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Paradoxes of power and culture in an old periphery: Surma, 1974-1998

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conflict in the Sudan threatened to swamp the Anywaa in the new game of 'ethnic' politics.

As the decade closed, the fragility of today's conditions and the social confusion threatened by 'ethnic' federalism to the Anywaa is reflected linguistically in how they described 1991 as compared to 1974. They used their own traditional word, *agem*, to refer to the, for them, more ordered and comprehensible changes of 1974. This does not mean, of course, that Anywaa necessarily recalled the 'revolution' of 1974 with affection, only that they felt they understood it, and could place it in terms of their own history of dynastic coups and power struggles. However, they borrowed the Amharic word *gürrgün* to refer to 1991 – with all of its connotations of riot and confusion.

Finally we come to Chapter 13, Cressida Marcus's study of the Amhara of Gondar. Marcus demonstrates the centrality of Orthodox Christianity, and particularly, the intense sociality of local church organization to Gondari Amharas' sense of identity and history. At the height of its project of *encadrement*, the Derg tended to see such local institutions only as obstacles. In that setting, church going and church building became forms of what Marcus calls a 'silent monumental resistance'. The religious efflorescence that began during Derg times, however, continued and took on new meanings under the EPRDF. Remembering the famous forty-four churches of Gondar became a way of nostalgically recalling a time in which Gondar and the Amhara constituted the very core of the empire. This process recalls various efforts at retraditionalization across Ethiopia in the 1990s. Among the Maale, for example, a ritual king was reinstalled at the end of 1994 (Donham 1999: 183) – a dramatic event after all reference to royalty had been suppressed by the Workers' Party for the previous decade and a half.

If, then, the Derg's explicit project of *encadrement* has been rejected at a national level, this does not mean that the Ethiopian state's fundamental project of 'capturing' its citizens has ended. Rather, this undertaking has only changed character in the 1990s. In converging with international expectations and rhetorics of democracy, it has come to mirror global discourses on rights, reparative group rights in particular. What this mirroring has allowed, in many cases, is a co-optation of local (male) elites. In this new context, political leaders – even at the village level – have become increasingly conscious of acting upon a stage in a kind of theatre of 'ethnicity'. Not only has the range of 'characters' brought into the play expanded, but the pace at which events occur has accelerated. It is in this context that we appreciate the 'unreality' of the world for people like Kurimoto's elderly female Anywaa informants: just at the point when they should have been able to preside over large households of coresident children and children of children, their progeny is scattered to foreign cities like Oslo and Dallas – not lost completely but now in only ephemeral and disembodied contact via letters and telephone calls.

Eight

Paradoxes of Power & Culture in an Old Periphery

Surma, 1974–98

JON G. ABBINK

This chapter discusses the dynamics of interaction between the Ethiopian political centre and the Surma or Suri people, a small group of independent agro-pastoralists located in the Maji border area of the south-west, from 1974 to 1998.¹ It will be argued that, in this period, the Suri – like neighbouring smaller groups in the Maji area such as the Dizi and the Me'en – provide an example of how allegedly 'marginal' populations were challenged, if not forced, to break out of their peripheral condition into one of engagement and co-optation that necessitated indigenous responses to an encroaching 'modernity'. Modernity is an ensemble of socio-economic and institutional conditions,² as well as a state of mind and a new conception of interpersonal relations. In the Ethiopian case, I see it as being manifested in an expanding bureaucratic and military state, politico-administrative incorporation of local communities, the import of new ideologies (codified law, Marxist socialism, ethnic self-determination) and the governance, or, more specifically, 'surveillance', of citizens.³ Up to 1974, imperial policy towards the smaller and politically less relevant populations on the margins of the empire was marked by a situation of what one might call 'tolerated difference'. Under the two post-revolutionary

¹ I gratefully acknowledge support for fieldwork and further research provided by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research in the Tropics (WOTRO, WR 52-610) and the African Studies Centre (Leiden). I also express my thanks to Dr Taddese Beyene, Professor Bahru Zewde and Dr Abdussamad H. Ahmed, successive directors of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, for their interest and support during the years 1992-97.

I would like to dedicate this chapter to the memory of a remarkable man, the Chai *komoru* Dollote (Ngatulul), who to my deep regret died in 2000 (see Plate 8.1).

² See, for example, Giddens 1990.

³ The influence of missionizing and tourism can, especially in the case of peripheral groups like the Suri, also be reckoned part of a process of modernization, but this will not be treated as central here.

regimes of the past twenty years, this situation came to an end.

The Ethiopian south-west is traditionally the habitat of a number of smaller ethno-linguistic groups that became part of the Ethiopian Empire under Emperor Menilek II in the late 1890s. This implied their being drawn into a hegemonic order, a 'national project' defined by the highland Ethiopian state, but in which they were deemed peripheral on account of their political, economic and cultural characteristics. They became part of the political economy of this state through indirect rule (via *balabbats* or local chiefs), taxation, and the *gebbar* system (see Donham and James 1986). Ethno-cultural differences and indigenous social organization were largely tolerated in the imperial system of governance: there were no mass campaigns of forced conversion or abandonment of customary law, traditional socio-political organization, or 'harmful customs' as long as political loyalty was shown to the centre.

