VIOLENCE AND THE CRISIS OF CONCILIATION: SURI, DIZI AND THE STATE IN SOUTH-WEST ETHIOPIA

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In recent years, anthropological studies of violence have increasingly addressed the cultural and symbolic variables that come into play in inter-group conflict and patterns of interpersonal aggression, thus adding to a well established tradition of studies shaped by conflict analysis, cultural ecology, and political economy. Some studies showing such a new cultural perspective on violence are Harrison (1993), Linger (1993), Hutchinson (1996), Heald (1999) and Donham (1999). While anthropology has thus contributed much to the understanding of contemporary violence as a socio-cultural phenomenon, the comparative study and explanation of the subject need to be developed further on the basis of more detailed empirical examples (Krohn-Hansen, 1994: 367).

The setting of this article is south-western Ethiopia (bordering Sudan and Kenya), and also in the study of this complex region much debate was generated around issues of culture and violence, recently fuelled by the great political upheaval in the area. Some major contributions to this debate are Tornay (1994, 1998) on the Nyangatom, Kurimoto (1994, 1997) on the Anyuak and the southern Sudan, and Turton (1993, 1994, 1997) on the Mursi. Their work has shown the importance of ethnography in dealing with the larger questions of ethnicity, power, conflict and cultural confrontation in this part of the world.

Referring to this wider discussion, and aiming to develop a more comparative view of the Ethiopian south-west, I here discuss a case from two small-scale societies in Ethiopia. This will allow us to address a local problem that has ramifications throughout North and East Africa: the *escalation* of violent acts in volatile socio-political conditions and the concomitant rapid *decrease* in the force of ritual mediation mechanisms. This problem perhaps indicates not only some fundamental changes in the wider socio-political order but also the changing status of transmitted cultural traditions and patterns of group relations. This is an issue to which I return toward the end of the article and which calls for a discussion of what ritual does, and in what conditions its appeal, or loss of it, is produced. Ritual I define here as a symbolic structuring of interaction in a staged and 'scripted' manner, aimed at establishing a kind of authoritative meaningful order among, or

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mediation between, people. Ritual thus has cognitive, social and political aspects.

South-western Ethiopia (and adjacent south-eastern Sudan) is peopled by several ethno-cultural groups (ranging in population variously from 25,000 to 65,000) and is a politically marginal area. The underlying theme addressed in describing this complex and fascinating ethnographic setting is the politics of culture difference and of community survival. In the debates referred to above, empirical studies of the *actual* mediation efforts undertaken have been scarce, and in addition their cultural implications have not been sufficiently elaborated.[1] This article intends to address these issues on the basis of a major encounter by a local society in crisis (Suri and Dizi) with agents of the Ethiopian state.

The first point to be made is that violence between groups often emerges in ambiguous discursive situations where the absence of a shared language or shared communicative values or of a wider cultural code combines with tense or contested access to and use of 'resources' (natural and political). In this sense violence is, of course, inherent in many social situations. The Ethiopian situation that I describe here is one in which the process of *transformation* of violence as 'practice' and as 'culture' can be studied closely at the level of a non-industrial, non-bureaucratic society. In explaining this problematic I argue also that in conjunction with a political-ecological approach to the study of violence a cognitive one is necessary: the perpetrators, the victims and the mediators or conciliators act and react on the basis of their own, culturally framed, perceptions, knowledge and values related to personal identity, status, supernatural notions and images of the other (see also Abbink, 2000).

OPPOSITIONS

South-western Ethiopia is a heterogeneous area where several ethnic groups meet. About a dozen languages are spoken. The past decades have seen a notable transformation if not acceleration of violent conflicts between the various ethno-regional communities and with the agents of the state. Although there are at least five relevant groups in the area, forming an interacting system, I focus here on the Dizi sedentary peasants and especially on the Suri agro-pastoralists (and to a lesser extent on the people in the small towns, who are from a mixed background). Conditions of recurring ecological crisis, population movement, the rapid spread of modern weapons (semi-automatics), and certain state policies form the backdrop to recent developments. These conditions articulate with cultural factors.[2] The violence—

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[1] Some as yet unpublished papers by Ivo Strecker (Mainz University) describe the 'peace ceremony' in 1991 of the south Ethiopian Arbore (or Hoor) people with their neighbours, and the case of the Hamar.

[2] See Abbink (1993). Fieldwork for this article was done in 1991, 1992, 1995 and 1999 in Maji town, in Adikyaz and Korum (using the Amharic and Suri languages).

defined here loosely as the use of physical, harmful force with the aim of intimidating, enforcing dominance or killing others—is marked by two aspects: intensification (more frequent recourse to violent acts, more cruelty and more dead and wounded per encounter) and, second, its (seemingly) endless cycle, because of a crisis in the customary mediation practices between the groups. One question is why these groups, which until recently had relatively effective, culturally regulated, mediation procedures, stopped observing them. Part of the answer I have tried to give elsewhere (e.g. Abbink, 1994, 2000), but the *nature* of the relations between the two main groups in question (Suri and Dizi) and between them and the Ethiopian state still deserve more attention.[3]

The critical question in studying violent performance in this specific context is not why there *is* violence, but why it has, also according to those involved, got out of hand. There is indeed a shared view among the local people that 'it never used to be as bad as this in the past'. They feel their society to be in disarray. This is not merely a predictable view that one might expect elders in general to have: a consideration of oral traditions and life histories seems to indicate that the past was indeed of a different order. It can also be easily recognised that the use of semi-automatic rifles as a tool in violent confrontations (since the mid-1980s) leads to more dead and wounded than the old technology of clubs, knives, spears and three-shot reloading rifles. It may also be asserted that their use has a far-reaching social effect, creating a 'rupture' in self-perception and experience among local people (compare also Matsuda, 1997; Tadesse, 1997).

As noted above, the escalation of violence is related to the devaluation of organised conflict mediation, which formerly defined or constrained the relations between neighbouring ethnic groups in this area. Discursive mediation was provided by the ritual code. Nowadays, these groups (analytically distinguished on the basis of differences in language, different histories of origins, and separate political identi-ties—or units of decision-making—despite partly overlapping ecological niches and even cultural traits) *convert* their systems of ritual mediation and conciliation into a practice of short-term violent 'settling' of disputes. This is largely based on the perception of who at any particular moment is strongest in terms of fire-power, or in terms of a group's relation to state power, which can harnessed for its own purposes.[4] This process is accompanied by an attempt at violent boundary construction: cultural or 'ethnic' difference is asserted, on the basis of material or imagined concerns, and is being brought in as a

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[3] The regional and political context in which to consider violence and state action encompasses more groups in the wider 'ethno-system' than these two, but in this article I chiefly limit myself to these two because (a) they were the subject of fieldwork and (b) they have shown the most acute example of negative transformation of violent practice mentioned above.

