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Abbink, J.

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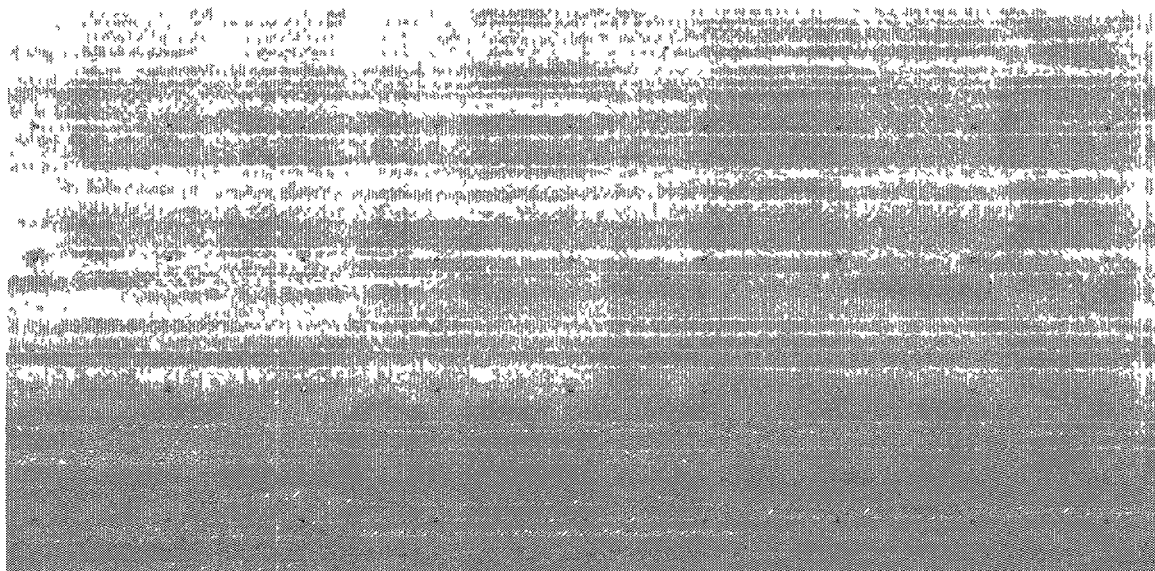
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Love and Death of Cattle: The Paradox in Suri Attitudes Toward Livestock

Jon Abbink

African Studies Centre, Leiden, and Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT *Livestock herding peoples are known for their close involvement with their animals, valuing them in multiple ways. This paper addresses the issue of the nature of emotional or moral commitment to livestock animals, particularly cattle, among a group of southwest Ethiopian livestock herders, the Suri people. From certain cases of cattle and sheep sacrifice it could be concluded that the Suri exercise particular cruelty towards their animals on certain ritual occasions. How do they see the issue of 'affection vs. cruelty' against stock animals themselves? How do attitudes toward animals relate to attitudes toward humans, notably neighboring ethnic groups with whom they are in conflict and who accuse them of using excessive violence? This paper argues that notions of affinity and equality indeed define human–animal relationships among the Suri but that these do not resolve the tensions inherent in their cattle being both economically useful and emotionally/aesthetically rewarding. Comparisons are made with the relationship of humans and animals as found in industrial societies.*

KEYWORDS *Pastoralism, animal–human relations, violence, morality, cruelty, Ethiopia*

In this paper I reflect on some aspects of the valuation of livestock and on the indigenous morals of treating life and death among a number of pastoral peoples in Northeast Africa. Much is known about the pastoral way of life and its problems, but relatively little about the moral and social issues raised by the close interaction of humans and animals.

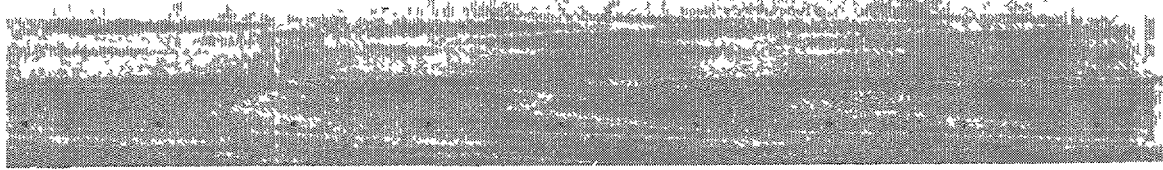
In Northeast Africa, livestock, especially cattle, and humans have interacted over a period of several millennia to such an extent that one could speak of co-evolution. The domestication of cattle and other livestock – such as sheep, goats, and, in the more arid regions, camels – yielded specific breeds, as well as a specific environmental adaptation of humans, which had notable economic and social effects.¹ The two species were mutually advantageous and

developed interdependently. The behavioral characteristics of cattle shaped human socio-cultural response, and human activity and domestication practices over several thousand years have shaped cattle ways. Cattle, as evolved in this relationship, of course do not survive without human care.²

In Africa, various sub-species of the *bos* genus emerged from stock, the origins of which are still debated (either imported from Asia and the Middle East, or indigenous-African, the *Bos africanus* (see Marshall 1989; Grigson 1991), or a cross-breed). The one dominant type in the plains of southwestern Ethiopia to be discussed in this paper is a locally evolved short-horned Sanga type, which is found in the vast area of the Sudanese-Ethiopian border plains and down into Kenya and Uganda.

In what follows I look at some aspects of this inter-relationship of humans and livestock among the Suri people, an autonomous group of about 28,000 cattle-herders and cultivators in the Maji area of southwest Ethiopia.³ They are related to Nilotic-speaking peoples in the Ethiopia-Sudan border area but form part of a separate linguistic unit (Surmic) within the larger Nilo-Saharan language family. The Suri environment is a hot savannah landscape between 900 and 1500 meters altitude, mostly plains, hills and some scattered mountains reaching above 2000 m. It is characterized by unpredictable seasonal rainfall and the frequent threat of food shortage or local famine and of cattle diseases. Many Suri live in villages at some 1000 to 1500 m altitude. Cattle camps (all-male population) are in the plains at lower altitude. Livestock raiding of neighboring groups, such as Nyangatom, Toposa and to a lesser extent Murle and Dizi, is a common practice and is rooted in the past (see Abbink 2000b).

As a group of relatively autonomous transhumant herders in a marginal area, the Suri more or less successfully survive the vagaries of drought, disease and conflict with the help of their cattle, used as a last-resort food source and a store of wealth to trade or sell to highland agriculturalists and villagers in times of need. Obviously, the 'economic' value of cattle for them is great. But Suri, as so many other pastoral peoples amply described in the ethnological literature (where Evans-Pritchard 1940 and Lienhardt 1962 are two unsurpassed classics), do not see cattle simply as 'a material asset' (although they are obviously used as such) but as the life-sustaining and meaningful companion animal *par excellence*. Cattle are virtually a part of human society if not its essential precondition (see below). Emotional, cognitive and also moral aspects can be recognized in the role that cattle play in their society. Indeed, in the Suri view, the economic or utilitarian aspects of cattle are *merged* with the



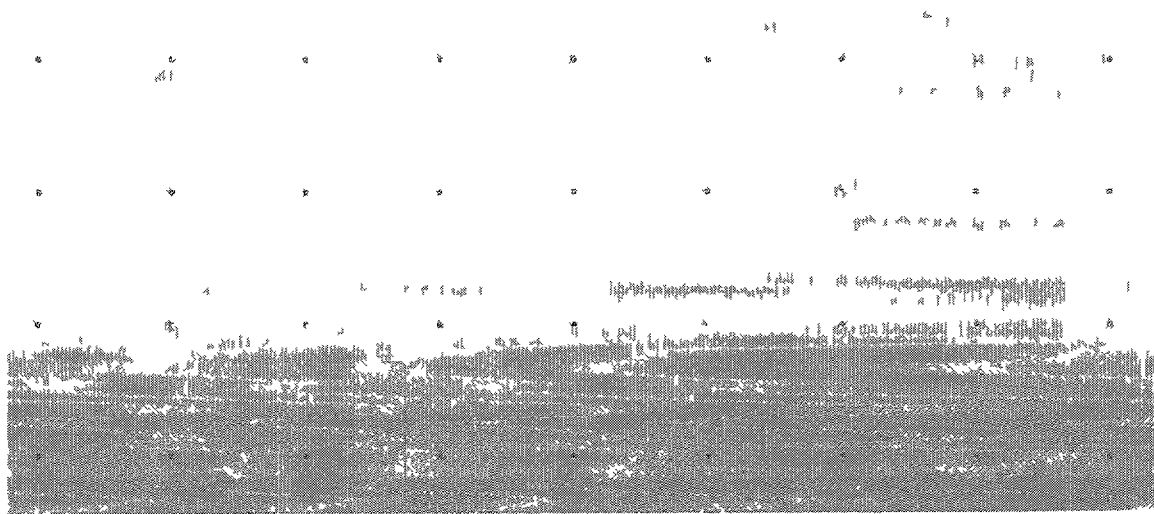
social and cultural ones, which has made it difficult to distinguish, and even to *name* this specific merger.⁴

