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Ritual and Political Forms of Violent Practice among the Suri of Southern Ethiopia*

Violence as a problem

As a theoretical field, the anthropology of violence has been expanding rapidly[1] in recent years. There has been an upsurge in both case studies and comparative study of conflict and violence. African examples have received prominent attention in this respect, although the continent is not an exception in being more or less violent than other areas. The renewed attention to violence from many academic disciplines study has led to calls for unified "theories of violence". While it is not likely that new grand theories will be forthcoming, it is appropriate to put the analysis of violence as interaction more central in social and cultural analysis. Although violence as a subject has not been neglected in general social theory and history or in anthropology, social studies which systematically address violent interaction as a basic dimension in the (re)production of human sociality are still relatively scarce.[2]

For this there are ideological reasons, contained in the long tradition of Western thought on the social order, where violence is—despite its ubiquity—usually seen as a problematic aberration, a non-rational, uncon-

1. Cf. BALANDIER (1986), BLOCH (1992), KROHN-HANSEN (1995), MOORE (1994), RICHES (1986, 1991).
2. See, however, KNAUFT (1991).

trolled mode of action signifying a regression to a wild state of "nature".
There may also be scientific reasons: problems of the definition of "vio-
lence", the reluctance in the comparative study of culture to ground the
analysis of violence in the dialectic of basic human predispositions ("biol-
ogy") on the one hand and the realm of social life and culture on the
other, and the relative infrequency of violence in research settings (and
its inaccessibility and danger when it occurs).

Various theoretical moments have characterised anthropological studies
on violence so far. It has been emphasised, especially in American
cultural anthropology, that aggression and warfare are culturally mediated
phenomena, and not just the reflection of an innate human urge which
just has to come out everywhere. Cultural materialist approaches have
stressed the environmental-ecological logic of conflict (cf. Bennett Ross
1980). There has, however, recently been a renewed interest in evolu-
tionary approaches which stress the "competition for reproductive success"
of persons within a population (e.g., Chagnon 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Betzig,
Borgerhoff Mulder & Turke 1988), and which counters such earlier cul-
turalist points of view.

In the anthropological study of "tribal warfare" as developed, e.g., in
Papua New Guinea-studies since World War II, ecological-materialist the-
ories have been important. They are revived in modern approaches which
emphasise "resource competition" as the framework of conflict and vio-
lence (cf. Ferguson 1984; Markakis 1994). It is often difficult to measure
and analyse this theoretical notion. The entities said to "compete" (indi-
viduals or groups) are always assumed to do so largely outside the socio-
cultural framework within which this definition of reality is constructed
and reproduced. "Competition for scarce resources" can indeed be a
concern perceived as such in many societies in conditions of social hier-
archy, scarcity, population density and power struggle. But this idea of
competition is not sufficient for a theoretical explanation of violence.

Violent action, like other social behaviour, can be more fully under-
stood in a theoretical perspective which sees humans as social animals
(i.e. with psycho-biological predispositions) with a capacity for symbol
manipulation and social construction of "meaning". This capacity is not
to be seen as a simple reflection of social conditions, but as a dimension
which enters into the very definition of reality itself by both subjects and
observers. Such a perspective, based on Weberian ideas about power and
legitimacy, should be able to deal also with the ambiguity of the manifold
social actions in every society which can be labelled as violent. Few if
any societies are consistently "pacifist" in rejecting all violence: in some
conditions it is seen and experienced by many as necessary, inevitable,
justified, or even psychologically rewarding.

