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Violence and survival in Ethiopia: a comparative anthropology of the Suri people

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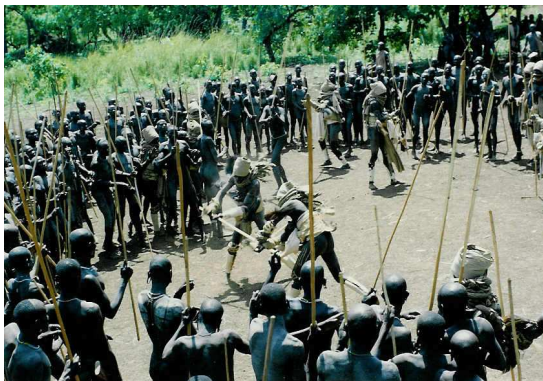
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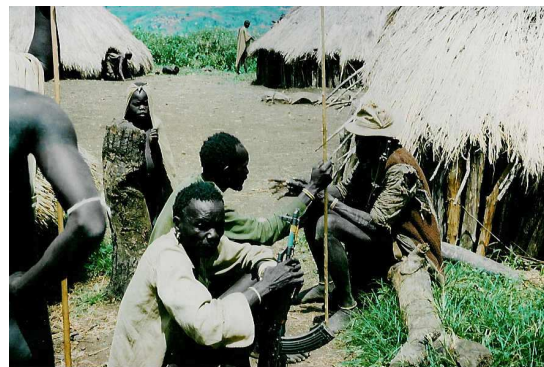
Numbering about 35,000, the Suri live in an area of southwest Ethiopia close to Sudan that has traditionally been marginal to the Ethiopian state. However, this group of agro-pastoralists has moved from obscurity to major 'stardom' over the last fifteen years. In the international discourse on tourism, the Suri have been cast as the new 'noble savages' and the region has become a popular destination for rich explorer-tourists seeking a picturesque, original and primitive African people in a non-industrial, natural setting. A host of photo books, websites, travel magazine articles and film documentaries have created a famous people who are now receiving a substantial income from their visitors. Suri ceremonial duelling, armed youngsters, women with lip-plates, male body decorations and the austere portraits of individuals all present irresistible photo opportunities for tourists and professional film-makers alike.



Suri ceremonial stick duelling

A longitudinal anthropological study of the Suri people and their neighbours started at the ASC in 1994 just before this wave of tourist interest emerged. The main aim of the project was to explain the escalating violence and crises that this small-scale society had been enduring with the (Ethiopian) state, their neighbours and, also, internally. How do traditional agro-pastoralists, such as the Suri, manage violent conflict generated by wider

societal and environmental as well as internal factors? What changes are they experiencing in their social system as a result of persistent livelihood threats and the insecurity they face? A comparative element in this study was to investigate how other similar groups in today's rural Africa handle similar situations and see what lessons could be drawn for future research and policy.



A typical Suri village





A village in the Suri region of Ethiopia in the dry and wet seasons

In addition to a fascinating case-study revealing a lot about people's social adaptation in times of crisis, both individually and at a household level, this research project yielded interesting comparative insights into social, psychological and cultural responses to the challenges of growing violence, the interaction of culture and local politics, and the fate of smaller ethnic groups caught up in processes of state pressure, globalization and environmental change.

The research wanted to depict the dilemmas of Suri society and the individuals who are redefining their lives, and not only analyse the often predictable processes of change in abstract terms. The publication of a book with Suri oral texts is planned for 2008. Interestingly, many of our results, reported in papers and book chapters, have been fed back into tourist/travel accounts and documentaries produced by others (although in a quite selective form).

The findings of the project can be summarized as follows:

- Growing numbers of violent incidents due to wider political turmoil, a rapid influx of

arms into the area and the willingness of young Suri males to use them (related to but not explained by certain cultural templates) have directly and negatively affected Suri relations with neighbouring groups, as well as family life and cultural continuity.

- Resource scarcity related to the availability of and access to land, pasture, water resources, game and forest products never used to be a problem among the Suri in the past but as a result of today's violence-induced migration and population concentration, it is now an issue facing many. Today there is less territory for herding, roads are dangerous, the risk of robbery is great, inter-group contacts are reduced and widespread mistrust is rampant. Climate change, however, does not appear to have had any marked effects on the area as yet.
- End-of-dry-season food shortages and scarcity for the Suri in April and May are leading to violent incidents with neighbouring groups and creating internal tensions.
- Gender relations appear to be vulnerable to recent changes, with (married) women and young children suffering the most.