The position of these mostly Omotic, Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan speaking groups in southern Ethiopia has changed significantly in the last decade, because of new interdependencies between 'minorities' or 'nationalities' and wider Ethiopian society. Especially in the case of the Suri (who are central to this chapter), this process of change in the south-west must be interpreted as part of a gradual process of the redefining of a periphery.⁴ Under the EPRDF-led federal republic after 1991, this process has decisively accelerated and gone in the direction of 'dissolving' the idea of periphery and marginality itself, by redefining ethnicity and ethno-regional identity as constitutive of a new federal Ethiopian state.⁵ As this chapter will show, however, this process of the ethnic redefinition of the nation is fraught with problems and paradoxes.

The political context

It could be said that under the empire and the Derg, relations between the Suri and the state were reproduced as ones between core and periphery in a politico-economic and cultural sense: the Suri people (and the region) were seen as being quite separate in culture and mentality, as 'having no religion' and as being politically peripheral (if not inaccessible, since they lived in one of the remotest lowland areas), though their area was economically of use as a hinterland for cattle and natural products (coffee, hides and skins, ivory, and later some gold).

The underlying hypothesis of this chapter is that under the post-1991 regime installed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front, with its policy of recognizing the rights of 'nationalities', Suri society, now seen as 'different'

⁴ The people under discussion call themselves *Sur* (when linking Chai and Tirmaga, the two sub-groups). As this chapter deals with the perception of 'periphery' I also speak of *Surma*, because this is the term by which they are known among outsiders (including government agents) and also indicates the area where they live (now the 'Surma *wereda*').

⁵ Article 39 of the 1994 Ethiopian Constitution, which recognizes the right of the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of the country to self-determination up to secession, illustrates this

in a relevant (rather than irrelevant) way, is being co-opted into the political dynamics of a new, de-centred, 'ethno-federal' state project. The Suri are also being affected by new globalizing cultural forces such as Christian missionizing and tourism, both present in their area since the late 1980s.

It is interesting to examine the question of whether and how the peripheral status of the Suri community is being reduced. This could be argued in reference to changes in core practices like local 'leadership', ritual life and community organization, as well as in cultural values and identity. However, I argue that peripheral status, at times and in some respects, provided the Suri with leverage and privilege in maintaining their autonomy. Under the imperial regime and the Derg they were largely left to their own devices. Under EPRDF rule they can claim separate status as a 'minority' entitled to self-government under the 1995 Constitution and the new administrative arrangements, and they are now organized into a new administrative district (the 'Surma *wereda*'; see Map 1.3, p. 31). This has led the Suri into a new and challenging phase of their history, where an emphasis on their 'ethnic identity' may turn out to have a short-term beneficial role.

Despite the fact that the studies in *Southern Marches* (Donham and James 1986) paid attention to the politico-economic connections between the southern margins of Ethiopia and developments at the 'core', there is still ample room to develop more integrated historico-anthropological perspectives on 'centre-periphery relations', especially in the wake of the demise of the empire in 1974. This is especially true for the historical exploration of the nature and impact of political and cultural dominance and its long-term transformative impacts on local societies. This applies not only to 'ethnically different' societies in the west, south, and east of Ethiopia, but also to many rural societies in the highlands, which are just as politically marginal as the south, as a study of relatively isolated rural areas such as, say, Wollo Borena, Amhara Saynt, Wolqait, Quara, Raya-Azebo, Selale or Genda Beret would show (and see, for example, Chapters 4, 5, and 7 above). This shows that ultimately the notion of centre-periphery relations should not be based on geographical or cultural criteria, but primarily on a model of the structure and distribution of political power.

The 'unknown' Suri

The Suri are an agro-pastoral group of some 26,000 people, organized on the basis of an age-grade system with three ritual leaders. They have come to be known as 'Surma' but usually call themselves 'Chai' or 'Tirmaga'⁶ (two territorial sections with different ritual leaders, and with a dialect difference), or in collective self-reference 'Suri'. Further, they reckon

⁶ Formerly called in the literature 'Tirma' Tirmaga is the correct self-name

themselves to be members of named groups or 'clans' based on patrilineal descent. They are marked off from their neighbours – except the Mursi and Baale,⁷ with whom they have much in common linguistically and culturally – by having their own language, ritual traditions and norms of kinship. The Suri live in a territory which has acquired significance for them in that it forms their 'meaningful area of living', with historical, cultural and economic dimensions. Their cultural space is a combination of territory with the ritual and other socio-cultural means to sustain and sanctify it. The latter refers to specific practices, like chiefly ritual blessing and reconciliation ceremonies, initiations, divination with reference to intestines, and ritual places like *komoru* (ritual chief) burial and initiation grounds. The perimeters of this cultural space were not defined or influenced by state referents: Suri territory was a domain outside state rule or regulation. It was not clearly bounded, as reflected in the (overlapping) territorial arrangement of named local Suri groups as well as neighbouring peoples, with whom the Suri shared water holes, pasture and cultural arrangements.

The state as an (external) hierarchical politico-administrative structure bent on exploiting the resources (both natural and taxable) generated by the local society and establishing a monopoly in the use of armed force made its presence felt only in the late 1950s, after the imperial regime had made the Suri tributary to the state for tax purposes. This lasted until 1969. In the Derg period and under EPRDF rule to late 1999, the Suri still did not pay taxes, although about eighty Suri youths were forcibly recruited into the Derg army. In the late 1970s, the government started a few primary schools in the Suri area (the last one was abandoned in 1988). The only other service given by the state was periodical inoculation of cattle by a mobile clinic, which reached only a small number of Suri. Primary health care posts were located in highland villages outside the Suri territory and were frequented only sporadically.

