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Remembering Londósa: Mediator and Counterpoint in a "Violent" Society

JON G. ABBINK

Introduction

Both in the societies we study and in explanations of social behaviour in general, the role and agency of individuals is very important. More than in the fields of philology and history, to which Siegbert Uhlig has made so many outstanding and stimulating contributions, in linguistic or ethnographic fieldwork we are dependent on the dialogic relations we develop with certain living individuals whom we often admire because of their achievements, role-model behaviour, courage or personality.¹ In explanations of human social behaviour not all is to be subsumed under structural models or historical processes: there is also the recognizable agency of persons that has a crucial impact as (re)shaping them.

In this essay I would like to present a remarkable man: Londósa Wolekórro, the late *komoru*, or ritual leader of the Chai Suri people in South-western Ethiopia,² a group of some 15,000 agro-pastoralists in an area of fragile ecology and volatile group-relations. Londósa was born in the late 1930s and died in June 2000. I intend here to acknowledge my profound gratitude to him as a host and collaborator as well as to honour his memory as a good friend and an in many ways exemplary person.

While thus recognizing that a great deal of the success of anthropological field research depends on the rapport with people and on good 'key informants', in addition, the role of the personal in social science and history is epistemologically relevant. Apart from questions of interpretation³ and explanatory theoretical models⁴ there are also issues of methodology and personal style. This subject is well studied in anthropology, accounting for its high, and often perhaps exaggerated, degree of reflexivity.⁵ However, I would like to focus not on how we 'manage' these personal relations or how we deal with the data we acquire through personal contacts, but on the person or 'informant' himself, on his role in society, and on his response to an

JUDITH T. OLMSTEAD, *Woman between Two Worlds: Portrait of an Ethiopian Rural Leader*, Urbana - Chicago 1997, OLIVIER TOURNY, "Abba Beyene le dernier moine juif éthiopien", *Cahiers de Musiques Traditionnelles* 15, 2002, 89-96

Cf. JON G. ABBINK, "Cai", in SIEGBERT UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 1, Wiesbaden 2003, 665-66

Cf. MELVIN PAGE et al (eds), *Personality and Political Culture in Modern Africa Studies Presented to Professor Harold Marcus*, Boston 1998

Cf. MARY DOUGLAS - STEVEN NEY, *Missing Persons: A Critique of Personhood in the Social Sciences*, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 1999

Cf. Spiro's critique MELFORD E. SPIRO, "Postmodernist Anthropology, Subjectivity and Science: A Modernist Critique", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, 1996, 759-80

uninvited outsider researcher. My encounter with Londósa, which took place over a period of about four years, has changed both his and my self-perception. The issue of subjective or too self-conscious reflections on one's own role in the field is not, or should not be, the central issue in anthropological research and in evaluations of its methodology. But sometimes some new insights are allowed by it, and I see no better way to express my admiration and debt to this man.

Londósa's life can be seen as a prism of contemporary Suri society and its contradictions. Indeed, I never ceased to be amazed by his role as *komoru*⁶, as 'institutional' mediator in Suri society, with a normative duty to call for moderation and peace, and his officiating as a kind of priest to bless and protect fighters going out on a cattle raid. While he himself did not feel such a contradiction, it was perhaps striking that this thoughtful and peace-loving person, who liked talking to all people and was a constant source of advice and stories, and proved to be genuinely concerned about the welfare of his own people and that of their neighbours (Dizi, Me'en), could also call, although ritually, for misfortune and war on those perceived as enemies of the Suri.

The *komoru* function in Suri society

In many pastoral societies in Africa we find mediating ritual chiefs, for instance the 'leopard skin chief' among the Nuer, famously described by Evans-Pritchard,⁷ or the 'master of the fishing spear' by Lienhardt⁸ for the Dinka people, also in Southern Sudan. Suri and related groups in south-west Ethiopia and adjacent areas in Sudan, such as the Mursi, Baale, Murle and Didinga, have similar religious officiators. In his pioneering work, the anthropologist David Turton has described the Mursi case and translated the term *komoru* with 'priest'.⁹ *Komorus* have no coercive powers but are normative reference points or conductors for humans in their contact with supernatural forces, especially the Sky God Tumu and his life-giving powers (fertility, rain, social order). Related to this religious function, the *komoru* also has a role of interstitial, ritual mediatorship within society. He must articulate consensus and symbolically bundle energy for the good of the people. To summarize a Chai *komoru*'s main functions:¹⁰

