

**RESEARCH PAPERS ON THE SITUATION OF  
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN ETHIOPIA**

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and Adolescents in Ethiopia, Held in Addis Ababa, 9-10  
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## Preface and Acknowledgements

The typical characteristics, peculiarities, the problems and overall situation of Ethiopian children and adolescents are not well studied and documented. Open debates and discussions on various major issues are not common. The circulation and availability of the few studies made are limited. Researchers (academics), policy/decision makers, and implementers (including national and international nongovernmental donor agencies) do not seem to have clear understanding of various aspects of Ethiopian children and adolescents. There is a lack of good reference materials which could be used for planning, teaching, research and intervention purposes.

Based on a proposal submitted by the editor, Kindernothilfe (KNH) sponsored the study and the conference. KNH was already cognizant of the lack of rigorous studies on the situation of children and adolescents in Ethiopia and actively encouraged the national study and conference. The conference took place in Technology Faculty auditorium of Addis Ababa University on 9-10 August, 1996.

The objectives of the study were to have (at least) some baseline data and interpretation which will assist in the common understanding of various issues at hand. Most of the issues are of some importance to policy/decision makers, researchers and implementers.

"Call for papers" was made in February, 1996 and 71 topics (short proposals) were submitted to the coordinating committee. Originally, it was planned that 12 to 15 papers would be prepared. But, due to the large positive response, some modifications were made and additional sources of fund sought. The Institute For International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (IIZ-DVV) was requested to cover the printing costs. It was convinced of the importance of the study and agreed to cover some costs. Hence the number of research papers to be supported (approved) increased to 29. Twenty six of the papers fulfilled the criteria, met the deadlines and were presented at the national conference attended by seventy eight researchers/academics, government officials, representatives of various NGOs and interested others. It is to be noted that 23 research papers, the opening and closing speeches, and major points of agreement at the end of the conference are included in this book. Due to the limitation of space three papers, two keynote speeches and the abstracts of each paper are not included. As could be observed from the list of authors, policy/decision makers, academics and practitioners participated in the study. The coordinating committee was very happy that these "three partners" came together to discuss issues of such national interest.

This partly indicates that these three parties could easily study, listen to each other, discuss and work together if appropriate fora are provided. As could be observed in this book of proceedings,

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## THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN AN ETHIOPIAN AGRO-PASTORAL SOCIETY: SURMA CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Whatever the differences of opinion are in national debates on educational aims and purposes in Ethiopia (and elsewhere), there may be a minimum consensus about the idea that state-sponsored, formal education should a) give people the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and b) enable them to participate in society as enlightened, able and productive citizens who can make informed decisions and choices (cf. also Habtamu 1992: 4; Getahun 1992 on the economic aspects; TGE 1994: 93).

But education in Ethiopia reaches a limited number of people (at present about 22% enrollment in primary schools; cf. Tekeste 1996: 44-45; USAID 1994: 2), so the above-mentioned ideal only affects a privileged minority, mainly in urban centers. For a rural majority the chances to attend are hampered by unfair practical difficulties such as distance from a school, parental poverty, and the need for seasonal agricultural labour from the school-age children. In addition, one of the great and as yet unanswered challenges for Ethiopian education in rural areas - with very limited job opportunities outside the fields of agriculture, handicrafts and some trading - is to develop a school curriculum more sensitive to the needs of the rural community and to the perceived local development needs (domestic fuel supply, transport facilities, food security, market access, roads, health clinics, electricity supply). While in many areas in Ethiopia these issues are being addressed in often externally funded projects, the nation-wide impact is by definition limited.

At present the Ethiopian education system is in a state of flux. In April 1994, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia announced its *Education and Training Policy*, which still serves as a

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policy baseline under the Federal Government. With the assistance of USAID a new programme, called BESO (Basic Education System Overhaul) is being developed since 1994.<sup>2</sup> It aims for a grand rethinking and restructuring to meet the challenges of regionalization and decentralization of the educational institutions. It is becoming the subject of a wider debate, e.g., in Tekeste Negash's recent book (1996). The new regional devolution along ethnic lines, realized through the Regional Education Bureaus, will imply a decline of nation-wide educational ideals and curricula in line with policies of ethno-regional identity formation. However, hardly any work has been done on the feasibility of this idea or on meaningful implementation. The "Southern Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region" (SENNPR) is, with Tigray Region, one of the regions singled out for special attention under the USAID programme.<sup>3</sup>

This essay examines the problem of the relation between socialization and cultural values of one Ethiopian ethnic group (the Surma) on the one hand and the challenge of formal and informal education on the other. Given the utter lack of school exposure and the social crisis among this group, what are the required ingredients for a successful educational program? The case of the Surma people, a relatively isolated agro-pastoral group of about 29,000 people in the Maji Zone in SENNPR, may illustrate many of the issues coming to the fore in debates on Ethiopian education.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. CRISIS AND CHALLENGE - A LOCAL-LEVEL STUDY

Education research literature is pervaded by a high degree of prescriptive formulas and injunctions: many 'musts', 'shoulds', and 'oughts' with pleas for new 'ideals', 'plans' and 'visions', etc. abounding. Sometimes these prescriptions and proposals have been followed up in policy and in actual practice, but more often they have not worked. In the meantime, educational practice has been going on, on the basis of unexamined social and cultural assumptions and biases and within

See, for the main outlines: USAID, *Basic Education System Overhaul, Program Summary*, October 1994, Addis Ababa: USAID/Ethiopia, 59 pp. It is an 80 million dollar, seven-year project.