In this article, we examine the construction and expression of violence
among the Suri (or Surma) of southern Ethiopia, a pre-literate, non-
industrial society which does not share our (Hobbesian) model of man

(Turton 1994a: 21). While in overall terms this group cannot be called more violent than, for instance, people in Western industrial society, it is a setting within which the workings of some "elementary rules of violent behaviour" might be observed. The case may tell us about this cultural, symbolic dimension of violence in a small-scale non-stratified society, and may enable us to qualify the often-heard statement that violent behaviour is meaningless and irrational—on the contrary, it is nearly always "meaningful" (cf. Blok 1991). In some respects, violence can be an "organising principle" in society, not only in moments of crisis but also to structure a part of human experience and values. Whether the Suri or related groups can be said to have a "culture of violence" is a debatable point. This concept has questionable analytical value, and carries the danger of essentialising a group tradition which is in reality fluid and adaptive. It is, however, a term in the local discourse used by their peasant neighbours, victimised by their raids.

David Riches (1991: 295) has described violence as: "...contestably rendering physical hurt." This refers to social interaction whereby intentional harm is done, and where the views of perpetrator and victim (and witnesses) are the issue of dispute, these parties being conscious of the problematic aspects and of different views on the (il)legitimacy of the harm done. The definition also points to the fact that violence, even in its most crude and aimless forms, always has an aspect of "communication"—be it as a statement of social protest, of intimidation, or of self-assertion—and thus of certain cultural values. Violence is also "rupture", immediate and challenging action, demanding a response. It may in all cases be tied to questions of social honour, of the integrity of the person or of the group.

This communicative, or perhaps performative, definition of violence was perhaps meant as a step toward a theoretical framework and for a more adequate ethnography of violence, which assume its universality but also see the culturally quite varying degrees of defining or contesting some social behaviour as "violent". But the definition excludes several forms of action which we would call violence from an outsider's point of view, e.g. when rendering hurt or intimidating persons, or for that matter, animals, is not in a particular culture seen as contestable (yet). For instance, Bloch's description (1992) of the sacrificial rite as being violent (the shedding of blood through killing, with the purpose of "appropriating" some other being's life force) will not count as such in many cultures.

Here we intend to follow a wider or "weaker" definition, along Bloch's lines. It is too restricted to only speak of violence when bloodshed among humans and destruction of the social order are involved. The challenge is to look for the cultural roots and antecedents of violent response in order to trace how aggressive, destructive and murderous violence of people could at all emerge. The local people and the representatives of

the state in the area which will described here say that the Suri violence
(their disregard for life and property, their raiding, their ambushing and
killing others) "is simply in their culture". Do such statements make any
sense? To answer it, a loose definition of violence is needed: violence is
the human use of symbols and acts of intimidation and/or damaging
(potentially lethal) physical force against living beings to gain or maintain
dominance.

## Chai-Suri society: the ecological, political and social setting

The Suri are a Nilo-Saharan (Surmic)-speaking group of agro-pastoralists,
somewhat comparable to other East African peoples many of which have
been well-studied in anthropology (Nuer, Dinka, Maasai, Turkana, Kari-
mojong). Their history is still shrouded in mystery, although they have
clear linguistic and cultural connections to other (Para)Nilotic groups in
the region. At present they cultivate a strong group identity, an aversion
toward a settled agricultural way of life, a "warrior ethos" (on which more
below), and a cultural focus on cattle. For the most part of their recorded[3]
history of some 200 years, the Suri were independent cattle-herders in the
Ethio-Sudanese borderland. The Suri-region came under the Ethiopian
state in the early 20th century, but, being remote from the central high-
lands, it was never well connected or integrated into it. The Suri have
two sub-groups—Tirma and Chai—, and the rest of this essay will speak
about the Chai, some 16,000 people. They live in the area southwest of
the small town of Maji, about 60 miles north of Lake Turkana (see Map).

Environmental and economic factors

The Chai land is a lowland zone south of the Maji highlands of South-
western Ethiopia, near the border with Sudan. The land is fertile due to
the volcanic soil, but rainfall is unreliable, especially in the plains where
the Chai keep their cattle-herds. The rain is insufficient for permanent,
intensive agriculture, and does not guarantee the successful shifting cul-
tivation of staple crops (maize and sorghum). Apart from cattle-herding
and cultivation the Suri are engaged in hunting. At the end of the dry
season (March-April), there is a problem of water and pasture, with staple-
food supplies running very low. They have both agricultural and agro-
pastoral groups as neighbours.

