Refractions of Revolution in Ethiopian 'Surmic' Societies: An Analysis of Cultural Response

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Abstract: *The impact of revolutionary policy (1974-1991) on two ethnic communities in southern Ethiopia is described and assessed as a confrontation of two narratives grounded in differing socio-cultural contexts. The Me'en shifting cultivators and the Suri agro-pastoralists of southern Kafa were caught up in a forced process of change which neutralized their participatory role not only in political and economic but also in social and cultural respects. The radical attack by revolutionary agents on leadership roles, socio-organizational structure, values and ritual life combined with a structural undermining of economic productivity and terms of exchange to produce an era of subsistence crisis, increased group tensions and identity crises. These issues revealed incompatible cultural bases of conflict which were not productively engaged in the revolutionary process.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM

Three years after the demise of the revolutionary communist regime in Ethiopia, there is some scope to evaluate the effects of its policy on ethno-cultural minority communities, divergent from the Central Highland peasant populations. This essay will offer a descriptive interpretation of the confrontation and reception of 'revolutionary policy' among two Surmic-speaking (Nilo-Saharan) groups, the Me'en and the Suri, both located in southwestern Ethiopia. These were societies seen in the Marxist vocabulary of the day as 'primitive communist' (or 'communalist') societies, where private property was not well entrenched, where there was no divorce of the means of production from the producers, and where no classes existed.

The often problematic and violent confrontation between state and local society in this area of southern Ethiopia showed characteristics not unique to this region, except that here one had fairly isolated, self-sufficient agro-pastoral groups not decisively integrated in a significant market economy, and with very diverging cultural traditions.

As can be seen from the extant literature, study of the Ethiopian revolution has largely been dominated by political scientists and modern historians (e.g. Clapham 1988, Harbeson 1988, Keller 1988, Markakis 1987, Lefort 1981). There are, as yet, few studies on the social and cultural impact on the revolution on Ethiopian society, certainly not from the vantage point of the post-revolution era. It is not only a question of describing how the revolution affected people or groups in political and ideological terms (cf. Baxter 1990), but also how it changed behavior, limited life options, influenced mentality and morality, or (re)shaped and modified cultural life. Doing research on these matters has, of course, been precarious and difficult, also because of the dramatic impact of the revolutionary period on most Ethiopians. So far, the subject is perhaps best reflected in recent Ethiopian novels. It is, however, important that researchers who were doing fieldwork during the past two decades now give more comprehensive interpretations of their findings and their own position in the process of knowledge formation, especially on lesser known social or ethnic groups, from a post-revolution perspective. Ultimately, such a holistic interpretation is helpful to understand long-term changes in Ethiopian society as they continue to shape social and political developments today.

In this paper, I give a preliminary analysis of the divergent ways of the encroachment of revolution and more in particular of the response to the, in local terms, unprecedented state-generated changes among the Suri and especially the Me'en people. The aim here is also to evaluate continuity and change in these non-literate societies, i.e. the impact of the revolutionary era will be seen in the context of their history and cultural traditions.[1] I will contend that a cultural analysis is important here, and the approach takes up themes treated only, as far as I am aware of, by Donham (1992) in his study of Maale society in the period of revolution. The wider question is not only how and what kind of ideological and political-economic processes had an impact on these two smaller ethnic groups, but also how the latter reacted to externally generated change and redefined or 'appropriated' elements from these processes in their own way. This approach may clarify critical elements of the inter-relation between culture and social praxis in a specific historical setting. A study of the two ethnic groups mentioned above is also interesting as an effort to enhance regional comparisons of ethnographic and ethno-historical material on southern Ethiopia (cf. Abbink 1992a, p. 24, 33), and of rethinking familiar ethnological categories and boundaries in the social study of Ethiopian society.

2. A NOTE ON THEORY

The study of ethnic groups and ethno-politics in the Horn of Africa has, over the past decade, been dominated by two themes: (1.) the dynamics and formation of ethnicity (i.e. a 'we-consciousness' based on a cultural interpretation of descent, putative or not) and (2.) pervasive problems of violence, generated by famine, power struggles, civil war, and state transformations (cf. Markakis 1987). Both themes are also relevant in the study of the Ethiopian southwest. While ethnology and anthropology have a good record of describing and explaining the variety and complexity of socio-cultural life in Ethio-

pia, a new phase in comparative explanation of ethnic formations, historical dynamics and culture is necessary. (This does not only hold true for the Horn of Africa or Africa in general, but for any other region on the globe). Ironically, in today's (post-) modern world, we witness the paradox that while on scientific grounds the fluidity and historical variability of 'ethnic identities' is more obvious than ever, ethnic labels are seized upon by groups to stake out claims in the political sphere (cf. the Bosnian conflict) . 'Ethnic identity' has, so to speak, collapsed into the defined space (cf. Eriksen 1993), i.e. its bearers have appropriated the terms of academic discourse for their own ends. Contesting definitions of identities are as important as ever in the arenas of resource competition and political realignment.

Equally problematic in post-modern anthropology is the use of the term 'culture.' While some argue against the time-honored use of this word, which for them creates an 'alienating' discourse of opposition and of boundaries (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1992), others still tend to see it as an indispensable concept, to be used critically (Peacock 1986, p. 7; Hannerz 1993, p. 109). The position taken in this paper is that while ethno-cultural groups and traditions share one world within which they are ultimately connected, they are placed differently in it according to historical, class and ecological positions, and have developed different cultural styles which have shaped their patterns of signification and meaning. 'Culture' consists of a loosely integrated body of ideas, norms and rules for action of a group, with an underlying implicational meaning. It refers to an aspect of defined reality and lived experience which shapes social interaction. It is reflected in core metaphors of sociality and worldview, and as such is relevant in changing contexts of social praxis.

So it is with the Me'en and Suri, whose 'styles' have an impact and a dynamic of their own, in some contexts perceived as irrelevant, but in others actively maintained when in contact with individuals and groups perceived by them as 'others'. Several agencies or institutions of the former regime in Ethiopia, when dealing with and doing research on the 'nationalities' of the country, obviously worked with the concept of culture as part of its very definition of 'nationality' (See: ISEN 1985) but have tended to see it as too bounded. In a study of the impact of Ethiopian feudalist and revolutionary policies on the Me'en and Suri, it is important to note that cultural material becomes rearranged and adapted according to certain economic and political relations in which it has entered (cf. Wolf 1982). An historical anthropology of state and society geared to this dynamic can clarify more about the practice of reproduction and the transformation of cultural forms.