Suri have lived with their cattle in the Ethiopian-Sudanese border regions probably for about 250 to 300 years. Their close interaction has led not only to a pattern of indissoluble interdependence but also to a cultural pattern of what we would call intense care and affection for the animals – especially of the milk cows and the ‘song bulls’⁵ – among their human guardians. Cattle are the subject of the Suri poetic imagination and of endless discussion and comparison between the owners. Cattle in their turn are, in the eyes of the Suri, the patient and willing recipients of this care and attention bestowed upon them (e.g., through decoration of horns and body, ear cuttings, lobe piercing, branding, covering with ash to protect them against biting insects, combing or stroking). But on the other hand, they are also the meek objects of lethal ‘violence’ inflicted upon them on certain occasions. In Suri rites for homicide ‘cleansing’ or reconciliation, for initiation and for the installation of a new ritual chief, the ‘affection’ for the animals seems to dissolve, and cattle or other livestock are often killed in what outsiders would see as a cruel manner: not just by a quick slit of the throat, but by strangling, bludgeoning or stabbing, and in the case of sheep, by cutting open the living animal.

The issue of the ritual but rather blunt killing of livestock by Suri (even of some of the individual animals that they cherish) gives rise to the question of what emotional involvement Suri have in their cattle, and whether we can term the Suri attitude toward livestock (especially cattle) as issuing from love or affection. This question will also be familiar to rural Europeans who develop affection toward domestic animals but see no problem eating them on certain occasions (rabbits, sheep, pigs).⁶ If there is ‘love’ involved, why then the apparent combination of ‘utmost loving care’ and ‘cruel killing’? I came to pose this question after a sense of shock in seeing a cow being hit dozens of times with a pole before finally dying (see below), and after talks with members of other cattle-keeping people in southern Ethiopia, like the Me’en, Bench and the Dizi, groups neighboring on the Suri. The latter also take great care of their animals but are appalled by what they also see as harsh and cruel ways in which the Suri occasionally deal with their animals. An attitude similar to that of the Suri is also found among the Mursi people living east across the Omo River and closely related to them, and among some groups (Murle, Baale) in southern Sudan. Generally speaking, few published studies are known about the difference in patterns of cattle care or abuse among pastoral groups, and specifically *methods* of killing and their emotional and moral ramifications.⁷

A related element that makes posing such questions interesting is that of inter-group tension and insecurity. In the past decade, the Maji area has been a violent place to live, with conflicts running high, as evident from ambushes, robbery, killings, attacks on villages and travelers, kidnappings and reprisal actions on innocents. Many of the perpetrators were Suri, and there is a biased perception among local people from adjacent, often rival ethnic groups that Suri 'cruelty' toward livestock translates into the (increased) violence against humans. This echoes the old philosophical argument of the late 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant suggesting a moral connection between human civilized behavior and an attitude of care toward other living beings (i.e., people who mistreat animals are also likely to mistreat humans; cf. Kant 1963: 240). In the past fifteen years a relatively high number of Suri were indeed involved in many violent, often unprovoked, incidents in the Maji area whereby hundreds of innocents died, among them women and young children. However, Suri were not the only culprits.

Addressing the question of cruelty to animals ties in with a lively philosophical debate on animal-human relations and the issue of animals as moral beings (Serpell 1986; Sorabji 1993; Maehle 1994; Pluhar 1995; Orlans *et al.* 1998). In Western thought, epitomized by Descartes' ideas, animals were long seen as automatons, mechanic beings to be dominated and exploited for human advantage. In recent years, new ideas about the treatment of animals as *companions* of humans are emerging, which also go far beyond Kant's reflections on the subject. These ideas have perhaps emerged as a result of three related developments: (a) the growing 'pet culture' in the West, sometimes taking on striking forms of 'humanizing' the animal;⁸ (b) the realization that the meat, milk and other products of callously treated and 'processed' animals may not be so healthy after all; and (c) new biomedical research and philosophical reflections that have narrowed the boundaries between human and other animals (see Cavalieri & Singer 1993; Beck *et al.* 2001). There is now certainly a heightened awareness of the fact that animals can suffer and of their right to be protected against abuse. Animals are not automatons, and humans' right to their unlimited use and abuse is not self-evident on any ground. Despite this, however, in the industrialized farming systems and company research laboratories of the developed world, animals are still essentially seen – and treated – as living laboratories for experimenting and as useful objects that yield marketable consumer products and thus monetary profit. This will, incidentally, only increase as the genetic modification and cloning industry increases its hold on the animal market.



Cattle and Culture

The Suri are organized in local herding communities (*b'uran*) and recognize twenty-one named 'patrilineal' clans as units of descent, which are used as reference points for rituals and for marriage purposes of individuals. Suri can only marry into another clan. Political leadership is nominal and rests with a ruling age-grade of 'elders' and with three ritual leaders or *komoru* who are, however, without executive or coercive functions. The Suri live in small villages, around which women cultivate land, and males keep the cattle in the lowlands, a day's walk away. The tracing of descent (relevant for deciding on marriage alliances) has a patrilineal bias; polygamous households are common. Houses of the second and next wives of a man are usually built close together, often in a compound. Married males with more than one spouse usually reside in the house of the first wife. There are, however, also a substantial number of female-headed households, virtually all widows, often assisted by brothers or fathers.

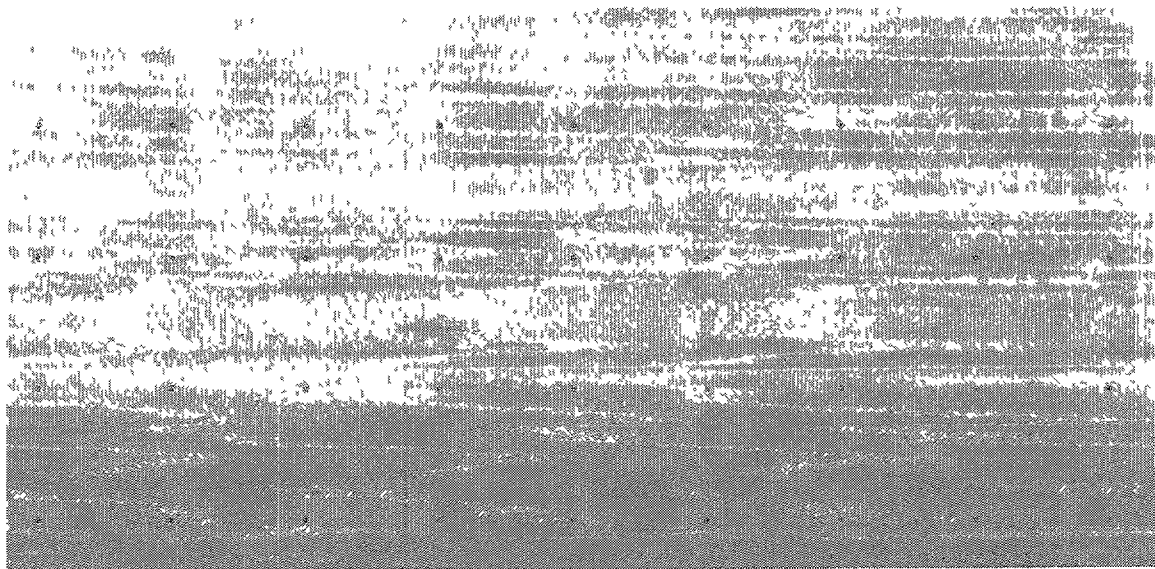
The average Suri married male has from 30 to 50 head of cattle and a smaller number of goats and sheep. A handful of people (including one or two ritual leaders) have 200 to 300 cattle. Cattle provide a good part of the diet of the Suri in milk, blood and meat, but less than what agricultural products like sorghum and maize provide. (Other crops are lentils, beans, small peppers, cassava roots, millet and some cabbage.) Women have their own fields and can dispose of the proceeds as they wish. Often they sell grain and beer to buy goats and then later convert a number of them into cattle. There is a deeply felt reserve among Suri toward becoming settled peasant cultivators and against the 'pathetic lifestyle' that this, in their eyes, entails. They heavily invest in augmenting their personal cattle herd and build themselves social status in expanding it. Historically, however, the Suri always showed both herding and cultivation (and hunting and gathering)⁹ as complementary activities, and in times of poor pastures, cattle disease and death of stock animals, they tend to invest more in cultivation activities. When the herds grow, however, there is an increased tendency to become more pastoralist, as reflected in labor activities, external contacts, and settlement patterns: most males moving from villages to lowland camps. These days, however, the Ethiopian state authorities – who want to discourage the uncontrollable 'roaming of nomads' – and the growing conflicts between ethnic groups, marked by fierce armed violence, are seriously jeopardizing this option.