The most prized possession of the Suri are their cattle-herds. Cattle
do not provide more than about a third of the food supply (milk, blood,
occasionally meat) but are a store of wealth which can be traded for grain

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3   In oral tradition.
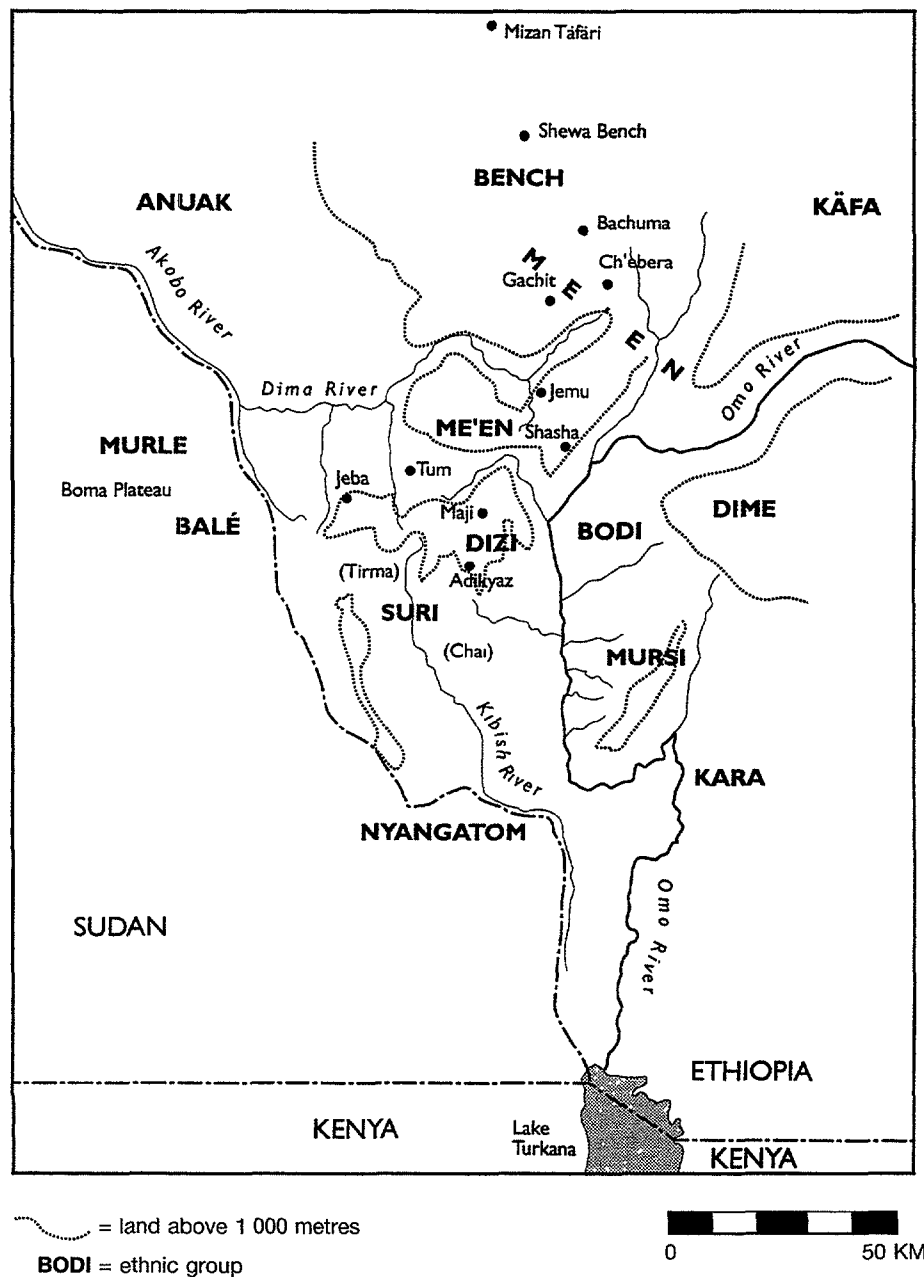
The Maji area, Southwestern Käfa, Ethiopia

