

Violence and political discourse among the Chai Suri

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1. Introduction¹

- 1 "Over there in the fog, we see it, Shulugui.²
With our newly acquired guns we will now go there.
Why do we only sit here and drink gèso?³
Why are we getting slow and complacent?
- 5 Don't think about fighting, killing and getting killed and suffering, just
go there!
I will go, I will really like to go.
Don't fight with the Su, only with the Bume.
Shulugui: it's not theirs, it's ours!
(.....)
Are our guns only to be used for shooting buffaloes?
- 10 No, isn't it for the fight for Shulugui?

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² The mountain in the homeland from which the Chai people were chased in 1987-1988 (see Map 1 on page 8).

³ A light alcoholic sorghum beer.

Go tomorrow, go to fight in our country.

(.....)

'Were our fathers here? Did they live here?

Don't you have guns? We bought new guns and bullets, we have enough.

We will go to clean our area, our country.

15 It should be like this; it's right.

(.....)

Yesterday we only had *Minishir* rifles.⁴ Now we have acquired real ones.

We have no other task [than to fight at Shulugui, JA], we were there in the past.

Don't you have force, or strength to fight?

20 So far, we have only talked too much about all this.

Our women and children were killed, our cattle was stolen.

If you don't act, you have no fighting spirit, no value.

Our real place, our homeland, is there [the speaker pointing south, JA]."

These words were spoken in late 1992 by an influential elder in a speech at a public meeting of the Chai Suri people in southern Ethiopia, before one of their major raids on the Nyangatom, a neighbouring ethnic group.⁵ Two remarkable traits appear: first, a tone of scolding, typical of the speech of elders towards juniors; and second, a multiple reference to violent action. Such speeches are a regular feature of the political discourse and of the cycle of political activities amongst the Chai agro-pastoralists.

The purpose of this chapter is to give a contextual ethnographic account and explanation of the political process in a small-scale society and of the practical role of rhetoric in it. It may be interesting to present a comparative study showing how basic forms of political behaviour are being constituted in a society at the margins of a globalising world and only superficially linked with a national (Ethiopian) state structure. The subject has added relevance as a result of the growing frequency of violent behaviour of Suri in their dealings with others and among themselves. I will specifically address the issue of whether and to what extent this violence (i.e., using intimidating or physically harmful acts of a contested nature, inflicted on other persons) is connected to, or predicated upon, elements within the political life of the Suri.

Owing to the work of anthropologists in numerous cultural settings, much is now known about the general outlines of the political process and

rhetoric in small-scale, non-literate societies (for some important examples, see Bloch 1975, Paine 1981, Bailey 1983, Myers & Brenneis 1984, Turton 1992). The basic structures of political speech and rhetorical persuasion seem to be similar across various cultural traditions, although they are recognisably stamped by the variables of social scale, cultural tradition, socio-economic conditions (egalitarianism vs. hierarchy) and the nature of external relations (subjection vs. dominance vis-à-vis the state). The vital importance of societies like the Suri and the Mursi (see below) is that they provide micro-level examples of the workings of the political process in its "elementary form", as rooted in basic social relations and human life strategies. From such studies we know, for instance, that enthymemic persuasion (leaving certain things unstated) is an essential rhetorical element in politics when its spokespersons or leaders want to mobilise for united action on the basis of shared, implicit values (see Paine 1981:13, 21). What speakers are *saying* in those debates is then mainly an exhortation to *doing* (see also Myers & Brenneis 1984:11). In the Chai polity, this doing is often the undertaking of a certain ritual or a certain form of violent action.

The Suri are an interesting case of a traditional society on the brink of being drawn into the wider political structures of the Ethiopian state, while still maintaining their distinctiveness as a relatively independent socio-political unit. They are a group of ca. 28,000 shifting cultivators/cattle herders in the savannah-bushland of southwestern Ethiopia (in the Southern Peoples' Regional State, formerly Kāfa region), living in ca. 40-45 villages ranging in size from a hundred to a few thousand people. Under the terms of the latest Ethiopian Constitution (which came into effect in August 1995) they are recognised as a separate ethnic group, allegedly with its own "cultural and linguistic rights". This means representation and co-optation in the national administrative structures and a seat in the Federal Parliament of the new Ethiopian Republic.⁶

On a micro-political level, the Suri (locally often called "Surma") can be divided into two subgroups, the Tirma and the Chai (the largest).⁷ These

⁶ The Federal Parliament has two houses: the "Council of the Federation" is the upper chamber, composed of members of what are now called the various "nations, nationalities and peoples" of Ethiopia. It has no substantial political power and is basically under the control of the Executive (the prime minister). The lower house is the "House of Peoples' Representatives" (HPR). Both were installed in 1995, after a nation-wide general election tightly controlled by the ruling party, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). As a "minority nationality", the Suri have one assigned representative in the HPR.

⁷ The third "Suri" group are the Baalé, ca. 8000 people mostly living in Sudan near and on the Boma plateau. They form a separate political unit from the Tirma and Chai. Their language differs substantially from Tirma-Chai (see Moges Yigezu & Dimmendaal, this volume).

⁴ Old three- or five-shot Männlicher rifles.

⁵ Ngorkana Woletula, on 23 February 1992, Makara. Transcribed from a tape-recording.

units have their own territory, grazing areas, and agricultural fields. They also have their own decision-making forums and initiation ceremonies (e.g., for a "ruling" age grade). In many respects, the Suri have always been rather autonomous, having little contact with the Ethiopian state, which only nominally incorporated their area in the late 1890s. In the 1980s, several dozens of Suri young men served in the army of the Mengistu-regime, speak Amharic, and have primary and some secondary education. But their influence on the traditional political and social system of the Suri has not been very pervasive. After their return in 1990–1991, they have been re-absorbed into Suri society. They re-adapted to its norms and customs, built up their herds, participated in the rituals, and tried to marry and start a family.⁸

In the Maji area of Ethiopia, the Suri have acquired a "bad reputation". In recent years, they have been involved in numerous violent conflicts with their neighbours, who consist of diverse ethno-cultural groups like the Dizi, the Me'en, the Anyuak, the Toposa, the Nyangatom and also the people of mixed northern origin living in a handful of highland villages in this area. (See Maps 1 and 2 on pages 8 and 76 for the geographical location of these groups.) The Suri have consistently been accused of "causing problems": arbitrary killings, ambushes, livestock raids, thefts of grain, honey and other property, and refusing to live in peace with others (cf. Abbink 1993b). They have the aura of being an "unruly, ignorant and uncivilised group of people", especially in the eyes of the villagers, the state administrators, and most Dizi. In this local discourse, what is seen as cause and effect are often confused: either the Suri are said to be uncivilised because "they cannot control their aggression and violence", or they are violent because they are "still uncivilised".