3. 'SURMIC SOCIETIES'—THE LOCAL SCENE

The term 'Surmic' is derived from linguistics and refers to agro-pastoral or shifting cultivator groups in southwestern Ethiopia like the Me'en, Suri, Majangir, Koegu, Kwegu, Bodi, Mursi, and Balé — who all speak related Surmic languages (a subgroup within Nilo-Saharan, see Unseth 1988, 1989), and who were often said to be the 'Nilotes' of Ethiopia. 'Surmic' can obviously not be applied without reserve to these various groups: a linguistic term is problematic as an ethnonym. While there is an historical language similarity (on the level of the 'proto-language'), there are also important divergences in territory, way of life, political identification. The label 'Surmic' is used here in a situational sense for some of the groups of original lowland agro-pastoralists in southwestern Käfa who came into contact with the Ethiopian imperial state after 1898. They are part of an ethno-system of acephalous groups (also including members of other language-communities like the Para-Nilotes) living in the borderlands of Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya, and some of which have posed a 'political problem' for state authorities to this day.

Important to emphasize from the start is that while the state administration saw them always as 'marginal', these groups in their turn saw state officials and policies as largely marginal and irrelevant to their own concerns (This holds true especially for the southern Me'en groups, like Boshu and K'asha, and for the Suri as a whole). However, they did have economic and social ties with the highland populations in the *kätämas* (see below). In fact, since the early 19th century, we see a gradual orientation of the lowland people towards the Ethiopian highlands, not necessarily to the Amhara or Oromo (who had not yet arrived), but first to various Omotic-speaking, ensete and grain cultivating groups. These contacts were ambivalent: partly based on economic exchange, partly on violent confrontation (raiding). For the Me'en, for instance, these contacts with highlanders (Bench, Kaficho, Dizi, Konta) are well attested already in d'Abbadie's work, dating from the mid-19th century (d'Abbadie 1890, p. 198-199). The Suri people had economic and ritual bonds with the Dizi highland people (see Abbink 1994).

Me'en and Suri form the large majority of the population in the Maji zone of Käfa Region (now *Killil* 11). This zone measures about 15,000 km^2 and has about 110,000 people. The Me'en count some 51,000 people, and are about 99% rural. Me'en people living in the six villages in the area (ca. 500) are either educated administrative workers, school pupils, or impoverished domestic laborers in village families (see Table 2).

The Suri comprise, according to a personal estimate, at least 26,000 people, and all live in the southern part of Maji zone, close to the Sudan border.[2] The Suri are all living in the lowlands southwest of Maji town and none of them live in any of the highland villages, which they only visit for the markets. While several young males have done some occasional short-term jobs there, they despise any form of servitude or labor for strangers and return after a while to their families.

Both the Me'en and the Suri have some distinct sub-groups, who act fairly independently and occasionally have conflicts. The Me'en group discussed

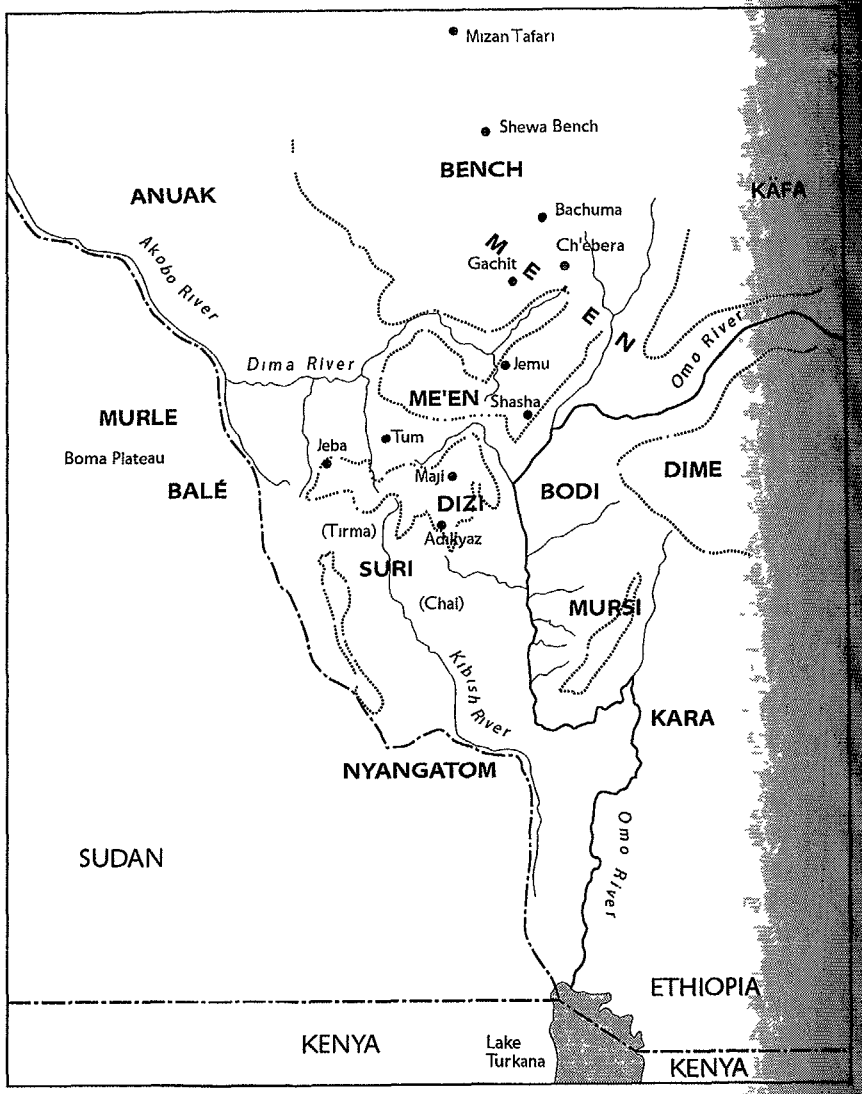

Figure 1. The Maji area, Southwestern Kafa, Ethiopia

= land above 1000 metres

BODI = ethnic group

...is also known as 'Tishana,' and consists mostly of highland dwellers liv... in the area between the villages of Maji and Bachuma (see map, figure 1). ...ey are divided into many territorial subgroups formed around dominant clan ...ments. Some groups (Boshu, Shua, K'asha, Wula) live in the lowlands near ... Shorum and Omo rivers and are not in close contact with the highland ...ple. The Bodi-Me'en (Mela and Chirim) east across the Omo in the Omo ...on (now *Killil* 10) are more agro-pastoral. They count perhaps an addi... 3,500 people. The Suri have three sub-groups: Tirma, Chai and Balé (the ..., about 8,000, living mostly in Sudan). For the purposes of this paper, I ...discuss the northern groups of the Tishana Me'en and the Chai Suri group ...ongst whom I did research.