See for Tigray: M. Sommers, et al. *Research on the Decentralization of Basic Education in Tigray, Ethiopia, Final Report*. Addis Ababa: USAID (BESO Decentralization Study), 142 p.

Fieldwork in the Surma area was done intermittently over the past four years, lastly in May-June 1996. This paper will not treat all aspects of the problem in detail.

the financial constraints of the state. The dynamics of the education sector are to a very important extent fueled by problems of the latter kind, not by new plans and policies.<sup>5</sup>

I will attempt not merely to focus on developing prescriptions and desired paths for the future education of the Surma, but sketch an anthropological perspective on the challenges of the current situation, describing what probably is going to happen to Surma youth and education in the near future. There are major problems in this relatively traditional, small-scale society (cf. Abbink 1994). I see reason enough to call what is going to happen - or is already happening since several years - a crisis in the socialization and education patterns among this people. It consists of a growing disequilibrium between the generations, between increased aggression and violence (arms), and a disrespect for traditional ritual mechanisms. This crisis might further manifest itself in the growth of internal divisions between young and old, emerging gender and other social inequalities, a loss of cultural values, a crumbling of the relationship with neighboring groups, and societal disintegration (See below).

State influence or regional education which are inevitably coming to the area have to run their course; but this is not to say that they are necessarily a positive thing or can prevent such a crisis. The reasons for the crisis are of course not only found in state policy: there have been other developments in the past one or two decades which have played a contributory role. Despite the fact that the chances for meaningful formal education within Surma society (and neighboring groups) must be ranked as rather slim, it would be worthwhile to follow a case like the Surma in the framework of a national study on the situation of children and adolescents. This for several reasons: a) the educational effort here has to start from scratch, in a precarious economic and security situation, thus posing a particular challenge; b) the Surma situation sums up many of the educational problems of rural Ethiopia: what is a relevant curriculum, how to anchor it in the community, how to link 'indigenous knowledge' and capacity with general educational aims, how to achieve continuity in quality and enrollment; c) it could become clear that, next to quantitative approaches, qualitative approaches can yield information on the best way to proceed in (re)forming education among such minority cultures (cf. Shimahara 1988). A cultural analysis of context, social setting and historical background might be helpful.

<sup>5</sup> This, incidentally, holds not only for the 'underdeveloped' but also for the more post-modern, 'developed' world, where there is an increasing and often underestimated disarray in the field of national education.

### 3. SURMA SOCIETY IN THE REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Surma are a non-literate, self-contained group, living in relative isolation in the lowlands southwest of Maji village. They consist of two very similar subgroups, Chai and Tirma, and speak a Nilo-Saharan language. On account of their remote position and their image of 'naked, primitive people untouched by civilization', they have acquired the status of a tourist attraction in recent years (actively promoted by the ETC and the NTO). This status is, however, deeply resented by the Surma. They take advantage of the money the tourists spend, but know they are seen as objects of curiosity. The tourists think the Surma are extremely rude and unpleasant, and many regret ever having come to their area.

The Surma economy is based on livestock-herding, gold-panning and the cultivation of sorghum, maize, and garden crops such as cabbage, beans and cassava. They use no modern farming or other technology, except automatic weapons. These were accumulated in large quantities during the last decade, ostensibly for self-defense, but also for cattle-raiding and robbing. The past eight years have seen hundreds of victims of local violence, mainly among the neighboring groups of the Dizi, Me'en, and village-people of mixed origin.<sup>6</sup> (Incidentally, only two Surma killers were ever arrested).