There is also substantial violent tension within Suri society itself, although this usually does not have fatal consequences (cf. Abbink 1994). They have mechanisms of self-control which are lacking in their dealings with outsiders. The latter are outside the ritual bounds of Suri society, and also outside the "moral community". The question of why Suri violence has become so conspicuous in recent years, and whether it is a common feature of their political system, might be answered by considering the changing conditions in and around Suri society, the characteristics of their

⁸ In 1995–1996, the regional government of the Southern Regional State has created a "Surma *woreda*" (district), and a corresponding "Surma Council" to act as a kind of local authority. This was in accordance with the policy of having ethnic groups represented by "their own" members. Some of the young men who speak Amharic as well as some other Suri men of influence were appointed in the Council after internal elections. They receive a government salary for their membership and activities.

political debating and political action, and their norms and representations of violence.

An obvious case for comparison are the *Mursi*. This group of ca. 5,000 people, living across the Omo River to the east of the Chai Suri, are closely related to them, speaking the same language, with dialect differences. They have been well described by anthropologist David Turton in a number of fascinating articles, two of which deal directly with public oratory and politics (Turton 1975, 1992). In several Granada films on the Mursi (Turton & Woodhead 1974, 1991), the subject was also treated in a penetrating manner. To Turton's accounts, based on a large corpus of speeches and oratory among this group, perhaps not much may be added in terms of explanatory analysis of political life and rhetoric, and my present essay will show overlap with his arguments.

While Turton's work is concerned with the functional and formal properties as well as the social context of public debate, I will reflect in particular on the relation between *Chai* debating and public gathering as it relates to what I see as cycles of age-set tension and of violence in this type of society (i.e. primarily Chai, Tirma, Mursi, and Baalé, but in principle also recognisable among similar groups in Eastern Africa marked by relatively egalitarian social structure, livestock-holding, a bridewealth system, and substantial socio-economic and political autarky). Both the Chai and the Mursi can be seen as relatively autonomous political units with a sense of distinctiveness and solidarity. This holds for these two groups in relation to their Su (highland farmers, mainly Dizi or Dime people) and pastoral neighbours, but also in relation to each other. However, in the case of the Chai, it will be of interest to recall their "ritual bonds" with the Dizi (cf. Abbink 1994:71), which show that they were certainly not a political isolate.

2. Political structure: The age grades and the komorú

The Suri were and still are a largely "acephalous", non-hierarchical society, i.e. without centralised political authority or the institution of chiefs: they have no dominant leaders with executive powers. In their democratic order, there is no notion of "sovereignty" nor of its delegation to a higher authority. There is an ideal of equality among adults, but it is structured by gender and age. The term equality here refers to the undeniable "relative political autonomy of actors" (Myers & Brenneis 1984:11). Girls and married women, although at the centre of domestic units and households, effectively forming the framework of social life, do not participate directly

in the most important public debates.⁹ The basic criterion to distinguish people and to accord them adult status and respect is age-grade position. The notion of a "supreme authority" does not exist; it is deflected towards the *komorú*, a mediator figure who has a kind of neutral, ritually facilitating position. His position is due to descent from a certain clan line and to personal character, *not* to bravery, personal feats in battle, political manipulation, wealth, etc. The *komorú* has no political office or authority, but is primarily a ritual figurehead,¹⁰ a conciliator, a point of ritual and moral reference of the society as a whole. On account of his position, he is considered as having a quality called *bārari*, i.e. 'hot', possessing extra power.¹¹ This "power" is applied for healing, blessing, reconciliation and initiation purposes.

In the political process, most prestige and influence is accorded traditionally to a "reigning" set of elders of the *rórà* age grade and to one of senior or "retired" elders (*bára*). They are the backbone of political society, to be respected and honoured on occasion by the junior set of (uninitiated) men called *tègay*.¹² Women are accorded authority, respect and prestige in connection with the age-grade status of their husbands, but are not initiated separately. Such a set of elders (*not* determined by biological generation and age) has a collective name, marking them off from their predecessors. Until December 1994, the reigning set was that of *neebe* (i.e., the 'buffaloes'). As villages and territorial settlements are usually made up of domestic units with members from all the clans of the Chai, one may find members of the ruling age grade in any such place. Within this population of *neebe*, there are a limited number of men with an outstanding position.

The locations for political discussions and decisions are the sedentary villages, where most of the *rórà* (and the women and young children) reside. The village of Makara, where the Chai *komorú* lives, is the scene of the most important debates, especially when a subsequent ritual blessing is to be given. The young men of the *tègay*-grade usually stay with the livestock in the lowlands, moving around with the herds and living in make-shift camps, one or two days' distance from the villages. This "dual" settlement structure of the Chai is notably different from, for example, the Mursi pattern, and has an impact on the political process. The senior *tègay*

among them could formally participate in the debates, but due to this distance, they are not often capable of doing so. Still, between these two sections, frequent contact is maintained by both men and women (especially youngsters) travelling to and fro between villages and cattle camps for reasons of, e.g., exchanging of news, visiting relatives and friends, drinking of milk or blood from the cattle, or supplying food from the villages (sorghum beer, grain porridge).

The ruling age-set (or *teny*) of *rórà* is replaced every 25 to 30 years. The norm seems to be every 15 to 20 years, but the last three ceremonies among the Chai all had a large interval between them: the *neebe* were initiated in the dry season of 1960;¹³ their predecessors, called Bi-Kambo, before the Italian occupation of 1936, around 1932. The approaching of the time for a new set ceremony is of major importance, as it generates pressure on especially the elders to prepare its initiation and prepare the *tègay* and other Suri for this major realignment in social and age-group relations.

Indeed, one of the central theses of this essay is that the tension building up within the political system of societies like the Chai in itself generates internal rivalry as well as external violence, both elements being reflected in the political cycle of discussion and debate. Apart from that, the relationship between *rórà* and *tègay* itself is one of a certain "ritual servitude", where the latter have to demonstrate to the former their valour and value as adults and as responsible people. Elsewhere I have stressed (following Tornay's insights) the importance of the metaphor of (sacrificial) violence underlying this relationship (Abbink 1994:73).