- * he performs rain control ceremonies if necessary
- * he acts as a ritual 'war leader', i.e., giving formal orders to start battle (usually after divination) or giving advice and ritual blessing before raiding and fights with enemies

⁶ It is impossible to exactly translate this word; cf. JON ABBINK, "The Elusive Chief: Authority and Leadership in Surma Society (Ethiopia)", in: EMILE A.B. VAN ROUVEROY VAN NIEUWAAL - RIJK VAN DIJK (eds.), *African Chieftancy in a New Socio-Political Landscape*, Munster - Hamburg 1999, 49-74: 58.

⁷ EDWARD E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The Nuer*, Oxford 1940; ID., *Nuer Religion*, Oxford 1956.

⁸ GODFREY LIENHARDT, *Drumry and Experience. the Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford 1961.

⁹ DAVID TURTON, "The Relationship between Oratory and the Exercise of Influence among the Mursi", in: MAURICE BLOCH (ed.), *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Societies*, London 1975, 163-83; ID., "The Politician, the Priest and the Anthropologist: Living beyond Conflict in Southwestern Ethiopia", *Ethnos* 68, 1, 2003, 6-26.

¹⁰ Cf. ABBINK, "The Elusive Chief . . .", 58.

- * he initiates mediation and reconciliation among Suri groups (families or lineages)
- * he acts as sacrificer at certain social and ritual occasions
- * he initiates fields for a new cultivation cycle
- * he participates in intestine divination
- * he gives periodic ritual and protective blessings for cattle and people.
- * he sums up and validates public debates and articulates the consensus reached.

If disaster, such as cattle disease, lack of rainfall or famine and illness besets the Chai, the *komoru* is, however, not held responsible for this. Neither is he a chief or 'big man', claiming and redistributing resources or building up a patronage network to compete with others.

The incumbent *komoru* always comes from a certain old clan within Chai but is chosen by the male public assembly from a number of candidates. Both descent and personal qualities are considered when making a choice, whereby the advice of elder men and women is decisive. In his activities, a *komoru* frequently refers to the past and to the preceding generations, thus inculcating a sense of history and identity among the people. A *komoru* should not be involved in arguments and insults, and never engage in acts related to death: no participation in raiding or fighting; no touching of corpses, no funeral functions.

Londósa's life history in brief

Londósa was born into the most prestigious Chai-Suri clan, the Komorténi, the clan of the ritual leaders or *komorus*. His grandfather and father had been *komoru* as well. Before he assumed office, his father's brother Gusibarári had been the *komoru*. He had taken the place when Londósa's elder brother Arlúgu, a promising and charismatic man, had died before he was officially installed. Other brothers were still too young to take over. Londósa's family is a large one, as the *komoru* has always at least four wives and their clan is one of the most numerous in Chai country. Londósa's father and grandfather were impressive persons who are well remembered. They were occasionally mentioned in the travel literature and in Italian reports. Especially his grandfather, Dolleti Donumora, who was active in the time before and during the Italian period (1936-41) - was a quite forceful personality. His mother was called Ngatigo, a Chai woman from the D'ama clan.

The names that Chai people have reflect their personal history. Everyone has at least four names. Londósa's first name, given by his parents at the baby naming ceremony, was Woletula, a cattle coat colour name. When he became a *tégay* (the second age-grade, of 'uninitiated', younger people), he received a favourite bull with this colour. In the 20th century the Chai came to call all their *komorus* with the name 'Dolleti', first given to Londósa's paternal great-great-grandfather, called Bulay Dolleti. Londósa was Dolleti the Vth. Later he acquired the name Londósa, in fact a Nyngatom name. When Londósa's father had died, elders of his clan (Komorténi) gave him another name - Bolekira - but that was only used by those elder clan members. After his age-grade initiation in 1994 (see below) he received the name of Ngatúlú.