For local society, the Ethiopian state continued to figure as an external, impermeable framework of power and hegemony, led by elites located outside local arenas of interaction. In the decades of contact between Suri and state agents, the conflictual dynamics of Suri-state relations in their various forms were shaped by the unresolved competition of cultural models of the nature and construction of political power, space and sociality. State representatives, northern in-migrating settlers and local (Suri) society, all had different notions about the specific hierarchical power structure in Ethiopia.

Among the Suri, political power relates to elements like the status equality of individuals, collective authority, the absence of coercive force being used on members of society, and political deliberations in public

⁷ The Baale (formerly known as 'Zilmamo') are a group of some 8,000 agro-pastoralists living in the Ethio-Sudan border area, partly in the Boma Plateau, northwest of the Suri. They speak a Southwest Surmic language, related to that of the Suri. See Dimmendaal and Last 1998 and Bader 2000.

until 'unanimous' decisions are reached. The state usually worked in opposite ways to these. For the Suri, the unarticulated concept of sociality (being human, and being socially connected) implied, amongst other things, the idea of equality among persons, the observation of balanced reciprocity, and the idea of open access to resources by all who knew how to use them (i.e., for making a living, not for personal exploitation). The approach of state agents, by contrast, was marked by ideas of boundary, territory, privileged access, and political and cultural hierarchy.

The exchange of material goods and persons which emerged in the Maji area after the turn of the century (see below) did not create a common sphere of understanding or a voluntarily entertained, durable relationship between the state and local societies; on the contrary, emerging perceptions (and practices) of rivalry, 'competition over resources', the unpredictable and often arbitrary use of force, and inequality between groups often exacerbated difference and distance.

Suri space in the context of the imperial state, 1898–1974

After 1898, the imperial state and its agents tried to include the Suri in a 'tributary' economy, which attempted to establish political hegemony while being indifferent to local culture. Northern settlers in the highland villages traded cloth, iron tools and later guns and bullets with the Suri for cattle, grain and game products (ivory, hides and skins), and also occasionally raided them. They did not incorporate the Suri into the *gebbar* system (as was done with the Dizi; see Garretson 1986).

In this situation, the role for the state in exercising coercive power and establishing an administration was limited. Until the Italian occupation in 1936, it rarely intervened to stop local conflicts and inter-group violence (e.g., cattle-raiding), and indeed may even have stimulated them in order to gain access to a supply of war prisoners taken as slaves and retainers to the north. Traditional cultural mechanisms of retaliation and reconciliation were usually observed among the various local peoples in times of conflict: state suppression was not the norm. On the side of the settlers, who deemed themselves culturally superior, or at least more developed, in terms of religious identity and political tradition, there was no forceful effort to assimilate the Suri to northern, Christian culture. The aim was to enforce political loyalty and the economic incorporation of local peoples into the wider Ethiopian politico-economic framework. The outlet for local products from Maji (however limited in volume) was the Ethiopian market (via Jimma to Addis Ababa), and the people in Maji (including the Suri) worked with only Ethiopian currency before and after World War Two.⁸

⁸ There was also, however, trade with groups living in the Sudan, especially the Baale and Murle (beads, ornaments, some cattle and grain). The Italian interlude from 1936 to 1941



Plate 8.1 The Komoru of Chai-Suri (son of Dollote IV), 1996 [J Abbink]

After liberation from Italian occupation in 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie attempted to forge a more unified and developed country, proposing to introduce the state and its civilizational project among the various local groups in the periphery of the highlands. He tried to establish law and order as well as taxation. The latter was to replace the tribute extracted, often by force, by the state-linked elite in pre-war days. As said, from the early 1950s to 1969, the Suri paid taxes in kind (a monetary value but converted into heads of cattle).⁹ The Chai-Suri *komoru* Dollote IV (Wolekorro) had nominally been appointed as a local 'chief' or *balabbat* (his son appears in Plate 8.1). The Emperor also tried to introduce other elements of highland civilization, for example by providing the Suri – predictably – with clothes, tools and improved seeds, urging them to start plough agriculture.

Apart from the above-mentioned *komoru*, the Suri were not involved in local administration, which remained marginal at best throughout the entire period. The Suri took no interest in this partly because hardly any Suri knew Amharic, the lingua franca (although several northerners trading and living in the area had learned the Suri language). The Suri continued to see themselves as a different politico-cultural unit. In terms of their segmentary political ideology, they differentiated themselves not only

⁸ (cont.) did not leave a lasting impact on the Suri, who were largely left to their own devices. While trade with Italian soldiers (in grain, meat, coffee, game products and ivory) was permitted and their elders and *komoru* gathered for consultations with officers, there was no attempt to draw the Suri into the administration or to develop the infrastructure of the area for their benefit.