in times of need. In a cultural sense, the possession of cattle is intimately tied up with Chai social personality, adulthood and individual dignity, both for men and women (who also have rights of possession). Young men are expected to be committed to herding the cattle and defending it against raiding outsiders. On this basic level—i.e. that of their mode of subsistence and of "competition for resources"—the readiness to confront and use violence (repulsing and/or killing the raider-enemies) is an essential "requirement" of the present Suri way of life, and is not seen in any sense as problematic or contested.

Internal relations

The Chai have no "chiefs", but only a ritual leader or figurehead (called *komoru*). All *komorus* come from the same ancient clan. He is chosen by consensus, and installed by elders in a special ceremony. He has no executive or commanding authority when in function. His main role is to be a focal point of normative unity of all Chai. The British anthropologist D. Turton, in his work on the related Mursi (cf. Turton 1975: 180), has called the priest-like figure of the *komoru* a "conductor of absolute power" (connected to the sky-god Tumu). The *komoru*, through his blessings is expected to emphasise values of restraint, to be non-violent, and to reconcile the various domestic units, clan groups and local communities if need be.

The Chai also know an age-grade system (for males), with four ritually separated grades, of which the third one (called *rórà*) provides the "reigning" one and has its own name (like an age-set name). This grade provides the main decision-makers and authority figures. Women derive age-grade status from their husbands, and are not separately initiated.[4]

Chai live in compact villages, with members from various clans. A clan identity is only important for the choice of marriage-partners (exogamy). Several villages form a territorial unit (called *b'uran*), which originated as a co-operative herding unit of its members. Domestic units led by married women are the foci of daily social life. There is little stratification in terms of possessions and wealth. Social relations outside village or *b'uran*-membership are formed on the basis of ritual bond-friendship (established through cattle-exchange), with other Suri as well as with non-Suri.

Inter-ethnic relations

Chai society, both internally and in its relations to other ethno-cultural groups, is marked by frequent violence. The latter comprises, among

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4. More on the authority structure among the Chai, in ABBINK (1997).
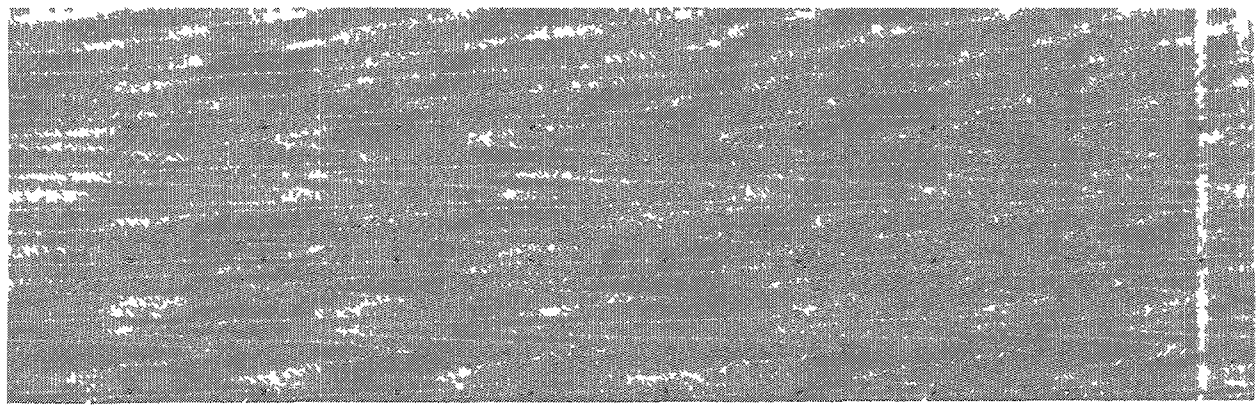
other things, inter-ethnic conflicts in the form of ambushes, robberies and killings. These seem to have gained in intensity in the last decade (see Abbink 1993b, 1994). There are indications that external factors, such as the nature of state—local society relations, changes in the regional power balance, as well as the influx of technologically advanced automatic rifles have played a decisive role here. These factors, to which we return below, have partly disturbed the "ritual control" of violence within Chai society itself.