Partly due to this violence and the resulting deterioration of group relations, the local image of the Surma in the Maji region is understandably negative. Surma are seen as non-cooperative, arrogant and aggressive 'by nature'. There has always been 'distance' between Surma and other groups, including state representatives, up until today. Government officials, though living only some 20 km. from the Surma area, also foster several core misconceptions about the Surma, dating back many decades (cf. Kebede 1960):

- \* they are nomads (Amh. *zällanotch*)
- \* they are ignorant
- \* they are poor

All three statements are misleading, even false. First, the Surma live in settled villages surrounded by cultivation sites, although young men roam with cattle in pasture areas at some distance away from the villages. The term *zällanotch* here probably does not mean 'nomads', but people outside the reach of government agencies, with a 'primitive' material and other civilisation (i.e. it is a

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In Maji, Jeba and Tum.

cultural category). Second, they may be 'ignorant' in the sense of not being literate or of not having modern technology and formal schooling, etc. But the Surma are perfectly capable of dealing with the relevant factors in their social and natural environment to their own advantage. They are keenly aware of how the local administration works and what it wants, and what the likely behavior and interests of neighboring groups are. In meetings with government officials they are articulate speakers, and are never fooled. In addition, they have an elaborate and highly developed indigenous knowledge system, geared to the needs of survival (e.g. good knowledge of plant species and their use, of pasture, of soil types and of animal life), and an intricate, aesthetically rewarding culture of cattle management, which outsiders do not understand. The argument of their so-called ignorance was first advanced in a derogatory sense, but now also by the authorities to explain the Surma's violent behaviour vis-à-vis their neighbours: this ignorance about things in the wider society and 'proper conduct' is held to make them aggressive in their reactions, the implication being that one should be patient with them and that once they are well-informed and exposed to education they would become less difficult.<sup>7</sup> The Surma know this argument and indeed it suits them fine; it means that their transgressions will be 'forgiven' on account of their being in this state of 'ignorance'. Indeed, most of their attacks on Dizi, villagers and Me'en have thus far gone unpunished.

The third point, their so-called poverty, is also a misconception of the first order. The average household has, apart from abundant cultivation sites for staple crops and gardens, a cattle herd of about a hundred animals, which means - even at the relatively low local prices - a walking capital of tens of thousands of Birr. In addition, the Surma are the main gold producers in the area, selling it in Maji, Dima and Jeba villages. Furthermore, they do not pay taxes on anything. They are, therefore, much wealthier than their settled Dizi and Me'en peasant neighbours, who are, however, in the eyes of the administration, 'the more developed and civilized' people.

Unfortunately, the above misconceptions, which as we can see do not stem from the facts but from a deeply engrained cultural bias, continue to serve as a normative basis for policy in general. These misconceptions also reinforce the bias in the Ethiopian formal education system against rural people and their concerns (cf. Tekeste 1995: 29, 31). The situation will, however, not be ameliorated only by teaching in the mother-tongue; it is a general bias in education which produces

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But sometimes the government itself lost patience with them and has used force in the face of Surma provocation. E.g., in late 1994, after the Surma had killed three soldiers, there was a two-day battle with security forces in which dozens of Surma died.

children which cannot do anything with their knowledge (except their literacy) in their own rural context and feel alienated from their own socio-cultural context. One of the underlying rationales for the present government's policy is declared to be respect for people's own cultural traditions, etc. but how this is supposed to work out in actual practice (including in the school curriculum) has not been addressed in the past five years.<sup>8</sup>

Since a few years (late 1994), there has been a new institution, the 'Surma Mikir Bet' - a local council (of nine people), set up at the instigation of the Zone administration - which is supposed to administer the newly created 'Surma woreda' (like the other woredas in the Zone created on an ethnic basis). Its record so far has been rather dismal, due to lack of activities. It has been noted especially for its infighting, its appropriation of money for personal purposes, its love for alcohol and its incompetence. In the field of education, there have been no initiatives except bringing up the old idea of a literacy campaign. However, teachers and means for this are lacking, and nothing has happened in the past year.

Of all the ethnic groups in Maji-Bench Zone, the Surma have been the least affected by education or any other government influences. Their area is also the least accessible. Due to the presence of large numbers of arms and ammunition among them, they have been able to maintain a relatively independent position in recent years, both under the Derg and the new government. This has worked in their (material) advantage for some years, but is now causing more and more internal tensions within their own society.

#### 4. SURMA SOCIALIZATION AND VALUE TRANSMISSION

The chances of future education and the integration of non-formal, community-based learning in Surma society will to a large extent be determined by the nature of their socialization and their traditional knowledge transmission patterns, and by the value they continue to attach to them. During field research in recent years, it was apparent that the Surma maintained a relatively close-knit society with a remarkable amount of solidarity and cultural unity, with multiple 'informal learning contexts' (cf. Ninnis 1995) geared to their present way of life as herder-cultivators.

<sup>8</sup> Except in the sense that "harmful customs" (*yegodjee bahil*) should be abandoned. During a conference convened by EPRDF in 1994 in Addis Ababa before the ratification of the new Constitution, leaders and representatives of the ethnic minority groups were told that the government would like to see them work towards the elimination of their respective groups's harmful customs (the list was not much different from that of the Derg government).