⁹ An effort to find the records in Jimma and Maji was unsuccessful. In Maji I found a ramshackle wooden storage room where most of the old archival papers from the Haile Selassie era had either not been sorted out or had been destroyed by rats and rain.

from neighbouring peoples like the Nyangatom, Anuak (or Anywaa), Toposa or Dizi, but also from the highland Ethiopians in general, collectively called *golach*, seeing their own initiated elders (a 'ruling' age grade) as structurally equivalent to the Ethiopian central government. Finally, the political economy of land and labour exploitation after 1941, while not feudalist like the pre-war *gebbar* system (cf. Garretson 1986), remained predatory and hierarchical, traders and district officials dominating the scene by illicitly augmenting their incomes. The Suri were usually left alone and kept in check militarily if necessary. In cases of persistent disputes or violent incidents (for example, cattle-raiding) between Suri and non-Suri, mediation talks were organized under the auspices of the government with village chiefs, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But the indigenous and state political traditions did not confront each other head on, and Suri traditional leaders were not captured by a state structure.

The Suri cultural model of 'political' authority was thus maintained throughout the Haile Selassie period. It was based on: a) the three ritual figureheads (the *komorus*), 'servants' of the people, agents of reconciliation and mediation symbolizing a normative unity of the Suri moral community; and b) the reigning age-grade or *rona*, the normative forum through which community decisions were reached in public debates (see Abbink 1999; also Turton 1978, 1992, for the comparable Mursi situation). Suri identity (or better, Chai and Tirmaga identities), the idea of their forming a distinct politico-ritual unit, remained anchored in a culturally and materially 'significant' territory; while a cultural aesthetic of 'difference' (consisting of ritual, song and dance, and bodily decoration) was also self-consciously maintained.

The revolutionary period 1974–91: the Surma as a 'nationality'

After 1974 a socialist ideology gradually became the basis of governance. The Suri were depicted as a 'primitive communalist' society, the lowest stage on the 'evolutionary ladder'. As such they presented an ideological and developmental challenge to a regime committed to collectivist–socialist development (and to the overthrow of the 'ruling classes' throughout the country).

In contrast to the imperial regime, the Derg introduced a policy of the positive recognition of the existence of ethnic groups or 'nationalities'. The founding of a political research bureau, the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN), in the early 1980s was meant to give expression to it, being based on Marxist–Leninist and student movement views of the 'national question'. The rights of nationalities to equality and development were mentioned in Article 2 of the 1987 Constitution. However, in the eyes of the Derg the development of nationalities had to be seen in terms of a 'progression toward socialism'. This implied a sustained attack on traditional elites based on the control of land.



Plate 8.2 EPRDF troops presenting themselves to the Suri, November 1991
[J Abbink]

The Suri, like many other peoples, were subjected to a revolutionary ideological campaign (*zemecha*) by cadres and students in 1976. A small group of six to eight students came via Maji to the Kibish area, near the old missionary-built airstrip, to meet elders of the Tirmaga sub-group. With the help of some government soldiers stationed there, they called a meeting and raised issues like inequality in land tenure, oppression, and also 'bad or harmful' customs (in the context of religion and ritual). The students were hosted by the *wereda* people in the Kibish area, who relied on the Suri to supply them with extra food. The 'conversation' with the Suri, however, did not go well. The local Dizi translators could not always convey what the students wanted to say and made mistakes in the translation of the students' neo-Marxist arguments. Suri realities did not answer to the model of an unequal, oppressive, feudal society. No oppressive land-owning stratum could be identified, for example: there simply were no 'landowning chiefs' in Suri society; Suri elders and *komorus* were not very different from average Suri, except perhaps in numbers of cattle. The cadres thus came to focus on an ideological, 'developmental' offensive, suggesting, for example, that the Suri start wearing clothes, settle in one place and practise plough agriculture, stop cattle sacrifices, and abandon the wearing of large lip-plates and ear-discs by women ('harmful customs', a concept later enshrined in Article 23 of the 1987 Constitution).

But the Suri did not take the visitors very seriously. They knew at the time that the Emperor had been deposed, but had also seen that in the subsequent political turmoil no new legitimate leadership of Ethiopia had yet formed. They did not see a worthy equivalent to their own elders and

komorus in the group of young cadres and students, and they could not deal with them on an equal basis. The impact of the suggestions of the *zemecha* visitors was virtually nil. Scepticism, subtle ridicule, and sometimes outright rejection remained a characteristic response vis-à-vis all subsequent local administrators who ruled from Maji town, located in the Dizi area.

Although the Derg made an effort to implement its new programmes, few had any impact, due either to lack of funds, a draining of manpower and finances to the war front in the north, or misguided authoritarian policy. In the Suri area their efforts to organize people into peasant associations – a new form of collectivist unit of rural producers – or herding associations (for pastoralists) failed: these plans remained paper constructions, existing only in the Maji government offices. As mentioned above, in only two locations in the Suri area were primary schools set up, and the mobile veterinary service for Suri cattle served for only a few years. Local officials attempted to re-instate tax collection (which had collapsed in 1969), but were not successful due to difficult logistics, non-cooperation by Suri elders and *komorus* and persistent difficulties in estimating wealth or pinning down the 'responsible people'. Neither was much headway made with the 'cultural offensive'. The Suri lowlands were hated by administrators and soldiers, and in the later years of the Derg the two remaining primary schools, three soldier posts and a sub-district (*mukutul wereda*) in Suri territory were abandoned (1989-90), giving the Suri back their de facto autonomy.