[4] On the Ethiopian side of the border the state in this area has grown stronger in the last seven years, but on the Kenyan and especially on the Sudanese side the reverse has happened.

conflict-generating element. In its turn this becomes an ideological, 'primordial' reason to fight out differences instead of discursively mediating them. In this respect the conflicts between the groups in the Maji area—an area not notably transformed by forces of economic or cultural 'globalisation'—is no different from 'ethnic' group conflict in modernising or postmodern industrial societies in, for instance, eastern Europe or ex-Yugoslavia (cf. Turton, 1997). Such conflicts can be related to general processes of state (trans)formation, whereby hegemonic structures of an administrative and military nature are being imposed on local societies.

The problem calls for an ethnography of the dynamics of group relations and culture difference. It can be said that, historically, the construction and discourse of difference between the ethno-cultural groups, through the maintenance of ritual codes and recognised symbiosis, served to manage and restrain violence and create predictability. The regulation and expression of difference on this ritual level had no effect at the practical level: there always were regular economic and social interactions (exchange of products, marriages, bond partnerships), including violent incidents, certainly in the area under discussion. The conversion of the ritual code and social pattern of co-operation into violence has predictable regularities based on political ecology (state versus local society, emerging perceptions of resource competition, and new weapon technology) and its ideational reflection—or, better, its cultural appropriation—in the various local societies.

MAJI: A FRONTIER REGION

The Maji area has historically been a classic frontier between British colonial East African dominions (Sudan, Kenya) and the independent empire of Ethiopia. Geographically it is an outlier of the Ethiopian highlands, and in the colonial scramble at the end of the nineteenth century sovereignty over it was claimed by the Ethiopian emperor Menilik II. His troops conquered the area in 1899–1900. A number of them stayed and settled in Maji and other newly founded garrison towns (containing 100–1,000 people).[5] From there the settlers made trading and raiding forays into northern Kenya (the Turkana area) and Sudan (the Didinga mountains and the Boma plateau; see Garretson, 1986).

The native inhabitants of the area were organised in agrarian-based chiefdoms like those of the Bench and Dizi people (living in the highlands) or in decentralised age-grade societies like the Toposa, Anyuak, Nyangatom and Suri (living in the lowland plains).[6] The state

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[5] At present the largest town, Maji, has some 1,600 inhabitants.

[6] There are intermediate groups of horticulturalists like the Me'en (related to the Suri in language and culture) in the highlands and foothills of the Maji mountains. They have economic and other relations with Dizi, Suri and the villagers.

presence was constituted by superior military force (soldier contingents
with better arms), and by the imposition on the locals of tribute and tax
requirements, and the obligation to provide *corvée* agricultural labour
for the northern immigrants. The latter also took cattle, ivory and slaves
for trade to the north. For the rest, substantial internal autonomy was
left to these various non-literate ethno-linguistic communities: there
was no effort (and no state capacity) to transform or assimilate them
culturally and socially.[7] Throughout the twentieth century—until
today—cultural group differences remained notable, and they are
often referred to in social interaction by the local people themselves.
Nor was there much socio-economic integration of communities, e.g.
through markets, common ventures or mixed settlement patterns.

From a national Ethiopian perspective the Maji area always remained
marginal in the political and economic sense. It still has no good road
transport links with other areas and no large-scale trade with the central
highlands or with urban centres. The level of technology in use among
the local agro-pastoralists and peasants is very low (hoes, digging sticks,
some ox ploughs), and there are no credit facilities, no banks, no
telephone lines and no local transport except mules. Occasional lorries
pass by in the dry season. There is a grass airstrip near the former
administrative 'capital' Tum (about 1,200 inhabitants) with a small
plane landing three times a week, and from which supplies are
transported to other places by mule or on foot. Government
administration (courts, police, educational services) is underdeveloped
as well. Virtually all households—except those of the salaried
government workers, the military, the police and immigrant traders—
live in a subsistence economy.

Since the early 1900s the image of the Maji area in Ethiopia as a
whole has accordingly been that of a remote and 'uncivilised,
uncontrolled' region. (Placement there was seen as 'internal exile'.) It
was a realm of typical frontier activities like slave and cattle raiding,
trade and contraband in weapons, hunting big animals, ivory trade,
gold exploration and adventure-seeking. To this day, the reputation and
position of Maji have scarcely altered; indeed, its reputation has
become much worse owing to the increase in violent incidents and
'lawlessness' resulting in fatalities among all groups.

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN MAJI

The three groups under discussion are two indigenous groups—the Dizi
and the Suri people—and the village people, descendants of immigrants
and of recent arrivals taking up posts as soldiers, traders, government
workers, etc. The Omotic-speaking Dizi are sedentary cultivators and
number some 23,000. They formerly lived in a conglomerate of
autonomous and rival chiefdoms that were internally and externally
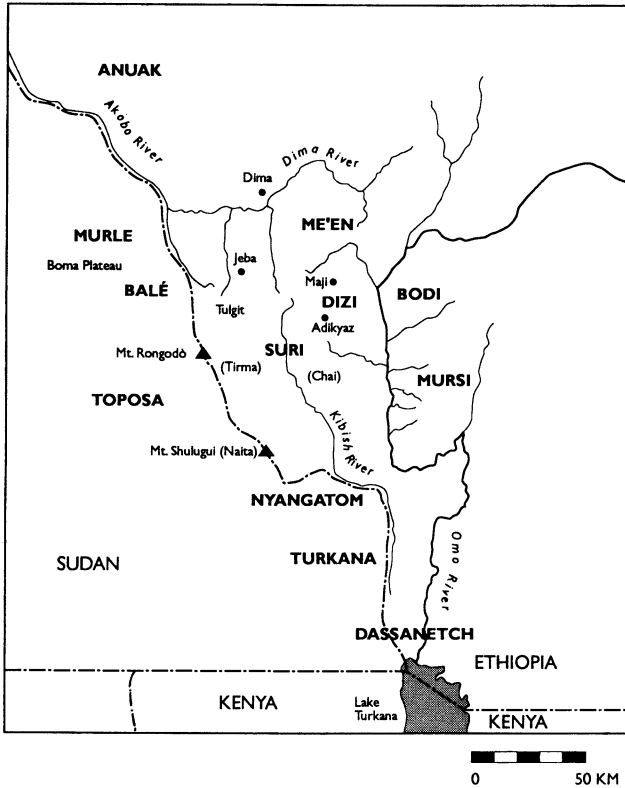
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[7] Compare Abbink (1997).

FIG. 1. The Suri area and its environs, south-western Käfa, Ethiopia

ranked in a complex hierarchical order (Haberland, 1993; Deguchi, 1996). These chiefdoms still exist in name but their hereditary leaders have little political power. Of all groups in the area, the Dizi have become most associated with (and dependent upon) the central Ethiopian government and with dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian highland values.