3. The nature of Chai political life: "Leaders", debates and action

In the anthropology of politics, attention has shifted from earlier social-structural and transactionalist views of political procedure, networks, and power relations to the analysis of "discourse" and rhetorical strategies in political manoeuvring (e.g., Paine 1981, Brenneis & Myers 1984, Strecker 1990). While the latter strand of thinking has contributed decisively to the understanding of the process of politics, there is a danger that social and material conditions constraining the rhetorical process and the strategic choices expressed in political discourse are given only secondary place. In the case of the Chai, it is evident that only a dialectical view gives a full picture. Political behaviour – defined here as the behaviour of a collectivity concerned with the definition and realisation of perceived common goals and rights and the delineation and defence of the group against perceived

⁹ Women have their own livestock (although they do not herd them) and have a large say in where fields should be cleared and what should be planted and when.

¹⁰ Turton (1975: 180) refers to him as a "priest". See also Abbink (1997) on Surma leadership.

¹¹ Several ritually important plants are also said to be *barari*.

¹² This compares with the Mursi, who also speak of *rórà*, *bára* (and an additional set of oldest elders, *karo*), and *teru* (for *tègay*). The Suri have a set of children or youngsters below the *tègay*, called *lúsi*. Strictly speaking, the Suri have no more than these four grades. The Mursi are said to distinguish seven (cf. Turton 1973: 125).

¹³ I.e., one year *before* the ceremony for the Mursi set, called Benna

outsiders – is conditioned by the interplay of, on the one hand, structural norms and “rules of the game”, and, on the other, socio-economic conditions which determine the formation of interests and conflicts of interests of the actors. Implicit in this definition is that the determination of the “perceived common goals” presupposes a process of social reproduction and of social validation. Myers and Brenneis (1984:4) have rightly argued that “... people’s relationships to sources of social value and to the processes that generate it” are important when analysing “politics”.

The changing external conditions of Chai society decisively contribute to the formation of assertive political behaviour in word (expressive discourse) and deed (violence to achieve individual or group aims). The goals of “political behaviour” (see above) are predominantly defined on the basis of the protection and growth of their crucial means of livelihood – cattle and crops (sorghum, maize, beans) – and of their fertility – safety of children, expansion of families. These core concerns are buttressed by the Chai’s staunch pride in and their feeling of superiority about their way of life and their culture. They hold it in a much higher esteem than that of the agricultural neighbours like the Nyangatom, the Dizi or “Su”, and the highland village people who are called “Golach”. This pride is evident in their aesthetic practices (especially body culture) and their moral imagination, which define a clear cultural boundary with these neighbours. A violent imagination is part of Suri life, not necessarily because they are, in comparison to others, a violently disposed people, but because of a socio-cultural response, codified in their culture, to their position as a herding people in a vulnerable environment both with regard to natural and human conditions. As a pastoral people with a partly mobile way of life, a decentralised social organisation, and a vigorous commitment to livestock as the crucial store of wealth and a means of forging social relationships, there is an ethic of independence and assertiveness, both among men and women. Customs also known from other East African herding peoples, such as bodily culture among youngsters, the “favourite song-ox”¹⁴ called *be-a-kèrègi* (in which many personal emotions are concentrated), a strong bond between unmarried age-mates, or ritual fighting, maintain a militant and vigilant behavioural pattern. Violence in both ritual and actual form is thus an important feature of this society, evidently seen in the mourning and purification rituals (killing of cattle) as well as in the texts of the many songs about cattle, initiation, or marriage. These all evince a militant and self-conscious group identity. Indeed, their self-name “Chai” was explained as meaning ‘people who avenge, who pay back’ (i.e., any insult, theft, or

killing). Violence is also a constant underlying point of reference in the political process.

As mentioned above, Suri politics is exercised through public debate (within the structure outlined above). Among both Suri and Mursi, a similar distinction of kinds of public talk and debate can be made. Turton (1975:170) mentions the term *methe* for a “... meeting at which a number of men discuss some issue which is public in the sense that it may be assumed to affect all members of the community equally”, and later goes on to divide this into two types: a ‘discussion pure and simple’ and a ‘debate’ (which has the added characteristic of some kind of ritual action, usually a stock animal being killed and the intestines read; *ibid.*:170–171). The Chai call the major debates and meetings with such an aspect of formality also *mèthi* or *mèzi* (dialect difference). Their public debates, however, seldom add the intestine reading. Only at some rare, really major, occasions this is done.¹⁵

Any decision or course of action of some weight among the Chai is taken or validated in a *mèzi*, which is always held at a recognised public meeting place, the *dóggò*. Any adult man (*hiri-mú*) can take part in such a debate and many do (not the younger *tégay* and the *lúsi*, the age grade of the boys), but the debate is dominated by some influential, senior *rórà* and *bára*. However, the Suri do not know the Mursi term *jalabái* for such authoritative speakers. They have another concept, *gulsà*, for village ‘leaders’ who are confirmed in their position by the *komorú*, but these are not by definition good public speakers, nor are all influential speakers among the Chai *gulsà*.

The topics discussed in a *mèzi* are: the movement of herds, decisions on a reconnaissance trip or a cattle raid into ‘enemy territory’ (i.e. that of the Nyangatom or Toposa), decisions on seeking reconciliation with a neighbouring group, the location of a village or of fields for the crops, the formulation of a response to government directives, or the decision to hold a major ritual, such as an initiation ceremony. As Turton already remarked in his first study of oratory among the Mursi, the outcomes of the *mèzi* may often seem like “foregone conclusions” (Turton 1975:182; also 1992:163) in the end, they may do no more than express the community’s joint feeling on the proper course of action. This does not imply that all speakers say the same thing. On the contrary: there is lively and substantial exchange of views, but the fact is that a majority opinion grows during a debate, which is then accepted by all those present.¹⁶ A major *mèzi* would not be called if the *rórà* did not already know the general outcome. In this sense, the speeches and rhetorical appeals made at the occasion, while eloquent and balanced,

¹⁴ Remarkably, among the Suri it is more commonly a song-bull, rather than a song-ox.

¹⁵ One instance was the big five-day reconciliation meeting of Mursi and Chai in April 1993 in the village of the Chai *komorú* (of which more to follow).