Reviewing the Derg's approach to local society in the south-western periphery, it can be said that in its radical drive towards modernization, it succeeded in many areas in removing 'traditional' chiefs from the political arena and replacing them with peasant-association chairmen, a new type of politicized and dependent local leadership. This often proceeded in a highly traumatic manner, in which the hereditary chiefs (*balabbats*) and ritual specialists of the various groups were delegitimized, humiliated, robbed of their insignia and cultural objects, and often also physically eliminated by the revolutionary authorities, as among the Me'en and Dizi. As a result, the remaining headmen and chiefs 'retreated' to the cultural domain, where their survival was deemed harmless. However, the elders and *komorus* of the Suri, being institutionally and geographically elusive in the Maji lowlands, escaped this campaign, losing neither access to their land nor their visible 'chiefly' insignia and objects. As we saw, their authority was constructed in non-material domains and continued to be recognized by the great majority of the Suri population.

Crucial developments in the area took place in the period after 1989 (just before the 1991 changes). In that year, the Derg government lost the monopoly of the means of violence when the Suri armed themselves with contraband rifles, mainly from the Sudan. This sudden influx of modern automatic rifles (imported in the context of worsening conflicts in southern Sudan and bordering areas of Ethiopia) was a factor that unexpectedly changed the entire political situation in the Maji area, undermining

government authority and local patterns of peace and co-operation. Other groups also obtained access to more weapons, but in far smaller quantities (compare the account in the next chapter by Hiroshi Matsuda for the Muguji). In the last years of the Derg, skirmishes and incidents had indeed become very frequent, due to the atmosphere of government failure and growing lawlessness, with fatal casualties in inter-group clashes (ambushes, raiding, robbing) an almost daily occurrence.

In addition, the Suri political system itself also came under threat. To understand this development, it is useful to recall Chai Suri political organization.¹⁰ Most prestige and influence is traditionally accorded to the 'reigning' set of elders of one age-grade (*rora*), already mentioned, and to a less important one of senior or 'retired' elders (*bara*). These together form the backbone of political society, to be respected and honoured on occasion by the junior set of (uninitiated) men called *tegay*.¹¹ Each set of *rora* elders (a status not determined strictly by biological generation and age) has a collective name, marking them off from their predecessors. Until December 1994, the reigning set was that of Neebi (the 'Buffaloes'). Since the early 1980s the Suri had been in violent conflict with the 13,000 or so Nyangatom or 'Bume', their southern agro-pastoralist neighbours. Until the late 1980s the Suri dominated them, but after the influx of large quantities of modern automatic rifles (which reached the Nyangatom first) and an emerging alliance between the Nyangatom and Toposa, the Chai and Tirmaga Suri have been raided, defeated and chased from territories they formerly held. The Toposa and Nyangatom (whose grazing areas and resource territories are contiguous) had always recognized their historical and cultural affinities, but closer ties emerged in the context of the rekindled Sudanese civil war after 1983. The Toposa were armed by the Sudan government, who turned them into a 'tribal militia', which meant more arms, ammunition and food aid. This was noticed by their Nyangatom brethren, who then acquired new Kalashnikov, M-16 and other assault rifles from them. From the mid-1980s, this enabled the Nyangatom effectively to occupy and incorporate essential pastures and lands of the Suri both in Sudan and in Ethiopia and to push them out of their strongholds around Mount Shulugui (called Naita on most maps).

The alliance of the Nyangatom with the 65,000 or so Toposa (whom they also call 'Bume') is still overwhelming for the Suri, even though the latter are now also well-armed with automatic rifles (mostly possessed and handled by young men of the junior age-grade *tegay*). The Suri have instead expanded towards the north and east, thus encroaching on Dizi territory. Violence has increasingly been directed towards the Dizi and other highlanders instead of the Nyangatom. The situation in the Maji area thus stimulated a process whereby the younger Suri of the *tegay* grade started taking violent initiatives of their own, beyond what the *rora* elders 'expected' or could 'tolerate' (in the context of the age-grade system and its

¹⁰ For a fuller account, see Abbink 1994, 1998b

¹¹ Among the closely related Mursi, this grade is called *teru* (Turton 1973: 125)

structural tensions). The pattern of often unprovoked violent attacks against Dizi went on, unsanctioned by the Chai elders.¹² Partly as a result of this, the Neebi elders kept on stalling the preparation for the new initiation ceremony for the *tegay*, which was long overdue. They tended to perceive the *tegay* as too uncontrolled to take on *rora* responsibility and appeared to think that *tegay* were endangering the social order of Chai society. This was the situation at the time of the EPRDF takeover in May 1991 (see Plate 8.2, p. 162).

Suri identity in federal Ethiopia: a 'periphery' on the wane?

The EPRDF government, which came to power in May 1991, instituted a new discourse on ethnic relations in Ethiopia and translated it into a policy of ethnic regionalization. Ethnic groups ('nationalities') have to realize self-determination in the management of their own affairs, including education, language use and political organization. This policy potentially has great implications for the 'peripheries'.

Compared to all previous types of government, the impact of the current EPRDF administration on the Suri seems to have been greatest. Combined with other forces emanating from an increasingly 'globalizing' world (see below), the new regime is posing the final challenge to the political and cultural autonomy the Suri were able to sustain under previous political regimes. The paradox is that this is happening under a regime which has proclaimed local ethnic identity and 'self-determination' as core defining elements of political participation and group identification.