   The Suri speak a Surmic (Nilo-Saharan) language and number about 24,000 people, living as cattle herders and shifting cultivators without central authority. They have age grading, an age-set authority structure and ritual chiefs or 'priests' (*komoru*) (Abbink, 1997). They live in lowland areas (in Ethiopia below about 1,000 m), and have remained relatively independent in the political and cultural sense. Like the neighbouring Dizi, they are patrilineal and have a patrilocal settlement structure. In contrast to the Dizi, the Suri have named clan groups as units of descent reckoning. Suri live together in rather compact villages, the largest of which numbers about 2,500–3,000 people. Cattle are grazed in lowland pasture, about a day's walk from the villages. The grazing areas are organised in 'herding units' called *b'uran*

and composed of members of different clans and villages. An average male adult household head has about forty to sixty head of cattle. Suri cherish egalitarianism and personal independence. Women are prominent in social life and can own cattle and small stock but never participate in herding. The Suri act staunchly self-conscious and as a rule shun the highland areas. There are frequent violent raids upon and by their agro-pastoralist neighbours, the Nyangatom and the Toposa (in Sudan), while they are in permanent conflict with the Anuak people, especially around the gold-panning areas just north of the Suri country. Gold, cattle and clay pots are sold by the Suri in the highland villages.

The Dizi number about 23,000 people and are a conglomerate of former semi-independent chiefdoms with an intricate hierarchical structure. They descend from an ancient agricultural population that built extensive terraces in the hills and valleys of the Maji area (which are now largely abandoned).[8] In the past the Dizi population was at least three times larger than it is today. They were hard hit by the conquest of the northern Ethiopians after 1900 (see Haberland, 1993), resulting in casualties from disease, serfdom and slavery. The Dizi now eke out a living as cultivators of maize, sorghum, pulses, spices, coffee, vegetables and root crops, and keep some cattle. Some young men have also taken up gold panning. They live in dispersed homesteads in the higher areas. While Dizi chieftaincy has significantly declined, the hereditary chiefs still perform important ritual functions.

Suri and Dizi live in strikingly different environments, and the transition from one zone to the other over a distance of only a few kilometres is as noticeable in temperature, vegetation and crops as in culture. (Most Dizi have never visited the Suri area, and vice versa.) The Suri environment lends itself much better to livestock herding than do the Dizi highlands.

In the period after 1991, when a new government led by the EPRDF took office[9], the *de facto* autonomy of the people in the Maji area was made politically relevant in a new federalist policy of organising local and regional administration on an ethnic basis, with the presumed ethnic territories of the group becoming the basis of sub-provinces and districts. Thus we have a 'Surma[10] district', a 'Dizi district' and a 'Me'en district', with the villages inhabited by people from various other ethnic and regional backgrounds as a species of enclaves.

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[8] Some old iron tools, like speartips of a type no longer seen among either Dizi or Suri nowadays, have been unearthed in recent years, and were shown to me by John Haspels (of the Lutheran World Federation) working in the Maji area.

[9] Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, led by the main insurgent movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front.

[10] This is the name under which they are known to neighbouring groups and state officials; they themselves now reject the term, preferring 'Suri'.

HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Evidence from Dizi and Suri oral traditions and settlement patterns suggests that the Dizi are the oldest and were once the politically dominant inhabitants of the area, and that their territory comprised not only the highland areas where they are now but also much of the lowlands. Elements of language, material culture and ritual also indicate that besides sedentary agriculture their economy had an important herding and hunting component.

The Suri are thus 'latecomers' to the area, and in penetrating the lowlands surrounding the Dizi mountains some 200 years ago came to recognise them as the 'masters of the rain' (the rain was more plentiful in the mountains where the Dizi chiefs had their residence) and of the soil. A rain agreement ritual (the precise historical details are not recalled by present-day Suri or Dizi leaders) was inaugurated between the two groups, whereby the Suri ritual leaders periodically came to the compound of the three most important Dizi chiefs to sacrifice jointly a black bull and a black goat, say prayers to the Sky God and ritually apply part of the blood and intestines to their bodies. This ritual appears to have been an act of submission or at least alliance between the two groups, and was meant to forge a bond between the two different communities and to seal their mutual dependence on rain and on each other in their precarious environment. (They had exchange relations: grain, foodstuff, cattle, clay pots, bush products.) One could interpret the ritual by stating that, in R. Girard's terms, it 'sublimated violence' (1977: 36), although Girard talked not of inter-group but of intra-group violence. No doubt the initial penetration of the Suri into Dizi territory did not occur without friction, and Dizi leaders at least maintain that the Suri often used intimidation or violence. Perhaps the agreement simply emerged from a truce. It was later codified in a myth of common descent of the Dizi and Suri chiefly families. In any case, what this ritual appeared to do was to keep obvious cultural and other *differences* between the two groups at bay. While the agreement did establish a framework of relations between the two groups, it did not preclude tensions and violence (raiding, theft or killings) between individual members. However, the agreement brought with it the norm—inseparable from the violence itself—of mediation and reconciling members of both populations by shared, accepted procedures in which the sacrifice of one or more head of livestock was also prominent. In this respect the ritual practice of sacrificial killing was an element in the cultural discourse of conciliation. But a conciliation of two very different groups in a gesture of 'unification' that was only symbolic.

In the last ten to fifteen years history has 'accelerated', so to speak, and the organisation of group relations was rapidly subverted, a process fuelled mainly by two factors: (1) the arming of agro-pastoral neighbours of the Suri, like Nyangatom and Toposa, with modern semi-automatic rifles, which later also spread to the Suri in massive numbers, and (2) the steady territorial expansion of these same groups on to Suri land and pasture. In addition, Suri came into violent

conflict with the Anuak people to the north, who forbade them by force to exploit alluvial gold[11] in the river Akobo border area. The net result was: (1) the emergence among the Suri of an armed stratum of youngsters of the adolescent age grade (formally the 'uninitiated') operating more and more independently of their elders (also because of the new gold money), and (2) the Suri being forced to contract their territory and to move towards the foothills of the Dizi highlands, thereby increasing the chances of conflict with them.