Two armed Suri youngsters

- State impact has been mixed: investment in infrastructure and basic education is appreciated but there is also more political-military control, neglect of specific Suri agro-pastoral management techniques, and suppression of social and indigenous political life.
- Globalization in the form of missionary activity, formal education and tourism is decisively reshaping Suri self-perception and identity, for example, in the growth of Evangelical Christianity as a way out of crisis. Tourism has become a major new motor of commercialization of the local economy and Suri culture and values.
- In the context of the Ethiopian state, the Suri, as an indigenous agro-pastoralist society with highly sophisticated traditional survival skills and cultural integrity, are now being redefined as a prime 'development' target on the basis of political aims that they have not defined themselves. In the coming decades, this will result in an ongoing loss of autonomy and in their subjection as a marginal rural population.



Suri mother and child



A Suri mother resting with her newborn baby during work in the fields

In a comparative perspective, these findings may not seem totally new but show in detail the local intricacies of conflict and the deep-rooted nature of patterns of regional insecurity in the Ethio-Sudan border area that policies by state authorities and NGOs cannot easily alter, and indeed sometimes even aggravate. They also highlight the remarkably rapid process of change in small-scale societies. This is illustrated, for instance, by a quick Internet search that demonstrates the Suri's

rise to international tourist 'star' status. It is likely that Ethiopian state coercion as well as educational opportunities and religious change will further impact on the Suri and force them to alter their livelihood practices, open up to wider circles of regional and national identification, and de-emphasize certain cultural practices and values that are labelled as harmful. In the present generation alone, we note fundamental, irreversible changes in the nature and scope of Suri society and identity. And although the project has now finished, other ASC research projects are continuing on the Ethiopian political system, development issues and ethnic relations.

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Photos by the author



A typical village garden, tended by married women

Recent publications on the Suri of Ethiopia

- 2007 J. Abbink, "Recycling Exoticism. Western Visualisations of the Ethiopian Suri People". Paper presented at the 2nd European Conference on African Studies, Leiden, 11-14 July (forthcoming publication).
- 2006 J. Abbink, "Kinship and Society among Surmic-speaking Peoples in Southwest Ethiopia: A Brief Comparison", in: S. Uhlig, M. Bulakh, D. Nosnitsin & Th. Rave (eds), *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, July 20-25, 2003*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 5-14.
- 2006 J. Abbink, "Of Snakes and Cattle: The Dialectics of Group Esteem between Suri and Dizi in Southwest Ethiopia", in: I. Strecker & J. Lydall (eds), *Ethiopian Images of Self and Other. Essays on Cultural Contact, Respect and Self-Esteem in Southern Ethiopia*, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/Vienna/London: Lit Verlag, pp. 227-245.
- 2005 J. Abbink, "Local Leadership and State Governance in Southern Ethiopia: From Charisma to Bureaucracy", in: O. Vaughan (ed.), *Tradition and Politics: Indigenous Political Structures in Africa*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, pp. 159-184.
- 2004 J. Abbink, "Converting Pastoralists: Reflections on Missionary Work and Development in Southern Ethiopia", in: A. Kumar Giri, A. van Harskamp & O. Salemink (eds), *The Development of Religion, the Religion of Development*, Delft: Eburon, pp. 133-142.
- 2004 J. Abbink, "Remembering Londósa: Mediator and Counterpoint in a 'Violent' Society", in: V. Böll et al. (eds), *Studia Aethiopica, In Honour of Siegbert Uhlig*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 371-382.
- 2004 J. Abbink, "Ritual and Political Forms of Violent Practice among the Suri of Southern Ethiopia", in: T. Young (ed.), *Readings in African Politics*, Oxford: James Currey, pp. 80-89.
- 2003 J. Abbink, "Tourism and its Discontents. Suri-tourist Encounters in Southern Ethiopia", in: S. Bohn Gmelch (ed.), *Tourists and Tourism. A Reader*, Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, pp. 267-287.
- 2003 J. Abbink, "Love and Death of Cattle: The Paradox in Suri Attitudes toward Livestock", *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology* 68 (3): 341-64.

For a full list of publications, see:
<http://www.ascleiden.nl/Research/Researchers.aspx>