I have suggested that, for the Suri so far, the state was never a normative agent with which a mutually beneficial relationship could be established. This still holds for the majority of Suri. But there were changes after 1994. The new state authorities started an ethnic co-optation policy intended to empower the Suri, engaging them in local-level government, self-administration and education (as well as in making them give up 'harmful customs', though there is unresolved confusion over what these are and over who decides what these are). It was hoped that this policy would also reduce the tendency of the Suri to resort to violence in dealings with other groups.

Even if the ethnic federal model in Ethiopia is fraught with problems and may not live up to its expectations¹³ – essential power is still retained at the centre and new ethnic tensions are being evoked in some areas – the

¹² This process frequently occurs in age-graded pastoral societies. For a fascinating example, see the case of the Turkana Ruru age-set (Lamphear 1992: 227), which emerged as a semi-independent fighting force in Turkana society after 1917, mainly as a result of an earlier round of firearms accumulation supplied by Ethiopian highland traders (ibid. 144–15).

¹³ For critical reviews of the Ethiopian ethno-federal experience so far, see, Cayla 1997, Clapham 1996b: 249, Kidane 1997, Ottaway 1995, Vestal 1996.

exercise, both rhetorically and practically, is crucial in reshaping perceptions of the importance of culture difference, redefining group relations and creating new forms of collective self-consciousness, whether these are based 'on the facts' or not.

After the establishment of the new regime and the instalment of regional and zonal administrations, group tensions largely inherited from the Derg past did not abate. Indeed, in the years after 1991 the Suri have had some of their most violent confrontations with both Dizi and Anywaa (Anuak) and the state. Whether there is a causal link between renewed state interference and violence cannot be ascertained. The Suri's conflicts with other groups in their vicinity were in part a continuation of the same structural problems indicated in the previous section: persistent economic and ecological pressures, increasing 'resource competition', and the new power position of the youngsters due to the spread of weapons in earlier years. But new 'ethnic borders' and ethnic party formation have tended to lead people to translate all problems in terms of ethnicity (instead of in terms of, for example, socio-economic inequality, educational shortcomings, environmental problems, faulty administration, or a lack of fair justice).¹⁴

The new authorities have frequently tried to mediate and negotiate local differences and disputes, but have not been very successful (cf. Abbink 2000b). There was also local criticism of their 'half-hearted measures' and style of mediation, which often alternated – in non-transparent ways – with violent means of enforcing order.¹⁵

A series of incidents in 1993 in which Suri attacked Dizi (in Kolu, Dami and Adikyaz) and, more importantly, killed EPRDF government soldiers in the Omo National Park finally led to retaliatory action by the latter. In a confrontation in late October 1993, in which hand grenades were used, it is estimated that a few hundred Suri died, mainly women and children. After this event,¹⁶ the Chai elders from various villages (among them the ritual leader or *komoru*, and those responsible for age-grade initiation) called a big public meeting in Makara, the village of the *komoru* (see Abbink 1998b: 340–1). This was one of the more important Chai gatherings in recent years. Elders of the reigning age grade (Neebi) reviewed the situation of the Chai, called upon those present to search for the reasons for the escalating violence, and implicitly castigated the *tagay*, the young men, for their record of excessive violence. Shortly after this meeting the elders decided to organize the new *rora* initiation, in order to force social adulthood upon the youngsters who had been responsible for this violence.

¹⁴ Especially in zones grouping together several smaller populations, a common policy to address shared regional problems would be perhaps be more conducive to development and local popular participation.

¹⁵ In 1994, some Me'en people, using a familiar local cattle metaphor, said, 'The government troops behave just like bulls', meaning: they have power but do not use their brains.

¹⁶ I was not in the Suri area at that time. Information was collected from local healthworkers, Surma informants, a university scholar visiting the area at the time, and local Dizi people in Maji and Kolu areas.

This was done in late 1994. Thus military action by the state resulted in precipitating a major Suri ceremony and in a 'reaffirmation' of its cultural value.

A year later, the government installed a *Surma Council*, a kind of local authority for the newly designed 'Surma *wereda*', with only Suri members, to operate under the guidance of the zonal administration.¹⁷ With the installation of the eleven-member council, a new phase of state penetration of Suri political space was initiated. The programme of the new national government was, in a sense, to 'recapture' the Suri people, who, because of their strategic position along eighty kilometres of the Ethiopian–Sudanese border and the growing economic relevance of their area (the gold trade, game resources, and the potential tourism in national parks), became more important. One strategy was to elicit a new indigenous but loyal leadership stratum. Ethnic groups had to be represented through their own ethnic party (founded under the auspices of the EPRDF), their own people in the reorganized local administrations (in the zones and the regional-state governments) and in the national parliament in Addis Ababa (the House of People's Representatives).¹⁸

The members of the Surma Council were nominally elected by the Suri people, under close supervision by the zonal authorities.¹⁹ As a rule, members had to be men who knew some Amharic (the national working language), in order to be able to communicate with government representatives at the zonal level. Thus most members were young, ex-soldiers formerly in the Derg army and marginal youths who had grown up with an Amharic-speaking soldier or trader family in the area. However, this policy of selecting only on linguistic ability led also to incompetent and even 'criminal elements' being included.²⁰ In the first council there were three monolingual Suri (both Tirmaga and Chai) and for a short while even the Chai *komoru* was a member (see Plate 8.1).²¹ The composition of the council has shown numerous changes over the past five years, members frequently being removed after 'elections' and 'evaluation sessions'. Council members received what, by local standards, was substantial government remuneration and 'fringe benefits' (this opened the door for embezzlement, allegedly practised by several members). The Council's contribution

¹⁷ Bench-Maji Zone, with its head office in Mizan Tefen.