While the Me'en and Suri linguistic as well as cultural traditions are simi... and point to historical affinity, at present the groups form two distinct en... with mutually unintelligible languages, different territories, modes of ...sistence and internal political structures. The Suri are agro-pastoralists with ...stantial herds of livestock living in a savanna lowland area; the Me'en are ...dominantly cultivators, somewhat more sedentary. In recent years, enmity ...tween the two groups has arisen. Contacts (e.g. intermarriage and economic ...change) are now very limited.

Both groups live in an environment where land scarcity has never been a ...oblem,[3] and have a decentralized political-territorial structure. In contrast to ...neighboring Dizi, the Me'en and Suri did not have an hierarchical chiefdom ...ructure, i.e. there were no powerful chiefs or *balabbats* (who always were ... first target of the revolutionary campaign in the countryside). Among the ...e'en, for instance, leaders were the elders (*tia*) of certain clans or lineages, ...e hereditary 'rain chiefs' or mediators (*komuruts*), and their regional 'depu... (*bizingit*) who all had multiple kinship and ritual ties with the rest of the ...ople. The Suri had a similar structure of segmented kin and territorial groups, ...th even less differentiation in wealth or power.

The Tishana-Me'en are shifting cultivators (sorghum, wheat, maize, teff, ...ans, cabbage, peas, etc.), with few amounts of livestock on the side (an av...ge of 6 cattle and 10-15 goats and sheep per household). They sell grain, ...ney and coffee on the markets for cash. The Suri are agro-pastoralists with ...ge herds (at least 60-70 head of cattle and many more of small stock per ...lt male). They also cultivate sorghum and maize and have gardens with ...bbage, peppers, and beans. They sell gold (in recent years) and occasionally ...estock in the market villages. Both Me'en and Suri also hunt and gather, but ...t frequently. They have no modern technology and work with digging sticks, ...all iron hoes, and machetes. The plough is not used by the Suri and only ...tle by the Me'en. Both have what can be called a kin-ordered mode of pro...ction (cf. Wolf 1982, p. 88): domestic groups formed by filiation and mar...ge are the units of production and consumption. At times, tribute was paid ...outsiders (in the form of taxes and bribes and sometimes labor services to

the administration), but not to fellow Me'en or Suri except for religious/ritual purposes.

It has to be noted that the relationship of Me'en and 'Amhara'[4] was much more evolved than that between 'Amhara' and Suri. They were always able to stay more aloof from involvement with highlanders (although they used Ethiopian money and bought and sold mainly in Ethiopian markets, not in Sudanese ones). The Me'en had been engaged with the northerners since the beginning of this century, when they started settling in highland zones, mainly through violent battles to prevent cattle rustling, slave-raiding and introduction of the *gäbbar* system. This indeed never really caught a foothold among the Me'en (see Abbink 1990). *Kätamas* (really fortified villages at that time) were set up on hill tops in the Me'en territory for the protection of traffic and trade routes. But the Me'en were gradually more exposed to Amhara local politics and culture, especially after the Italian period, when relations became more peaceful. Local leaders (i.e. clan/lineage leaders) were recognized by the local administration, and were forced to collect the taxes (in cattle or produce, later in cash) for it. Several Me'en clan-leaders (despite their not knowing Amharic well) participated in a big meeting of Kafa local leaders convened in Jimma in the early 1950s, presided over by Emperor Haile Sellassie himself (Suri people did not participate).

Nonetheless, the Suri and especially the Me'en were at a disadvantage in terms of strategic connections to the wider society. In the system of imperial rule they were a subordinate group,and in various ways became more dependent on the northerners and the administration. The memory of slavery and raiding lingered among the Me'en, and the cultural dominance of the northerners was obvious. The Me'en (also Dizi) were seen as part of the *Shankʼila* population.

In the Suri area, there were also two *kätämas*, but they were founded well after the villages in the Me'en area and were dismantled in the late 1960s, although a soldier post was maintained. The extent of contacts of the Suri with northern culture has never been pervasive. The Suri were more independent and wealthier because of their cattle herds. They kept quite a distance from the *kätämas*, on pastures extending into the Sudan. Highlanders did not like to visit and travel in the hot lowland area, and the Suri (a part of them) only paid taxes for a brief period of some 15 to 20 years in the Haile Sellasie era.

4. REVOLUTION—THE EVE

The revolutionary process on the national level (i.e. mainly in Addis Ababa) has been analyzed to a great extent. However, its spread across Ethiopian regional and cultural space has not been sufficiently studied yet. Local societies were partly (re)constituted in their confrontation with an initially alien cultural ideology and power politics informed by Marxist premises (albeit often in trun-

ed form) and ideals of modernization.

Among the Me'en and Suri, the Ethiopian revolution was imported from ve. For them it was not the first instance of externally induced radical change the past century. They had, of course, seen the military incorporation of r regions in the Ethiopian feudalist state after 1898 (cf. Abbink 1990). The quent economic exploitation and the political divide-and-rule policy of northern soldiers, traders and slave-dealers changed the nature of their ties in several respects. Since then, there has always been — for better or worse — interdependence and exchange between the local ethnic-territo- groups with these northern settlers and state authorities. Despite the 'iso- d' and 'traditional' appearance of the Me'en and Suri to present-day visi- — and, significantly, to state officials who, to this day, talk about their cational and other backwardness, low production levels, etc. — both groups been long involved in the wider Ethiopian society, though they have not milated.'

A second phase of impact was the Italian occupation (effectively from 6 to 1940), which brought a final blow to slave-raiding and to efforts of gating the local population to the *gäbbar*-system. During this period, some ier and police posts were established in the area and some communica- s and medical infrastructure was set up. In the final year of their reign, ever, the Italians antagonized the local population and had to suppress al unrest among the Me'en.

Another external influence was that of the missions. The American Pres- yterian Mission set up stations in the Me'en and Suri areas in the 1960s which centrated not so much on "missionizing" as on educational and medical k. They were very successful and popular but were ordered to leave the untry in 1975-76 by the Derg. They left no indigenous stratum of new young ri or Me'en leaders,[5] and today this episode remains a memory, nothing re.[6]

Compared to the *ancien régime* of Haile Sellassie, the Ethiopian revolu- n brought a policy of recognition of the existence of ethnic groups or 'na- alities' (the old Stalinist term). The founding of the Institute for the Study Ethiopian Nationalities (in 1983) bears witness to that. In some speeches d declarations of the leader of the Derg, the right to self-determination and n secession was rhetorically granted, although the underlying aim was al- ys unity at all cost, and the development of the nationalities should be in ms of a progression toward 'socialism' (cf. Bureau 1989, p. 226).