Cattle and Culture Among the Suri

As said above, the attitude of the Suri pastoralists toward their prime companion animals¹⁰ – cattle, and to a lesser extent sheep and goats – is not a primarily 'economic' or commoditized one. Due to their long symbiosis, which is hinted at in oral traditions and evident from evolved methods of cattle care, Suri humans see Suri cattle neither as material objects kept for meat, milk, blood and money, nor as pet-like 'friends'. The Suri view their animals like an extension, or better an overlap, of human social groups, enhancing their survival chances in their difficult environment and enriching their society.¹¹ By this I mean that cattle, by being a material precondition for the arrangement of human social relations (e.g., marriage through bride wealth, and in compensation payments after a homicide), are involved in the formation and reproduction of human kin groups, and that in that sense cattle possessed are seen as part of the kinship group. An example is when in case of a homicide compensation several heads of cattle *together* with a young unmarried girl, both from the lineage group of the killer, are given to the family of the slain person. The Suri, however, do not see cattle as sacred in any sense: they are not taboo to eat, and neither the object of cultic reverence nor agents of the divine. They can only be consecrated in certain rituals to act as mediating elements for deflecting tensions or bring forth fertility and kin group continuity.

The Suri have no myths about the supernatural origin or arrival of cattle.¹² In this they resemble neighboring groups or other pastoral peoples in the region. One of my informants, Londosa, a prestigious Suri ritual leader, said that, as far as he knew, cattle were not a gift from God (*Tumu*) or any other non-human, transcendent power, but 'they were just encountered by our ancestors in the plains where they were living, complete with horns and all. They became our companions, we cultivated them and lived with them ever since.' So in the Suri view, there emerged a perception of a kind of natural alliance, based on mutual interest and affinity, between humans and cattle: two species living in the same environment, not competing over resources but living in symbiosis.¹³

Cattle are thus related to humans – they make family life, procreation and conflict resolution possible. They are not pets. In a way, pets are slaves, subservient to the master for their fun and comfort. Cattle are not like that: first because of their utility value, but second because of the admiration and respect that especially the strong young bulls evoke. Most importantly, the Suri fascination with cattle comes from the perception of the self-generating, procreative power that they are seen to have. Cattle exchange constitutes marriage (through bride-wealth), ritually facilitates birth, burial, and compensation after conflict.



Their intestines are used for divination (cf. Abbink 1993), and, most importantly, cattle provide people, especially men, with symbolic elements of prestige and personal identity. For example, virtually all personal names are derived from cattle coat colors or patterns, and men are in many contexts also known under their favorite cattle song-name.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the Suri language all color terms are derived from cattle coat colors/patterns. There are no terms or sayings of abuse about humans that refer to cattle – perhaps because to compare cattle to depraved humans is an insult to cattle.¹⁵

Cattle are given away and received, groomed and cared for, violently defended, and praised in songs. Their blood is used as food, their dung as fuel in the cattle camps, their urine for cleaning beer containers. They also play a central role in the socialization of children, who not only play with clay cattle models and small stone kraals (learning counting, coloring and coat-patterns), but also from an early age observe the treatment, care and ritual importance of the animals and start assisting in the herding when they are about eight years old.

When cattle are dead, either of a natural cause or after being killed, body parts (skin, horns, tail, bones) are used in many contexts. Even after their decease, cattle remain both a useful and ritual object: the dried cattle-skins are the mats on which people sleep, and a skin of a favorite animal or clan-emblem animal is the one on which people sit when negotiating marriages or homicide compensations. A cow's skin is used as a cover or canopy in the ceremony for newly-weds when they enter the house, and the corpse of a deceased person is wrapped in a cattle skin before burial. As is known from the comparative study of African pastoral societies, cattle are thus the medium and metaphor of human sociality.

But the animals are also sacrificed, and in that context they are the prime vehicle or conduit for abreacting the problems emerging in human social life, and indirectly for connecting to supernatural forces (God; ancestor spirits; see also below). Apart from the institution of sacrifice, done at initiations of new age-grades, a major public debate, burials or on the occasion of a purification ceremony to remove the 'pollution' of a killer, Suri life is marked by the absence of any explicit religious activity referring to the supernatural. Although ritual action is very intensive in this society, it has to do with establishing or upholding the *human* order and its centrifugal tendencies, although references to God (*Tumu*) are made. Cattle are essential to this; they have to be around at all times.

Cattle Care

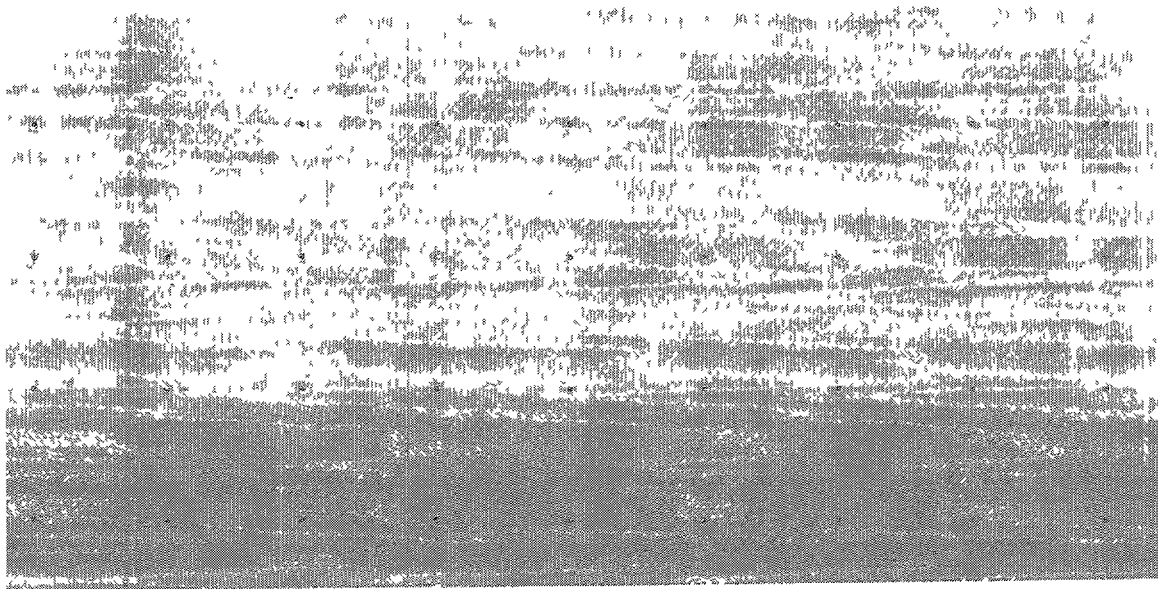
Suri are excellent herders, and their animals are the envy of their Dizi peasant neighbors, who state that the Suri cattle are 'the healthiest and strongest type'. When Suri men are herding in the lowlands, their life is fully geared to the needs of the cattle. While in the cattle fields, the herders also largely live on milk and cattle blood, augmented with some gathered fruits and occasional grain porridge and cabbage brought in from the villages.