Chai violence has indeed always moved between the two poles of *ritual containment* and *political strategy*. The former element was related to keeping equilibrium in their own society, the latter to safeguarding access to pasture, water holes, fields, and natural resources vis-à-vis other pastoralist groups (Nyangatom, Toposa and Mursi), and agricultural neighbours (Dizi, highlanders). In recent years there have been additional political-ecological factors at play, and these have brought them in conflict with the Anuak and the agricultural Dizi people as well (see Abbink 1993a). Especially the relations with the latter, now their most immediate neighbours, deserve to be considered.

Historically, the Chai were located near Mt. Naita (also called Shu-lugui), a border mountain between Sudan and Ethiopia. According to their oral traditions they were formed or just "arrived" in this area about two-hundred years ago. However, in the past decade, the Chai gradually have filtered into areas formerly used by the Dizi people for cattle-herding, hunting and apiculture. The Dizi were an hierarchical chiefdom society, with elaborate rank distinctions, since the early 20th century heavily exploited and decimated by the northern Ethiopian settlers. Relations between Dizi and Chai are important for two reasons: a) both Dizi and Suri traditions maintain that their leading families have a common descent and cannot intermarry; b) they had instituted a kind of ritual alliance in matters of rain-control. While the Chai leaders were ascribed rain-making powers in the lowlands, the final authority on this was ascribed to the Dizi chiefs in the adjacent mountains (see Haberland 1993: 253). Under this "rain-pact" itself, the Chai—in times in drought, food shortage, cattle disease or other problems—were permitted to enter the areas claimed by the Dizi. This important cultural agreement was a kind of temporary sealing of a balance between these groups, codifying the exploitation of different but partly overlapping and complementary ecological niches: there was—and still is—economic exchange between them (cattle, pot-tery, iron products, grain, garden crops). There was also frequent inter-marriage, although mostly in the form of Chai men talking Dizi wives, in itself a sign of Chai dominance.[5]

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5   In the course of time, the Dizi—who also kept cattle in the lowlands—came to
     adopt several customs related to the "cattle-culture" of the Chai, but they never
     developed a comparable assertive ethos, emphasizing e g , personal violent per-

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Suri culture and the ethos of assertiveness

It was noted above that on the level of the Chai mode of subsistence and the readiness to confront raider-enemies, violence is emphatically present. What is more, it is not seen in any sense as problematic or contested.

But the Suri attitude towards violence is more than just essential self-defence. An imagery of tension or violent moments is woven into many aspects of Chai life, into ideals of manhood or social personality, and in general in a ritually expressed concern with what we might call "expansive reproduction": the growth of herds and of family and offspring. For outsiders, this attitude is reflected in many cultural metaphors which permeate Chai (Suri) culture[6], and even in the self-name "Chai", taken to mean "We revenge, we pay (them) back". For the Chai themselves, this imagery or symbolism of "violence" does not count as problematic either.

We immediately note two things: first that this "violent imagery" is mainly an aspect of the construction of the male gender. Females, while sharing the values underlying it, are not socialised to perform it except in a verbal manner. Second, we see that this imagery or symbolism is *not seen as problematic* or as referring to "violence" by the Chai themselves. This is done only by external observers.

The various realms of social discourse which serve to construct shared cultural scenarios for the Chai—and which are even shared in outline by their pastoralist Nyangatom neighbours, very similar to them in way of life—might also be said to have psychological aims: first, to force new members of society to overcome the *fear* of violence, of armed attack, of wounding and killing. Interestingly, Chai say that young boys have to learn to suppress a "natural inhibition" against the spilling of blood and against violently inflicting harm. A second aim may be to inculcate the idea of the immanence of violence, i.e. death, or the flowing of blood, in various stages and crucial moments of the life-cycle. When these two aims are achieved, violence is both domesticated, "embodied", and made instrumentally useful[7].

