, or Bench), the most radical change after 1974 was the utter delegitimisation and attempted elimination of hereditary chiefs and ritual specialists by the government. Some were killed, some were dispossessed, and their ritual paraphernalia, insignia, and objects were confiscated and destroyed. Among the Me'en and Dizi, there is a tragic record of devastation and public humiliation of such chiefs. They had to give up their age-old cultural artefacts, which now are irretrievably

lost, and were forced to break traditional chiefly taboos (e.g., concerning food). Among the Me'en, Dizi and Bench people, the traditional leaders and chiefs, however, did not die out; they simply went underground. In some areas they could even continue their practices (of mediation, performance of ritual, spirit-healing, divination) in covert fashion. Nevertheless, the Surma elders and *komorus*, institutionally and geographically elusive, were not seriously affected by this revolutionary drive. They did not lose their land-base because they never had one. As we saw, their authority was constructed in non-material domains.

In the years after the cadre-campaign, a few peasant-associations for the Surma were designed (although the Surma were not 'peasants' and loathed what they saw as the highland farming culture of toil and poverty). These remained constructions on paper only. In two locations in the Surma area primary schools were set up, as well as a mobile veterinary service for Surma cattle that served for a few years. Local officials attempted to re-instate tax-collection which had been discontinued in 1968, but were not successful, due to non-co-operation of the Surma elders and *komorus* and persistent difficulties in pinning down the 'responsible people'. Administration of the Surma area went through the officials in Maji village, and through the local police and army chiefs of the three contingents stationed in the Surma area. Their most important job was to organise periodical reconciliation between Surma, Dizi, Anywa and Nyangatom, after large-scale cattle-raiding and homicides.

Until 1989, the government still had the 'monopoly on the means of violence' in the area. But after that year it was gone, due to the self-arming of the Surma with contraband rifles. In 1990 the soldier posts were abandoned, due to threats for their security. This sudden influx of modern rifles was a factor that unexpectedly changed the entire political setting in the Maji area. It not only undermined government authority and local peace with neighbouring groups, but also threatened the Surma political system itself (see section 7). This incidentally illustrates that the process of political reform or incipient 'democratisation' can be thwarted by unexpected factors.

The general *Dergue*-policy toward ethno-cultural traditions in the South had been paradoxical. Totalitarian, hard-line socialism was the dominant ideology, but in various documents (the 1976 Program of the National Democratic Revolution), as well as in the work of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, the regime appeared to want at least to pay lip-service to ethnic diversity and pluralism in the country (cf. Solomon 1993: 154). However, the stratum of traditional leaders who expressed this ethnic diversity and its concomitant cultural resources was largely neutralised. In its radical modernisation drive, the *Dergue* succeeded, more than Haile Sellassie ever did, in removing these traditional chiefs from the political arena, replacing them with peasant-association chairmen, a new style of politicised and dependent local leadership. Headmen and chiefs retreated to the cultural domain, where their survival was deemed harmless.

Incorporation of the Surma polity into a post-Communist state structure: in search of 'leaders'

Since the 1991 change from a state-Communist unitary system to a federalised ethnicity-based system of government, the Ethiopian political landscape has changed dramatically, also in remote regions like Maji. Ethiopian national identity is being redefined as a unity in diversity, with the emphasis on ethnic groups as the constituting elements. The new ruling party, the EPRDF (see note 13), came to power after a guerrilla struggle conducted in the name of ethno-national liberation. The 'national question' was seen as the problem which had generated perpetual violent conflict in Ethiopia. In the view of the leading party, the various 'nationalities'²⁰ of Ethiopia should receive autonomy and administer their own affairs, 'without any one ethnic group dominating'. In this line, ethnicity has been declared as the basis for new regional organisation (in zones, i.e., districts largely along 'ethnic boundaries'), for the staffing of local administrations (by local ethnic candidates only, excluding the northerners), and for education and justice (to be conducted in the vernacular languages).

Before the impact of such post-Communist change was felt in Surma society, there had been an *internal dynamic* in the Surma polity, not directly caused by state imposition but by the above-mentioned problem of the 'democratisation' of violence: the wide availability of automatic rifles. The internal dynamic revealed the specific nature but also the vulnerability of leadership and authority in Surma society. Two things were central here: a devaluation of the role of the *komoru* and a crisis in the age-grade system. Both were triggered by the sudden militarisation of the young generation: the influx of large numbers of automatic rifles and ammunition allowed every male to have at least one Kalashnikov. Its availability and fire-power (for a generation that had only known spears and slow three-bullet reloading rifles of at least 50 years ago) led to a youthful fascination with the exercise of violence (in raiding, ambushing neighbouring groups, and in 'conflict settlement' within their own society).

