Famine, Gold and Guns: The Suri of Southwestern Ethiopia, 1985–91

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Over the past few years, the Suri have lived through a deep ecological and social crisis without substantial external aid from either the Ethiopian government or international aid agencies. They have experienced drought, cattle disease and an increasing level of violent conflict with their neighbours, leading to the severe disruption of their traditional agro-pastoral subsistence system and settlement pattern. Through migration, the exploitation of gold resources and investment in automatic weapons, however, they have managed virtually a full recovery of their economy and society.

The Suri, who number about 28,000 and are made up of two sub-groups, the Tirma and Chai, live in Kafa region in the far southwest of Ethiopia. They practice shifting cultivation, transhumant pastoralism and hunting and gathering. Their area is one of the most inaccessible and neglected in Ethiopia: there are no government offices, no public services, no roads and no police or army posts (Figure 1).

Their territory is a semi-arid lowland plain, covering about 4400 km², and between 500 and 1000 metres above sea level. Annual average rainfall (less than 1000 mm) is insufficient for intensive, permanent agriculture and even (as the drought and famine crises of the early 1980s testify) for regular reliable cropping by shifting cultivation. The soils, although fertile, are mainly rocky and unsuitable for plough agriculture. The vegetation consists of bushland thicket, wooded grassland and some riverine forest along the Kibish River. The tsetse fly is not widespread and conditions for cattle-keeping are good.

Game animals, which were once abundant, have been greatly reduced in numbers by ferocious local hunting.

THE 1985 FAMINE

Since the early 1970s the Suri have suffered a number of setbacks to their subsistence economy. Epidemics of cattle disease, including anthrax (probably introduced from Sudan), made large tracts of their traditional grazing area around Mt Naita (called Shulugui by the Suri) and along the Tirma Range a danger zone for herding. Drought caused severe crop failure and cattle losses, especially among the Chai, a Suri section living east of the Kibish River (Turton, 1984, p. 187). Since 1968 they had also been prevented from hunting in the Omo National Park, which was patrolled by game guards who were, until recently, better armed than themselves. They say they were defenceless in a double sense: not only did they lack food reserves but they also had too few weapons to raid their neighbours (principally the Nyangatom to the south) for cattle.

The crisis reached its zenith with the drought and famine of 1984–5, which informants describe as their worst period in living memory. Traditional coping mechanisms (intensification of hunting and gathering, emergency sale of livestock and raiding) proved inadequate and there were so many deaths that most corpses were simply covered with branches and leaves and left unburied. No doubt disease was an...
important contributory factor to the death rate, as De Waal found in his study of Darfur (1989, p. 7), but it is impossible to make an accurate assessment of this.

Several Suri groups migrated northwards to the Tulgit area, southwest of Jeba town, drawn both by the town itself and by the prospect of new grazing and cultivation areas. Around 1000 Tirma (the Suri who live west of the Kibish) crossed into Sudan to exchange cattle for grain with the local inhabitants (Isale and Murle) and to find new cultivation sites on the southern fringes of the Boma Plateau — an identical move to one they had made earlier this century. Under similar pressure, the Chai moved closer to the Maji foothills, into territory traditionally regarded as belonging to the Dizi, who live on the Maji plateau. An additional reason for this northward movement of Suri was the military threat from the Nyangatom (see below).

The authorities in Maji eventually notified the Government’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) which set up a famine relief programme together with the non-governmental organisation, World Vision International (WVI). Planes landed at a small airstrip in the Kibish area (constructed by missionaries during the 1960s) and sacks of grain were distributed to the Suri. No relief camp was set up: the Suri, who live west of the Kibish, moved closer to the Maji foothills, into territory traditionally regarded as belonging to the Dizi, who live on the Maji plateau. An additional reason for this northward movement of Suri was the military threat from the Nyangatom (see below).

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When, after some months, the relief operation ended, conditions in the Suri area were much the same as before the crisis: crop yields were poor, stock-wealth was down to less than three animals per household head and wild plant and game resources outside the National Park area were being seriously depleted. There were some unsuccessful attempts by the RRC and WVI to ‘rehabilitate’ sections of the territory. The secret of this recovery lay in the increased exploitation of a single resource: gold.