Both the Tirma and the Chai subgroups form a politico-ritual unit, with a ritual leader and an authority structure of age-grades. The grade of the *rora* or junior elders<sup>9</sup> is the most important one. It has a collective name and its relation to the two grades below it is defined by certain obligations and duties. The grade of the young men or 'warriors' (called *tégay*), i.e. those responsible for the herding of the livestock and for defense, are in a subservient, respectful position towards them. The elders also can give the younger generation certain tasks to do, and should know where they are and what they do. Most important, the elders should emanate values of unity, truth, righteousness and agreement. In the public debates, where Surma political decisions are made (cf. Abbink 1996), they are the voices of authority which yielded the final decisions. This is a pattern familiar in other East African societies and I will not go into the specifics.

Up to their 12th year, Surma male youths stay in the villages, socializing with their age-mates and with the elder people, who discuss current affairs, rehearse oral traditions and songs, discuss cases of dispute, etc. and encourage children to observe and listen. In addition, the children participate in the household activities, carrying water and fuelwood, accompanying their parents to the cultivation sites, learn about gathering edible plants and fruits, etc. The children also spend plenty of time in a large variety of competitive and cooperative games. In this phase, the family household, especially the hut of the mother, is the secure centre of orientation for the child.

In this period (in the so-called *lusa* age-grade), the life of Surma children is of an intense sociality, although a differentiation between boys and girls is clearly visible from the 8th year onwards. Various factors intensify this sociality, which remains visible throughout the Surma life-span: they live close together in compact villages, they are monolingual<sup>10</sup>, live self-contained in isolation from the highlands (there are many Surma of various ages who have never visited the highland villages, three hours' walk away), and have a specific culture different from surrounding groups. Part of this culture is a high amount of ritual structuring of life (which shapes the cultural order and the shared ideals of the Surma life-career, creating predictability in behaviour and social identity).

<sup>9</sup> Male elders, although females of equivalent age-grade status are accorded similar respect. They seldom speak in public debates, but act upon their husbands and brothers behind the scenes. They do participate in certain vital 'political' rituals such as the *rora* age-grade initiation ceremony, held every 25 years.

<sup>10</sup> Except for some 40 ex-soldiers (in their late twenties) who served in the Dergue army and know some Amharic.

The parent-child relation is relaxed, not authoritarian. There is, e.g., no corporal punishment of children (as in Ethiopian highland cultures), but only verbal scolding and instructing. If, however, parents think that their children are unjustly treated by others, especially by their age-mates, they encourage their off-spring to 'pay back', to stand up to the other, often insisting that the child pinch or beat the one who insults him/her. Children are also encouraged to be verbally articulate, and to always anticipate the actions and plans of others. One could say that Surma children thus develop a high 'social intelligence', which differentiates them markedly from the Dizi peasant children in the highlands.

Gender relations have their predictable character of inequality, but the specifics are important. Women have the main domestic responsibility, but also cultivate their own fields, buy and sell on markets, prepare the culturally important sorghum beer for work parties, and own livestock, although they never have more than their husbands and do not herd it. Due to material interests, marriages are relatively stable. Sexual relations before marriage are not restricted, and the idea of virginity at the time of marriage is unknown. In fact, sexual experimentation before marriage is customary, and girls are not submissive in any sense. Also the girl's say is final in the choice of a husband (and not her parents). All this goes to show that women are socially speaking not dependent or second-class.

Surma socialization is also premised on assumptions about personality and personal identity different from those of other ethno-cultural groups. This becomes important when considering psychological and other health problems.

In connection to the tasks of 'survival' and optimal utilization of the natural environment, children are constantly urged to assimilate all the names and properties of the plants, animals, soil types, etc. in their habitat. For boys, a new stage in this cognitive endeavour begins when they start working in the cattle fields, with older adolescents. Through their constant observation of cattle behaviour and characteristics, they develop cognitive skills of classification of cattle-coat colors and patterns, of predicting patterns of heredity, memorizing the history of cattle descent lines and exchange histories (e.g. through bridewealth deals, compensation payments and inheritance). They also learn cattle songs and parts of oral (clan) history. This intensive 'informal learning process' goes on all through the period of the second age-grade, when they are forced to live more or less on their own, developing herding skills and learning to deal with the problems of the human and natural environment.

In both the second and third age-grade values of equality and reciprocity are important. Surma traditionally have no central authority figures. The ritual mediator called *komoru* was not a political but more of a religious figure: a ritual mediator between heaven and earth, who through ritual action maintained proper contact between the God-given natural forces (like rain) and humans. He was, in a sense, also a role-model, standing for compromise, harmony or cooperation within the Surma polity. As such, the *komoru* was another focal point of some core values of Surma culture.

In a psychological sense, one could say that the values which Surma youths learn include not only reciprocity, respect for elders and cooperation in common tasks, but also self-confidence, personal independence, experimentation, and pride in their group culture.