Londósa was born in the Chai heartland at Wayanné, near the Shulugúí mountain, also known as Mt. Naita (2,154 m. altitude). The Shulugúí area is, as the Chai



Photo 1. Londósa (on the right) playing the Suri board game *hór*, 1992

say, the 'stomach' of their country, their core area with *komoru* grave sites, their age-set initiation place, and their traditional pastures. It was not a hot lowland area but a relatively cool and forested highland region, where coffee and other forest resources could be found. The Chai (called T'id in the travel literature,¹¹ after the *Juniperus procera* tree growing there) had their villages in these hills, while the cattle herds were kept in the plains below in areas such as Lo'ong and Móosa, just north and west of Mt. Shulugúí. Here Londósa grew up, herded cattle and was involved in the skirmishes with the Nyangatom or 'Bume', their Paraniotic agropastoral neighbours to the south,¹² with whom the Chai had both a fighting and an exchange relationship. In the late 1950s and 1960s Londósa also engaged in a few bond friendships with Nyangatom age-mates. In these contacts he probably received the name 'Londósa'.

In 1987–88 the Chai had to entirely abandon the Shulugúí-Wayanné area and move to the north because of armed expansion and constant cattle raiding by the Nyangatom, who in the mid-1980s had acquired automatic rifles on a large scale, before the Suri¹³ got them. The balance was definitively tipped in favour of the Nyangatom later when they also received help from their allies the Sudanese To-

posa (some 70,000 people), who speak virtually the same language and are culturally very similar, and probably from SPLA units in Southern Sudan. Londósa's family and a large group of followers then resettled at the Korum hill, which was originally Dizi area and has a commanding view of the plains below. Standing on the southern edge they could see Shulugúí, the homeland. When the Chai moved north, leaving their sites of memory, all their cattle herds were taken out as well, leaving the ancestral pastures. A few of Londósa's half-brothers (like Ekkèdi and Halagamèri) were instructed to go and live in the Sai area, in the eastern plains between the town of Maji and the Omo river.

Londósa married seven wives, all except two when he was still living at Wayanné. His first wife was from the Tirmaga, the second sub-group of the Suri people. Also in the choice of his other wives he showed that he wanted to forge alliances across Suri country. He did not take a wife from a non-Suri group, however.¹⁴ Four of his wives lived with him in the village of Makara, where I spent most of my time; three others lived in other villages. His relationship with his first wife was particularly good. He shared a house with her and she advised him in all matters. She was a forceful and intelligent, yet reserved person, highly proud of being the *komoru's* wife. She had an important role in the local community.

Londósa had about 15 surviving children. He always showed great concern for children, his own as well as others'. One day in 1992, Londósa was absent from his compound. I heard he had gone to the sorghum fields of his senior wife and one of their daughters. I went there and found them all sitting together in the field shelter. The sixteen year-old girl, called Tishana,¹⁵ was gravely ill, sweating, vomiting and with stomach aches: perhaps malaria. While I took out some medicine, we came to talk of his children, and he told me that so many of his kids ("about twenty") had already died of disease or other misfortune, including violence. He did neither complain nor show any self-pity in telling me this, but he was obviously very concerned lest Tishana, probably his favourite daughter, would also die. That night, he and his wife stayed awake on the side of his daughter. Fortunately, some weeks later she recovered.

When I met him, Londósa was at a stage in life where his main activities were consulting with other people, performing rituals, attending to family and community business, visiting people and being available for others. Often he was engaged with other males in playing the board game called *hór* (see photo 1), a variant of which is found all over Southern Ethiopia. While playing, he and the others present chatted and commented on the concerns of the day. He did not do any 'economic' activities like cultivation, trading or herding. As a *komoru* he also had to be in Chai country all the time, following the unwritten rule that a *komoru* for the protection of his people cannot leave their territory. This is why he never visited Maji or any other place outside Suri country except once or twice for a real emergency. His herds – the largest in Chai country, comprising perhaps about 500 animals – were cared for

¹¹ Discussed by ERNESTA CERULLI, *Peoples of Southwest Ethiopia and its Borderland*, London 1986, 38–40

¹² SERGE TORNAY, *Les Fusils Jaunes Générations et Politique en Pays Nyangatom (Ethiopie)*, Nanterre 2001

¹³ JON ABBINK, "Changing Patterns of 'Ethnic' Violence Peasant-Pastoralist Confrontation in Southern Ethiopia and its Implications for a Theory of Violence", *Sociologist* 44, 1, 1994, 66–78.