¹⁶ See the film, *The Mursi* (1974).

only express a synthesis of talks, discussions and exchanges of opinion that have preceded the *mèzi*. These speeches are a reflection of social processes going on in the community. It is on this preceding process that more attention should be focused. The idea of considering the discussing and debating process as an event with various stages is not new; Strecker, in his brief but clear account of Hamar politics, also pointed to a 'spiral' of political discourse (from conversation to divination to oratory to blessing/curse (Strecker 1990:40). As such, it provides a further illustration of the pattern of consensus formation in small-scale, non-centralised polities, although his analysis was not meant to focus on the process in a longer term-perspective. The Hamar system is also somewhat different in that there is no 'ruling age grade' and no *komorú* intervening in the process.

Observations of Chai life over a period of almost three years suggest that there are several 'cycles' of politics in their society: those of the *longe durée*, so to speak, relating to the span of the ruling age-set, and those of short duration, on the basis of the productive year, called *óyò*. The long-term cycle is that of the sequence of named age grades, and of the specific "ruling" set in particular. The Chai are very conscious of this cycle. If they speak of the past and the future, e.g. of political relations with their neighbours or with the Ethiopian state, they always relate it to the 'reign' and the achievements of a specific age grade. They also judge the performance of various regimes in Ethiopia (the Menilik-Zewditu era, the Italians, emperor Haile Sellassie, the *Dergue*, the new EPRDF) against their own cycle, and in fact their historical memory of all these regimes is quite lively. Important is also that every specific set has its own life cycle and memorable events, of which people are equally aware. It is unclear whether developments in the wider (Ethiopian) society have any influence on the Chai decision as to when a *rórà* initiation ceremony should be held. Some initiations were held just before a big change in Ethiopian national politics, some shortly thereafter.

I now outline the political talk held in the short cycle, i.e., every year in connection with, and as a preparation of, the important *mèzi*'s.

An important first phase is the common 'gossip' or 'playful talk' (*tirayn* or *tiráyndò*, as the Chai and Mursi say, see Turton 1975:170), mingled with news about what is happening in the country, either concerning the cattle, other economic activities, visitors, and developments among neighbouring groups (in our case especially among the Nyangatom, the Dizi, and in the highland villages). It can be aired by anybody, both male and female, and occurs during any public collective gathering, such as a work party, a wedding, an organised stick-duel, a group market visit, or the almost daily talk under the village shade trees. The tone in such public gossip talks alternates between quiet reflection on and exchange of information on the

one hand, and the expression of irritation or indignation about certain events and actions on the other. Indeed, this kind of gathering is one in which emotions are least controlled. The typical social groups of such play talk are an extended family, a work team, age-mates and friends, or herding groups. Here the desire or need for larger meetings is gradually built up.

When some events or developments are thought to merit wider reflection, they are brought up in minor meetings, which the Chai call not *mèzi* but *lógó*, literally 'word' or 'dispute'. These are more serious gatherings in a central place in a village where groups of people mixed according to gender or age (excluding the *lúsi*, who are not considered adults) discuss matters which 'require some action', or things which 'should be corrected', etc. Although here, as in *tiráyndò*, equality of participation is evident, again the adult men predominate. Norms and values are invoked and precedent cases are discussed. The typical group here is the local or village community and the *suran*, the territorial herding unit (of which there are eight in Chai). In most villages of the Chai, such a *lógó* is held at regular intervals of two to four weeks, and they are often used as the sound boards for larger meetings and often for a *mèzi* preceding collective action. These *lógó*'s are also the gatherings in which important news is transmitted. However, they do not lead to a clear conclusion and the *komorú* does not give a final summing up. An intestine-reading is never held. But elders of the *rórà* grade, judging the swell of talk and sometimes the grievances in the village communities, gradually become convinced that 'soon' a *mèzi* must be held. In fact, there is an intricate dialectic between the lesser *lógó*'s and the *mèzi*'s.

This last stage, a *mèzi* – which is evidently the most 'formal' occasion of the three – may have two forms (see above, Turton's distinction): either a minor debate, to formalise decisions and course of action (often in response to a major challenge, from either neighbouring groups or government inquiries and plans), or a major debate, concluded by an intestine-reading or a ritual blessing. These *mèzi*'s are characterised by forceful, controlled speech, with strong rhetoric and repeated injunctions to action. Men from various *suran* participate in these *mèzi*'s. Debates of both types are summed up by the *komorú*, expressing the common-denominator opinion emerging in the debate in a careful and often admirable speech. The "final" debate is often one in which the community is unanimously decided on a risky or violent course of action. The genuine *mèzi*'s are held in only two villages in Chai: in Makara, the village of the *komorú* Dolloté, and in Bi-Jagaré, the village of the most prestigious elder of the *neebi-set*, Arsi-Goloñi. This elder has the only remaining "sacred drum" (*kidonj*) of the Chai in his possession.

According to the developmental stage of the ruling age-set, the different forms of discussion have a different impact. When the ruling age grade is

still "fresh", the frequency of *lógó* and *mèzi* is limited. When the set advances in time and the number of *tègay* – those who are getting older, marry and have children, and acquire all the important tasks of herding, defence, and other economic activities – is growing, pressure on, or tension with, the *rórà* mounts. Many *rórà* get older and no longer participate in activities like raiding, herding, or cultivating. They may also have grandchildren who start "knocking at the gates" – demanding cattle for bridewealth, etc. This gives rise to the planning and evaluation of actions of the *tègay*, who get a more central role in Chai life. Toward the last period of the age-set's life, a process of discussion starts about whether and when the time is ripe for the consideration of a new initiation ceremony for *tègay*. This process may take several years. It is also during this stage that the internal political function of the *mèzi*'s becomes clear: they are a forum to validate unified action against outsiders, but also to bring fellow Chai into line. In this sense, it is an arena to "cut down arrogance"; in other words, to prevent certain people from becoming too important.

In this last period mentioned, the situation in itself generates not only internal tension, but also challenging and often reckless behaviour of sections of the *tègay*, who wish to prove themselves through violent performance. An institution exists in which this "reckless behaviour" is allowed, but in a controlled and ritual manner: the *ságiné* or ceremonial stick-duelling. Nevertheless, young men continue to go on raids to acquire cattle and on game-hunting expeditions, or to kill individual members of other groups in order to enhance their prestige among peers. This effort to distinguish themselves vis-à-vis others in order to create a boundary or an identity, is what happens both *inside* Chai society (vis-à-vis the elders) as well as *outside* it (to create a political opposition with regard to neighbouring groups): it is a traditional pattern and a concomitant of their political process. This stands in relation to the paramount need for the defence of herds and of family members as well as guaranteeing long-term access to resources.