¹⁸ The Suri have one representative in the House, a young man in his late twenties and educated by an Amhara man in Mizan Teferi. He speaks good Amharic and some Dizi (being married to a Dizi woman). In May 2000 he was re-elected by the local Suri to the Ethiopian parliament, the House of Peoples' Representatives, remarkably as an independent candidate.

¹⁹ There are also at least two non-Suri government party cadres active in the council, though they are not formally members.

²⁰ According to local townspeople and Dizi, several council members were known to have been involved in multiple homicide. Council members were therefore not screened by the administration as regards their past record, a mistake which undermined the confidence and willingness of non-Suri to co-operate with the council.

²¹ He resigned after eight months, probably convinced that the job was not suitable for him as a ritual, non-political leader

to constructive Suri self-government or to stimulating development has been marginal, and its authority among the Suri is limited.

However, the role of the Surma Council as a new local political body may eventually bypass the traditional arena of political decision-making formed by Suri assemblies or public debates held under the auspices of age-grade elders and the *komoru*. Against this, the state has its own programme that it wants implemented, and in its view 'democratization' means primarily ethnic representation and working through ethnic elites connected to or co-opted at the regional and national level, and not grass-roots decision-making. The Surma Council is thus also – predictably – used as a conduit for implementing national policy (as the previous regime used the districts and peasant associations).

One interesting future aspect of social transformation will be 'Suri culture': social organization and economic and cultural practices will very likely be a 'target' of planned change. One example has been the declaration by the zonal authorities that the popular ceremonial stick-duelling (*thagane*) of the Suri, a major cultural event, should be prohibited, or at least toned down, because it is seen as 'too violent'.

Even though the Suri may be co-opted into a state structure where they have little real influence, they now do have some voice at the higher echelons of the state. They are formally represented in the local and regional administration and in the national parliament on the basis of the ethnic quota system. In this sense, their peripheral position as an 'ethnic minority' or 'nationality' has now become a privilege, because other local people – for instance the dispersed descendants of northern settlers – are not politically represented.

Whether this new position will break the Suri's ingrained perception of the encroaching Ethiopian state as an imposition and a threat remains to be seen. The Suri will perhaps remain a dissatisfied and unstable element in the region if local problems with neighbouring groups are not solved, if participatory local administration is not established, if they detect local ethnic favouritism biased against them, and if public debate, consensus-building and the ritual confirmation of decisions within local society neglected by the new authorities.

Suri identity vis-à-vis tourists & missionaries

Apart from the political arena, there are other spheres of change in the Maji periphery which affect Suri society and identity, and will continue to do so in the future: namely the encounter with tourists and the impact of a slowly encroaching evangelical Christian mission. Both are developments that emerged in the 1990s, and they form a major challenge to the Suri, decisively invading not only their territory and economic system, but also their cultural and political space. These two factors will connect them to a global discourse on religion and identity construction. The encounter with



Plate 8.3 Missionary teacher Mike Bryant with Damel Kibo (a Christian convert) and a non-converted Suri (left). November 1999, Tulga [J Abbink]

tourists (Europeans, Americans and Japanese) has so far mostly evoked irritation and anger, because Suri see them as not observing the rules of reciprocity and as showing an imposing, exploitative attitude. Mutual contacts have been aggressive and occasionally violent. The Suri have developed a disdain for tourists that is only thinly veiled, and in their encounter the 'boundary' between them and the white foreigner is reinforced. This is not based on any inherent negative attitude towards white foreigners as such – they had known the Italians in the 1930s, as well as some well-liked missionaries and development workers in the 1960s – but purely on the stunted nature of the current social interaction with tourists (cf. Abbink 2000a)

The foreign missionaries who have resided in the Suri (Tirmaga) area for about eight years are Evangelical Christians or Presbyterians associated with the Lutheran World Federation, working together with the local Mekane Yesus Church and the Qale-Hiywot Church (see Plate 8.3).²² They are engaged in infrastructural and agricultural work, in setting up a clinic, a literacy programme, and a church building together with local people. They are also trying to introduce new crops (fruits) and cultivation among the Suri. One couple is carrying out linguistic research (partly funded by the Wycliffe Bible Translators) in order to prepare primers for the school and to translate the Bible (mostly the New Testament) into the local language. The programme started in 1989 in the district capital of

²² In the late 1960s there was a Presbyterian mission station in Merdur, a remote spot in the Tirma area, also staffed by some Americans. They were forced to leave in 1977 because of logistical difficulties and Derg pressure.