This violent imagery is expressed in at least the following three cultural metaphors/schemas, which tell us about the *indigenous* Chai conceptions about human motivations and relations. These are important if we want to advance anthropological theorising about violence and warfare and their relation to culture (cf. Turton 1994b: 25).

- The *sacrificial* metaphor. — The equation of the killing and offering of a consecrated (domestic) stock animal with beneficial effects for

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formance, militant defence of the cattle herds, or a specific decorative "body culture".

6. Culture we define here as the more or less durable, shared and transmitted patterns of behaviour in which collective ideals and norms of a group are expressed and which form an element of identity formation.
7. See part 4.
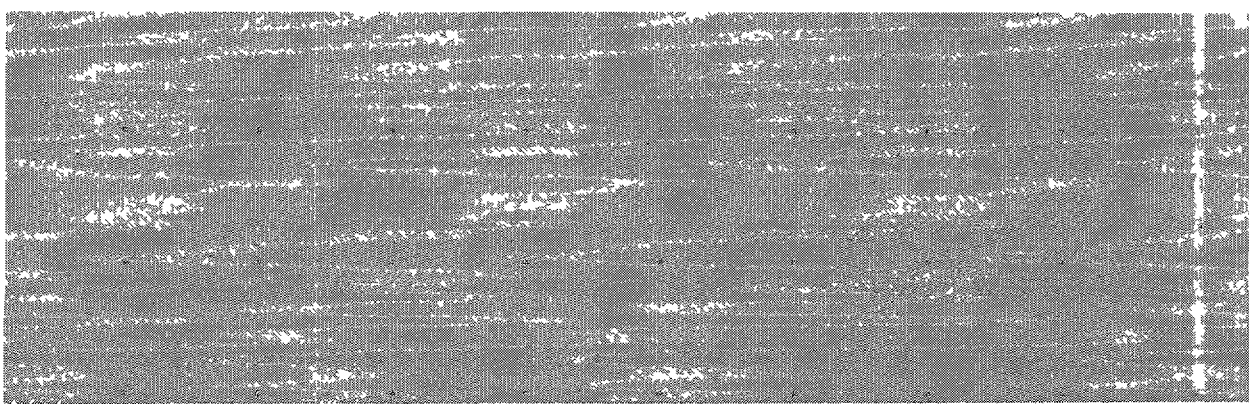
humans. This is done at certain ceremonial occasions, for instance: marriage, burial, age-group initiation, a rain-ceremony, installation of a *komoru*, and also at a major public debate, or sometimes in case of serious illness.[8] The core ideas behind putting a consecrated animal to death are perhaps: *substitution* and *vicarious victimisation*, because the violence is performed for the benefit of the human sacrificers. Maurice Bloch (1992) has called it "rebounding violence", whereby the "vitality" of a live being once killed ritually is deflected towards humans (utilised for human purposes). The effectiveness of the sacrifice is predicated upon the close (social) bond between humans and domestic (livestock) animals. The cattle also provide the bride wealth, and thus the medium for marriage and, ultimately, fertility. The flowing of blood thus is seen as essential, yielding beneficial results. The idea of sacrifice was also relevant in the context of inter-group relations (see below).

• The *purification* metaphor. — The idea of purification is pervasive in Chai culture. People involved in homicide or in handling corpses at burials but also in adultery are to be temporarily isolated and cleansed. They can only be made "normal" members of society again by cleansing themselves with the freshly spilt blood of a stock animal. To purify, in this respect, means to kill and to use the life-force of the animal which was killed, and which stood as the "killer". Humans only then are able to re-enter social life. At the same time, to purify with the fresh blood is to redraw a boundary between individuals who were earlier socially separated by their violence.