In this *practical care* of the herds, as their most cherished property, the Suri move with them for the best pasture and water, and for protection against animal enemies (like ticks, flies, panthers, hyenas or lions). They build fences and fire-places in the cattle fields to guard the animals, and at dusk cover them with ashes against biting insects. They care for sick animals until the last moment, with a wide variety of cattle medicine (both traditional means and modern ones, brought in by traders, or, since a few years ago, supplied occasionally by government veterinarians). Suri mourn cattle, especially favorite animals, in song and recital when they die. Always carrying arms (semi-automatic rifles), they do not shun any action to defend the herds. Human casualties are frequent in armed confrontations with neighboring raiding groups.

In their daily handling of the animals the Suri gain great practical knowledge about their personal characteristics, keep track of cattle 'family lines' (tracing their descent lines even up to seven or eight generations), and take these into account when exchanging and disposing of them. If it can be avoided in any way, Suri neither sell their animals nor eat them.

At least as important is the poetic expression and affectionate care toward cattle of which the Suri give evidence. Every boy when young receives a favorite animal, a young bull (*b'ongay kèrègt*). This becomes the focus of his attention and he is addressed by his age mates by the name of this animal. He invokes the name of the animal in battles and on ritual occasions.¹⁶ If it dies, the owner is overtaken by grief and anger. He never eats the meat from the animal (which would be like 'cannibalism') or from any other animal of similar name and coat-color. During their life, the cattle are decorated and treated to enhance their beauty and appearance:

- To get the preferred shape of the horns (bent inwards, close to each other, standing straight up – done also for a practical reason: not to become entangled in bushes) they are broken at the base with a long rectangular stone, hit carefully with another stone. Then the broken horns are tied together (the tips) for one month or more, when they start growing again. This horn shape is also imitated by the owner in dances.



- Male adolescents and unmarried men spent many years in the cattle fields as herders, and physical proximity to the animals is important. Suri have physical contact, stroking and patting the animals frequently while herding them or leading them to their places of rest in the evening. This grooming and care evokes a certain individual recognition by cattle of their owners/caretakers (cf. Hart 1985:55-56).
- Men sing and recite about their cattle in praise poems, of which a brief one is given here (in free translation):¹⁷

Oh, the black-white patterned one,¹⁸
the one which I received from my father;
he went with me everywhere, to Lo'ong, to Moosa,¹⁹
escaping the Bume²⁰ spear, and the Kalanshi.²¹

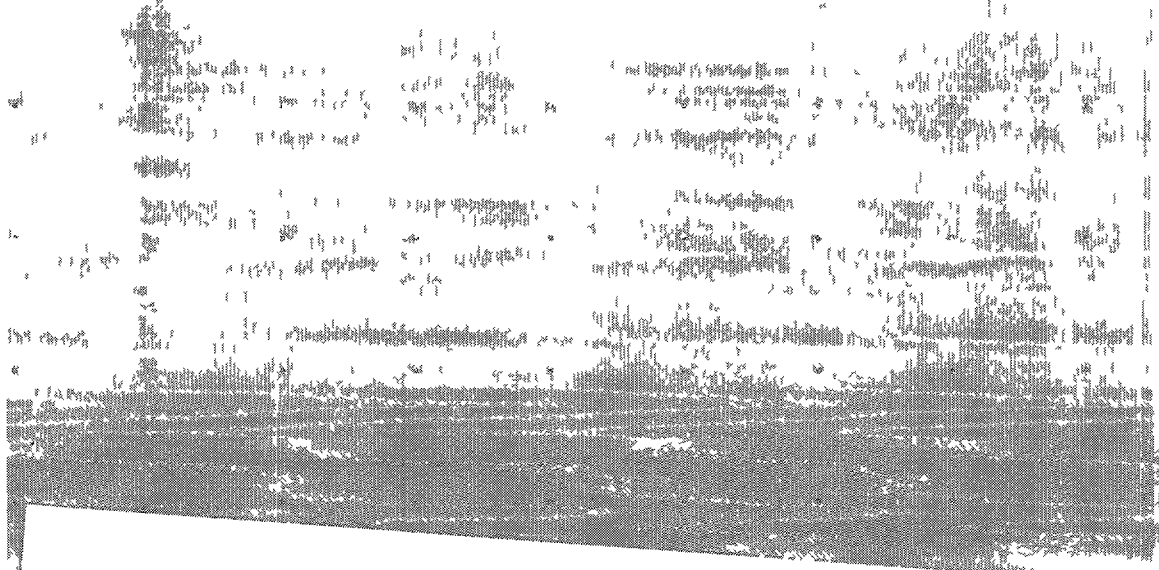
Reaching the water place at dusk
we rested and joined the others.
Moving to Sêgilo,²² we escaped the raiders,
walking all day.

The black-white one will not be given,
and will not depart from me.
Luwari²³ is his pasture, *ngarégani*²⁴ he will graze.
Let his horn grow and become bent, upward
may he go upright,
may he lead the others.²⁵

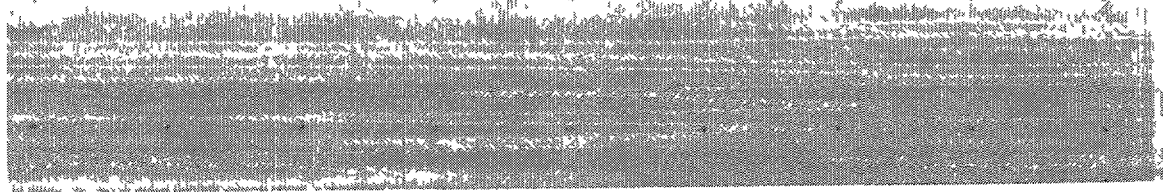
In such songs, the positive personal traits of an animal are rehearsed, and wishes for its personal well-being and 'career' are expressed. A central theme is the (desired) admiration and prestige it brings its owner. One can say that such songs reflect a personal relationship between owner and individual cattle.

Cattle Killing

Perhaps *because* of their pre-eminent social, emotional and economic role, cattle are the prime object of the Suri for use in sacrifice and in offerings; the death of a stock animal can be 'beneficial' for humans because (1) their blood is seen as substitution energy on behalf of sacrificers, and (2) their death by itself displaces guilt or defuses tension between groups within the community. As among most peoples, sacrifice can never be done with wild animals, only with the most cherished and 'valuable' domestic ones.²⁶ Cattle (and sheep) are thus the main medium in the sacrificial practices that permeate Suri culture. While the animals themselves are not held 'sacred' in any sense, they can, by their ritual consecration, be made to express the Suri relation to *Tumu* or God



and the natural order, rain and 'fertility'. More important, through their *blood*, their sacrifice is to have a reconciling, cleansing effect on human conflicts. Blood is the emblem and source of vitality, the life force, and cannot be spilled on the ground. (This is of course a general feature in most pastoral groups.) It is ritually used on human bodies to remove pollution, or on objects to ward off detrimental effects for humans, for instance smearing it on the entrance gate of a ritual chief's compound. It is also a food source (taken from the jugular neck vein).



Cattle are ritually killed during ceremonial occasions, for instance a marriage ceremony, burial, age-group initiation, a rain-ceremony, the installation (or burial) of a Suri ritual leader or *komoru*, at a major public debate, and sometimes in case of serious illness. In these contexts only, cattle meat is eaten.²⁷ The core ideas behind thus putting an animal to death seem related to notions of deflecting danger or 'shifting the blame', so to speak. It is vicarious victimization, because the violence is performed for the benefit of the human sacrificers in their relation to each other or perhaps to the Sky God. A religious, supernatural referent is, however, of much less importance than the secular, praxis-directed one: by indirect means keeping or restoring a balance between rival human groups that come into conflict. Very few, if any, prayers or invocations of God are made.