Surma society as briefly presented above in an ideal-type fashion has not been impervious to change in the past years. Its socio-cultural framework is still there, but one sees signs of crisis. Various causal factors can be identified: occasional famine and cattle disease, problems spilling over from neighboring Southern Sudan, demographic pressure, fights over resources, the availability of modern automatic weapons, and their participation in new trade networks for gold, cattle, guns and ammunition in Ethiopia and across the Sudan border. These have led to social disturbances, the impact of which they fully experience only now. In this respect it is remarkable that the Surma have not successfully adapted to the social and political consequences of these changes, unlike, for instance, the Nyangatom (Bume), their southern agro-pastoralist neighbours.

## 5. SURMA SOCIETY IN CRISIS

The social structure, relations of authority and values of the Surma as sketched above have undergone significant transformations in the present period of political change, innovations in arms technology and inter-group resource competition. This is not to say that their culture has gone, and that all of the above norms and values have been inverted, only that they have come under great pressure. I mention a few of the many elements of crisis.

a) There is first of all the crisis between the generations: due to their new power position, the young men, having acquired guns and ammunition in abundance, have gained more self-confidence and arrogance than the traditional authority system could cope with: they no longer listened to the advice of the elders, went on independent robbing and killing expeditions, and evaded ritual obligations (cf. Abbink 1994). Thus, values of the age-grade system were eroded. In addition, after the new *bara*-initiation ceremony of the Chai Surma, a long-awaited major event held in November

1994, many Surma 'just took' the *rora*-title even if they were not qualified for it in either a biological or mental sense. This has led to the social anomaly of 'children' becoming 'elders', and to a corresponding decline in the authority and moral integrity of the *rora*-group. Its example-function is no more. (Among the Nyangatom pastoralists, in contrast, the relation between the age-groups is still intact).

b) Secondly, there is what I would call 'ritual deterioration'. Ritual had an ordering function and kept a social balance in Surma society. But at present, the 'proper' rules of ritual in, for instance, homicide compensation, ceremonial duelling, or age-grade initiation, are not followed any more. People try to get away with transgressions and to duck out of the duty to pay fines and compensations. There is nobody with authority to keep them in line, and they do not care about 'public opinion'.

c) Third: there is a visible erosion of the role of the *komoru*. The sphere of ritual-religious activity in Surma life has become less important in the eyes of young people, and is less observed. The role of the *komoru* is therefore seen as less vital. At present, only one of the three *komorus* of the Surma is active. One has been killed about 14 years ago by the *Derg*, his designated successor was killed 4 years ago by another Surma (which was unprecedented), and the other one recently died, without a successor being installed yet. This erosion is also related to the new political set-up. The above-mentioned 'Surma Mikir Bet' enlisted the only remaining *komoru* as a 'work manager' (Amh.: *sira-asfets'ami*). This is in contrast with his traditional neutral position 'above the parties', and will lead to a decisive weakening of his position and role-model function. By accepting - for financial reasons or because of an error in judgement - the *komoru* has set the first steps towards making himself redundant.

d) Fourth, there is a notable increase in inter-society disagreements and crime: disputes over rights to property (e.g. cattle), alcohol abuse (*aragê*), theft, and homicide. Also traditional rituals like ceremonial duelling tend to lead to more conflict and aggression.

e) Fifth, inter-ethnic relations have gone from bad to worse: not only with the traditionally hostile Nyangatom people in the south but also with the Anyuak and with the Dizi peasants, their erstwhile allies with whose chiefly families the Surma acknowledge historic kinship ties (Abbink 1993b). Traditional bond-friendships were cut off, raids on cattle and people have increased, and sharing

of resources like water holes or bush areas for bee-keeping and hunting-gathering is cancelled. There was also a major military conflict with local government forces in late 1994 (See note 6).

All these developments have also implications for Surma childhood: children witness more disputes and conflict (often violent), a loss of 'order', of learning contexts, and of cognitive and affective security. They see a de-emphasizing of relations of respect, of values of co-operation and harmony, and of proper ritual conflict management. They are confronted with the effects of violence by losing a parent, a sibling or a friend. Even though they see that violent action can 'pay', i.e. yields loot (like cattle) and added prestige in the peer group, they are aware of negative effects as well. It is like two Surma youngsters remarked in a dialogue recorded in 1993, talking about the many problems and killings among Surma themselves: "The country is spoilt for us here, .... we don't know how it became like that. We won't say anything, we suffered, and we may disappear; the country became dark." (Lucassen and Last 1993).

Naturally the question comes up if and how education could play a corrective role among the Surma, or provide them with a new sense of continuity. The issue is a general one, because education is often expected to have a cooling influence on (the expression of) conflict (see Agedew 1995) and as carrying a promise to enhance social harmony (Menelik 1995). Despite the small-scale nature of Surma society, the question has a paradigmatic relevance, in view of the coming educational incorporation of the Surma in the Regional system, and of the great ethnic diversity in the country: similar problems face most ethnic minorities, and general solutions are necessary. This issue has so far not been addressed in the minimal formal education structure among the Surma.