These processes served to strengthen the instrumental use of violence (as self-defence or attack, while herding, raiding and travelling) but also its cultural use: it became a new way of acquiring personal prestige among peers (within Suri society). Dizi became the main victims of this violence. It is important to note that in attacking the Dizi the Suri also attacked the state, because it showed that the latter was incapable of protecting citizens who pledged it adherence (Dizi paying taxes and registering weapons, unlike the Suri). Suri were at the same time showing disdain for the life style of sedentary farming favoured by government policy. Excess Suri violence directed against others was thus also a 'statement of difference', a way of claiming the right to prefer their 'free herding existence' above any other way of life. The people in the small highland towns were seen by the rural Suri and Dizi as closely allied to the 'state': they were salaried workers in government offices, the police, the militia, the school, the clinic, etc., while many others were shop owners, traders or bar keepers. They were of necessity close to the state discourse on 'backward rural people and in need of education and development'. In past periods of unrest or regime change the towns had occasionally been attacked by Suri or Me'en people, and their inhabitants always adopted a suspicious and cautious attitude towards them.[12] Markets in the towns were essential not only for the supply of food but also for meeting people and being informed about what was going on in the countryside.

ELEMENTS IN THE GENERATION OF CONFLICT

Economic
The Suri economy is dependent on cattle herding in remote lowland pastures, far away from the villages, and on the hoe cultivation of crops like sorghum, beans and maize. But the economy is precarious. Cattle disease, lack of rain and competition from agro-pastoral neighbours like the Nyangatom and Toposa in the Ethio-Sudan border are factors that threaten their livelihood and require constant vigilance and self-defence. State police or army do not protect them from the danger of raiding by others. In their turn they also raid the herds of their neighbours—but the Suri have been on the losing side since the late

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[11] This is a new local economic activity which has emerged in the last fifteen years.
[12] Many townspeople were 'prepared for any eventuality' and kept hidden arms.

1980s. Thanks to irregular rain, agricultural crop failure is also frequent.

Social

The Suri and Dizi notions of internal authority relations, kinship, family life and settlement pattern are very different. Foremost is a difference between the Dizi model of society as hierarchically ordered and the Suri model of egalitarian segmentary ordering. It has led to conflicting perceptions as to the nature of social and political relations between each other. In the sphere of social life there were exchange contacts (bond friendships) and also marital relations, but usually in the form of a Dizi girl moving out to marry a Suri man. Bond partnerships existed, but despite the assumption of eternal friendship underlying them they were vulnerable, sometimes turning into their complete opposite. In one conflict in the Dizi village of Kolu a few years ago a Suri bond partner specifically sought out his Dizi friend to kill him. According to informants, such an incident was 'unheard-of in the past'. Obviously, the existing differences in social organisation did not in themselves generate violent conflict. In addition, though the Suri have an age-group organisation, it does not fulfil the role of a 'military organisa-tion'—as has often been asserted to be the case with age-group societies. Members of the junior age grade, called *tègay*, though mainly engaged in herding and defence, are not 'warriors'.

Cultural

Although the ethnic communities have had age-long social and economic contacts and partial intermarriage, there is a significant difference—expressly cultivated in their self-image—between them in their ideas of *moral community*, expressed through an array of what they see as different habits and customs. I confine myself to the Suri and Dizi (and villagers *vis-à-vis* the Suri). These groups do not—or no longer—seem to believe that they form part of a common 'human community' wherein essential shared values hold. Suri denigrate or despise the others, who, as one Suri elder said, 'have to make a stationary living from crops and sitting in cramped, dirty villages full of mud, and who have no cattle'. The Dizi dehumanise the Suri as 'uncultured, uncontrolled killers and indifferent to human life for themselves and for others' (as one young man in Maji described them). The non-Dizi villagers tend to see the Dizi (the poorest group) as inferior and pity them in a somewhat condescending way. They also often describe Suri as 'like animals living in the bush, without civilisation'.

   Though in general terms one cannot speak of clearly identifiable 'cultures' which on all accounts differentiate local groups, there are (not least in the local view) different behavioural styles and organising rituals distributed variously among them. While culture is thus a fuzzy entity, one can say that, compared with Dizi and villagers, Suri 'culture' is marked by an imagery of interpersonal tension and violent perfor-mance. It appears to be woven into many aspects of life, like ideals of

social personality and identity concerned with assertiveness, personal independence, and achieving status and prestige among peers. For men this is realised through ceremonial stick duelling, the constant search for and acquisition of extra cattle, and valiant feats in raiding. (This is, e.g., reflected in the Suri praise and cattle songs and in ritual blessings.)[13] In their culture, young men of the junior age grade of tègay (somewhat comparable to the Maasai moran) are expected to show assertive behaviour and cultivate a fighting spirit. Among women, also, there is marked concern with consciously assertive behaviour, in their roles as village organisers, beer brewers, cultivators or mothers zealous for the interests of their children, and when their vital interests are at stake they do not shun violent acts, like hitting with wooden poles. In this respect Suri society can be said to be competitive— certainly as compared with Dizi society.

INTER-GROUP VIOLENCE

The actual rate of inter-community homicide and other forms of conflict (theft, cattle raids) in the Maji area is relatively high. My estimate, based on a three-year count of incidents in the mid-1990s where five different ethnic groups[14] and village dwellers were involved, is about five to six fatal victims of armed conflict per 10,000 inhabitants per year. Most of the perpetrators are Anuak or Suri, and few are ever brought to justice, either by their own people or by the state authorities. Dizi and village people practise self-defence and occasionally retaliate, but if they create victims it usually brings more violence.

The violence often occurs unpredictably, in sudden flare-ups in the market place, on the road when groups pass each other, or during a drinking party, and, is vehement, and according to local informants, more cruel than in the past: involving machetes, with an overdose of bullets, and often unprovoked (as in ambushes). Finally, and most important for our purpose here, the violence defies reconciliation. The reason it defies reconciliation is that its actual 'performance' has significantly transgressed the accepted cultural or ritual bounds (e.g. killing women and children in the fields or on the road, killing elders not involved in any fighting). Instead of reconciliation, revenge is sought, seemingly based on the idea, also according to Suri elders who reject the violence of the younger age grade, that 'the gun solves problems' and 'saves time'. Mediation is rejected when retribution is so easy. Since the possession of at least one automatic rifle per person has become a necessary symbol of 'manhood' and even of social identity among the junior age-grade members, a Suri ethos of violent self-assertion has been reinforced at the expense of notions of balance and

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[13] The concern with status and prestige (and its link with violent self-assertion) is of course a human universal.

[14] Anuak, Me'en, Suri, Dizi and Nyangatom.

conciliation. This holds true of cases not only outside their society but also within it, because there has been a noticeable decline in observation of the practice of intra-Suri homicide compensation (*ligin*) as well.

<center>PRECARIOUS MEDIATION MECHANISMS</center>

Among the Suri and Dizi[15] reconciliation rituals were the rule for intra-group conflicts including, notably, homicide. They followed the classical model, the general outlines of which are well known from the literature on African societies (public gathering of the two families involved, mediation by elders, agreement on compensation in kind or in cash and ritual reconciliation). For inter-group conflict mediation in the recent past, a similar public procedure was followed, led by leaders and elders. Between Dizi and Suri, these were the local chiefs of the Dizi chiefdoms and the spokesmen of the 'reigning' Suri age grade called *rora*.