¹⁴ Suri men marrying Dizi wives was not uncommon, never Dizi men marrying Suri wives

¹⁵ This was the name of a neighbouring ethnic group, the highland Me'en living north of Maji

by his sons and several brothers. He hardly ever visited his herds in the lowlands but spent most of his time in and around the Korum hill where his village was located. Only when ceremonial duelling contests were held, in a large open space one hour's walk from his village, he used to be there.

Being a Chai

Londósa became one of my key informants – fortunately, because he was a key figure in Chai society. From our first meeting onwards we had a good relationship. He was quite fascinated but also puzzled that a foreigner was interested in their way of life. He listened to my questions, at times complaining that they gave him severe headaches. Indeed, sometimes I could not put across what I wanted. But he was always ready in his own way to explain Suri ways to me, and showed his pride in doing that. While sitting near his house engaged in talk, we were often accompanied by youngsters and children. If I asked him about Suri social life and history, before answering he repeated the question first to the kids sitting with us. He took his talking to Chai kids – his own or others – seriously.

In Makara village he shared a house with his senior wife in a spacious, fenced compound. Here, important rituals were held (except sacrifices), visitors were received, and Chai teenagers came together for their dances on full moon nights. Also meetings of senior men from his clan, the Komorténi, were called here. Next to the compound stood the house of one of his brothers and of several other patrilineal relatives. Londósa's village was the centre of Chai socio-political life. Public debates of the senior men were held at the edge of the village.

An interesting aspect of Londósa's position as a *komoru* was that while he was recognized and officiating as such, he was not yet fully accepted because of his 'junior status' in the age-grade system. Only adult men of the third age-grade (called *róra*, singular: *róri*) were accepted as authoritative speakers in public assemblies and as major decision makers of the community. While Londósa was in his early fifties when I first met him, he had not yet been initiated into the *róra* grade and still was a *tégay*, technically a "youngster" (the second age-grade). Traditionally in Suri society, the *tégay* were the unmarried warriors/herders. And as long as he was a *tégay* he could not do the final installation rites for the *komoru*-ship. So, as with many adult men of his generation, Londósa's social age was not in line with his biological age and his family status (married and with many children). This was due to the long delay of the age-grade initiation among the Chai.¹⁶ This initiation ritual, ideally done every 15 years, is one of the most important events in Suri society.¹⁷ Before his initiation in 1994 and his entry into the newly created age-set, Londósa's voice in community affairs, divination readings and public debates

¹⁶ See JON ABBINK, "Violence and Political Discourse among the Chai Suri", in: GERRIT J. DIMMENDAAL – MARCO LAST (eds.), *Surmic Languages and Cultures*, Cologne 1998, 321–44.

¹⁷ All three Suri groups, the Baale, Tirmaga and Chai – and also the Mursi –, have their own ceremony. The traditional sequence of staging the ritual among these four related groups was: first the Baale, then the Tirmaga, then the Chai, and finally the Mursi. Remarkably, in 1991 this order was reversed: due to specific internal problems, the Mursi held it first. Chai then followed in 1994 (34 years after their last one), but the Tirmaga and Baale had still not performed it in early 2003.

was only one among many and his ritual authority could not reach its maximum impact.

Being a Chai for Londósa meant leading a life of freedom and cattle-herding, infinitely better than that of 'toiling peasants' like the Dizi and other highlanders. He largely shared the disdain of most Suri for highland peasants and townspeople. I know of no Suri who became a farmer or settled in the highlands. There are some young men who in recent years became involved in the state administration and live mostly in towns outside Suri country, but even then they keep their own cattle, herded by relatives, in the lowlands.¹⁸ Feelings of pride come up among Suri when comparing themselves with other groups who do not have their free cattle-herding existence or their ceremonial stick duelling. Chai – and Suri in general – thus cherish their way of life and their independence. It struck me that they usually had little interest in other people's cultures. All this did not mean that Chai people saw no disadvantages in their own way of life, such as environmental pressure (insecure rainfall, leading to periodic famines), contagious cattle disease from which there was no easy remedy, remoteness from medical facilities, persistent enmity with neighbouring pastoralists, and in general a risky life style. In addition, the Chai, as independent, egalitarian and individualistic people, were hard to deal with and, in a way, not 'governable'; there was no idea of an hierarchical structure of power or of ranking (like among the Dizi), and for elders or a *komoru* nothing was enforceable. In the past two decades, this was shown by the increasingly frequent disputes and violent incidents within Suri society, which Londósa could not prevent or control.