The events of the revolution on the national level had no response among Me'en and Suri. Compared with the Maale experience, as described by Donham (1992), revolutionary ideas initially did not resonate among disaf- ted Me'en or Suri: they had no real non-indigenous landowner-stratum above m and were not an exploited group of landless peasants. Land was plentiful d could not be monopolized and divided. The Me'en and Suri, however, had

an underlying distrust and resentment of the 'Amhara' (i.e. all northerners including the Kaficho, Gurage, Oromo, whom they collectively call *Gotas*) because of the days of slavery in the decades before World War II, the unequal terms of trade, and the taxes and bribes which they were forced to pay without getting anything in return. The 'political' ideas of the Me'en and Suri were reciprocity, egalitarianism and local autonomy, and these were always on a tense footing with the values and political style of the northerners. This was to be the locus of conflict in the revolutionary years.

5. LOCAL REFRACTIONS

In 1975, after the Proclamation on 'public ownership of rural lands' (part of the land reform), the first *zämächa* campaign reached the Me'en and Suri areas. Urban students, cadres, and other leftist officials came to lead and instruct the rural population about socialist reform and reversal of oppressive structures, and to institute new local administrations. The general background of this campaign is known from the literature and will not be dealt with here. Important to note is whether and how these socialist policy lines are implemented among the Me'en and Suri, which were 'primitive communalist societies' lacking many of the inequality structures characterizing the core areas of Ethiopia. Indeed, the traditional structure of control in the Me'en and Suri area was focused on the political and cultural, not on the economic: as land and pasture could not be not monopolized, Me'en and Suri were 'possessors' and users of their own land. Strictly speaking, there was no private ownership of this land, only collective use. The land already belonged to the tiller. The Me'en were organized in local patrilineal groups, spread out over a large area in compounds or small hamlets. Such groups were connected through collective labor alliances and also in various rituals. Households chose their own plots and gardens, but worked frequently together in collective work-teams for the seasonal tasks. There was no developed tribute structure. Livestock was herded together. The Me'en social system was characterized by a clear ethos of equality and an absence of religious and political hierarchy, rooted in their mode of production. This same basic structure was found among the Suri, although with even less focus on the land (more on pastures), and they were even less connected to the socio-economic system of the northerners.

The Amhara and other northerners living in the villages were also cultivating crops (mainly t'eff and wheat) and keeping their livestock. They were, however, more individualistic. They were the most powerful group in the area because of their connection with the feudalist administration (tax collection, the justice system, the military and police), and because of trade. Some had made their wealth in the days of the slave trade before the war (They were also mostly Orthodox Christians and thus part of the cultural order of the empire). Since the end of the Second World War, shops were opened, selling basic consumer goods like clothes, salt, iron tools, soap, razors, but also rifles and bullets (often illegally). Many Me'en also began to frequent the villages to drink alcohol: *arak'e* and *täjj*, for which they themselves sold the honey to the barowners. Village people had also built up trade links (cattle, coffee, honey, grain, skins) with important Me'en and Suri elders on a personal basis, whereby they had adapted themselves to their culture by entering into a ritual bond-friendship called *laale* (basically an extension of the kinship mode of production). Partly through their association with Amhara traders and officials and partly because of their hereditary or generational position as clan/lineage elders, several Me'en had thus established themselves as some sort of 'big men' in their own society: they became partly incorporated into the patron-client system centered on the villages. But, as said above, their authority and position were accepted by the other Me'en and they were not seen as a class of oppressors.[7] In short, among the Me'en and Suri there was no effort to develop a local narrative of revolution: there was no receptive 'educated elite,' nor a serious antagonism of social groups which could have stimulated this.

5.1 THE BALABBAT AND THE LAND QUESTION

Hence, when the revolutionary cadres and students came and searched for oppressive structures to reverse, they had difficulty in finding them. But they had to find something and consequently focused on any semblance of 'inequality' or 'hereditary privilege.' The modernist ideology of national development and collectivism was held in the abstract and not matched with local conditions and culture. 'Culture' (in the sense of 'divergent customs') was only seen as an obstacle.

Among the Me'en, they asked for the *balabbats*—a word meaning 'someone having a father,' i.e. a lineage, or a traditional position of authority—and of course hereditary Me'en clan elders or *komoruts* were strictly speaking 'owners of a father.' But they did not have the oppressive style, power and privileges of the landlord-*balabbats* of the Amhara core areas of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the local 'leaders' or spokesmen of the Me'en, who were contact persons in the structure of the *ancien régime*, had to be humiliated and disowned. They were questioned, arrested, stripped of their power. Their cattle was confiscated, the big compounds which some of them had were destroyed, and the insignia of leadership status which some had (some ritual ornaments like bead chains, an ivory bracelet, ritual drums and ivory horns, which were all clan property) were also confiscated.[8] Some were arrested, forced to break traditional food and ritual taboos, some were tortured, some disappeared. There was no dialog or discussion with Me'en on how to reform society or improve local conditions.

From the start, the cadres did not let themselves be hindered by their lack of knowledge of the local situation and cultural assumptions of the Me'en. Part of their project of modernization was simply the reversal of the social order

that they found. The theoretical paradox of socialist reform of a 'primitive communalist' society did not bother them (This notion itself was never seriously reflected upon or tested against the concrete local setting). Among the Me'en, they could focus on the local clan-elders, *komoruts* and traditional healers (some of whom were indeed relatively wealthy because of the gifts given to them by their clients). In the villages populated by northerners, they had more clearly defined targets, because there were important local power holders with a position partly based on trade and slavery activities of the past or on their role as tax collectors/administrators under the old regime. But the village population was a small minority in the area (10 percent at most), and culturally closer to the revolutionaries. Eventually, therefore, they were less affected by the revolutionary measures and rhetoric than the Me'en.