If a number of violent incidents had accumulated so as to endanger the peace of the country, a reconciliation ceremony was organised, which was usually a two or three-day get-together. The absolute prerequisite if such a reconciliation gathering was to have any value was a ceremony (in itself worthy of extensive comment) marked by the following elements: (1) the ritual slaughter of two or more oxen; (2) the washing of the Dizi and Suri community leaders in the animals' blood, (3) the cutting and dividing of the peritoneum[16] and drying it on the fresh hide of one of the animals; (4) verbal pledges by the representatives while seated on a cowhide, and washing their hands in the green substance (partially digested grass and plants) found in the stomach of the ox, and (5) hanging the dried strips of the peritoneum on the necks of members from the other group. Sometimes both groups fired their rifles, with the muzzles directed downwards at a big stone to signify the idea that bullets should hit the earth and not the people from the other group.

These reconciliations were, however, never seen as 'the end of all violence'. They were part of a long-term cyclical process of 'readjusting' group relations when a serious crisis loomed. No one had the idea that violence and killing could be prohibited or banished: all one could do was contain it, on the basis of the idea that shared interests and bonds between the groups[17] should be addressed. In this sense violence was a normal and accepted part of life, as was its periodical mediation.

The impact of the state, especially in the time of the Marxist communist Derg regime led by Mengistu Haile-Mariam (1975–91) and the present EPRDF regime (after 1991), has brought important

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[15] And among others groups, but they are not discussed here.
[16] The subcutaneous fat from the stomach of the oxen.
[17] E.g. there was a putative kinship bond between the ritual leaders of the Dizi and Suri, highly unlikely in biological terms.

changes. As group conflicts escalated owing to developments briefly indicated above (ecological, economic, demographic and political) the state sought to impose its peace on the area with force and to contain the increased recourse to violence. In the wake of the rapid spread of modern rifles among the population, especially the Suri in the border area, it was to prove largely unsuccessful.

The 'hegemonic project' of the Derg state was defined by a Leninist-communist ideology and aimed at forging a unity of all groups under a socialist vanguard party, declaring traditional political-economic inequalities and cultural differences 'backward' and to be overcome. The project of establishing a strong state at the local level, however, did not materialise. The state administration did not respond adequately to local problems such as famine (in 1984–85 and 1988), did not control the incursions of Sudanese groups on to Ethiopian soil, could not deliver the necessary services, and could not maintain public order, as was evidenced by the growing number of fatalities in the incidents between various ethnic communities challenging state policies (forced resettlement, high taxes, campaigns against so-called 'bad cultural habits'). In general, the malarial lowland area—home of Me'en, Anyuak and especially Suri people—remained out of the reach of the authorities, and investing military and administrative resources in it was considered economically and politically unrewarding.

Nevertheless, state officials tried on various occasions to call reconciliation meetings between the ethnic groups when they thought public safety was in danger. Such efforts had already started under Emperor Haile Sellassie, during whose forty-year reign two such meetings were called (and under whom violent confrontations were less frequent). In the seventeen-year Derg period there were at least five such big inter-community meetings. But they did not stop the escalation of violence. Notably the Derg regime with its policies of violent political suppression, stifling traditional culture, economic stagnation and militarisation of the country is recalled as a disastrous period, to which all present-day problems are traced back.

Under the EPRDF regime after 1991 a new policy of ethnic rights and federalism was declared. Minority group languages were to be respected and used in education, and members of the local ethnic groups should form the local administration (even if lacking the skills or personal ability). In the meantime, problems like the spread of small arms, encroachments on each other's territory (Nyangatom–Suri–Dizi), recurrent local famine, and the difficulties of establishing accessible health services and securing safe roads were not seriously dealt with. In the Maji area an unpredictable pattern emerged of violent incidents, robberies, ambushes and cattle raiding.

However, the new government that took over in May 1991 also tried to reconcile the ethnic groups or 'nationalities' (in Amharic: behéreseb) in the Maji region. The most interesting effort was made in late 1991 (and has not since been repeated). In the name of the new policy of recognising and reconciling ethnic groups a big 'reconciliation meeting' was organised in November in Maji. An EPRDF army contingent came

to the area 'to once and for all settle the conflicts' between the ethnic groups. The aim was to reach a comprehensive agreement based on mutual consent, grounded in recognition of the rights and duties of every nationality by the state and by all others, although the government representatives also frequently threatened the use of military force if co-operation was not forthcoming. An account of this interesting though inconclusive meeting is given in the following section.

MEDIATION FROM ABOVE: STATE AGENTS AND LOCAL ACTORS

I pay special attention to this 1991 Maji gathering because it was the first mass meeting of the representatives of the new regime and indigenous groups, about whom they did not know very much. Secondly, the meeting was a major social drama, a theatre of politics and power that presented the Suri and the other groups with the new face of government and with a new official ideology or rhetoric of ethnic group relations. It was a first effort at local translation of new (EPRDF) policy. The proceedings of the meeting reveal as much about Suri and Dizi attitudes as about those of the EPRDF people.

1. The community 'reconciliation meeting' was held in Maji town on 6 December 1991. The call had gone out three days before to the Suri, Dizi, and Me'en communities and to the townspeople. The meeting was presided over by the new EPRDF army contingent in Maji, the leaders of which wanted to introduce themselves (young soldiers in their mid or late 20s) and impress upon the people that they were the new authority in the country.

A young commander who chaired the meeting gave the first speech (translated into three languages):

'We came here to establish peace and government. The problems now existing between you should be solved. We are here to achieve this and guard the peace. A few things should be done for this:

• All military material, guns, ammunition, etc., should be declared and turned in. Government-supplied weapons should be brought back to the administration.

• People should return stolen property, especially cattle.

• Surma[18] should not enter and occupy Dizi country but stay in their own area, or go back south. This will prevent problems of fighting and killing.'

Only a small group mostly of older Suri men (not fully representative of the group as a whole) had come to listen, and any kind of serious talk and reconciliation between the communities could not be made. The chairman then asked 'why the Surma had not come'.

One Dizi man (who had lived for many years in the Suri area) answered: 'The distance is far, they are engaged elsewhere, and giving an invitation [order] two or three days before is too short notice.'

Another Dizi said: 'That is not true, they have very good ways of communication, and the invitations have arrived.'

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[18] He used the word Surma, not Suri. This was common usage among virtually all non-Suri people in the area.

Some Suri then said: 'We are in trouble with the Bume [Nyangatom] and many of our people are now there, guarding and defending the herds.'

A Dizi retorted: 'That again is not true, just an empty excuse not to come here and try to get an arrangement. It is just a sign that they do not want to come, are not interested . . . . But we must have our property back, and our people should be safe on the road and on the fields. How often did we have a "reconciliation" and how often was it broken by the Surma? The Surma are just too arrogant.'