Being a komoru

Londósa – as any *komoru* among the Suri – was the central person in the ritual life of the Chai, but not in an authoritarian or self-posturing way. Indeed, he could not impose any sanction or 'punishment'. The chief characteristic of his role as priestly authority was to admonish people, especially adolescents, to call upon disputants to reconcile, and to perform the proper rituals for Chai as a whole, e.g. initiation of new fields, blessing warriors before an expedition, assisting in a healing ceremony or a wedding. As said above, he should be a mediator between God (Tumu) and people, and between people amongst themselves.

But in this mediatory or peaceful activity he was not a normative role model for other Suri or a person to emulate, but only a kind of living safety valve and ritual officiator that the community as a whole needed. In a sense, he was a captive chief: at the mercy of his community, that needed him for all kinds of functions and forced to follow and sum up common feelings and public opinion within it. He did not have any role in funeral ceremonies or homicide compensation talks, as a *komoru* should not be involved in matters of death and killing. The *komoru* was

¹⁸ There are a few poor Suri who were resettled in the wake of the 1985 famine in a small hamlet near Mizan Tafari town. Also a few Suri (one girl, a few boys) were taken in by townspeople in Maji, Mizan Tafari and Jimma for domestic work and school education.

said to have a quality of being 'dangerous', or 'hot' (in Suri: *barari*), which is also said of certain ritually used plants: being above the average, not to be handled directly or carelessly, and with a certain extra power to invest ritual acts with performative meaning. This is evident in the documentary film "The Mursi",¹⁹ advised by Turton, which has one telling scene where the Mursi *komoru* Komorakorra, in the context of the ritual 'spearing the *komoru*', is symbolically threatened by the others, because he is seen as a possible source of 'danger'. The Chai have similar ideas on their *komoru*.

This situation of a *komoru* being 'captive' explains the unease that Londósa personally seemed to feel between his institutional duty to perform blessing rituals for warriors and cursing enemies on the one hand, and his personal inclination to always call for moderation and peace-making: his position demanded that he subsume the second aspect under first. This explains also his feelings of powerlessness and internal anger at excessive violence and its unforeseen effects. In fact, this was the tragic aspect of his position, that became more pronounced towards the end of his life.

In his career, within the formalized and expected role that he had to play as *komoru*, Londósa nevertheless gave his own personal style to his function. As few others could do – certainly as compared to Ngagoróki Bolegid'angi, the late *komoru* of the Tirmaga, whom I also saw in action during my fieldwork – Londósa was an authoritative public speaker, who, with his carrying stentor voice, summed up public debates in an exemplary manner, articulating consensus and decisions. When he spoke in the last stage of such a debate, all people automatically rose and listened.

He also showed concern about his family and his people and tried to maintain good contact with every one. Londósa was considerate and forthcoming in daily life, open to visitors, and took children seriously. In view of the escalating conflicts of Chai with the Dizi people, their former allies,²⁰ he never ceased to call for the restoration of a peaceful relationship between them and the Chai, despite the fact that he had no high esteem for the Dizi way of life as sedentary cultivators living without cattle, with a quite different body aesthetic, a submissive attitude, etc.

Being the *komoru* meant daily duties to be performed. One of them was the ritual fire making: each day at dusk, he went to the big fireplace in his compound and carefully lit the fire with wood giving off a lot of smoke, meant as a protective device for the village and an appeal to God (Tumu). He usually performed this alone, a solitary figure absorbed in his duty for the community (see photo 2).

Change and impending crisis: Londósa's premonitions

One day in February 1992, just after a ritual led by Londósa to bless Chai raiders preparing for an expedition to the Bume, a young man from the Taru clan was accidentally shot and killed by a man from the Buley clan. Among the young men and bystanders present there was immediately great panic and anger. The

¹⁹ LESLIE WOODHEAD, *The Mursi* (Anthropological advisor: David Turton). Film in the Disappearing World Series, Granada TV, U.K. 1974, 52 minutes

²⁰ Cf. ABBINK, "Changing Patterns ...".