The *first* aspect of internal change was an erosion of the role of the *komoru*. The sphere of ritual-religious activity in Surma life has become less important in the eyes of young people. Several of the village headmen (the *gulsa*), were able to play a much more active role. Another element is that at present only one of the traditional three *komorus* of the Surma is active. One has been killed about fourteen years ago by the *Dergue* and his designated successor died at the hands by another Surma five years ago (which was unprecedented). He has not yet officially been replaced. The third one has recently died, without a successor being installed yet. Although this lapse in the prominence of the *komorus* might only be momentary, there was definitely a crisis in that the *necessity* or relevance of *komorus* was questioned. As we will see below, their diminished role is also related to the new political situation among the Surma.

²⁰ The official Ethiopian term (in Amharic: *behéreseb*) for 'ethnic group'.

The *second* aspect of crisis was the gradual shift in the balance of power between the generations. The youths (mainly of the second age-grade, called *tegay*) dissociated itself from the elders. They no longer heeded to the advice of the *rora*-elders, went on independent robbing and killing expeditions, and evaded ritual obligations (elaborated in Abbink 1994a and 1998). These young people hence gained a much more independent position than the traditional authority system could cope with. Organising values of the age-grade system were eroding. This deteriorating relationship between the generations (or better, between the age-grades, their formal expression) led to an all-out crisis that lasted for eight years and is still not solved satisfactorily (1997). The youngsters for years refused to be initiated in the grade of junior elders (*rora*) because they would not part with their 'free life-style'. Because of it, the Surma clashed with neighbouring ethnic groups. Many people were killed in violent incidents. Economic relations also worsened and internal rivalry between Surma increased. Also with government forces the tension grew, because Surma were impervious to appeals to stop violence and register their weapons. The critical point was reached when some Surma of the *tegay* age-grade (the 'rebellious grade') made an attack on a Dizi village and also killed some EPRDF soldiers. This sparked a punitive action in late 1993 in which several hundred Surma (many women and children) were killed in a two-day battle.²¹ This destructive violence gave the elders and the *komoru* the possibility to reassert themselves - as 'political agents' - and to press for the initiation-ceremony of the *tegay* to make them *rora*, social adults (see Abbink forthcoming). Thus, after a delay of more than a decade, a new *rora*-initiation ceremony of the Chai Surma was held in November 1994. However, it was not done according to the rules: many young Surma 'just took' the *rora*-title even if they were not qualified for it in either a biological or psychological sense. They entered *en masse*, apparently with the aim to stay together as a group. This led to the social anomaly of 'children' becoming 'elders', and to a corresponding decline in the authority and moral integrity of the *rora*-group. The present new *rora* cannot be said to have any 'example-function' for the rest of society, like the elders of past generations (claimed to have) had.²² Thus, the crisis in the Surma political system is not over.

The programme of the new government was, in a sense, to 'recapture' this ethnic community, which due to its strategic position along 80 kilometres of Sudanese borderland and its increased economic relevance (the gold-trade, in which hundreds of Surma were active, and game resources), became more important. One of the strategies was to elicit a new indigenous but loyal leadership stratum. This was an ideological

²¹ In the almost six years of post-1991 government, more Surma have died in violent encounters (apart from this battle, dozens in violent inter-ethnic incidents) than in the Haile Sellassie and *Dergue* periods combined. Surma violence was probably also at its worst level ever in the years 1990-1996.

²² It is remarkable that among the Nyangatom agro-pastoralists (the Surma's southern neighbours), a similar process of militarization of the youth has seemingly *not* led to a breakdown in authority structures.

point corresponding to the conception of ethnicity as the new basis for a definition of group and democratic rights, and was declared relevant for all the southern ethnic communities. Ethnic groups *had* to be represented through their own ethnic party (founded under the auspices of the EPRDF) and their own people in the reorganised local administrations (in the Zones and the Regional-State governments) and in the national parliament (the House of People's Representatives). In the Surma area itself, a new institution, the 'Surma Council' (in Amharic: the *Surma Mikir Bet*) was installed in 1994 - a local council (of eleven people), set up at the instigation of the zonal administration. It was supposed to administer the newly created 'Surma *woreda*' (sub-district), which, like the other *woredas* in the Zone, was created on an ethnic basis. The members of the council are mostly young Surma, with knowledge of the Amharic language, necessary for communication on the regional and national level. The installation of this Council was done with substantial pecuniary incentive (Loyalty appeared to have been bought: the new office-holders rose from scratch to positions of authority and relative wealth - i.e., a monthly government salary, fringe benefits - and were thus tied to the government).