• The *achievement* metaphor. — A Chai's personal history or social career is important. His/her personality and deeds may live on beyond the lifespan, and in this consciousness, people try to make a name for themselves: as "warriors", ceremonial duellers, public speakers, important family heads, or ritual experts. Achievements are often laid down in personal favourite-cattle songs *(roga kiyogá bio)* or battle songs *(kírogeñyò)*, which every adult male has. They are composed especially by men in the junior age-grade *(tègay)*. Most men keep working on such songs during their whole life, changing and adding text. Such songs can speak of deeds done in raids and war, in other dealings with neighbouring and/or enemy peoples, and of actions carried out during the defence of cattle herds and of their own favourite animals. Violent moments or episodes are an inevitable and desired element of such achievements.

Another moment of achievement is, of course, gaining adulthood. This social adulthood is not "just there" when people come of age, but must be achieved by having shown valour and personal strength (demonstrated in ceremonial duelling, see below), by capable herding, and by initiation (by elders) into the senior age-grade. For this, they must have demonstrated their "worthiness". This is a function both of time passing

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8   As in most pastoral societies, cattle meat is never eaten outside a ritual context

and of appropriate behaviour of the junior grade (see Abbink 1994). Hence, adulthood cannot just be taken—it is only reluctantly accorded to the newcomers by the outgoing grade of elders. The ritual of the initiation has violent aspects: elders (men and women) insult the new candidates, give them exacting and humiliating tasks to do, deprive them of food, and lash them with whips until their backs bleed.

These domains reveal underlying values and violent motifs active in the constitution of the Chai social person. They are especially articulated vis-à-vis outsiders. In their turn, these motifs and values inform *cultural scenarios* in Chai society. D. Linger (1992) has used the concept of "cultural scenario" to indicate the expected behavioural "performances" of values in action. For him, the *briga*, the violent street-encounter in Brazilian urban society, follows a known, shared "scenario", a scripted course of meaningful action in which the participants know what to expect. It is marked by emotional commitment and shared assumptions and values. Even though the actions are violent and can end in death, they are set in a model, which has psychological and cultural components inhibiting direct aggression but communicating its message. The important point is that *briga* violence, although ambivalent because of its two poles of fascination and restraint, is not aimless, chaotic violence which suddenly erupts. A similar point can be made for Chai violence, which also follows cultural scenarios.

The exercise of violence

In this section, the practice of violence, i.e. the production and enactment of some frequent "violent" behavioural patterns ("scenarios") in Chai society, is reviewed. Two kinds could be distinguished: the ritually enacted "domesticated violence", and the external violence, i.e., relating to non-Chai. In the first instance, violence is transformative, i.e. fulfills an essential role for individual Chai in becoming full or accepted members of society; in the second instance, it is constitutive of their own group, a necessary inversion of peaceful social relations in certain conditions requiring distance between them and others.

Ritual enactment of "domesticated violence"

One finds the following forms expressed within the Chai group:
• Duelling *(thagine)*[9]. — A major event of domesticated violence is male ceremonial duelling. This is done with big poles made of tough wood, of ca. 2.10 to 2.40 metres length. The main contestants are young men

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9   In this and other sections I draw partly on material first presented in ABBINK (1993a and 1994).

of the *tègay* age-grade (unmarried) coming from different territorial settlements and/or clans. They hold several matches and return-matches over a period of a few months every year, supervised by referees *(oddá)*. The *thagine*-duel is strictly contained by rules of procedure, and the killing of an opponent, on purpose or accidental, is prohibited. If it occurs, homicide compensation should be negotiated. Social relations are perceived to be disturbed between the family groups of victim and killer as long as a deal is not made.