The Suri, however, had bigger problems. The first recorded contact of the students and cadres with the Suri was immediately after they disembarked from the small airplane which had landed on an airstrip (formerly constructed by the missionaries). At the first meeting convened (with some Tirma and Chai), it was noted that there was even less reason to find and attack inequality or landowners: there were no visible chiefs, no private property, no groups fitting the description of 'oppressed.' The revolutionary officials then chose for an 'ideological-cultural' offensive: e.g., by ordering the Suri 'to start wearing clothes,' to settle and practice agriculture, to tone down their ceremonial dueling contests, and to stop wearing their big lip-plates and ear-discs. The response was one of incomprehension. One Suri elder said that they would give up their own customs when the visitors would give up writing down everything in their notebooks. A few subsequent meetings were held but were largely fruitless. The cadres left, and, for practical reasons, did not return. Interestingly, the Suri also did not take the visitors very seriously. They knew that Haile Sellasie had been deposed but saw that in the subsequent turmoil no new legitimate leadership of Ethiopia had been formed. Their own internal political structure was characterized by the formal 'reign' of a generation set of elders. In the group of young leftist officials, they did not see a worthy equivalent with which to deal on an equal basis. This scepsis vis-à-vis all subsequent local administrators remained.

In the course of reform of the local administration in the years that followed, some new development initiatives were taken. A few peasant associations were designed on paper for the *woreda* (Tirma-T'id), although the Suri were not 'peasants,' and loathed what they saw as highland peasant culture. In two locations, primary schools were set up, one in the building of the former American mission. Also a mobile veterinary service for Suri cattle was instituted. It served for a few years. *Woreda* officials attempted to cash the taxes, but were not very successful. One official (of the Dizi ethnic group) went to live among them with his family to stimulate contacts with the administration and to give the Suri an example in farming, but he left the area in 1989.

By and large, the Suri—partly because of their inaccessible and malarial lowland area and its lack of economic significance—were largely left unaffected by the revolution and did not change much of their way of life and customs in the 1974-91 period. Only in 1984-85 the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and two foreign donor agencies set up a relief action for the Suri, dropping grain supplies at the airstrip and later initiating a scheme to instruct them in agrarian cultivation techniques. Later, when the Suri were able to acquire automatic weapons from various sources during the 1980s, the schools were attacked and the teachers chased out. The soldier posts were also abandoned after a while. This deterioration of the security situation led to even greater disengagement of the authorities from Suri affairs.

THE CULTURAL OFFENSIVE

After the campaign of instant revolutionary change by urban cadres or students had waned in 1976, the new policy was carried out through the reformed administrative structures on the *awraja*-level and the newly instituted peasant associations and *k'ebeles*. (This did not apply to the Suri, who were, as indicated, largely bypassed by the revolution.) In the Me'en area, local people were sought out to become cadres (speaking the local language and 'knowing the culture'). Youngsters from the northern population and from the Me'en were selected. Some of them were Me'en who had lived in Amhara families, some were products of the mission school. One of them was P'aulos (Gere-Gere) Shaya, the gifted son of a prestigious local Me'en family. He was studying in Addis Ababa when he was asked by the government to become a cadre 'in the service of his people.' Friends in the capital advised him not to go, but he went and was active for almost a year. But with what the average Me'en would consider an alienated, dogmatic outlook, he quickly became involved in conflicts with Me'en elders. He was the scion of an important family related to a major *komorut* ('rain chief') in the Gesha area, and he attacked the ritual distinction of groups ('rain clans' versus commoner clans) from within (cf. Abbink 1992b, p. 361). His work and that of his colleagues among the Me'en was no success. The critical point came in early 1977, when he very seriously insulted the wife of a prestigious leader of the Bayti clan. Me'en antagonism to the revolutionary authorities and their political ideas waxed. Nevertheless his activities were not put to an end by the Me'en; early in 1977 he was arrested by the *awraja* authorities and killed under circumstances never cleared up.

Another focus of rebellion was the pressure put on the spirit mediums, who acted as traditional healers and diviners, called *men-de-nyerey* (often translated as *k'allich'a*, but not quite accurate). They had an important function of social control in society. They were forbidden to practice their arts and to accept livestock or other gifts for their work. Some did their work in secret, some were forced to flee to the lowlands.

In addition, various ritual customs of the Me'en were prohibited, like the killing of cattle at funerals. An important element of a Me'en funeral is the ritual killing of cows or oxen (by hitting it with a big stone between the eyes) by the oldest son, the first son-in-law, and any other important local person, in honor of the deceased. (The meat is later eaten by the relatives.) The cadres and the administration always saw this as a wasteful destruction of productive resources. In a sense this might be true, but this custom — embodying metaphors of the exchange of long-term fecundity of families and lineage groups — also expressed the links between affinally related Me'en groups assisting each other, and was a source of protein at a festive occasion.

There were other cultural matters which the administration constantly tried to discourage, ranging from bodily culture to religious-ritual life. Women were told not to dye their hair with a beautifying reddish-brown powder, not to pierce their ears and insert wooden discs, not to remove lower incisors, not to tattoo their bodies, and not to isolate themselves in small cold huts during their menstruation period. This was all part of the *yä-gojee bahıl* campaign: measures against 'harmful customs.'

To anticipate partly on what transpired in the later period of the revolution era, it can perhaps be said that the result of the revolutionary approach was that, instead of emphasizing solidarity or commonality across ethnic and economic lines, its policy on the local level upheld, and in fact reinforced, the social and cultural **boundary** between the Me'en and the others (including the village people). By the revolutionary vanguards, Me'en were considered (often perhaps with the best of intentions, driven by the ideological urge to modernize and develop) as 'still ignorant and primitive' in their way of life, in cultivation practices, settlement pattern, values, domestic life, food consumption, hygiene, etc. There was also an underlying cultural model of change — in terms of values, personhood, ideas of sociality — involved. Any reflection on a possible 'dual identity' of local ethno-cultural and 'modern,' revolutionary Ethiopian components was absent — they were seen as incompatible.

At the same time, the Me'en knew very well that the political and economic conditions which the government promised for improvement of rural life and productivity were not created, and they saw that their dependence from traders and village people in general remained the same or even increased. Except for primary schools or a clinic and a cooperative shop here and there, the infrastructure of roads and markets was not developed, taxes (in cash) were steadily increased, bribes for all kinds of 'services' and paperwork (which exponentially increased in the revolutionary period) multiplied, but prices for their own products did not rise. In fact, measured in quantitative terms, the economic opportunities, and output of the Me'en in the whole period of 1974-91 declined, while the work-load increased.[9]

In a sense, the revolutionary approach, by grounding itself in a **negation** of the socio-cultural arrangements found in Me'en and Suri society, did not

offer the people an opportunity to open up towards the wider society or to find ways to combine traditional cultural commitments with the new ideas, policies and practices.

1977—THE VIOLENT RESPONSE

The above two factors — the dishonoring of their leaders and the suppression and delegitimation of vital aspects of their culture — soon led to disenchantment. The Me'en saw no advantages in the 'revolution' and did not like the violent discourse in which it was phrased and executed. They and their leaders never intended to bow to the pressure of cadres and students such as Maale did (Donham 1992: 51). After the first two years, in a still confused period, they rose in armed rebellion against all the 'Amhara'-villages in their area.