The EPRDF people, after consultation with some town administrators, said: 'We are going to issue a new invitation to all parties, to a meeting to be held three days later. For this meeting, all parties should indeed come. Young and old, women and children. Whoever does not come, indicates that he is against peace in this area, and shows that he prefers war! This would be a bad decision, because if they don't come, we will come and start a campaign down there.'

So after just one and a half hours the meeting was adjourned. Dizi and townspeople were angry with the Suri. 'They are empty boasters, killers, robbers, liars. We waste our time here.'

2. The second meeting was held on 11 December 1991 in Maji.

The ritual leader [*komoru*] of the Tirma Suri (Bolegid'angi) had come this time, but not the leader of the Chai Suri. (Ritual leaders of the Suri are traditionally not allowed to leave the territory of their community.) For the rest, very few Suri came, and none of their women and children. The total number of participants was about 460: twenty Suri, about eighty Tishana-Me'en, about 350 Dizi and townspeople.

The meeting was then opened by two EPRDF representatives. They talked about peacemaking, group boundaries, and the rights and duties of 'nationalities'. They stressed the importance of reaching inter-community understanding and peace and co-operation. 'We will hear the grievances and problems of the various groups presented here, and then determine what to do.'

First the Dizi representatives spoke. One man gave a good and fairly complete picture of the plight of the Dizi, and even presented a brief 'list of main crimes by the Surma', raising the problem of lost property, and of husbands, children, wives killed '. . . who will never return. This must stop. All of it is unprovoked. We were hosting them [the Surma] on our land in periods of trouble, and now they usurp it and finish us. This is how they pay us back.'

A second Dizi speaker, a teacher and also working in the Ministry of Education branch in the district capital, gave a survey of Suri aggression, and talked about their lack of self-control and social disarray. He mentioned that the Suri now allegedly made the ritual killing marks on their arms when they killed a Dizi. This was a heavy indictment if true, because in the past it was never done, as the Dizi were ritual allies of the Suri. If markings were now made it meant that the Suri had declared the Dizi to be enemies by definition and a legitimate target for looting and wanton killing.

Then a Suri man gave a speech. He talked about the problems of the Suri in the Derg time (oppression, lack of support, neglect in times of trouble), and about the Bume who attacked them, robbed their cattle, and pushed them up into the Dizi mountains. He agreed that solutions should be found. 'The Government never helped us. Up to that time [i.e. of increased fighting and raiding with new firearms], there were never any problems with the Dizi. The Bume are the cause of all this, killing Suri up to the Sai area, in

Ekkedi's country. Also the attack on the Dizi that was mentioned by you [a notorious big raid on the village of Kärsi in 1989, where forty-three Dizi were killed in an hour-long attack] came only when we were provoked by the Dizi: the wife of a relative of Bolegid'angi, our leader, was killed. Also, our people were killed in the market in Maji: it was not safe for us.'

Another Suri speaker said: 'Basically we have no problem with the Dizi or the government. The problems come from a foreign country.' [meaning Sudan and the Toposa people there]. Then he tried to stall the discussion, talking about things of no substance. 'Tell us what is wrong, and we will try to discuss it and prevent it.'

After this, a Me'en person, son of a local chief, gave a calm speech about 'the Surma problem'. He said the Suri had also come to the fringes of their area three years ago, close to the cultivation sites of the Me'en, north-east of Tum town. Also on the road to the Jeba market the Suri were obstructing people. 'On several occasions they killed our people without provocation— for instance, a married couple recently. We have trouble in going to the fields, we cannot work there undisturbed. This situation must stop.'

The EPRDF representatives said: 'We heard all that was said, on Surma culture, on the unsolved problems, on the incidents. This should all be settled peacefully. The use of weapons cannot be the solution. And we are the army, not just any people. We say this to you. The former good relations between the Surma and Dizi should be restored.'

Then some additional questions and remarks were put in by the various groups of participants. Dizi: 'Our mining places, beehives, cattle, fields, etc., should be safe to go to. On our land we should have the right to live and to exploit it. We want agriculture and trade in peace with all. Thus all these [Surma] weapons should be registered and turned in to the authorities.'

The EPRDF people then asked the Suri: 'Now, why don't you turn in the weapons, which you cannot legally have?'

A Suri man: 'We bought them to fight the Bume and defend the herds.'

EPRDF: 'Do you want to give them back or not?'

The Suri man was hesitant and evasive: 'Well, . . . we came here as your relatives, and in good faith . . . We should be able to defend ourselves if the government cannot protect us. . . .'

Here confusion and irritated exclamations arose from among the crowd about this evasiveness.

The EPRDF people then said: 'We heard the information about the Bume problems, but: peace means that weapons should be handed in.'

Then there came a speech about EPRDF policy towards nationalities: their all being equal and having their own rights vis-à-vis others. Not like the Derg policy of suppression, etc. They compared the Amhara–Oromo relationship (of inequality or exploitation) with the present situation. Now there were (to be) more chances for both; and 'Also in this area, the Surma, Dizi and others should be treated equally, respect each other and work towards peace. Reconciliation through the elders to correct the bad policies of the past is now necessary. If the Surma do not want peace, violence may follow. If more problems for Dizi and Tishana [Me'en] come, this would be a very problematic development for all.'

A Suri spokesman said: 'We do not want to die, we want to live in peace, in good relations only. Many things were not yet said, and don't need to be said. . . . If you want a reconciliation, we will try your proposal [to turn in the weapons]. If there are problems, just come to us to talk.'

The EPRDF representative: 'There is a simple way to make peace and

reconcile. We will continue our discussions later. Consider the present proposal for real reconciliation.'

3. After a break of an hour for lunch and consultations, the meeting reopened. An elderly Amhara trader from Maji spoke. 'We have all seen what has happened in this area in the past years. This country, the roads, need peace. We call upon you all, bring the weapons, bring peace. The Bume are the government's problem. We need peace again in this area.'

EPRDF: 'The reconciliation should be made, and we should now see who supports it.'

Then they tried to take a vote, on a show of hands, on the proposal to register the weapons, but this failed; there were interruptions.

A Suri man said: 'When the weapons are not legal, they should be collected from all three groups, also Bume.'

EPRDF: 'It's true, the Bume are a problem, but in due time we will approach them too. We now need the will of all of you here, to make peace here. We will have to start with registering the weapons through elders, and then they have to be submitted to the local authorities.'

Again a vote: among the Suri few hands went up, but they agreed. The Dizi agreed massively. But they commented: 'Our guns are already all registered, only those of the Surma are not!' The Tishana-Me'en also agreed, making the same remark.