Tum, where water supply and medical services were provided. The present mission station is in Tulgi, a locality at the northern fringe of the Tirmaga area

This effort, which is so far not unfavourably received by the Suri, shows another face of global culture: next to their valuable modern medical and educational assistance, used as an entry point, the missionaries formulate a new appeal to a transcultural religious ethic and worldview that is held to be universal but may tend to bypass central tenets of the Suri way of life (for example, gender relations, traditional religious and ritual ideas, healing and divination, alcohol use in the form of native beer consumed in work parties, decorative body culture). This is regardless of the sincere and open attitude they have toward Suri history and culture. The missionaries have found some response because of the Christian message itself, but also because of the internal disarray in which Suri society finds itself in the last decade (due to excess violence and persistent threats of drought and famine). It can be expected that, by creating a Christianized Suri group which may come to agitate against the premisses of Suri culture, the missionaries may inadvertently contribute to an internal 'power struggle' in local society and thus link the Suri ideologically to a translocal modernity formulated outside their own domain, and also beyond that of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.²³ This factor, together with the political challenges initiated by the new federal government, will constitute much of the future dynamics of Suri society. The Suri will thus become involved in a national discourse on political ethnicity and a global discourse on religious and cultural affiliation. Both processes will undermine Suri local autonomy, redefine their value system, and transform their group integrity and cultural identity.

Conclusions

Since the demise of the imperial regime, the Suri have been increasingly drawn into the wider Ethiopian political system. Although they frequently resorted to excessive force when they saw their political and cultural space being invaded by enemy groups and state agents, they could not stop this process, nor foresee its unintended consequences. Because of persistent inter-group conflict, they were also drawing more of the attention of the reconstituted, post-1991 Ethiopian state, which saw them as a challenge to its policy of ethnic devolution and 'empowerment' in an increasingly sensitive border area.

A divisive process has been noticeable in the Suri community in recent years. We have seen that internally the Suri have not been able to contain the contradictions in authority relations of the age-grade system, due

²³In mid-2000, the mission in the area reported that there were at least ninety potential Surma converts enrolled in Bible classes. At least a dozen others had already been converted and baptized earlier.

especially to the usurpation of firearms by the members of the younger age-grade. The metaphor of 'age' as an organizing principle in their society (see Turton 1995) may be on the wane

While the new presence of automatic weapons and large amounts of ammunition gave the Suri – the younger age-grade – a false illusion of power, they did not solve any of their long-standing conflicts with their Nyangatom, Anywaa, or Dizi neighbours (see Gerdesmeier 1995), conflicts which were partly about guaranteeing free access to economically important territory (pasture, fields, gold-panning sites) and partly retaliations for past killings. Nor have the Suri been able to reoccupy their core area near Mount Shulugui. Violence has also bred rivalry and conflict vis-à-vis local groups *within* Suri society itself.

The presence of the state in both a military and an administrative sense has inevitably grown, exploiting internal social divisions between young people who had served in the former national army (now becoming leaders in the Surma Council) and those not exposed to outside life in the wider society. In addition, schooling and missionary influence may exacerbate social and family divisions further and break the normative and ideological unity of Suri culture.

One of the underlying arguments of this chapter has been that, in this part of Africa too, a conception of 'ethnic groups' based on geographical boundaries is becoming less and less viable as an explanatory element in understanding cultural and historical developments in a globalizing world. Seen in terms of the flow and exchange of commodities, images and persons, boundaries are becoming more and more permeable. They are flexible and manipulated, despite the rhetorical counterclaims by some governments (see Clapham 1996b).

Thus, in the study of a complex society like Ethiopia, the focus of analysis may have to shift from how supposed 'ethnic' groups interact with the state to how individuals come to 'represent' such groups within the arena of national politics. It is difficult to speak of ethnic groups as collective, acting agents. The critical factor in the new political space for ethnicity created by the federal Ethiopian state are local elites and individuals, people emerging as political and cultural agents in the name of 'ethnic groups' which are presumed to exist and to have the right to express themselves collectively. These agents of change may be brokers in the classic sense, crossing boundaries, making use of differential access to 'resources' (including an identity and legitimacy derived from mandatory, ascribed ethnicity), bringing together formerly separate spheres of interest and carving out a power base that is not located entirely within the local society. The new federal structures and the system of ethnic representation (in parties, zones and the national parliament), as well as emerging missionary church structures, are thus creating different opportunities for social action for people who have long remained in the margins.

These facts in themselves construct new modes of both political communication (transcending and partly invalidating the old age-grade

structure and the idea of a *komoru*) and cultural communication (through global religious connections and the tourist trade that is commodifying 'Suri culture'). The Suri will thus be part of the new wider Ethiopian political structure and of global cultural and identity discourses. At the same time, as the highly significant example of the efforts to end Suri ceremonial duelling mentioned above make clear, there is a distinct possibility that they will also gradually lose much of their specific culture under the impact of a continued project of 'reform' and 'development'. These projects envisage sedentarization, more agricultural activity, a halt to cattle-raiding, controlled grazing, disarmament, the disempowerment of traditional authorities such as elders and ritual leaders, and the abandonment of 'harmful customs' (as determined by the national government and its 'experts') – customary law, initiation ceremonies, ritual stick-duelling, animal sacrifice, intestine divination, body-piercing, scarification, etc. It is likely that, despite the current national rhetoric of all groups 'developing their culture and language', the material basis of the cultural distinctiveness of groups like the Suri will be de-emphasized. While the rhetoric of identity may increase, its substance will become elusive but tightly controlled within the new political framework. Perhaps the Suri will gradually become part of a general Ethiopian rural 'underclass', as has been happening with other groups. That is, their dependence on outside forces and on non-Suri political agents may increase and their local autonomy in decision-making decline. This scenario may perhaps seem paradoxical if not sad in an era in which ethnic and cultural rights to self-expression have been proclaimed in Ethiopia as a duty, but it is nonetheless a likely outcome of the current process of co-opting local elites.