## 6. THE FORMAL EDUCATION SITUATION

This is a brief paragraph, because at present there is next to nothing in the way of formal schooling among the Surma. There is, however, a history of efforts: an American mission school and a government school in the Haile Sellassie era, and one in the *Derg* period. They were operative for a number of years, but have all been closed.<sup>11</sup> A substantial number of Surma have at some time attended these schools, but the remarkable thing is that among those who attended them in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, virtually no trace of education or literacy can be found. All

<sup>11</sup> The last one in 1988, when a teacher was killed in the Surma area when travelling back to his school.



'knowledge' (like the school buildings themselves) has vanished: it is forgotten or abandoned. One might say that the effects of modern schooling, apparently irrelevant to the life concerns of the average Surma, have been 'reabsorbed' by Surma traditional culture. Not only the education system itself is responsible for this, but also the choice of Surma simply to ignore education. There have always been schools in the Dizi highlands at some two or three hours' walk, but they have never attended them.

Since September 1995, there are two primary schools in the Surma area. One was built by the American Presbyterian Mission and the EECMY but run by the regional government. Both schools have only a first grade. One school has about 12 pupils, though they started out with 22. There is also an adult education class with some 8 students, held in the afternoons from 3 to 5, but only two students are Suri, the others are from the Dizi people (government workers in the area). The other primary school, at Kibish, further south in the center of the Surma area, has about 14 pupils. The participation rate is thus an estimated 0.02 % for all the Surma school-age youths.

The curriculum in the new schools is the regular one of Ethiopian primary schools, with Amharic, basic English, arithmetic, elementary science, social studies (in Amh.: *hibrät*), agriculture, home economics, and handicrafts. Not all of these subjects were given equal attention, however.

Even with their small enrollment, both schools have very irregular attendance. Pupils stay away for days or weeks when they have obligations at home, work in the fields, to care for small livestock, a ritual occasion, or whenever they feel like it. Parental pressure is virtually absent.

The question comes up what relevance the school has for the Surma. A survey among several dozen of Surma parents showed that they saw it playing a very limited role: as a source of information the school is marginal for them; they do not see the teachers as role models; the knowledge transmitted is, except for Amharic, not much desired; and they and their children do not see the advantage of school education in itself or as a venue for future employment. Besides, more than half of the parents did not understand my questions about the function of the school.<sup>12</sup>

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The Surma neither have a clear picture of what kind of 'employment opportunities' (there is no such concept among them) they could find outside their area. There are several dozens of male Surma who live in other regions of Ethiopia (who were originally taken as soldiers for Mengistu's army, got elementary education, and found some kind of job), but few of them come back, and certainly not as teachers.

At no time in the past or present have the Surma looked upon education as a 'resource' to be used to enhance their overall position within Ethiopian society, despite their persistent problems of famine, cattle disease, and conflict with their neighbours.<sup>13</sup>

The children have mixed opinions or none at all. The pupils in the schools are of various ages from 5 to 13, i.e., large age differences in one class. Some children dropped out early saying they couldn't do it, didn't like it or saw just no point in it. They also did not like the authority relationship of teacher and pupil, and some had trouble in being away from peers and family. The remaining children - perhaps inevitably - seem to like the after-school hours of hanging around and playing in the compound more than school itself.

What we notice, and what can be expected to be a major issue in the future, is the discrepancy between values and skills transmitted in the Surma family and other social contexts on the one hand, and those in the school on the other. The Australian researcher P. Ninnies has observed the same problem in the Solomon Islands (Ninnies 1995: 25). The point is especially relevant in a society where there is no developed economic structure to absorb the newly educated people. As long as the Surma are going to be the relatively successful and independent cattle herders/cultivators and gold producers that they are now, the school-acquired skills will be only of marginal value to them. The only advantage would be that being literate in Amharic can enhance their contact and chances for mutual understanding with non-Surma, their Dizi and villager-neighbours, and the government administration. But for their herding, cultivating, self-defense, and knowledge of their natural environment they will not learn much new things. Except for the teacher from Dizi (who knows the Surma language), the teachers in the two Surma classes are largely ignorant about the needs and skills necessary in the Surma environment and about the social and cultural context of Surma life.

The Regional Education Bureau of the SENNPR has not begun to explore possible changes in the curriculum or a new combination of formal and non-formal subjects and methods adjusted to the situation of the various ethnic groups in the Region (There is little knowledge available on Surma childhood and socialization). Perhaps this would be too much to ask, but in the new policies of decentralization, regionalization and local ethnic staffing of government offices, one would expect

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A contrasting example is that of the Hadendowa as recently described by Idris el Hassan (1996): they have seized upon modern education - through their Islamic tradition of learning - as a means to improve their position as well as to leave pastoralism altogether.

such an exploration to happen. In practice, however, educational criteria are still set by the 'modernist' agenda inspired by Western development models. People are prepared for occupations and jobs which will not be found in the Southern countryside, certainly not in Maji-Bench Zone. The large majority of Surma youths having gone through the education system (if it will be in place) will have the worst of two worlds: alienated from their culture by modern education, and not equipped to find meaningful and proper jobs elsewhere.