The new administrative system imposed by the central government²³ has not considered a role for the generation of senior elders and the *komoru* among the Surma, although they were recognised as having some influence. In late 1995, the Surma Council, at the instigation of the district administration, enlisted the only active *komoru* (at that time) as a 'work manager'²⁴ with a government salary. Such a position contradicted his traditional role of neutral or emblematic figurehead 'above the parties', and would lead to a decisive weakening of his position and role-model function. However, after hardly eight months, in June 1996, this *komoru* resigned from this position. If he would have stayed on, he would have encouraged the process of making himself redundant, and most likely he saw that danger. His decision to keep aloof may also be interpreted as a move against state co-optation and cultural dominance. This may indicate an emerging counter-discourse among Surma - which is also evident among elders and some youngsters outside the Surma Council - about the relation between Surma group identity and Ethiopian identity, whereby the issue of cultural values and local autonomy vis-à-vis the encroaching state will be the defining elements.

The Surma Council, as a would-be political-administrative institution, has had great trouble in establishing itself as a representative or legitimate body among the Surma. Local people see it as too much external-dominated, and membership in it has become a contested resource: members get a good salary, and can augment their income by various other means (e.g., the money demanded from foreign tourists who visited the

²³ There are now also representatives of the Ministries of Finance, Education and Agriculture present in the Surma region, all of non-Surma origin.

²⁴ In Amharic called *sira-asfets'ami*, a position created within the context of the peasant associations of the *Dergue* period. In Amharic called *sira-asfets'ami*, a position created within the context of the peasant associations of the *Dergue* period.

Surma area).²⁵ The Council members are confirmed in their position in a process only vaguely resembling elections and have thus only a precarious legitimacy, also to local Surma standards.

The work that the Surma Council is expected to do may bypass the traditional arena of political decision-making, which is done in the Surma assemblies or public debates (called *mezi*) held under the auspices of elders and the *komoru*. The state has its own program to be implemented, and in its view 'democratisation' primarily means 'ethnic representation' and working through ethnic elites, and not grass-roots decision-making. This ethnic model *may* work: even though they are co-opted into a state structure where they have little influence, the Surma do have a voice. They are now also formally represented in the national parliament (in the House of Peoples' Representatives they have one seat), and in the local zonal and regional administration on the basis of the ethnic quota-system. But the Surma have an engrained perception of the encroaching Ethiopian state - whatever its nature - as an imposition, with few advantages. Indeed, if participatory local administration is not established, and if public debate, consensus-building, and ritual confirmation of decisions is neglected, the Surma will remain a dissatisfied and unstable element. This partly depends on which people are going to fill the position of chairmen in the peasant-associations, which the zonal government intends to install among the Surma. If the elders are barred from doing this, another field of tension will be built up. The new stratum of young Surma leaders²⁶ will not be able to enforce government policy. Explaining and getting acceptance for government policy in the ethnic community itself cannot be tackled without the support of the community leaders, such as the *komoru* and the age-grade elders, and possibly of the members of the emerging new age-grade of youngsters, who are going to be potential competitors of the new Surma politicians.

Prospects and conclusion

Southern Ethiopian local administration always knew an uneasy alliance of two types of leaders: imported highland rulers and local, indigenous chiefs or ritual leaders who represented the ethnic polities. The latter have never been the carriers of real authority. Since Haile Sellassie's reforms of the system of regional and local administration in the late 1940s, the appointed local chiefs (*balabbats* and *chiqa-shums*) were basically government liaison men, who had neither decisive, autonomous power nor full

²⁵ Its record so far (late 1996) has been rather dismal. There are reports of a lack of activities, alcohol abuse and frequent infighting. Barely one year after its establishment, there was a great conflict about the illicit appropriation of tourist money (in May 1996). This split the council and required the intervention of the zonal and regional governments.