In the night of 28 to 29 Gänbot 1969 E.C. (5-6 June 1977), the northerners in the villages heard the approaching sounds of Me'en trumpets. Me'en groups were advancing on the villages. It was the start of a concerted attack of a broad coalition of Me'en (and some allied Bench) groups on all the *kätämas* in the area: Bachuma, Gesha, Barda, T'ui, Ch'ebera, Däbrä Worq, Jemu, Maji and Shasha. It was coordinated by the Me'en leaders and relatives of people arrested and dishonored. They had rifles (no automatics), knives, machetes and spears. Women were in the rear guard, encouraging the men. Village defenses were hastily organized. A two-day battle followed, and dozens of Me'en and villagers were killed. On the eve of the third day, reinforcements from the provincial capital were sent and the attackers were beaten back. Several villages, however, were immediately abandoned after the attack: Ch'ebera, Barda, T'ui and Gesha. The latter three were later completely destroyed, the first was only resettled after six years by part of its former inhabitants. Shasha never recovered after the attack and has now only two or three families of Amhara descent. During the 1977 attack, Maji village was saved by accident: the Me'en had also arranged with the Suri people (mainly Tirma) to attack Maji. But due to a mistake in the counting of days, the Suri came one day too late, when the villagers were warned and could beat them off. About a week after the first attack, the rebellion came to an end.

Some time afterwards, the local authorities began hunting down what they suspected were the instigators of the revolt, especially lowland Me'en and the families of the 'rain chiefs' and of the spirit mediums, which they saw as the root of unrest. For instance, the family of the former cadre P'aulos Shaya (see above) was a main target. Three of his four brothers were arrested and killed. One local leader of the highland Me'en around Ch'ebera, called Shala, who had chosen the side of the government, helped in tracking down the rebel leaders, some of whom already were his enemies before the revolt.[10] One of them, Aga, a member of the Lemach clan and the grandson of the great Tishana-Me'en war leader Ngorba,[11] was executed with all of his male children and his

brother. A daughter of Shala, married to a brother of Juga, was killed by [illegible] father after she had refused to divorce her husband.

In this same context, a three-week punitive expedition was carried out [illegible] a contingent of well-armed *awraja* soldiers and policemen across the Me'[illegible] area, whereby hundreds of livestock and other possessions were confiscated. For the Me'en this was just another raid of northerners as they knew them [illegible] before the Italian period.

The result of the suppression of the revolt was that in the following [illegible] in the wake of the reprisal campaign of the authorities, several Me'en leaders went into hiding in inaccessible forest areas or lowlands. This occurred at a time when in the center of the country the Red Terror raged in full force, of which Me'en were certainly aware. Among the fugitives were all important Me'en territorial leaders, like Bilemu, Juga Ngorbok, Gelejba, Shaya, Komoch and Gali (some of them *komorut*, clan-leader or spirit medium). Invitations by the administration to come out and negotiate were not heeded after the first two leaders (a Bench and a Me'en) had naïvely followed such a request and were executed. Most of them stayed away for many years. For example, the only remaining brother of P'aulos Shaya, inheritor of the line, withdrew in the dense forest of Gesha and was not seen in the villages for 12 years. Requests to come out were always countered with the answer: "Tell me first this: what has happened to my brothers?" Leaders from other ethnic groups like the Bench, living north of the Me'en, also stayed out of reach, some even retreating into Sudan.[12] They thus became *shifta* for the authorities. Some of them only came out ('gave their hand') in 1991, after the change of the central government.

This revolt was fueled by a variety of causes: deep disenchantment with the new 'revolutionary' policy and people, the cultural humiliation which the Me'en had to incur, power vacuum, economic crisis, and historical revenge for the slave-raiding days of one or two generations ago. It stood in the tradition of rebellion which the Tishana-Me'en had built up in the 1920s and 1930s. Evaluating Me'en testimonies, the dominant theme seems to have been the resentment of the violent offensive in word and deed of the new power-holders and their local associates against Me'en values and leaders. They also feared a new subjugation in economic terms (recalling the efforts of northerners to force them into the *gàbbar*-system, see above). In a sense, the revolt was their way to **redefine** the terms of relationship with the non-Me'en highlanders, to **affirm** their existence in a time of turmoil and threat. It was not primarily a revolt to rob and steal cattle and property, as the northerners of the villagers later asserted.

The effects of the revolt and its suppression were serious: Me'en cooperation with the authorities was completely undermined. No Me'en intended to seriously be involved in local administration, except as chairmen of peasant associations set up in the course of the following years. While their influence was limited, they became a medium for receiving the policy directives from

[illegible]ove. An exception was a person like Shala, who cooperated more with the [illegible] authorities than any other Me'en, and rose to wealth and political standing [illegible]rtly through bribes and connections. He even became a member of the Work[illegible] Party of Ethiopia in 1987, together with his sister's son, who was made a [illegible]asant association secretary in his home area. A handful of Me'en young men [illegible]re also selected to be trained as translators and informers on their commu[illegible]y. The large majority of Me' en, especially those in the southeastern low[illegible]nd areas, tried to distance themselves from the local administrative structure, [illegible]d even from markets, where they only sent their wives and daughters.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF REVOLUTIONARY POLICY

However, there was a consolidation phase of revolutionary policy and [illegible]ministration also in the Me'en area. It was characterized by the further es[illegible]tishment of peasant associations (see Table 1), the tax collecting structure, [illegible] 'mass organizations' (REYA and REWA). The Me'en peasant associa[illegible]ons were never as developed or as active as elsewhere in the country. Some [illegible]f them indeed only existed in name. But it was through them that the *gubbo* [illegible]ystem started seeping down, to an extent previously unknown among the [illegible]e'en.[13] The mass organizations were only established with much delay and a [illegible]nually complete lack of enthusiasm among the Me'en. (They were never set [illegible]p under the Suri) What they saw was an extra burden of financial contribu[illegible]ons (obligatory membership dues) and no activity. Obviously, in a dispersed [illegible]ettlement structure like that of the Me'en, one could not see how such orga[illegible]nizations could have a useful function at all. (In the villages, there was activ[illegible]y.) Additional levies and corvée labor also existed: when a small clinic or [illegible]chool had to be built it was not paid from tax money but from extra contribu[illegible]ons of the local population. There was also an extra national tax for the warfront [illegible]nd for the resettlement program in the years 1988-90, which was double that [illegible]f the normal tax. All this came when the objective possibilities for income [illegible]ncrease for the Me'en were absent. The wealth that they had (cattle) often had [illegible]o be sold, which again undermined their future productive capacity.[14]

But the two issues which came to irk them most were, predictably, the [illegible]illagization program and the campaigns for 'national (military) service,' which, [illegible]pecially after 1987, turned violent (like in other parts of the country).