4. Suri politics at a crisis stage, 1985–1995

In the past decade, internal and external changes have been occurring which have increased the violent aspects of Chai political expression.

The background of the state of turmoil of the Chai polity¹⁷ should be briefly sketched. First of all, they have a longstanding conflict with the ca.

13,000 Nyangatom or "Bume", their southern agro-pastoralist neighbours. Until some ten years ago the Suri dominated the Nyangatom, but since the influx of large quantities of modern automatic rifles (reaching the Nyangatom first) and an alliance of Toposa and Nyangatom (who are culturally and linguistically similar), the Chai (and Tirma) have been raided, defeated, and chased from territories they formerly held. In contrast to earlier observations that pastoralist groups do not consciously expand to conquer territory (Tornay 1979:115), the Nyangatom have effectively occupied and incorporated essential pastures and land of the Suri both in Sudan and in Ethiopia, and have pushed them out of their strongholds around Shulugui (Mt. Naita, see Map 1 on page 8). This was the area where their most famous ancestors were buried and where they held the age-grade ceremonies of the past. The loss was thus not only of economic importance (lost pastures) but also of major cultural significance. In the speech cited at the beginning of this article, we see the reflection of a sentimental attachment to their land, and of the prime symbolic role it has come to play in the Chai collective memory.

The alliance of the Nyangatom with the ca. 60,000 Toposa (who are also referred to as Bume) has been proven to be too formidable for the Suri. The relationship between the two groups is now one of enmity and violence only. There is no more resource sharing (e.g., of water holes and pastures) nor social contact (e.g., all Bume-Suri ritual bond-friendships have been cut off), and any prior balance between the two has ended.

Secondly, the Suri have been brought into closer contact with the Dizi, Omotic-speaking agriculturalists on whose resource area they have encroached. Many disputes and violent incidents have arisen, despite the "historical agreement" (on "rain control", resource sharing) which exists between the Dizi and the Suri. This agreement was based on the presumed kinship between the chiefly families of the *Adikyaz* Dizi and the *komorú* clan (Komorténi) of the Chai (Abbink 1994). One can definitely discern an element of resource competition at work in generating the conflicts, but this is not the only reason for the violence.

A third factor involved is that the Suri have also feverishly been accumulating automatic weapons in the past eight years. The wide availability and the nature of these weapons has been a factor *in itself* in accelerating disruptive and destructive violence in the region as a whole:¹⁸ the fire-power and deadly effect of the rifles is very seductive, reinforcing

¹⁷ The same holds for the Tirma. The Tirma and the Chai are seen as one polity by the state administration.

¹⁸ Cf. the impact of a similar influx of weapons among the Pokot of North Kenya, described by Bollig (1992: 353). These weapons reached southern Ethiopia several years later than northern Kenya, where all groups were fully armed by the early 1980s (Bollig 1992: 284–85).

ideals of "warrior-hood" and intensifying the scale and nature of killings.¹⁹ The paradox is that the violence has been increasingly directed to the Dizi and to other highlanders instead of against the Nyangatom (see Abbink 1994 for the possible reasons).

This situation of shifting group relations in the Maji area and of internal tensions has thus stimulated a process of *tëgay* taking violent initiatives of their own, much beyond what was expected of them by the elders. The fact that this tendency coincided with the final – always tense – stage of the reigning age-set, was an aggravating historical circumstance: the traditional tension between the younger and the senior age grade, which is "endemic to the system" (Turton 1992:165), was capitalised upon by the *tëgay*, so much so, that it even threatened the system itself.

Because of the geographical distance between herders and people in the villages (see above), as well as the new opportunities of members of especially the younger *tëgay* to simply act independently and *unauthorised* by the decisions made in *mëzi*'s by seniors in the ruling *neebe* grade, there occurred a kind of *split* in the system. The youngsters were inclined to assert themselves by relying on the power of their rifles and on their growing economic leverage (as herders, and as gold traders: see Abbink 1993a). Under these circumstances, the use of violence – especially against the Dizi but also among the Chai themselves – became more widespread than it had ever been.²⁰ The interesting thing about this split was that the *tëgay* hardly ever attended the big *mëzi*'s in the villages. They had their own meetings – *lógó*'s – at the cattle camps, where raids and ambushes were planned, on the Dizi as well as on the Nyangatom herds. In other words, they showed a tendency to develop "their own politics". Here, the power of traditional *mëzi* rhetoric – rooted in the appeal to common values and aimed at common courses of action – was temporarily weakened. For pragmatic reasons, the violence against the Dizi – which, as we saw, was without provocation – was criticised by the *neebe* elders in their speeches, because of its unproductivity and of its endangering social relations, exchange, and the ritual rain-agreement between the two peoples. Thus an extremely tense relationship developed between *neebe* and *tëgay*, which set the stage for all subsequent political developments in the Chai polity and which tended to change the terms of the relationship between the age grades. Some Chai even expressed

the fear that the *rórà* initiation would have to be cancelled completely if their society continued to "derail".

5. Debating and violence in the present political conjuncture: A case-study of a three-year cycle, 1991–1994

In local Chai political discourse, suffused with metaphors and appeals to values from the domains of their traditional culture, an image of normative political praxis is created. Part of this praxis is violence: the "tamed violence" between territorial sections in the arena of ceremonial duelling, and the violent defence of the own (Chai) group and its means of existence. We already saw this aspect reflected in the speech cited at the start of this essay. The underlying values are those of the integrity of the domestic unit, reciprocity, complementarity of age groups, and group solidarity. Due to the upheavals of the last decade, such values came under great pressure, whereby traditional rhetorical appeals and persuasion techniques used by the elder speakers at the debates became increasingly questioned and challenged by the young. Their non-participation and their independent action outside the validation structure of the big *mëzi*'s was perhaps the most serious challenge so far to any reigning *rórà* age grade in recent Chai history.

In this section, I present, by way of illustration, a summary outline of a cycle of meetings and debates and its relation to escalating violence in the years 1991–1994. This period also marked the final phase of the age-set "rule" of the *neebe*, who were replaced in December 1994. The impact of the problems mentioned above were all reflected in the twelve or so *major* public debates held in that period, and in the numerous gatherings in-between. Only a few will be mentioned here.