In the context of the ritual of homicide purification, the animals are the 'vicarious killers', and when killed become the victims of violence, to 'repay' blood with blood. It seems that the life force of a live being, once killed ritually, is deflected from the animals towards humans, i.e. utilized for their purposes. The animals, though 'peaceful',²⁸ *stand for* their transgressing owners, and deflect them from possible harm. In view of this direct ritual symbolism, the cattle *are* the killers, so to speak, and are then killed to take the polluting blame away for their human associates. The effectiveness of the sacrifice itself is thus predicated upon the close social bond between humans and domestic (livestock) animals.²⁹

The idea of sacrifice was also relevant in the context of inter-group relations, as can be seen in the rain control alliance that the Suri had with their Dizi highland neighbors, a long-settled agricultural group who were recognized by them as 'rain masters' of the area (cf. Abbink 1994). In a periodic ritual in times of impending drought, a black Suri bull was sacrificed by the Dizi chiefs in order to bring forth rain. In the last fifteen years, however, the relationship with their Dizi neighbors has become extremely tense (Abbink 1994, 2000a).

Below we give examples of a few important ritual killing occasions among the Suri.

Homicide

People involved in homicide (purposely or accidental: no difference) are 'polluted' and to be temporarily isolated. They are fugitives in the bush and under threat being killed in revenge and having their property taken until they are cleansed and made into normal members of society again. This 'cleans-

ing' happens with the freshly spilt blood of a stock animal. To purify, in this respect, means to kill and to transfer the life-force of the animal which was killed to humans as protection. It can perhaps simply be seen as the diverting of future revenge toward another living being, i.e., the scapegoat (in R. Girard's sense, 1977:96). Suri statements on this cleansing ritual explicitly refer to this idea of diverting tension or 'pollution'. After the killing ritual humans are able to re-enter society. To purify with the fresh blood is to remove the boundary between individuals who were previously socially separated by their transgressing violence.

There are two kinds of homicide purification: (a) after killing an enemy of a rival group (a non-Suri), and (b) after killing a Suri.

People who killed a member of a neighboring, enemy group (e.g., in a raid) place themselves in a 'dangerous', liminal state. This kind of killing was in principle not seen as a problem but as a feat of daring and achievement. Although the act is announced in song and responded to by women and others when the killer returns to camp or to the village, his unclean state has to be ended ritually. This is done by killing one head of cattle and by washing in the blood of a sacrificed ox or bull. The animal is killed by slitting the throat: the fastest and for the animal least painful way. It is significant that this killing of cattle is done only with Suri 'contaminated' with the killing of a non-Suri. I interpret this as expressing that the death of a non-Suri evokes little pain and fear within the community.

When a fellow Suri is killed a very different procedure is followed. The animal used for homicide purification is usually a female *sheep*. The way it is killed is striking: assisted by two other persons who hold the sheep and keep its jaws shut, a mediator elder from a clan not directly related to either victim or killer takes the body of the sheep and slits open the stomach of the animal while it is alive and conscious. The animal twists and tries to bloat. The chyme (*wáaba*) from the stomach is taken out and thrown on the killer and on some close relatives of his victim. It should not be wiped off but dry on the body and then be brushed off later. This purification ceremony (called *mèdèrè-níkiddá*, sheep's washing) 'cleanses' the killer (who was a fugitive before) and is the last stage of his return to normal life.

We have here a way of killing that, to outside observers, is 'cruel' quite similar to the Giriama procedure (described by Parkin 1991:148, who calls it 'gruesome'). However, this case of sheep slaughter may be an exception. Sheep are never used in rituals that have a supernatural dimension: e.g., not in a rain ritual or in a chief's installation ceremony, nor during a wedding or a burial



ceremony. We could explain the manner of killing by the fact that sheep are seen by Suri as very different from cattle: as passive, 'innocent', predictable, and less senti-ent. Neither are they the object of the kind of care and affection bestowed upon cattle: the Suri appear to be Cartesians here, viewing the sheep as an automaton without feeling and social identity (as cattle have because of their exchange role). Therefore, the paradox would not arise in this case. But the ritual reveals a meaning: first of all, the choice of a sheep instead of cattle may be to avoid arguments about value and loss of cattle between groups (of slayer and slain) that have affinal relations forged by cattle exchange. Sheep are thus not involved in disagreements between lineages: they are never given as bride-wealth. Secondly, sheep are silent and peaceful, impartial to anyone who may approach them. Suri say that cattle 'recognize their owner, but sheep do not.' The sheep is more of a 'spirit animal' than cattle: less connected to humans than to other unknown or perhaps supernatural forces. This makes it a neutral vehicle of reconciliation. This is attested from many other East African cultures. De Heusch (1985:114) reports a similar view on sheep in Rwandan culture. The western Oromo of Ethiopia think that for reconciliation after manslaughter '[o]nly a sheep can give peace' (Bartels 1983:244) and David Parkin states that the Giriama of Kenya see the ram as 'the animal of peace and purity' (1991:15, 147). But central in this case seems that 'intra-Suri' killing raises high emotions and endangers the social order. A perpetrator immediately goes into hiding from the relatives of the victim until mediation is sought. This state of emotions and dismay seems to be expressed via the bloody and painful death of the animal killed.

Burial Ceremony

When a person has died either of natural cause or by accidental manslaughter, a day-long ritual of cleansing follows for the family, to 'ensure its continuity' and remove 'polluting' or endangering supernatural influences. The key event in this ritual is the killing of a cow.

Before the actual killing, a man enters the compound under the wailing of women with a thick branch of *errr* tree wood (an Acacia species). The branch is then cut into a heavy stick (called *úrurum*) in the form of a baseball bat, to be used for the killing of the cow.

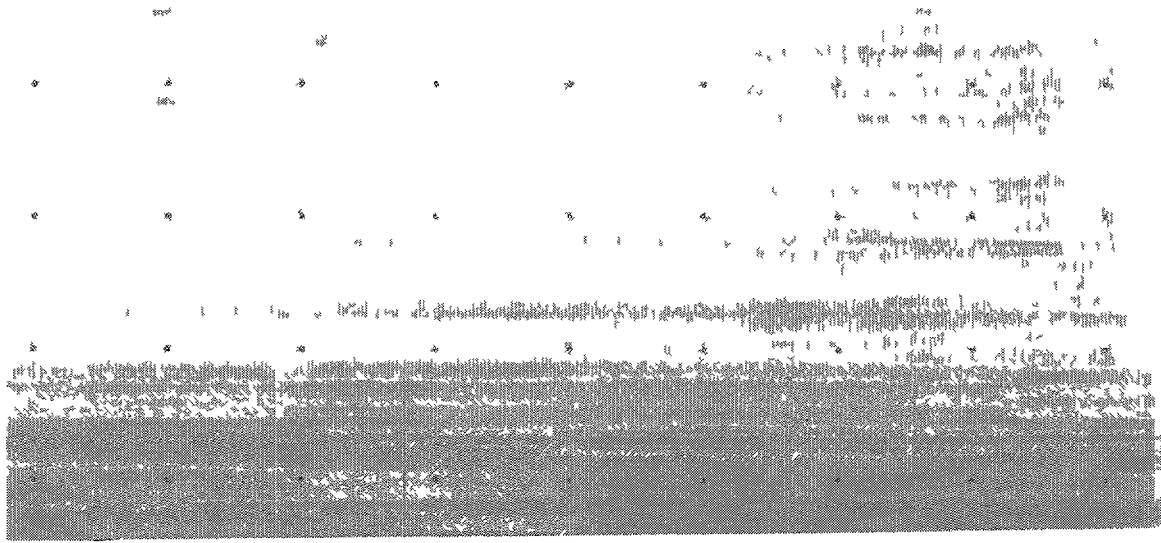
At one point the cow is brought forward. An old leather strap, made of lion skin, is put across the horns and mouth of the animal. The consanguinal relatives of the deceased person then stand in a circle around the cow and ceremonially take a small branch of a certain ritual plant (*kallochi*, *Grewia*

mollis Juss.) and one of them makes a slow circular move near the spot in the neck where the animal is to be hit and killed. Then a senior elder starts hitting the cow on the jugular neck vein. The animal should be killed without a drop of blood showing. It may often take twenty minutes or more before it falls down. In one instance I witnessed it the first hitting round was 26 times, then a second of 15, then another 35 times: in total 76 times before the animal succumbed. During the last series of blows some persons held its neck twisted. The cow gave no sound, and neither did the other cows in the group: they did not 'panic' (neither later when the cow was cut up). When the animal fell down, blood visible below the skin and trying to come out, two gunshots were fired in the air by relatives of the deceased. When those present thought it was dead, a cut was made in the right cheek of the animal, and also its right front leg was tied up double. It was then butchered, and the meat roasted and eaten by the elder family members (father, FB, M, MZ), not by the age peers of the dead.