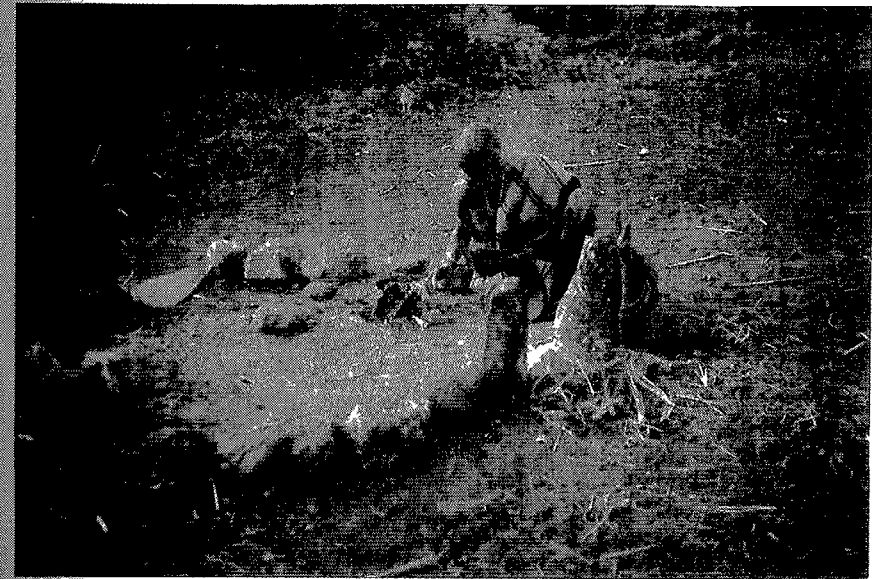


Photo 2: Londósa lighting the daily ritual fire at dusk (1992)

perpetrator fled to the bush, protected against pursuit by his relatives. Women started wailing, and male relatives of the deceased went to the killer's village and started robbing property from his house. Londósa, who had officiated just before it happened, quickly withdrew to his compound – we saw that it was forbidden for him to see a corpse or to mingle in matters of death and burial. I was near the place of the shooting and Londósa dragged me along back to his house. The elderly father of the boy – completely in shock – was led away by another man to his house, numbed by grief. He seated himself outside the hut of one of his wives, mother of the boy, in silent, tearless mourning. Londósa sat down and said to me: "Look, look now what happened. This is the fate of the Chai in this time of guns. We were preparing to hit back the Bume and now this comes along, a boy of our own killed for nothing, lying dead on the ground, his family in trouble."

It was one of several remarks made by him on the plight of the Suri as a militarizing society where the increased level of violent incidents as well as an emerging 'cult of the gun' were causing great trouble, not only in relations with neighbouring groups and government, but also within Suri society. He felt the dilemma they were in. In the above case, the bitter irony of what happened was not lost to him: an elaborate 'blessing' ritual that was supposed to have given protection and courage to the Chai young men in their exploits against an external enemy was subverted by a freak killing of a Suri by a Suri.²¹

²¹ After the boy's death in the above incident, the expedition to the Bume was delayed.

Londósa thus had a clear premonition of things to come. He saw that Suri needed modern guns for self-defense and survival, because other groups also had them and used them, but the negative backlash on society was becoming obvious to him. The overall effects of the multiple presence and use of automatics had not quite been foreseen. The Suri have acquired means to defend themselves and to attack if need be, but they use them also to create additional problems, e.g. against Dizi and Me'en people.

The tensions with the neighbouring groups therefore have increased rather than diminished in the last fifteen years. The ready resort to violence – made easy by the ubiquitous presence of the automatic weapons, always carried along – led to higher numbers of dead during confrontations, and to a higher frequency of raiding but diminishing returns. More women and children were victims of the violence. The response of the state authorities to local problems was one of more involvement, but often this took the form of arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate punitive action, or meting out 'justice' without proper trial (including executions). Mediation efforts by the state were ultimately not successful and bypassed local complexities and norms for conflict resolution.