(a) The villagization program: As with the mass organizations, the effort to start this in the Me'en area was slow and half-hearted. The program fell under the July 1985 national campaign, but effectively began only sometime in 1987. The practical problems were overwhelming. Even local officials admitted that a principally sensible policy could be proclaimed in the center, but its local implementation was another thing. Only at the northern fringe of the Me'en area, a border area with the

Bench people and near the main Amhara villages, schemes were set up in five locations. Economically and socially it did not make sense to the Me'en, for reasons also heard in many other areas. (cf. Alemayehu 1990). In the Me'en area even less facilities could be provided because of the isolation of the area (no roads for cars, no water system etc.). After a pathetic effort of one or two years, the new huts built were still not occupied, or were already abandoned again. The Me'en stressed that they "could not live in villages like the Golach."

b) A very serious problem in the last four or five years of the Revolutionary period were the forceful recruitments of young men as soldiers. This was done in the best military style of old times: 'capturing' people on market days while traveling or during meetings for which they had been called up. Any voluntary recruitment had since long been abandoned, and one Me'en leader, upon repeatedly being requested by officials to offer men for the civil war said, "How? We cannot give you people; we Me'en pay our dues in taxes, not in human beings." The Me'en obviously drew a parallel with the former slave-raids, not least because the boys were tied up in ropes and guarded by armed police of *woreda* and village volunteers. While Amhara and other village youths usually heard in advance of an impending recruitment campaign, the Me'en often did not. They had no serious chance to put up resistance, nor could they all flee to the lowlands. Every year at least some 200 Me'en men were seized. Most of them never returned.

7. INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

Apart from the problematics of the direct confrontation between Me'en and Suri and the Derg/WPE authorities, there were other ramifications of the revolution. Inter-ethnic relations in this area of Ethiopia with its diverse ethnic groups had always known phases of cooperation and partial assimilation. (The Me'en, for instance, had incorporated substantial numbers of Dizi and Bench people, while the Suri had assimilated a Me'en group.) Ethnic boundaries were not strict. However, there was also a persistent underlying tension between highlanders and lowlanders, related to their political ecology. In 1974-76, the initial period of perceived breakdown in authority and the insecurity in relations between state and local community let the tensions surface. One example was the raiding of 'traditional' enemies. It should be remembered that most of the Me'en and the Suri were not really peasants, neither in socio-economic position, nor in agrarian practices, nor in self-image. The southern Me'en and the Suri had always been known for their cattle-rustling among the highland people (called Su). Since the mid-19th century at least, the Me'en had rega-

Table 1 - Peasant associations in (former) *awrajas* with Me'en population, 1989 figures

Awraja	Number	Members	Percentage of Me'en (male household heads)
Goldiyya	57	13,539	90 %
Bero-Shasha	43	3,896	80 % (*)
Maji	23	2,950	8 %

Source: Regional peasant association office, Mizan Täfäri, Käfa Administrative Region.

(*) Of seven rebellious *k'ebeles* (only existing on paper) in this district there were no data in 1989.

Table 2 - Population figures in Maji zone

	1990 report	1991 report	Field estimate (1990-92)
Me'en	41,281	50,465	51-52,000
Suri	16,985	16,426	26-27,000
Dizi	20,066	22,329	23-24,000
Others	4,403	—	5,000

Sources: OPHCC 1990, p. 35-36; OPHCC 1991, p. 49.

Problems of this table are the following:

a) ethnic groups cannot be delineated clearly as suggested here.

b) there is divergence in the two main statistical sources: the OPHCC report on Käfa (1990) and the OPHCC report on the national figures (1991), both given here.

c) In the 1990 report we find the 'Suri' and the 'Surma' listed (but these are the same group).
The Suri are not mentioned in the population table of the 1991 report, but only in the language distribution table (OPHCC 1991, p. 55), under 'Surigna' and 'Surmigna'.

d) the population of the villages is mixed and cannot be split out according to ethnic group. The figure for 'others' refers to the population of the villages combined.

N.B. Tables with detailed (but partly speculative) information on the population of each of the former *woredas* is given in OPHCC 1990, pp. 95-96.

larly raided the sedentary Konta and Ch'ara peoples, east of the Omo. For such raids they often combined with the Mela and Chirim Me'en (the Bodi). After the revolution, a massive combined raid was organized in 1975 against the Kullo-Konta area, yielding hundreds of livestock. The Dizi people, on the other hand, were not raided by them (possibly because of the multiple ties of economics and kinship they had with this people), but only by the Suri. The raiding proceeded according to a fairly predictable pattern, always likely to occur when the military threat from the state political authorities waned.[16]

Apart from this there were regular local skirmishes and killings between members of different ethnic groups. The state juridicial authorities were largely powerless in helping to resolve the disputes, many of which were not brought to their attention. In several cases it was tried but without success. One instance was the following. Early in 1986, Hakumu Boshu, the spokesman of the Boshu Me'en, the prestigious lowland group who were living in Decha *woreda* in Käfa *awraja* across the Shorum river, was murdered in cold blood by a Ch'ara man while visiting a Ch'ara village. The killer was caught by accident by a Käfa official. A tortuous investigation and trial began. But the case was not concluded and the killer only remained in custody for a brief period.[17] According to Me'en custom, the Ch'ara were also liable to pay a homicide compensation (Me'en: *asha)* of seven cattle and a young girl (compensating life with life). This was not considered by the court. The Me'en could then only have taken what was 'rightfully theirs' by force, but did not act. But relations between the Ch'ara and Me'en were obviously spoiled, inter-ethnic bond-friendships came to an end. At the time these incidents occurred, the Me'en noted that the revolutionary justice system did not properly function for them. In addition, they saw that the Ch'ara, who are Omotic-speaking, sedentary cultivators, were provided by the authorities with weapons for 'self-defense,' which were used frequently for attacks on the Boshu. Retaliation came five years later: after the demise of the Derg regime, the Boshu and their allies staged a massive attack on the Ch'ara, partly in revenge for the killing of Hakumu.

In the final years of the revolutionary period, there was an increasing militarization and concomitant spread of weapons which disturbed the local 'balance of violence' between ethnic groups. Finally, in May 1991, the collapse of the national army and the various administrations in the south led to an uncontrolled spread and sale of weapons by retreating or fleeing people. A substantial amount was eventually acquired by the southern peoples, including the Suri and the Me'en.