If the deceased was the victim of manslaughter, accidentally or on purpose, there is a second ritual, carried out in the compound of a ritual leader (*komoru*) and similar to the one described above (the homicide purification ritual): the killing of a sheep, being cut up on the stomach side to take out the chyme and the blood. This is used to 'wash' the head and feet of the close relatives of the killer and of the victim. The ritual leader himself, although not in any way involved as a relative or as a perpetrator, is also smeared. The message is: Let no more Suri be killed accidentally here in a home compound, or in the bush, but on the battlefield only.

In the first phase of the ritual, that on behalf of the family, the blood of cattle may not be spilt, because it is not about 'compensation' of the blood (or life) of the deceased with that of cattle as a stand-in, but about the protection and continuity of life: the flow of blood as the life force may not be interrupted. Thus, the idea of cruelty, of making the animal suffer unnecessarily, is superseded by the cultural meaning of a bloodless killing.

If asked about the way of killing the cow with the blunt pole, a few Suri men whom I talked to directly after the burial ceremony, the answer is mostly one of non-comprehension. 'This is the way we do it and it should be done. You see that the other cows do not mind. They keep quiet throughout ... Blood cannot be spilt in this occasion; it has to die without crying and blood. It is not 'killing' (*nitha*), it is making to die, to pass away.' The first remark is a predictable one, but the second is interesting. I do not claim to understand what they really mean by the latter expression – perhaps that it was not a purification



sacrifice. The other three head of cattle, lying there in the compound and masticating when one of their mates was bludgeoned, did not react – cattle usually do not. In addition, I later found out that the cows chosen for the ritual were not ‘relatives’ of each other: as if the Suri recognized that kin-related cows would protest. Whether this is true or not I cannot confirm, although recent research suggests that there exists such a thing as kin recognition in animals (cf. Fletcher & Michener 1987), perhaps also in cattle. The point is that this Suri perception of avoiding ‘kin-related animals’ to be killed in such a way is important.

The Age-Grade Initiation Killing (‘nitha’)

The Suri age-grade initiation is done every 20 to 30 years and is a major collective ritual event in their society. It is an occasion whereby a new age-set is created, essentially for the young adult males who are made into the ruling group of ‘elders’. The last ceremony of this kind was held in 1994, and about eight head of cattle were killed.³⁰ The method of killing of the animals on such an occasion is by stunning or knocking unconscious: the animal is led to the circle of participants, and one man violently hits the animal on the forehead with a large stone.³¹ It falls down unconscious. This is also a method of killing whereby the animal should not visibly shed any blood. The act of hitting is a tense moment for both the audience *and* killer: trembling and nervous, he knows he has to hit right the first time, because repeated hitting is embarrassing, the doing of an amateur. The animals are then immediately skinned, without people knowing or caring if they are really dead or only unconscious. Whether this act is to be seen as cruel or not is in the eye of the beholder, but the animal when hit right does not suffer.

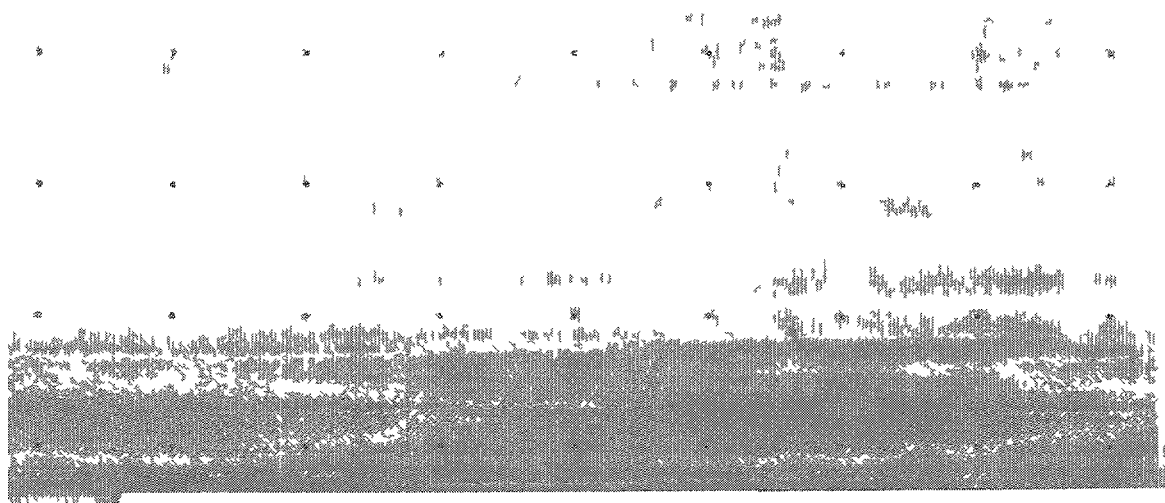
Another instance of cattle killing must be mentioned because it seems to indicate a remarkable flouting of the high esteem in which Suri hold cattle: the machine-gunning of cattle. In today’s inter-group cattle raids, Suri and their enemies, notably the Toposa and the Nyangatom, occasionally resort to gunning down cattle indiscriminately when they see a herd of their animals being taken away by the enemy and have no chance of recovering them. This has happened several times in the past five years but is an unprecedented practice of killing cattle, provoked by the changing battle tactics of the groups concerned: all are now heavily armed with automatic rifles, used profusely in mutual attacks and leading to a higher number of human casualties. It also results in cattle being badly wounded and left to suffer and bleed to death on the battlefield.

Suri explain that they just 'had to shoot' at cattle sometimes because enemy raiders were hidden beneath them and they had no other way of preventing their animals being taken away under their own eyes. Some youths even stated: 'When we can't retain our own animals, we will make sure that the Bume [= Nyangatom, Toposa] will not get them either.' I cannot say whether this practice has become general in recent years, but this kind of thinking would be a radical deviation from the customary Suri view of respecting cattle, and it was provoked by the militarization and general rise in violent conflict in the Maji area. Similar responses have been reported from the Karimojong area in Uganda (cf. Mirzeler & Young 2000). Sharon Hutchinson (1996:140, 155, 355) has also described alarming developments in violent performance among the Nuer.

The practice just mentioned is a significant development because if it takes root then the Suri cultural notion that cattle cannot be killed without a reason, i.e. outside a meaningful ritual or utilitarian context, will be abandoned, and this will prepare them for a detached, indifferent, and exploitative view of livestock, which is the defining trait of developing, industrial societies with commodified animal production (cf. Serpell 1986:155).³² One might expect their growing connection to ideas and ideals of modernity, as evinced by state discourse and bureaucracy or even by Evangelical Christianity, to play a role here, but I think this relation is tenuous. There is, certainly, an ambivalence toward the trappings of 'modernity', but the Christian teachers among the Suri try to convince them not to mow down cattle in the manner mentioned above. The striking thing in current Suri attitudes is that such a more instrumental view of cattle seems to be generated from within, i.e., born from their own painfully felt inability to defend the herds from the overwhelming violence of heavily armed enemies, which has closed off routes to reconciliation.