The stage was set by the situation of increased tension and incidents, between Chai-Tirma and Dizi on the one hand (since the Chai had settled near the Dizi area in 1988), and Chai-Tirma and the Nyangatom (Bume) on the other.

Two major confrontations took place in 1991. One was a raid on the village of Kãrsi in April, where 43 Dizi were killed in a Chai raid. The second confrontation was an attack on the village of Kolu in September, in which one prestigious Dizi chief, the *Dishi-Gaaz*, was hacked to death with a machete by Chai youngsters. On both occasions, no reason was given, although some property and cattle were stolen. Dizi appeals to the government did not yield any result, so the Chai were not deterred. Both raids were taken without any authorisation from a Chai *mëzi*; they were

¹⁹ The violent incidents over a three-year period (1991–1993) on which I have data yield a rate of about 5 to 6 killings per 1000 inhabitants per year among Suri, Dizi, Nyangatom and village people. At some stages (e.g. late 1994, early 1995, 1997) the killings were less frequent, because of a lack of bullets and stricter government control.

²⁰ This also in the eyes of the Chai themselves. A dialogue recorded by Marco Last and Deborah Lucassen in January 1993 from two Chai youngsters reflects this (see Lucassen 1994; Last 1995 contains a slightly revised version of the same dialogue).

actions of a group of *tègay*, allegedly trying to settle scores (revenge) on their own account. While Chai elders did *not* denounce the culprits to the government or publicly scold them at a meeting, they did not approve of this violence either. At various *lógó* meetings in the villages, differing evaluations could be heard of these acts. That the killings were not seen as anything heroic could be concluded from the fact that none of the killers received the honorific *riddò* scarification on his arm.

Later in 1991, a period of general insecurity followed the change of power at the national level; the *Dergue* regime being replaced by that of the insurgent movement EPRDF in May. For several months, there were no effective police or army units active in the Maji area, and the ambushing by Suri of Nyangatom (and vice versa) and particularly Dizi went on unabated. The robbing of village traders, Dizi, and Me'en travellers (between Tum and Jeba villages) became notorious. But there were also several classic livestock raids on the Nyangatom, with dozens of casualties on both sides.

1. The moment to start considering the cycle of debates is during a big duelling game (*ságine*) in December 1991, held near the village of the *komorú*. It was held after the end of the yearly cycle (*óyò*), which is a time when the main sorghum and maize harvest are collected, and in the middle of the main *ságine* season, when most herders from the *tègay*-grade are back in the villages. On the second and last day of this duel, a *mèzi* was held, which dealt with the "Bume problem" as well as the invitation from the new government to send delegates to Maji village to discuss the problems of violence in the area. In this *mèzi*, the elders took a cautious line: they suggested that the Chai would have to take a low profile and in further contacts with the government they should bring up the problems they had with the Bume. The ambushing and robbing on the roads and the raids on villages were perpetrated by unknown people who could not be controlled. At the same time, several speakers emphasised that the Su (i.e., the Dizi) were not "the enemy" and that they should not be targeted without reason. When the *komorú* came forward to speak, all men present rose to their feet. He then summed up and closed the meeting by stressing these last points, and that they, the Chai, would send *rórà* and *tègay* to Maji to find out what was going on. He also spoke of the value of *ságine*'s, as a training ground for *tègay* to gain physical strength and elementary fighting skills, but immediately added that the enemies to be dealt with were still the Bume, implying that it was ill-advised to make trouble with the Su.

2. A few days later, a big meeting was held in Maji between representatives of the government, the townspeople, Dizi, Me'en, and Suri (Chai and Tirma as one). This kind of meeting cannot be compared with a *mèzi* of the Chai, because it was a central state-organised gathering, where

people do not meet as "equals". It could be said that the Chai perceived it as "... a single will which imposes itself upon a multitude of others" (Strecker 1990:45), i.e. the opposite of their own political process, and thus they felt less bound by it. A few dozen Suri people had made an appearance, in comparison with about 300 Dizi, fifty non-Dizi townspeople, and about a hundred Me'en. The Suri contribution to the meeting limited itself to stating the case that they needed their weapons, which they were accused of abusing constantly. They argued that they used them to defend themselves against the Bume – they could not surrender them to the government (as was requested earlier). They also avoided discussing any concrete case of violent assault or robbery which was put forward by Dizi and townspeople. The soldiers of the EPRDF-administration were too new to the area to understand all the details of the local situation and spoke in general terms about the need to leave the past behind and start anew from a peaceful situation. They also warned that stolen property should be returned and that no one should be killed on the road or in a raid. At this meeting, which was basically a statement of positions without a consensus emerging, the Suri found no reason for any "commitment" to what was said or decided. The Suri called it a *lógó*: an exchange of views, no conclusion

3. After the challenge of the government, the Chai were inclined to devote more attention to raiding of the Bume. This is at least what appears to have been the case in the months after this Maji meeting. Several minor meetings (*lógó*) in Chai and Tirma villages led to two major *mèzi*'s, both in Chai and in Tirma, with respect to the Bume problem. They took place before the large majority of *tègay* were to return to the cattle camps, and during the meetings, the elders put up a major challenge to them to go to the Bume area, and not make "cheap attacks on the Su". Some incidents with the latter were inevitable, they said, but these highlanders should not become a major concern of the Chai. One elder said:

Look at them, at the Su: they have no value. What is there in the highlands, except bugs and mud? Are there cattle to guard? Is there pasture? There are people moving into our land over there, in Lo'ong, in Wayanné:²¹ should this go on?

This challenge was taken up by the *tègay*, who, during the meeting, stood up and came forward with their rifle towards the speakers, singing the name of their song-oxen or bulls (cf. the scene in the film *The Mursi* (1974) and below, pt. 5). Following the *mèzi* and the ritual blessing given by the *komorú*, there was a raid toward the Rongodò area (see Map 1 on page 8), where Toposa-Bume herded their cattle.

²¹ Places near Mt. Shulugui.