²⁶ Towards December 1996, most of the Surma council members had passed a three-month training-course for local administrators in the regional capital Awasa. For them it was the first trip ever outside their home area.

legitimacy among the populace. The only sphere in which they were tolerated to function was in that of adjudication and customary law, as far as the transgression or crimes did not involve homicide or serious 'trans-ethnic' criminal cases. Nevertheless, the local leaders had more leverage and prestige among Haile Sellassie's administration than under either of its successor regimes. In the era of the emperor, the Surma had one *komoru* named as *balabbat*, although he could not be said to carry out administrative tasks. The Surma were basically ruled (which in practice meant 'taxed') directly from Maji.

Under the *Dergue*, a centralisation drive was reasserted again after a period of leniency in the first years of the Revolution era. In the Ethiopian South as a whole, what remained of the old local leadership structure was ideologically and materially destroyed, and replaced by the heads of peasants' associations and co-operatives, set up according to socialist-collectivist ideology. These leaders became the conduits of government policy, inevitable collaborators in dubious and deeply unpopular government schemes (like forceful army recruitment, villagization and collectivisation of production). The countryside was thus politicised to a degree never seen before. Although younger collateral members of local leading families were often able to secure such new local leadership positions, the former chiefs or ritual leaders themselves were not tolerated by the regime as office holders, e.g. as chairmen of peasant associations. In addition, their relatives who were appointed did often not follow the advice or policy line of their seniors, but tried to exploit the new niche of local power for their own ends. The Surma were able to 'escape' any pervasive state rule because of their geographical and cultural remoteness, the limited economic value of their area, and the lack of available 'leaders'.

Under the new federal government since 1991, a new phase of 'remote-control administration' was instituted, based on the state's selection of younger, relatively uneducated and inexperienced local people, mostly youngsters and ex-Army soldiers who know Amharic.²⁷ But their effective power or room for manoeuvre was kept extremely limited. In the case of the Me'en and the Surma - both relatively 'traditional' polities in the Ethiopian context - we could see that their leaders or assigned representatives were either co-opted or replaced by a new stratum of carefully chosen, more malleable persons (few of them with any recognised authority). Although the new 'leaders' occasionally consult with the elders and the *komoru*, they tend to bypass them in trying to introduce the ideas or carry out the policy instructions of the zonal or regional administration.

In the particular case of the Surma²⁸, we have seen that the nature and structure of 'authority', of 'leadership' in their political ideology was culturally specific and not

²⁷ Apart from the ex-soldiers (in the army of the previous government), virtually all Surma are monolingual.

²⁸ The same case could be made for the Me'en, Dizi and other groups in the South.

congruent with the image and expectation that the new EPRDF-government had of local leaders. In the near future, the force of political pressure and financial incentives emanating from the central authorities will keep the new group of 'ethnic leaders' in place. Whether the activities of this new stratum will lead to an erosion of the socio-cultural referents of 'traditional leadership' in societies like the Surma is unclear. In cultural terms, the Surma (and Me'en) *komorus* derive their position not primarily from secular power defined in the political arena, but from the religious-ritual domain. Hence, they are not real competitors of the state. They remain outside 'politics', delegating it to others. In this sense, they are elusive, but this characteristic also allows for their adaptive persistence, as long as the material basis and ideological value-system of their society are not fundamentally changed.²⁹

Even though the Surma *komorus* - the most respected figureheads and reference points of internal peace and social order for the Surma - will continue to act as authoritative ritual intermediaries in their own polity, they cannot but lose their prestige and role even further as the new leadership gains a foothold. Although the strengthening of the 'cultural identity' of minority groups or 'nationalities' like the Surma was proclaimed to be a central aim of the new federal policy of Ethiopia, the perhaps inevitable tendency to bypass the stratum of traditional authority and core cultural values as expressed in the age-grade system and the *komoru*-institution, obviates that aim. It is ironic that the process of incorporation of local leaders and ethnic polities in Ethiopia is being implemented through a discourse of culture and ethnicity - denied in the days of the emperor and ignored in those of the *Dergue* -, while at the same time political practice and the administrative context make the actual content of that ethno-cultural tradition almost superfluous. In post-Communist Ethiopia, the political co-optation of ethnicity and local chieftaincy is thus complete, with the state - perhaps rather unique in contemporary Africa - in a stronger position than ever to realise its reformist and hegemonic ambitions. The question of how this process unfolds, thereby not only challenging local forms of authority and leadership but also transforming their scope, integrity and cultural valuation, might set the agenda of future research.

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