In late 1999 the Me'en of the Gesha and K'asha areas, tired of the long series of ambushes and smaller raiding incidents on the roads they used to go to the market towns of Tum, Maji and Jeba, combined to carry out a large raid into Suri country and rob cattle. They took away 4 to 5,000 animals, an unprecedented number. Most of Londósa's herd was also taken. When he heard this, his anger boiled over and he became extremely upset. But he also knew deep down that Suri were also themselves to blame for this mishap because of the uncontrolled violent actions of Suri youngsters.

At some moments Londósa could grow quite pensive on the future of the Chai, reflecting that when they would not bring their own people, especially the *tégay* youngsters, under control, their society would suffer. He also was aware of the growing influence of outside forces like the state (and its taxes, bureaucracy and army), tourism, and the impact of Christian mission and education, but he did not understand yet how their combined effect would transform Suri society in a globalizing world.

Londósa also had other disappointments in the personal sphere. While he never openly talked about it, he also felt quite bad about his eldest son Wolechagi: an intelligent person with abilities, but who, due to his exploits as a gun-bearing *tégay* and having killed some people, could not be seriously considered as a successor to the *komoru* position. This requires a peaceful person not stained by blood. He was rejected by the foremost Chai ritual experts, who make recommendations on who to choose.

Conclusion: Remembering Londósa

Londósa died of ill-health and anger in June 2000. All Suri I subsequently spoke to, and also many Dizi people who knew him, agree that the loss of so many of his cattle in the Me'en raid, in itself a response to previous Suri attacks on Me'en trav-

ellers to markets, was decisive in further deteriorating his condition. Most likely, in the last years of his life Londósa was deeply disturbed by the 'mimetic circle' of violence in which his people and the neighbouring groups were caught. The awareness that there was no easy way out of this, and that it spread within Chai community, must have worn him out.

His death was deeply regretted by the Suri, generating a moment of reflection on the uncertain future of their society in crisis and upheaval. But Londósa at least died as a respected *komoru* and a prestigious elder who had made a personal difference. Six years before his death he had finally been initiated as a *róri*, a junior elder, and had received his new age-set name of Ngatúlú. This name, by which he was called in the last years of his life, was given to him during the long awaited initiation ceremony of the new Chai age-set in November 1994. The outgoing elders – who moved up one grade into retirement as 'senior elders' – had given him the name. When I had met him shortly afterwards he proudly announced his new name and together with some elders also ritually included me in the new age-grade as well.

So Londósa/Ngatúlú died as a fully adult and respected leader. His becoming *róri* also confirmed him as a fully recognized *komoru* (who has to be a *róri*). But he may have been one of the last of his kind. One cannot predict the future, but political incorporation by the Ethiopian state machinery and bureaucracy as well as relentless globalization will transform Suri society and erode its autonomy. What we see now is a violent protest by Suri against these processes, because most Suri, except the new stratum of young 'leaders' who have a stake in connecting to the external forces (getting access to salaries, education, and other resources) see exactly what is going to happen: a process of disempowerment and devaluation of a local culture.

As Londósa died unexpectedly in June 2000, I could not take leave of him. Some four years before I had promised to return, but it was not to be. The Chai people lost a notable man, who struggled with the limits and duties of his office, and felt distressed and powerless in the face of the recent upsurge in violence and social upheaval in his society. He deserves to be remembered both for his efficient ritual leadership and mediatory function in a society of tough and independent-minded people constantly challenging the normative framework of their culture, as well as for his efforts to calm down the rebellious and often violent young generation. Old-style ritual leaders like him are still necessary in Suri society, but they will be challenged, and perhaps eventually replaced, by younger political office holders who have emerged in the wake of the ethno-federal restructuring of Ethiopia.²² These have taken seats in the local "Surma Woreda Council", in the Zonal administration and in the National Parliament in Addis Ababa. In an ominous twist of fate, one of these new leaders, Guldu Tsedeke, a promising, young but mature spokesman of the

²² See JON ABBINK, "Paradoxes of Power and Culture in an Old Periphery: Surma, 1974–98", in DONALD L. DONHAM et al. (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia. Socialism and After*, Oxford – Addis Ababa – Athens, Ohio 2002, 155–72

Suri and their first member of Parliament, met a violent death in January 2002. He was killed by a fellow Suri in his home area. This tragic event is indicative of the uncertain future that the Suri people are facing at this critical juncture.