4. In 1992, the same ambivalent pattern of dual violence against Bume, Dizi, and highlanders went on. On the trade-route between the villages of Jeba and Tum and the hinterland, along which gold, grain, cattle, coffee, honey, etc. were transported, ambush attacks became the order of the day. However, the year was started with several raids on the Bume, which were elaborately discussed and prepared. Among the various groups of *tègay*, meetings were held to give substance to the expressed need "to do something" about the Bume, or at least, keep pressuring them. In fact, after several such meetings (the cycle of which is not discussed here), a general decision was reached: to move towards the village of the *komorú*, "attack" his compound, and finally seek his blessing for a major raid.²² This ritual and blessing is referred to as *dirám*. The raiders were virtually all *tègay* (and were, due to the long delay of the initiation, in their thirties, some reaching their forties).

In one crucial meeting in February 1992, the words cited at the opening of this article were spoken by Woletula Ngorkana, one of the chief *rórà* elders. As in the Mursi speech cited by Turton (1992:166–168), we recognise the three common style figures (distinguished by Turton, *ibid.*) with which the senior elder formulates the appeal to the younger generation: rhetorical questions, use of metaphor, and references to the past. Through these, the central rhetorical function of such a political speech – the forceful articulation of inevitable consensus, the prescribed role of the *tègay*, and the assertion of Chai group identity – is vindicated. This was the core speech at the meeting, and apart from its classical rhetorical aspects, it was also a very *direct* appeal. It was not the typical speech of a debate: not one opinion among many, contestable and tentative, but more of a rehearsing of the *inevitable* conclusion that a violent response was the only thing to do. As we argued above, this directly relates to the structure of the age-grade system and its overall social normative function in Chai society.

After Ngorkana's speech, the *komorú* gave the warriors his blessing. He summarised the theme of Ngorkana's speech and concluded by saying:

Do not spill your bullets here, go and shoot them at Shulugui.
 (....)
 Arise, arise: aren't the Bume our enemy? Is there any fear on your side?
 Our cattle were being taken all the time – is this to go on?
 Fear will not grip you. The road is there; our weapons are here.
 They were my enemies, enemies of us all.
 Why, up to now, did we not go?
 We are like this, ready to go!

²² See also the film, *The Mursi* (1974), in which a similar scene ("spearing the *komorú*") is depicted. But it is somewhat different from the Chai custom.

Again, the words represent a direct appeal – predictable and irrefutable – to the *tègay*. It is an appeal not to waste energy and direct their force to a proper cause. The first line was a reference to the reprehensible tendency of youngsters to fire their rifles at weddings, burials, public gatherings and duelling places, as well as at the Dizi.

In the subsequent two months four raids were made on Bume herds and settlements, leading to dozens of human casualties and the acquisition of livestock. Nevertheless this did not cause a change in regional power relations.

5. In June 1992, a new challenge presented itself in the form of the visit of a Mursi delegation with the aim of forming an alliance with the (well-armed) Chai. Space is insufficient here to discuss properly the relationship of Chai and Mursi. But the point is that, despite their close historical relationship, there has been no lack of violent incidents between the two groups over the past two decades. In several preparatory meetings, attended by members of various territorial groups from all over Chai country, different views were heard on the proposed alliance. Some speakers were against any deal proposed. One elder said:

... the Mun [i.e. Mursi, JA] are liars and robbers who took so many of our cattle and killed Chai women without ever paying compensation (...) Did they help us in the hunger period? Did we get grain from them when our people were dying like flies?

Nevertheless, the meetings led to a consensus that, in view of their common problems with the Nyangatom, an agreement was desirable. Long-standing grievances between the two communities should be solved.²³ In a big *mèzi* on the fourth day of the visit, the agreement was reached. On the fifth day, cattle were sacrificed in honour of the guests, the intestines read, and, as is the custom of reconciliation, the peritoneum cut and worn around the neck of the elders. Thus, the debate ended in the prescribed form with a sacrifice and a ritual. This big meeting accomplished the renewal of the historical link between Chai and Mursi, while at the same time reconfirming their existence as separate political entities.

6. From 1992 until early 1994, the raids on the Bume abated, mainly because of retaliatory counter-raids. At this point, the Chai and Tirma realised that there was no chance of balancing their relationship with the Nyangatom, in particular because of their alliance with the Toposa. Incidentally, this problem also confirmed the fact that the Chai did not know how to *adapt* their mode of battle warfare to the new possibilities and demands of automatic weapons. Instead, they continued with their old hit-

²³ The Mursi also wished to acquire automatic weapons and ammunition via the Chai

and-run tactics and the occasional ambushing of groups of adversaries (herding boys, isolated cattle camps, or villages). This yielded livestock, but in Bume counter-attacks, most of the stolen animals were often lost again. The Chai did not develop effective field-battle tactics, which would have allowed them to regain territory and keep it.

Instead, the traditional pattern of violent attacks against Dizi went on, unsanctioned by the Chai elders. Partly as a result of this, the *neebi* kept on stalling the preparation of the new age-set initiation ceremony. They tended to perceive the *tègay* as too uncontrolled to take on *rórà*-responsibility. Implicit in their argument was the idea that *tègay* could at this point in time even be seen as endangering the social reproduction of Chai society itself. This idea was expressed in public meetings:

There were days when we hated to kill women and girls (...). How long will it take for Dizi and Golach soldiers to do the same to us? Didn't our fathers say so in those days: 'Is not one woman equal to ten men?'

7. That the *neebi* were largely correct in their assumptions became clear in October 1993. Because of constant *tègay* violence against Dizi and additionally provoked by a massive raid of Chai youngsters on the outlying Dizi village of Kolu and the killing of an EPRDF-soldier, the Ethiopian EPRDF-forces²⁴ mounted a major battle against the Chai that month, in which reportedly more than two hundred Chai (men, women, and children) were killed. Thus, the escalated violence of, literally, an "unleashed" generation of *tègay* in itself had grave political consequences, affecting the life of the Chai community as a whole.

This was a central theme in a *mèzi* held a few weeks after this defeat. Here, the *neebi* elders of several *ḡuran*'s were the main speakers. They evaluated the situation of the Chai. Their problems, including the period of the famine in 1985, the Bume war in 1986–1987, government harassment in 1989–1990, and now the constant tension and uncontrolled violence with the Dizi, were evoked dramatically. In no uncertain terms, the *tègay* were blamed for their abysmal record, their failure to push back the Bume and take their cattle, and their having provoked the death of many women and children and the destruction of houses and crops. Thus, they were blamed for having endangered Chai society itself. They alluded to events early in the reign of the *neebi* in dealing with enemies (Bume), when, as they said, people knew when to fight and raid or when to "offer a cow to a friend", i.e., to seek peace and to live together on good terms. They also recalled the example of their forefathers, who had always returned to the same pasture and water-hole sites, often shared with the Bume. In addition, they evoked

the beneficial effect of the alliance with the Dizi, who were related to them and who – as relatives did – had often "provided rain" (through praying ceremonies by the Dizi chiefs) and given grain to Chai in times of extreme need. They asked themselves: "What was the purpose of aimless killing of Dizi women, and of their elders?" In the search for reasons, however, some of the elders mentioned that perhaps if the youngsters had received responsibility earlier – i.e. if the *neebi* had not delayed the ceremony – it might have prevented them from lapsing into the excessive violence of the last years.