A Dizi farmer then gave further reasons for making peace in a good and convincing speech about the troubles among the Dizi due to the violence, about the tragedy of the killings and their disturbing effect on daily life, and emphasised their own (Dizi) peacefulness. Applause followed this speech.

EPRDF: 'We now need a date for delivering the lists with the weapons to be registered. This will be: Tahsäs 8 [15 February 1992].'

A Suri man: 'It is better for the EPRDF troops to come to us to do the job, because we Suri here are few in number, and we can't reach everywhere.'

EPRDF: 'No. It should be done through your own people.'

Suri man: 'OK, then . . . We will try to do the job in the coming ten days—we will warn the people and call them up with our trumpets.'

A Me'en representative said: 'We agree, but also our weapons have already been registered through the k'ebeles [local authorities]. The Surma don't have these [k'ebeles]. And they will hide most of their weapons.'

EPRDF: 'In ten days again, a meeting here.'

A Dizi commented: 'Of course, if we hand in our guns, you can be sure that the Surma will attack us again.'

EPRDF: 'We will see about that. All parties should give the right number of weapons possessed. No hiding. This is serious. We will get to the bottom of this.'

Another EPRDF man added: 'We heard about the stolen property [by Surma] of the Dizi. This must be returned, with apologies. The Bume problem should eventually be solved through elders and through us. It takes time, but will be done.'

A Dizi man: 'Our property stolen this year alone amounts to at least eighty-five cattle, twenty-seven mules of traders, and then we are not counting the dead . . .' This remark was not taken up.

A Suri man: 'We have to have recognition that the Bume, always coming into our area, are our biggest problem.'

EPRDF: 'The Bume should, if they are there in Surma territory, go back.'

Suri man: 'The Bume are now also close to Merdur [a place in Suri territory]. Why did the government give up the Merdur soldier post?'

EPRDF man: 'We will report on that.'

Then the election of 'elders' responsible for the registration of the weapons was held: from every group four to five people were signed up. Thereupon, the meeting dispersed.

4. On 15 February 1992 two EPRDF cadres (political officers from the ruling party) from the zonal capital Mizan Teferi returned to Maji to 'finish' the reconciliation between Dizi, Me'en and Suri, with the help of the local contingent of the EPRDF. People had been sent out again to get the agreement of the Suri elders in their villages. But the results were inconclusive. Only a few people came and very few weapons were turned in. The EPRDF troops saw the impracticability of roaming around the countryside in search of weapons and did not pursue the issue. The registering of Suri arms was unsuccessful, and the EPRDF contingent in Maji and Tum hoped that by their continued presence they would have a deterrent effect on local violence. Although a last collective meeting in Maji was never held and peace was neither officially established nor culturally sanctioned, the EPRDF local leaders later that month sent a news message to Addis Ababa, later also broadcast on Ethiopian national radio, stating that all was peaceful again in the Maji area. This was all too optimistic. In subsequent months and years the government troops indeed had a hard job in dealing with many violent incidents. Thus the overall 'reconciliation' effort had come to nothing.

POWER, CULTURE AND DIFFERENCE

As the proceedings of this historic meeting made clear, the idea that a 'final settlement' of regional problems could be reached, on the basis of 'reasonable agreement' among the groups, proved to be too optimistic. The outcome was inconclusive.

As a close reading of the statements reveals, the meeting was marked by misunderstandings and by underlying indifference among the participants (except perhaps the Dizi). The EPRDF people perhaps thought it could work along the lines they knew from conciliation efforts in the communities in their own (Tigray) area, where there was an underlying linguistic and cultural homogeneity lacking among the Maji population, and where they had been active as a movement for about sixteen years. Hence their cultural concepts of mediation and conciliation were shaped by a partly traditional northern Ethiopian ethic modified by secular and revolutionary-socialist thinking, which declared cultural differences and personal grievances (related to theft, loss of dignity, insult, etc.) relatively insignificant in view of the *collective* interest. Another underlying idea among the EPRDF people was that (as some of them repeatedly explained to me) whatever the problems in the Maji area, one had to deal with the fact that the people there were illiterate, uneducated and just 'ignorant' of how to deal with problems of conflict and reconciliation; one therefore had to 'teach them'.

The Maji meeting showed the above-mentioned misunderstandings in a number of ways. First of all, the 'imposed' nature of the meeting—not enough time was given for representatives of the groups to come to the meeting place, and they were approached in an authoritarian manner.

Second, the discussion itself had been arranged too hastily and was planned to take only one day, although the number of people attending was large (about 450 people). A traditional reconciliation meeting of leaders of the Dizi, Suri or Nyangatom took at least two days; food (especially cattle slaughtered) and drink were provided, and the discussion of peace in a sociable setting was given time to run its course and was directed at consensus through deliberation.

Third, there was, understandably perhaps, no attempt in this state-sponsored meeting to sacrifice oxen or to carry out the other ritual acts deemed necessary for a true reconciliation (see above). The EPRDF soldiers and cadres directing the meeting were all from the northern Tigray region and perhaps did not know the details of such a 'culturally acceptable' reconciliation, although it is more likely that they did not care. For them a 'modern approach' to conflict resolution did not refer to such things, but only to a public gathering where opinions could be voiced and the imposition of a reasonable, common agreement prepared by the vanguard (the ruling party representatives). This had been the practice within their own insurgent movement during the armed struggle and after. Hence the meeting ignored or bypassed cultural expectations among Dizi, Me'en and especially Suri of what a reconciliation meeting should be and how the participants should be treated.

Finally, the people present knew that the EPRDF and government representatives simply did not have the ability or the material resources to address the underlying economic, ecological and political problems which cyclically *generated* conflict between the groups in this area.

A planned subsequent collective meeting in Maji after the one in November 1991 was never held. In the months and years thereafter, violence between the various groups did not stop. Tension came to a head in November 1993 with a big armed battle between EPRDF and Chai–Suri, after the latter had raided a Dizi village and prepared to attack the fifteen-strong EPRDF contingent in the neighbourhood. In this confrontation some 220 Suri and three government soldiers died. Although the violence subsided somewhat in subsequent months, reconciliation efforts were not forthcoming. Social relations between the groups remained unpredictable and in flux.

Since these events the government has tried to deal with the ethnic groups on a separate basis, creating a local administration in each 'ethnic community'. This has been partly successful in that a new local leadership stratum was created and direct government control of the groups increased. Local violent conflict and incidents were also dealt with on an individual basis, to the dismay of the Dizi and Me'en people, who would value a serious collective reconciliation, backed up with some guarantees from the new government.