Summary

This chapter briefly presents the biography of Londósa, a ritual leader or *komoru* of the Southwest Ethiopian Suri people and shows how a personal case-study can highlight recent social problems of an ethnic group. Suri face a crisis of security and of social continuity. Both their physical security and their food security are at risk, and they have enduring tense relations with neighbouring peoples and with the Ethiopian state. Like other ethnic groups (e.g., Nyangatom, Toposa, Anywaa, Me'en) they use armed force to defend themselves or contest resources. The relatively quick 'militarization' of societies like the Suri in the last 15 years has brought new problems and challenges. Londosa, as the Suri ritual mediator and leader, recognized the problems emerging and called for restraint to Suri exercise of violence, but with little effect. He was powerless to prevent the gradual deterioration of *internal* social relations in Suri society resulting from this militarization. Feelings of powerlessness and deception with the way Suri society was developing undoubtedly contributed to his early death in June 2000.

Fährten der Erinnerung: Die Verknüpfung von Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in Südwestäthiopien

HERMANN AMBORN

Wenn hier versucht wird, bei drei Bevölkerungsgruppen in Südwestäthiopien Fährten der Erinnerung zu verfolgen, so geht es in erster Linie um die Frage, warum bestimmte Geschehnisse erinnerungswürdig sind und wie deren Tradierung Ausdruck findet. Damit verbinden möchte ich die Frage nach dem Sinngehalt der Erinnerung. Mit Erinnerung ist hier stets die gemeinschaftliche Erinnerung einer Gruppe von Menschen – also die kulturelle Verarbeitung von Erinnerung – gemeint. Somit steht hier die Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen Erinnerung und so genannter realer Ereignisgeschichte erst an zweiter Stelle. Erinnerungen an persönlich Erlebtes sind von der Untersuchung ausgeklammert, es sei denn, sie böten Anknüpfungspunkte für kollektive Erinnerung. Die vorgenommene Auswahl von Bevölkerungsgruppen, die beiderseits des südlichen Abschnitts des äthiopischen Grabenbruches siedeln, ist subjektiv, doch seien einige Kriterien, die zu dieser Auswahl führten, genannt: In den Traditionen der drei Gruppen wird Bezug auf ein ursprünglich gemeinsames Siedlungsgebiet genommen, sowie auf den späteren Exodus und die Besiedlung der jeweils eigenen gegenwärtigen Lebensräume. Auf das ursprüngliche Siedlungsgebiet – in Liban gelegen – beziehen sich überdies noch zahlreiche oromosprachige Gruppen. Oromo-Nationalisten beanspruchen Liban als die gemeinsame Heimat aller Oromo. In der vorliegenden Betrachtung werden jedoch oromosprachige Gruppen weitgehend ausgeklammert, und zwar, weil die hier behandelten Gruppen (Burji, Konso und D'iraaša) ihrer Libantradition zufolge mit dem Exodus gerade die Trennung von den dort lebenden oromosprachigen Borana vollzogen haben. Für die vorgenommene Auswahl lassen sich noch weitere Kriterien anführen. Es sind dies insbesondere allen gemeinsame elaborierte Arbeitsmethoden der intensiven Landwirtschaft, unter denen vor allem die steinernen Feldterrassen auffallen. Verbunden hiermit und charakteristisch für diese Region sind geschlossene Siedlungsanlagen im Hauptsiedlungsraum zwischen 1500 und 1800 Höhenmetern, die aufgrund ihrer Infrastruktur städtischen Charakter tragen. Das Verbreitungsgebiet der Steinterrassen reicht zwar weiter nach Westen, doch ist dort die erwähnte Wandertadition unbekannt. Deutlich unterscheiden sich diese am Südrand des Hochlandes lebenden Bergbauern von jenen angrenzenden Bevölkerungsgruppen, die sich vornehmlich der Viehhaltung widmen (besonders Borana und Guji). Sprachlich sind D'iraaša (Gidole) und Konso eng verwandt und werden dem tief-landostkuschitischen Makro-Oromo (oder Oromoid) zugerechnet, während es sich bei dem Burji um eine hochlandostkuschitische Sprache handelt. Aufgrund langwährender historischer Kontakte rechnet H.-J. Sasse alle drei jedoch einem gemein-