They increased fire-power gave the Nyangatom a decisive edge over their traditional enemies, the Suri (or Nyikoroma, as they call them). A period of ‘hunting’ of Suri by Nyangatom began, causing not only many deaths but also the loss of large numbers of cattle and small stock and of traditional grazing areas around Naita. This might argue that this conflict was the prime cause of famine because it undermined the traditional coping mechanisms of the Suri (including the sale of cattle, hunting and gathering and short-term migration). They were forced to concentrate in larger, more easily defended settlements which resulted in the relative depletion of bush resources (for firewood, building, and fencing compounds) and lower crop yields (because of shorter fallow periods). In 1986—87 the threat from the Nyangatom finally forced the Suri to settle, in mass, in their present area in the Maji foothills.

Despite the fact that most of them have now (1991) been there for five or six years, they see themselves as living in exile from their homeland, Shulugui (Mt Naita), where, they say, their most important rituals should be held. Although they insist that they will eventually return, they are also aware that it may already be too late for this. In any event, the northward push of the Suri into the fringes of Dizi (and probably Mē’en) territory will continue, whether or not any of them settle permanently in the highlands.

At the time of my first visit to the Suri, in February 1988, they were still suffering from the effects of the drought and famine. By late 1991, however, they had substantially recovered from the crisis: many more young children were in evidence, they had large fields of ripening sorghum and maize, their cattle numbers were greatly increased compared to 1985 and there were some returnee migrants from Sudan among them. Another indication of their regained strength and self-confidence was that almost every adult man carried an automatic rifle, the new symbol of male power and status. Next to the Nyangatom, the Suri were now the best armed group in the area. The secret of this recovery lay in the increased exploitation of a single resource: gold.

Dizi and Anuak have obtained gold by panning in the upper Akobo (Dima) area since at least the time of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935—41). The Suri say they became familiar with the practice about twenty years ago but that, until recently, they have had no incentive to engage in it to any significant extent. Not only is the work hard, requiring several weeks stay in a kind of no-man’s land, but they have no use for gold within their own society. It was only external demand, from traders in Jeba and Maji, which finally persuaded them to take up gold-panning in the years of the drought. They soon found it profitable. It provided them with cash for buying tools, food, cattle and, later on, weapons. For 4.5 grams of pure gold (the result of a few weeks’ work) they received, in 1986—7, about 300 Ethiopian birr. With this they could buy one big cow or bull, or two heifers. By 1991 the price of gold had risen by about 15 per cent.

After 1986 there arose something of a Suri ‘gold rush’ to the Akobo area. The gold was not only sold to town-traders but also used (by Kalashnikovs from the Anuak) to buy Kalashnikovs from the Anuak (who had obtained them from Sudanese army depots). The main use made of the gold was to invest in cattle and guns: the two items which would enable them to re-establish their traditional economy and reinforce their hold over their traditional territory. But their newly acquired weapons also enabled them to attack the Dizi, on whose land they had been encroaching since 1985. In 1991 they launched at least four big raids on Dizi settlements, killing close to 100 people. In 1992, Suri youths killed several Dizi chiefs and, randomly, defenceless girls carrying water or fire-wood and men returning from their cultivation sites. Gold, then, enabled the Suri not only to survive their subsistence crisis but also to achieve a new position of power in the Maji area. No government forces, whether before or after the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991, were able seriously to threaten their position.

In these conditions it is highly unlikely that the Suri will voluntarily make the transition to sedentary agriculture. David
and Pat Turton have described such a pioneer move by a section of the Mursi, who settled as cultivators in the Mago valley at the end of the 1980s (1984). At present, however, this settlement has largely been abandoned, most of the migrants having returned to the lowlands. The Suri, like the Mursi, will be very reluctant to lead the life of settled farmers, especially if they have the option to strengthen their foothold in the pastoral economy. It should be recognized, moreover, that this attitude makes good economic sense since the growth potential of their herds enables them, in good years, to create substantially more wealth than is possible for the Dizi or Me'en. In addition, their new weapons have given them easy access to game meat from the Omo National Park (since the game guards fear their fire-power) and to the gold, the exploitation of which they have tried to monopolise.