However, there has been no sign of a culturally sanctioned reconciliation, with elders and ritual leaders of the local ethnic communities involved, and an appeal to traditional moral values of co-operation, reciprocal exchange and compromise, as well as restraint in the nature and exercise of violence. Most likely there never will be. The socio-cultural systems of local societies like those of the Suri, Dizi and Me'en seem notably, perhaps decisively, affected by the results of unsolved environmental and economic problems, by ambivalent state policy, and by the unforeseen, and probably unintended, effects of the new, unprecedented exercise of violence itself: excessive in scale, cruelty, scorn for suffering and vulnerability, apparent joy or a sense of achievement in killing others. This is not to say that all this is a runaway development incapable of being muted or transformed, but the point is that, at this historical juncture, it is occurring and has provoked intense confusion and unpredictability in the social fabric of the local 'ethno-system' in the Maji area.

PROSPECT: THE WANING OF MEDIATION MECHANISMS

Summarising the above account, one may conclude that underlying the breakdown of accepted ritual ways of mediation among Suri and Dizi in particular were a number of factors:

1. The reduced economic dependence of Suri on Dizi, i.e. a decline in the reciprocal relations of trade in grain and cattle, obviating the need to cultivate good relations.

2. The relatively rapid adoption of semi-automatic rifles among the Suri when their neighbours already had access to them.

3. A concomitant internal crisis in Suri society between the generations (junior age grade versus senior 'ruling' age grade). The Suri polity could not deal with the new power of young Suri (based ultimately on the proceeds of gold sales, converted into guns and ammunition), which led to increased and excessive cattle raiding, killing and robbery.

4. A decline in respect for traditional religious or supernatural notions, sanctions and rituals. In itself the loss of confidence in the value or efficacy of the ritual code is a process not fully understood by the Suri and Dizi people themselves but is a remarkable and perhaps troubling *cultural* fact which has engulfed this society in only a few years.

5. The claim of the Ethiopian state—since 1991 especially—to be able to provide an alternative model of 'mediation' and 'conflict resolution', devaluing and bypassing existing cultural notions of mediation and reconciliation. It is, however, unlikely that state policies will have any success unless they build in some way on local understandings of conciliation and cultural validation. So far, we could say (recalling, e.g., the violent incident of 1993), state intervention has largely been a failure. In subsequent years no meaningful mediation or settlement of violent conflicts was accomplished, although the state set up new administrative structures in the

respective 'ethnic areas' under which the local people have been accorded positions of local leadership.

That ritual has in fact lost its efficacy in inter-group relations can thus be explained from the combined effect of factors already mentioned: the relatively recent influx of arms, mainly from Sudan[19]; the push of the Nyangatom towards Suri and Dizi country; the effects of the possession and use of new fire-power technology on generational relations (age grades); and finally the disregard of the EPRDF for local notions and symbols of peace-making. Finally, while conciliation rituals were frequently broken in the past—though at much longer intervals—local people always held to the *ideal* of ritual mediation and ceremonial agreement in itself. This ideal, however, is subverted by the developments just mentioned, and this in turn has a far-reaching impact on people's cultural representations of 'moral community' and social interaction.

It may even be hypothesised that the era of culturally sanctioned 'reconciliation' is gone for ever: perhaps Suri, Dizi and Me'en are fighting a chimera of the past, because contemporary socio-political *conditions*—shaped by the general spread of small arms, growing competition for valuable resources, economic relations in turmoil, the growing role of state officials and their policies, and the growth of tourism, the mission and 'development'—have simply made the very validity and feasibility of such ritual agreements appear redundant or vacuous.

An analysis (incomplete as it is) of Suri violence in relation to its wider politico-ecological environment demonstrates that material concerns on the one hand, and certain cultural templates on the other (such as the concern to expand herds and families and to attain status based on, and attached to, consciously violent self-expression in general),[20] have combined to reinforce violent performance and the decline of shared codes of (ritual) mediation. As a result, for the Suri males, it became more than a survival tactic and a cultural ethos of self-defence: a mode of self-assertion and a way of life, breaking the bounds of the culturally accepted and the economically necessary. The intensification of violence itself was not a series of individual acts of transgression but a structural phenomenon, having a social logic of its own. It thus led directly to the 'undoing of culture', i.e. of the ritual codes of mediation. This problem is now the subject of intense debate within Suri society, and no solution is yet in sight.

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[19] The guns from the disintegrating Derg army in May 1991 mostly went to highlanders in the small towns and especially to people east of the river Omo; the Maji route was not an escape route for retreating Derg soldiers and officers.

[20] As, e.g., in ceremonial stick duelling (*donga*) with other Suri and in cattle raiding and killing members of enemy groups (in recognition of which the prestigious scarifications on the arms were obtained).

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social and political background of escalating violence between ethnic groups in south-western Ethiopia who until recently had customary and ritually sanctioned ways of resolving conflict. It highlights the impact of the emerging state hegemony in a local setting on ethnic groups not yet involved in the global political economy. The account also indicates the changing arenas of 'ethnic' self-definition and economic opportunity for local groups in post-1991 Ethiopia. As the report of a big reconciliation meeting held between the government and the groups involved (and discussed here) makes clear, in the efforts of state agents to mediate emerging conflicts in conditions of increasing resource scarcity and identity struggle, the use of customary mediation mechanisms and their cultural symbolism was rhetorically recognised. But at the same time efficient mediation was structurally impeded by the very nature of the exercise of authority by the agents of the state and by their incapacity to implement practical measures to establish local peace. This failure to reconstitute a new political arena of conflict resolution was matched by the inability of the (representatives of the) ethnic groups concerned to redefine their relationship in a constructive and culturally acceptable manner.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine le contexte social et politique dans lequel s'inscrit l'escalade de la violence entre groupes ethniques du sud-ouest de l'Ethiopie qui, jusqu'à une période récente, résolvaient leurs conflits au moyen de méthodes consacrées par la coutume et le rituel. Il souligne l'impact de l'hégémonie étatique naissante, au niveau local, sur les groupes ethniques

restés à l'économie politique mondiale. Cette étude décrit également l'évolution des domaines propices au développement économique et à la détermination "ethnique" individuelle des groupes locaux dans l'Ethiopie d'après 1991. Comme le montre clairement le compte-rendu d'une grande réunion de réconciliation rassemblant le gouvernement et les groupes concernés (étudiés dans cet article), le recours à des mécanismes de médiation coutumiers et à leur symbolisme culturel était reconnu en théorie dans le cadre des efforts de médiation engagés par les représentants de l'Etat face aux conflits naissants sur fond de pénurie croissante des ressources et de lutte identitaire. Or, dans le même temps, l'efficacité de la médiation était entravée dans sa structure par la nature même de l'exercice du pouvoir par les représentants de l'Etat et par leur incapacité à mettre en œuvre des mesures pratiques pour instaurer la paix locale. Cette inaptitude à reconstituer un nouveau champ politique de résolution des conflits avait pour parallèle l'inaptitude des (représentants des) groupes ethniques concernés à redéfinir leur relation de manière constructive et culturellement acceptable.