## 7. INTEGRATING FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION?

That present-day formal education is inadequate in Ethiopian rural areas has been noted by many observers. The federal government admits this in policy documents. But, with the assistance of USAID, they keep focusing on massive investment in formal education (mainly primary), intending to make it more

high-standard, more cost-effective and more efficient. There is nothing wrong with that, but there is relatively little reflection yet about the actual contents and about adapting it to local conditions. There is indeed a dilemma here, because focusing on locally adapted informal education may mean to undermine the 'modernist dream' of education as a gateway out of the countryside, which most Ethiopian children and their parents cherish: to go to an institution of higher learning, become a well-paid government-employee, manager, doctor or engineer, etc. and if possible outside Ethiopia. This ideal is threatened in a model which would try to 'tie' people to their region of origin. Nevertheless, this is probably what is going to happen, because it fits in well with the new decentralization approach. The fact that most pupils do not or cannot go on beyond 6 or 8 years of basic education probably also reduces their versatility in Amharic as a national language.

Given the need for a reflection on non-formal education, what would non-formal community-oriented education consist of among the Surma? What elements in their tradition and indigenous knowledge could be built upon? Tekeste (1996) identified this general problem, but did not really give concrete answers. In the Regional Education Bureau of SENNPR in Awasa it has not yet been posed either.

In this respect, an educational program among the Surma might have to address several things, for example:

- the natural environment (cf. Fitzgerald 1990), the implications of lowland (*qolla*) versus highland (*woyna dega*), a very relevant dimension of their way of life;

- their knowledge of cattle herding and breeding, and their classification of patterns, geometrical forms and colors based on it;
- the nature and demands of their field cultivation and its techniques,<sup>14</sup> of the variety and use of crops;
- their ethno-botany, i.e., the classification of plants, their habitats and use;
- traditional medicine, both for humans and livestock;
- the information or knowledge transmitted in the 'informal learning contexts', such as the initiations, life-crisis-rituals, public debates and judicial disputes (oral historical traditions, values and cognitive skills).

In an ideal situation of integration of the formal and the non-formal, not only the curriculum would have to be broadened and made more responsive to local concerns and conditions, but the schooling rhythm itself would also have to be adapted, e.g. to seasonal labour demands of the parental household, to central ritual events in the community, i.e. when kids cannot attend school. The contexts of teaching could be a combination of formal classroom teaching with practical experiments, field-trip instruction, and confrontation and discussion of 'modern' and 'traditional' approaches.

In addition to curriculum adaptations, there is a need to improve the general receptivity of the Surma to education. We have seen that Surma society is in a crisis: their livelihood is uncertain, internal social relations have gone wrong, they have violent conflicts with surrounding groups, and they distrust government action, including education. It is obvious that this crisis will not be solved soon, because the Surma usually respond to crisis and outside interference by withdrawal and by violent action. But there is a need to develop measures to convince the Surma of the advantages of education:

Surma students should be exposed to successful examples of education and science, e.g., agricultural enterprises, irrigation schemes, health projects. Also education in a multi-ethnic setting which is the reality of Ethiopia - is probably advisable. Much of the crisis in Surma life is related to their self-imposed or forced isolation from other groups, and their ignorance of alternative cultures.

<sup>14</sup> The Surma are of the opinion that no one needs to tell them how to herd, or how to cultivate, although they might wish new inputs (seeds, fertilizers) and technology. Nevertheless, they could be introduced to new crops and varieties, or to unknown local medicines, (e.g., from Dizi or Ma'en).

- The development of a communications, health and economic infrastructure in the Maji-Bench Zone as a whole may have an accelerating effect on the interest of people for education (although a direct relation between education and development is very controversial, cf. Hydland 1994, Tekeste 1996).

- Teachers assigned to Surma schools should be motivated people who have some understanding and sympathy for the Surma way of life. It is well-known that teachers in Ethiopia assigned to remote rural areas are placed there against their will, are inexperienced, lack motivation and tend to despise the local conditions and the 'backward population'. This also holds for those who are assigned among their own people: when educated, they feel it as a regression to have to teach in 'their own' area. Crucial points in teacher-behaviour are motivation and understanding. The Regional Education Bureau of SENNPR has already taken a good policy measure in trying to strengthen quality of teachers (see Daniel 1995: 9-10). In addition, the teachers should perhaps get extra salary for serving in remote areas such as Surma.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

The crisis in Surma society is pervasive and has a great impact on childhood and socialization. It also hinders the acceptance and progress of education among them. Summing up the main factors, one can conclude that:

Surma are in disarray about unifying values, the older generation having lost normative authority, and rituals and social norms losing much of their ordering force.