A Paradox?

When discussing affection vs. cruelty, a conceptual analysis of these terms is needed. I limit myself here to saying that the Suri do speak about 'loving' their animals, in the sense of considering them 'good, strong, exemplary, and very pleasing to the eye', but not in any sentimental manner. When we define 'cruelty' as the wanton torturing or killing of a live being, made to suffer purposely by a perpetrator who shows a kind of enjoyment in inflicting it, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Suri have such a notion: not with regard to animals, and certainly not the sadistic variant whereby direct pleasure is received from hurting others (Baumeister 1999:22). Sacrificial and other killing of livestock is not seen as such. But the external observer's question about



cruelty is apt on certain occasions when (like the bludgeoning method at burial, or the sheep's killing discussed above), the animals do visibly suffer and the audience sees it as taking too long, showing signs of discomfort. Indeed, some people show express embarrassment when seeing the killing of live sheep during the homicide purification ceremony. In the last case, of cattle being gunned down and left to die without people being able (or willing) to retrieve them, the question of cruelty certainly does arise in Suri terms, and Suri elders have reproached young herders for starting this practice.

From the evidence of their 'insensitive' treatment of animals in ritual killing that in many cases *does* evoke ambivalent feelings of pain, one might also suggest the existence here among the Suri of an institutionalized, cultural attitude of restraint of the affective bond with cattle, in order to prevent its becoming dominant over ties with humans. There is indeed some evidence that Suri tend to value cattle so high that it competes with their esteem for others, certainly non-Suri:

(a) members of cultivator groups like the Dizi are often scorned because of the very fact that they don't have cattle and don't forge affinal links through cattle exchange; and (b) Suri often argue and fight amongst themselves over delayed bride-wealth cattle, cattle debts, and the division of raided cattle, which they cherish above all else to enhance their own social objectives and status. But the ritual violence against livestock is rooted in the structural relationship of ultimate subservience and the cultural assumption that cattle blood is a life force appropriated for human procreation (cf. De Heusch 1985:202). On an *individual* level, however, it is certainly the case that Suri males are implicitly warned against a too emotional identification with their favorite animals, and this actually happens: elders and married women often try to purposely correct the idea developed by youngsters that their identity or 'destiny' is dependent on cultivating certain individual favorite bulls. The generation of feelings of pain or empathy with the suffering animal, while not expressed in a wailing or complaining fashion, would then perhaps be a way of channeling the emotions surrounding the grief of killing (and losing) some one.³³

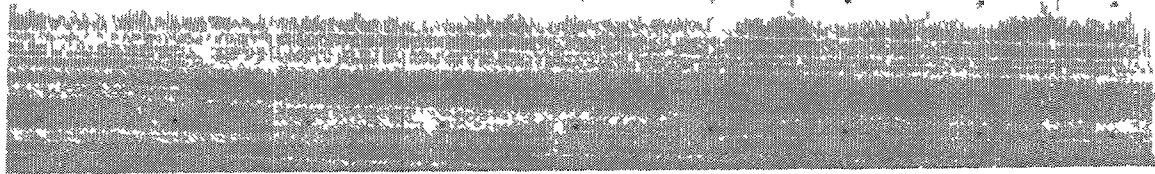
Without claiming that the paradox (i.e., the seeming contradiction) of both showing affection and apparent cruelty towards livestock is a peculiar thing only of pastoral groups like the Suri (cf. Arluke & Sanders 1996:4-5; Serpell 1986:15), I find that the contrast is stark because of the simultaneity of and easy alternation between both moments in the same persons. In industrial or peasant societies, the functions of caring for, slaughtering, consuming or dis-

posing of livestock animals is usually subject to a division of labor, where the consumer of meat does not meet the slaughterer or the livestock raiser. But among the Suri every adult can be (and usually is) a cattle herder, sacrificer, killer and consumer of cattle at the same time. This also raises the question, already mentioned above, of what they themselves feel about it. Do Suri recognize the paradox themselves? Judging from the careful and subdued way that any cattle killing proceeds, my answer would be yes. I have never seen a Suri man laugh or visibly enjoy the act of killing of an animal: the slitting open, clubbing, or stone-stunning of an animal was done business-like, as fast as possible, and was never the issue of jokes or exclamations of joy or triumph. It was seen as a necessity, a mandatory 'technical' operation, which they per-haps regret *has* to be carried out.

So a paradox exists and seems to be felt. It is even becoming more articulate because of the frequent statements of members from neighboring groups, including the local administration, on the 'bad way the Suri treat cattle'. I suggest there are at least four elements to explain it:

a) The conception of cattle, *beyond* their practical use, as a symbolic category of beings that have become the issue of an *idealization* and are a crucial element in the construction of the ideal Suri person and the building up of personal (male) prestige. I do not deny that it transcends any materialist view on the economic status of the animals, but – as among virtually all pastoralist groups – Suri views on cattle are embedded in an integrated symbolic system of human-animal-spirit relations, expressing their interdependence. However, the specific sacrificial metaphor in Suri culture that declares and codifies the ultimate subservience of cattle to humans precludes explicit thinking in terms of excessive love or of cruelty. In the last resort, the fact that real affection is developed among people for some of their cattle may also show that we have here a dilemma in Suri life that cannot be resolved.³⁴

b) The strong *individualization* of cattle (the favorite bull, and the favorite milch cows for women): Suri do *not* see all cattle as equivalent or of the same intrinsic value: some are to be gotten rid of – e.g., the sterile ones, the very aggressive ones, the not so beautifully patterned ones – and some are to be cherished. Most important of all, specific individual cattle – given either by the father or the mother's brother – contribute to forming the personal identity of a young Suri, later augmented by his own choice of a beautiful animal (usually a bull). They thus are the basis of human identification and thereby of distinction of Suri *vis-à-vis* one another. This tendency, incidentally, also gives rise to conflict among Suri men as to which animals are to be



used for ritual purposes: there are disagreements over who is to give which animal, and in such moments cattle and their owners become 'allies' in resisting the claims of others.

c) Cattle provide a mirror order to human society; are apart, yet part of it. This implies that violence can hit them also, as it hits humans in the course of everyday life. Ultimately, cattle – and livestock in general – are 'answerable' to humans and their needs, because of their life-sustaining, 'economic' role. Cattle, for instance, cannot fight to protect themselves and the human companions – in the perpetual fight against raiders – only the reverse is true: they endanger the Suri. In this light, Suri see cattle as having the obligation, so to speak, to repay their human guardians with their blood, as the material symbol of vitality and continuity. The way death is inflicted on cattle – and the way the blood is handled – is defined by the ritual context, within which the culturally defined act of killing overrides the expression of 'feeling' for the individual animal to be sacrificed. Ultimately the Suri are Kantians in the sense that they do not accord cattle any rational agency and hence no moral autonomy.

d) Finally, following what was said about the generation of feelings of pain or empathy with the suffering animal by a particularly circumstantial and cruel way of killing, Suri appear to use the animals as a medium to re-enact the generation and deflection of emotions of death and loss – and the threat to disruption within their own tightly balanced communities – through the stylized killing of livestock as described above. We saw there was a distinction of ritual cruelty in the ceremony for the occasion of a non-Suri victim and a Suri victim, tying in with the symbolic recreation of pain and anger toward the own community and toward outsiders. But to say that there is a perfect correlation between cruelty in the killing of what, in the last instance, remain their own animals slaughtered to stall the anger of Suri victims and more humane killing of animals in the case of non-Suri might be premature at this stage.

The Tension between Affection and the Ritual Need to Kill

In a comparative study of human–animal relations, the various modes of interaction (exploitative, affective, caring, indifferent, violent, etc.) between the two should be related to the specific characteristics of the human society under discussion: how do they relate to the material and productive basis of the society? What are the cognitive, cultural and world-view correlates of human–animals relations? What is seen as (il)legitimate violence in relation to animals and humans?