SOME SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS

At the height of the famine, as resources available for sharing declined, solidarity between agnates, clan members and fellow villagers broke down and domestic units became more isolated from each other. A division also occurred within domestic groups, as men and women operated more independently of each other. Related to this was a greater frequency of inter-community rivalry which has made them more competitive everyday relations. The Nyangatom, which has lost its importance, so a policy of consensus between ethnic groups has given way to one of confrontation. This in turn has cut off, or at least seriously impaired, a traditional mediatory channel for example, between Suri and Dizi — have undergone changes which have affected their ‘back yard’. On the other hand, there may be equivalent resources available to other groups, in similar crisis situations, which are completely absent for the Suri — such as wage labour on plantations and in cities.

In any case, the Suri continue to be a highly vulnerable population. Their main problems are (1) unreliable rainfall; (2) competitive relations between demographically expanding ethnic groups in an area with finite and limited resources; and (3) external threats due to large-scale regional conflicts spilling over from adjacent areas (Northern Kenya and Southern Sudan). State power being virtually absent in the area, local conflicts are increasingly played out at the local level through force of arms.

As traditional mediatory channels through established ritual mechanisms — for example, between Suri and Dizi — have lost their importance, so a policy of consensus between ethnic groups has given way to one of confrontation. This in turn has cut off, or at least seriously impaired, trade and exchange relations, forcing each group to rely on its own resources and to aim at self-sufficiency. These developments are not simply the result of a deterioration in the natural environment, since earlier conflicts were more or less contained and brought to at least a temporary, ritualistically sealed conclusion. What is decisive about the present situation is the uncontrolled spread of powerful modern armaments, creating an unpredictable and insecure political environment. Since the problem of arms proliferation cannot be solved easily, the resultant instability will continue, for the...
forseeable future, to exacerbate the over-
exploitation of a dwindling resource base by
increasing numbers of people.

A general point to emerge from this article is that disaster-affected populations should be given a chance to develop their own responses to subsistence crises, and that external aid should be geared to such indigenous responses (Turton 1984). This does not mean that they should be left to sort out their problems entirely on their own but that their view of the situation should be taken into account at the outset, including any inclination they might have to reject external aid if it involves too many compromises or concessions. They will remain in the area after the relief workers have left and the general level of socio-economic development and the cultural and political context will be largely unchanged. A sustainable development program must therefore be based upon concrete knowledge of these conditions. In the case of the Suri this would mean, more specifically:

recognizing their wish to maintain their pastoral economy;
— making the provision of veterinary services an integral part of any aid programme;
— taking into account their seasonal transhumant movements;
— recognising the importance of the gathering of wild vegetable products to daily subsistence;
— recognising the central role of women in most subsistence activities;
— ensuring that any development of irrigation agriculture (along the Kibish river) is focused on crops familiar to the Suri; and
— in the long run, improving transport, educational and medical facilities to enable them to participate in the national economy.

But one should not expect too much of such ‘development’ schemes. Based on their past experience of state intervention in their affairs, the Suri are weary of outside interference of any sort and, in addition, are contemptuous of the peasant culture of the Dizi and other highlanders. Having now a power-base which gives them a great deal of autonomy, it will be difficult — though not impossible — to discourage them from attacking outsiders (such as travellers and teachers), raiding members of neighbouring groups for livestock and from hunting in the Omo National Park. If ‘development’ means giving up their self-won independence and proudly maintained culture, they will probably refuse it, preferring to rely on their own resources in times of crisis, even if the human costs are high.

Notes

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1. They are popularly known as Surma (e.g. Beckwith & Fisher 1990) but, although this name is known to them, they more often refer to themselves as Suri when talking to outsiders. Amongst themselves they use the self-names ‘Chai’ and ‘Tirma’.

The population estimate is based on a field census carried out in 1991/2. The local administration, in Maji, has no census data for the Suri. During the 1985 famine, World Vision International (referred to later in the article) estimated the population at 35,000 — almost certainly an over-estimate. The 1984 census of Ethiopia (Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1990) treats the Suri and Surma as separate groups and gives their combined population, based on a sample, as 16,426.


3. Some of this information was confirmed to me by Serge Tornay, the leading anthropological authority on the Nyangatom, during a conversation in Addis Ababa in January 1991.

References


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