Conflicts over resources with other ethnic groups encroaching on each other's territory perpetuate instability and violence.<sup>15</sup> Efficient ways of conflict management are not in place.

There is basic distrust between government and Surma, based on long-standing differences in material interests, culture and life style. The institution of a 'Surma Mikir Bet' for the *woreda*, seen as a measure to 'empower' the ethnic group, in itself does not advance the cause of education.

There is no perceived need for formal education neither among Surma parents nor children, neither for economic reasons nor for its own sake.

The rudimentary education structure in place now is also inadequate:

It has little opportunity for expansion, due to transport problems, lack of textbooks and other educational materials, and lack of Surma teachers (and of Surma interested to become one).

The curriculum of the two schools does not (and cannot) tie in with traditional nor future concerns of the large majority of Surma. There is no 'community linkage', and the emphasis is too much on 'formal education'.

Attendance in the primary schools is minuscule and irregular, thus not encouraging growth and commitment.

There are logistical problems and a permanent threat of security<sup>16</sup>, which makes the position of teachers difficult.

The school does not address or deal with the local problems which specifically confront the Surma youth.

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The government, despite its declared policy of ethnic rights, has neither been able to assist the Surma in keeping to their traditional territory, which was partly conquered by Nyangatom and Toposa in the past 10 years.

E.g. in February 1996, the head of the local police and the chief clinic worker were shot and killed by a Surma, which led to a temporary exodus of many government workers from the Surma *Kibish* area.

The development of relevant and efficient education among the Surma - in the light of the ideal of enhancing their role and participation in national life and as an ethno-cultural group respected in its own right - should: a) link up with their indigenous knowledge system, local needs and concerns, assuming that the majority of the Surma will continue to be cultivators and livestock herders in their own area; b) enhance basic literacy and numeracy and trans-group communicative skills, e.g. knowledge of a national language (they are now mono-lingual)<sup>17</sup>, c) instill knowledge and pride in their culture, in the positive, ordering aspects of their social organisation, and in the cultural arrangements of cooperation which used to exist between them and their neighbours in the recent past. For instance, family obligations, positive reciprocity, the norms of the age-group system (respect for elders, generational rights and duties) and respect for the role of the *komoru* (the ritual mediator), who stood for cooperation and mediation. This should provide the inspiration for a restoration of both internal peace and a new regional harmony, de-emphasizing the role of aggression and armed violence in managing conflicts.

The wider societal crisis of the Surma obviously requires both external measures and action by the Surma themselves, reordering their authority system and their group relations. The task of the government at the present juncture would be to create a facilitating environment whereby prescriptions and straightjacket approaches are undesirable. Its main tasks are:

- a) To create and maintain a credible judicial system (police, army, courts) where victims know they can get fair redress and perpetrators know that they can expect effective punishment (Such a system does not exist in the Maji area). Part of this task would be to emphasize nation-wide values of peace and cooperation, which means penalizing violence and use of automatic weapons. An effort to disarm the Surma would be advisable, but this should simultaneously be done among the Anyuak, the Nyangatom and the Sudanese Toposa (now the main enemy of the Surma). Although necessary in theory, this seems all rather utopian.
- b) To improve communication in, to and from the Maji area: mainly all-weather roads, bridges, electricity and telephone lines. This will increase information flows, wider market orientation and inter-group contacts. This task will, however, be hampered by budgetary constraints, and is a long-term one.
- c) the specific contribution of school education among the Surma would be not only to supply basic literacy and numeracy, but also to promote values of cooperation and reciprocity on the basis

of common material interests between groups in the Maji area. One of the strategies would be to make the record of violent conflict and aggression an issue of discussion in the classroom. Education has in principle a role to play in the management of conflicts (Agedew 1995). It would be especially appropriate in the higher grades, where the members of the *tégay* age grade would be represented.

The challenges for the coming years are great indeed. If they are not met and if Surma turn away disenchanted, they may rally again to reconsider the values of their own culture as opposed to that of outsiders, reordering generational norms, and reinstating ritual obligations, or, in the worst scenario, to stick to the instrumental use of violence to further their short-term goals. This tactic of 'solving their own problems' has been followed before in the face of famine and economic decline (Abbink 1993a).

While successful education builds on local knowledge and culture, it would also provide people like the Surma with alternatives for a life career, giving them new options in- and outside their own society and territory. However, given the material and ideological constraints in government education policy, and given the material basis of conflicting group relations in the Maji area, a realistic view compels us not to expect such effects of education in the near future. The crisis in Surma society and 'education' will continue, with disaffection and internal discord on the rise. The creation of a new Surma elite on the local *woreda*-level will not alleviate these problems.

<sup>17</sup> This remains an undeniable necessity in the SENNPR, with its ca. 45 languages. Amharic, the widely used language, would be the inevitable choice.

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