In the case of pastoral societies like the Suri, in a precarious environment where sedentary agriculture is not possible as a mode of subsistence, it seems clear that the comprehensive interaction between livestock (especially cattle) and humans, while economically driven, is socially and cognitively rooted and an essential prerequisite of their way of life and sense of human identity. The Suri social *persona*, i.e. their desired social identity and self-presentation versus others, is constructed with reference to cattle as the 'mirror species' of humans: Suri recognize their sociality, their life-giving force (both literally and metaphorically), their individuation as evinced in their endlessly varied coat-colors, and their ultimate subservience to humans by means of their sacrificial role defined symbolically and pervasively. The Suri attitude toward cattle sees them as dignified beings, endowed with their own individuality – but not in the manner of Western pets, which tend to be somewhat sentimentalized because of their daily companionship and the human characteristics ascribed to them. There is no greater difference than between the dog in Western pet culture and the bull among the Suri. My interpretation is that Suri see cattle more as equals, to be treated well and to be venerated up to a point. The Suri are appalled when they hear stories about livestock in the industrial world, with cattle as 'economic assets', produced, traded, slaughtered, and disposed of directly for money or other material gain without much ado. Their view, lacking the growing dichotomy of 'pets' vs. 'exploitable animals' prevalent in our own society, tempts us to say that cattle are much better off in their society than ours. The underlying attitudes of Suri toward their animals, which allows them to shape their persona and prestige, is in terms of respect instead of sentimentality.

Thus, the 'affective' dimension between cattle and humans in Suri culture is predictably generated by the scope and nature of social and economic interaction between the two species, interdependent and sharing a difficult environment. Ways of 'cruel killing' of sacrificial animals are a direct result of the cultural interpretation of cleansing and overcoming death in their own moral community, whereby the animals are defined as willing substitutes for humans who have shed blood. The argument that Suri 'cruel treatment' of beloved animals generates disrespect and a disposition to violence toward outsiders, is not tenable, as it misinterprets the cultural complexity of Suri ritual and the bond of humans and cattle in Suri society.

Notes

- 1 A point which was often emphasized in the work of anthropologists, see for instance Leeds & Vayda 1965

2. For the processes and effects of domestication, see e.g. Clutton-Brock 1981; Epstein & Mason 1984; Hart 1985.
3. One group also called Suri (the Baale people, roughly 8–9000) live mostly in Sudan, and have a somewhat different language. The two Ethiopian Suri groups call themselves Tirmaga and Chai. Research was done intermittently in 1991–99 among the latter.
4. The view of pastoralists on their cattle and environment is still subject to serious misconceptions if not paternalistic disdain among governments, international policy makers and NGOs. Despite the lip service to 'development' and 'local solutions', these three external parties still want the pastoralists to become market-oriented range-managers, and only rhetorically recognize the wider significance of cattle for the pastoralists' survival strategies, world view and social life.
5. These are personal favorite bulls chosen in youth by male Suri on which they compose songs which they sing in various ceremonies and in battles.
6. From my personal experience I recall that when as a young boy in the 1960s I found out that a pet rabbit that we had kept for several years in our garden was killed by my uncle and served at the table. I felt shocked and hardly ate anything.
7. An exception is Parkin 1991, but he does not reflect on the implications of the different modes of killing.
8. This is especially evident in the pet food industry, the creation of graveyards for animals, the production of CDs with soothing sounds for scary dogs, etc. Another example: in the Netherlands, for instance, it is notable that dogs now have mostly human names, and no longer the typical dog's names that were common a few generations ago. We have here a kind of 'category mistake' that has 'over-humanized' pets in the domestic context. Lévi-Strauss's (1962:240–41) assumption on the existence, or better the recognition, of at least two distinct classes of names – dog names vs. human names – is no longer valid. The two have fused.
9. Suri are known to be relentless hunters in the nearby Omo National Park (buffalo, hartebeest, giraffe, antelopes). Neighboring people like the Dizi and Nyangatom (who also hunt) say the Suri have a very exploitative attitude toward game, not seeming to care about extinction of species.
10. I do not define 'companion animals' as *pets* (as often happens in the literature), but as the partners of humans in a variety of ways or activities: economic, social, cultural.
11. This point on the 'kinship' or the social bond between humans and stock animals was repeatedly stressed by anthropologists writing on pastoral societies (see, for instance, Evans-Pritchard 1940:19, 33–34; Lienhardt 1962:25–26; also Girard 1977:3). In describing this relationship of livestock and humans among the Suri I do not claim to offer insights radically different from those achieved in such other studies of agro-pastoral societies but underline their overall validity. Cf. also Hutchinson's excellent study (1996:50, 53, 59–63, 98–99, 172, 250–51).
12. E.g., among the Parakuyo Maasai, cattle was seen as a gift from the sky, from *Enkai* (God), (see Hurskainen 1984:198).
13. I hesitate to call the cattle-humans relationship in pastoral societies simply 'akin to feudalism', as some would have it (Ingold 1988:15). I do not pursue the point here but the way cattle are affectionately treated, praised in poetics and mourned when dying does not seem to me particularly 'feudal'. Humans also have to obey the 'laws' of cattle if they want to make them expand and prolong their lives;

- good cattle are always in short supply. Perhaps *pets* can be said to have a feudal relation with their owners.
14. See Fukui 1979, 1996, and Turton 1980 for striking examples (from the Bodi and Mursi peoples in the same area in Ethiopia) about the social and cognitive importance of cattle.
 15. Edmund Leach, in a delightful paper of 1964, analyzed the social context and impact of taboo concepts. Reconsidering Suri attitudes toward cattle in the light of his approach confirms that Suri see cattle, much more than any other animal, as part of the human social world, and not a good category to derive jokes or insults from – they are not an ‘ambiguous category’. See Leach 1964:45.
 16. These names do not refer to the coat-color patterns (which are differently named), but are derived from them. E.g., the name of the owner of a certain black-and-white patched animal (a pattern called *kora-holli*) will often be *Ar-d’uguni*, derived from it.
 17. I thank Barhoyne Wolekibo for help.
 18. A favourite cattle coat-color.
 19. Place names of pasture areas.
 20. Bume are the Nyangatom and Toposa people, agro-pastoral groups to the south and west rivaling with the Suri.
 21. The Kalashnikov automatic rifle, much used in cattle-raiding since about 1988.
 22. A place name in Suri territory.
 23. Place name.
 24. A preferred kind of grass for cattle.
 25. I.e., other animals in the herd.
 26. See also the insights of J. de Maistre (1890), cited in Girard (1977:2–3): ‘The sacrificial animals were always the most prized for their usefulness: the gentlest, most innocent creatures, whose habits and instincts brought them most closely into harmony with man.’ According to Girard (*ibid.*), this reflects ‘an attempt, as it were, to deceive the violent impulse’ of humans toward each other.
 27. The only non-ritual occasions when Suri eat meat (beef) is in the highland villages, located outside their own territory. This is meat from non-Suri cattle, offered on sale in butcher shops. However, they hunt game (buffalo and antelope) for meat.
 28. Although Suri do not look upon this matter in terms of guilt and innocence but more in those of disturbance and correction of the social order.
 29. I owe some of the ideas in this section to conversations with the late Rev. Lambert Bartels, a great expert on Oromo religion (see Bartels 1983).
 30. According to custom, an animal with a preferred coat-color was offered by each of the six most ancient Suri clans.
 31. Michael Bollig (personal communication 2002) reports that the Pokot of Kenya have a similar way of killing, and others even more dramatic. They also have the cutting open of live sheep (see above), and find the image horrifying.
 32. As said above, Suri only rarely kill cattle without ritual: only sick animals were killed thus or left to die. Male animals are regularly sold to neighboring people in the villages (who have plough agriculture and need draught oxen). Incidentally, Protestant-Evangelical converts among the Suri (more than a hundred) also develop the idea that cattle can and should be killed and consumed in a non-sacrificial way. They tend to delegitimize Suri traditional sacrifices.

33. I am grateful for Michael Bollig for his suggestions on this point.
34. In his analysis of animal categories and abuse, Leach (1964:42) pointed to the fact that 'the concept of *cruelty* is applicable to birds and beasts...', these categories of animals 'being to some extent akin to man.'

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