8. CONCLUSION

In the early period of the Derg/WPE era, undoubtedly a discourse of ethnicity was opened in Ethiopia: the often repressive policy and cultural

ionism of the Haile Sellassie regime which had ideologically buttressed thern exploitation of culturally divergent minority groups was broken and promise of change was felt. But as political survival at all cost became the f aim of the Derg/WPE regime, earlier promises and policies were disre-ded, and ultimately the contradictions in the economic and ethno-regional icy exploded. The fall of the Derg was seen as another phase of liberation n political and economic burdens which had ruined Me'en society. For the i, who were fully armed and defiant of virtually all their neighbors by the e the EHADIG came to power, nothing changed. They already had de facto nomy in their own area, and were preoccupied with their old enemies the gatom and with raiding the Dizi people (cf. Abbink 1993a). In this re-, the feeling was that the policies of the Derg had failed to guarantee a imum semblance of order and inter-group understanding.

As the for the cultural terms in which the confrontation of the Me'en and Suri on the one hand and the revolutionary authorities on the other hand ceeded, we must conclude that a negation of the relevance of the idea of ferent cultural styles led to a gradual dissociation of the Me'en and the Suri n any serious involvement with administration and its policies. Every measure was tried to circumvent or stall. Admittedly, there **was** a small elite of inistration and party-affiliated Me'en, who had risen within the frame-k of the peasant associations and the school system[17] and wielded influ-ce in limited areas, especially at the northern fringe of the Me'en area. But majority stood aloof and continued to work and live within the framework their lineage organization, traditional ceremonies and rituals, diviner-consultations, cooperative work-parties, etc. which they thought could best provide continuity of their social reproductive system in the absence of a clear ernative.

From the local vantage point (in the field) it also seemed that while state wer and its repressive apparatus in the center of the country (the urban areas) steadily increased in the last years of the revolutionary period, it was circumvented or neutralized in the periphery of the Me'en and Suri. The state wer as securely established its presence here as it did in a peasant society like the Maale, which also had a visibly 'suspect' kingship-ideology (cf. Donham 1992, p. 52-54). The Me'en, and especially the Suri, were much more able to 'move away' (literally) from state discourse and policy, reverting to economic and socio-cultural subsistence structures.

Both the Suri and the Me'en experience illustrate that the external interventions and changes in the past century did not substantially improve their material conditions or quality of life. They have been concerned primarily with one thing — group survival. Only in this sphere the revolutionary period has taught them, at quite some cost, to improve their skills. In the process of revolutionary reform of the *dar agär* countryside in southern Ethiopia, the paradox of reconciling local cultural traditions and imported political ideologies of

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NOTES

1. This article is a draft of work in progress. I have also been engaged for some time in preparing a monograph on the Me'en people in the time of the Revolution and the Derg/WPE regime, where the theme will be taken up in more detail.
2. My guess is a total of ca. 28,000. The term 'Suri' is an occasional self-term of the *Tirma* and the *Chai*; they are called 'Surma' by the neighboring Dizi people. The OPHCC number was based on an extrapolated sample. As one of the 1984 census workers in Maji told me (February 1992), no actual counts were made in the wide and inaccessible territory of the Suri.
3. Although it can be predicted that among the Tishana-Me'en, population growth will very soon put serious pressure on the carrying capacity of the land. An exception are the less densely settled lowlands near the Shorum and Omo rivers.
4. Here used as a general term for the dominant element (from Mänz, Gojjam and Wällo) in the groups of northern settlers who arrived after 1898.
5. Two former Me'en students of the missionaries became cadres of the Derg, but one of them was killed in the Red Terror period a few years later (See below).
6. Contrast this with the Maale case, Donham 1992.
7. It is, nevertheless interesting that the traditional leaders, the *komoruts* (of which there were five), did not engage in such relations with Amhara.
8. This also happened among the Dizi people, whose chiefs were much more hit by this symbolic destruction of their hereditary leading role than Me'en and Suri. A large amount of chiefly insignia (old glass beads, ivory horns, drums, spears and brass head ornaments) were taken away by force. Part of these age-old objects was probably illegally traded by these 'revolutionary' cadres, part was stored in a building of the local administration in Maji, later in Tum, and were stolen in the months after the collapse of the Derg regime in May 1991. They can be considered lost forever. See Haberland 1993 for a survey of Dizi culture and its demise under northern domination.
9. Even many villagers admitted that the Me'en, especially the women, were always very hard workers.
10. The conflict went back to some traditional Me'[illegible] putes between the men, over bride-wealth or [illegible] solved homicide compensation. The revolutionary [illegible] moil offered an opportunity to fight out these [illegible] in another arena.
11. Called 'Mirba' by Garretson (1986, p. 205). The [illegible] 'Shala' and 'Juga' which I give here are pseudony[illegible]
12. The most prestigious Me'en *komorut*, Bosha, [illegible] in the far southern lowlands, had not participated [illegible] the revolt.
13. A local 'politics of the belly' became dominant: [illegible] eat or be eaten' (cf. Bayart 1993). This was of [illegible] of also the expression in Amharic.
14. Such problems possibly led to a reduced ability [illegible] spond to crop failure and food shortage which [illegible] a famine in the Me'en area in 1988, in which several hundred people perished. Relief aid came [illegible] months too late and only consisting of wheat [illegible] which the Me'en were not familiar.
15. Exactly the same pattern resurfaced in the months [illegible] ter the fall of the Mengistu regime in May 1991: [illegible] a combined raid against Kullo-Konta and two [illegible] the Ch'ara. The Bodi (with part of the Nyangatom [illegible] Selab'uli Me'en) went also on a raid to the Bada[illegible] area (June 1991), and to the Malo area (March 1992), both several days' march from their home base. All raids led to numerous casualties. Only one raid (June 1991) was ever mentioned in the mass media (Ethiopian Herald, 28 January 1992).
16. Bonga *woreda* law court, case # 7/89-8/80 (September 1986). It was later referred to the Mizan Teferi court. The ramifications of this case perhaps deserve more detailed treatment elsewhere).
17. For the entire Suri population, only one such an [illegible] person was known. He had been educated in Maji, [illegible] in Mizan, even went to East Germany for a [illegible] and was a *woreda* administrator in the late seventies and early eighties. But after being involved in a [illegible] ing, he was imprisoned for six years in Maji and [illegible] to end his career in government service. New problems and tension with the EHADIG authorities in 1[illegible] made him return to his Chai relatives in the Suri [illegible] land.

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