The final outcome was that the *neebi* were confirmed in their authority. Their admonitions to the youngsters about what could happen had been proven right. One might even say that the action of the EPRDF troops thus contributed to reinforce the perception of the validity of the traditional political system of the Chai. In this respect, we see the inevitable dialectic between internal and external factors, shaping the political process among communities like the Chai.

8. After the attack, one additional factor led to a toning-down of *tègay* violence: a serious famine in the Suri area in early 1994, caused by drought and by the disturbance and neglect of normal agricultural activities during the preceding period of tensions with the Dizi and with the government troops. This set the stage for the *neebi* to press home the need to rearrange the country, to "clean it", and to whip the *tègay* into submission by forcing *rórà* status upon them. The proposal that the initiation was to be held was discussed and arranged during several meetings of *neebi* elders, without any *tègay* attending. The *komorú*, who was a *tègay*, was also not present.

In late October 1994, Arsi-Goloñi, the senior *neebi* elder, finally approved the actual preparations for the ceremony: preparing the special branch whips, selecting and delivering the cattle to be sacrificed, deciding on the location, and planning the order of events during the ceremony.

9. In December 1994, the *rórà* initiation ceremony of the Chai was finally held. It was a major five-day event, and a large-scale affair not to be described here. The *neebi* elders did, however, give speeches to the assembled *tègay*, and, according to informants, gave them one of the worst series of insults and scoldings ever heard on such an occasion. Multiple reference was made to the excessive, self-defeating violence against Su and others, as well as to the failure of directing it against Bume. The elders stated that a complete "cleansing" of the land, one that even their forefathers had never seen, was necessary. Part of the ceremony (see also the film *Nitha* (1991), on the Mursi ritual) was a ritual whipping with tree-branches of the *tègay* initiands, who had to move around naked (without any ornaments, etc.). This whipping was done not only ceremonially, but

²⁴ These forces also acted as the national Ethiopian army, starting from May 1991.

with excessive force and for several days, both by women and men of the outgoing *rórà* grade.

This verbal and physical violence, albeit in ultimately ritual form, was the final closing stage of one of the most eventful and tumultuous periods in the age-grade cycle of the Chai. Tradition had perhaps been vindicated with this change-over. Nevertheless, as a new cycle of events begins, whether or not Chai violence will abate or not may largely depend on external relations of Chai society – with its natural environment, neighbouring groups, and the state administration.

6. Conclusions and prospect

An important conclusion I want to make here is that the nature of public debate and the choice of the option of violence in societies like the Chai – with their norms of egalitarianism and unity and their formal age-grading accompanied with its concomitant cultural ideals – in part hinges on the long-term political stage (as part of a larger cycle of political life) they find themselves in. We saw that at the end of an age-grade cycle a major ambiguity arises with respect to the initiation of a new ruling age grade (“contested” both by the *tègay* and by the outgoing *rórà*, who seize upon this major occasion to press their own educative programme, so to speak). The chance of violent tensions being acted out at that moment is much higher than in “normal years” in the middle of the cycle. Having weathered the turbulent ritual change-over of grades, the society then enters a new a stage of realignment and relative tranquillity.

Whether this predictable – and in its own terms, orderly – system of power transfer will be maintained in the future depends more and more on the *external* environment in which the Suri are embedded. First, the continued impact of environmental problems: the Suri remain vulnerable to drought, cattle disease, crop failure, and local famine, endangering their material basis of existence. Second, it can be expected that the ongoing conflict with their pastoral neighbours, the Nyangatom and the Toposa, whose encroachment on Suri grazing land, cultivation sites, and ritual heartland around the Shulugui mountain has not been remedied until this day,²⁵ will provide a continued dynamic for the Chai political system, and will underline the relevance of violence in it. Third, it is likely that under

²⁵ This is a problem not only of the Suri but of the Ethiopian state as well: sooner or later the authorities will have to deal with it, if the declared policy of “ethnic democracy” and regionalisation, which imply that people have at least the right to live in their own territory, is to have any meaning.

the influence of the encroaching state – which insists that the Suri stop all kinds of public violence and aims to co-opt them in the national political and administrative process and the ethnic-political game – the Chai will be developing new modes of political accommodation with state political structures and programmes. This will affect the democratic nature and freedom of action of their polity. In this respect, the Chai stand perhaps more to lose than to gain. And in such circumstances, it may even become doubtful whether a subsequent *rórà* grade – due in about 2020 – will ever be initiated.

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A sketch of Koegu grammar: Towards reconstructing Proto-Southeastern Surmic

OSAMU HIEDA

1. Introduction

The Koegu language is spoken in an area along the Omo River in the extreme southwestern corner of Ethiopia by a small group numbering around 300 individuals, who call themselves Koegu (koegu). They are called Muguji by the Kara (who speak an Omotic language), and Umucu by the Bume (or Nyangatom, an Eastern Nilotic group).¹

Koegu is one variant of the Kwegu-Muguji language or cluster, which belongs to the Southeastern group within Surmic proper, which in turn is part of the East Sudanic family within Nilo-Saharan. A further variant of the Kwegu-Muguji cluster is Kwegu, which is spoken by another small group, numbering probably no more than 300 individuals according to Turton and Bender (1976). Kwegu is the selfname of this latter group; they are called Nyidi by the Mursi and Yidi by the Bodi; Nyidinit or Yidinit is the corresponding singular form.

Haberland (1966) refers to a group by the name of Kwoygi, a caste of hunters among the Dizi (an Omotic-speaking people). Lacking linguistic

¹ Field research on the Koegu language was done in Ethiopia in 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990, through a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Japan, and in cooperation with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. When I was engaged in my field research, the Koegu people were living in a village called Kuchur, where they had gathered under a threat from neighbouring people. Recently, however, they abandoned their village, now living scattered along the Omo River