Three aspects of these duels stand out. First, the *thagines* ostensibly is a forum for male competition and acquisition of culturally approved status among peers and also vis-à-vis girls. They allow young, ambitious men, eager to start life as independent household-heads, to show their strength and virility. This latter aspect is explicitly recognised by nubile Suri girls: the duelling provides a place of male-female contacts, whereby girls among themselves make a first choice as to whom their partners might be, although there is no 100 % correlation of being the winner and being the most popular person. Second, it can be interpreted, in psychological terms, as a training ground for youths to explore the fascination and energy of violence in a controlled manner. Thirdly, the duels are forums where competing village communities within Suri society meet (People from the same village can never compete). On these occasions, where thousands of people gather, one might say that these communities (called *b'uran*) are in fact constituted.

• The procedure of homicide compensation *(lígin)*. — When an internal homicide has occurred, the lineages of victim and perpetrator are in a state of conflict, whereby in principle revenge can be taken at any moment. People avoid normal social contacts. After some months, negotiations are started, by neutral members from another lineage or clan group. These must lead to the fixing of a compensation sum and to the agreement to hand over a young girl to the victim's group. The killer and the closest male agnate of the victim must also be purified with the blood of a sheep. Without this ordered procedure to restore the peace, feuding would ensue.

• "Blessing of the raiders" *(dirám)*. — This is an essential ritual supervised and carried out by the *komoru*. Before going on a raid for cattle, participants (who virtually all are of the *tègay* age-grade) have to be blessed and ritually protected from death and defeat. This is done in the compound of the *komoru*, and should proceed according to a strict and faultless procedure. The raiders are smeared with a protective black clay and jump across thorn-bush branches, which symbolically stand for the enemy. They also threateningly face the *komoru* as if to attack him—an act to challenge his blessing and divert the power which he has (via the connection with the sky-god) [10] The speeches by elders and the blessings

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10 In the film *The Mursi* (1974, Granada TV, Disappearing World series, UK), the similar ritual among the Mursi, "spearing the priest", is shown

of the *komoru* are full of violent imagery, cursing, the enemies, calling upon the raiders to be fearless and dauntless in their attacks. They are expected to make effective use of violence and to come back with glory (they announce their "successful" mission upon return in their village with a special boasting song). In the knowledge that the opponents do exactly the same, there is here again no controversy on the use of violence.

• The ritual killing of livestock *(nitha)*. — This is a very common event, violent although not directed at humans. It is done when people have killed some one (on purpose or by accident), at an initiation-ceremony, a divinatory intestine-reading, a marriage, or a burial. The ideas of substitution and of cleansing through blood and death come back here. The manner in which the cattle or sheep are killed has its own meaning, but is seen as cruel by outsiders: it varies from cutting the throat, or slowly bludgeoning an animal to death (cattle), to slitting open the stomach before it is dead (sheep).

• Body culture. — One could see certain Chai *body treatments* as violent, though they are again not "contested" (except by government agents, who discourage it): the piercing of lips and ear-lobes with sticks and inserting big wooden and clay discs; the making of scarifications with a razor blade on the arms, back and abdomen of women; the kicking out of lower incisors with a stone, and the "honorific" *rídò*-scarifications (carved in the skin by an age-mate) for people who have killed. In all these cases, blood flows and pain is inflicted, but only in order to enhance *culturally styled personal purposes:* respectively aesthetics, age status, and personal achievement and prestige in the eyes of peers. It is not seen as a contested infliction of harm. This is all part of the self-conscious cultural body-aesthetics which Chai emphasise vis-à-vis other groups, and which is, for instance, completely lacking among the Dizi people.

External violence: ritual and political

We have seen that the Chai had social relations of exchange, ritual friendship bonds *(laale),* and of joint exploitation of pasture and water resources with their Mursi, Nyangatom, Dizi and other neighbours. These groups had close social ties with them, which were fully taken for granted. But, with the exception of the Mursi, such groups remained outside the Suri "moral community". As the complementary side of these social bonds, the Chai always knew various forms of violent behaviour and conflict in their dealings with them:

• the stealing of crops and individual cattle without violent assault. These matters, if the culprits could be found, were resolved through talks and compensation on an individual or family level;
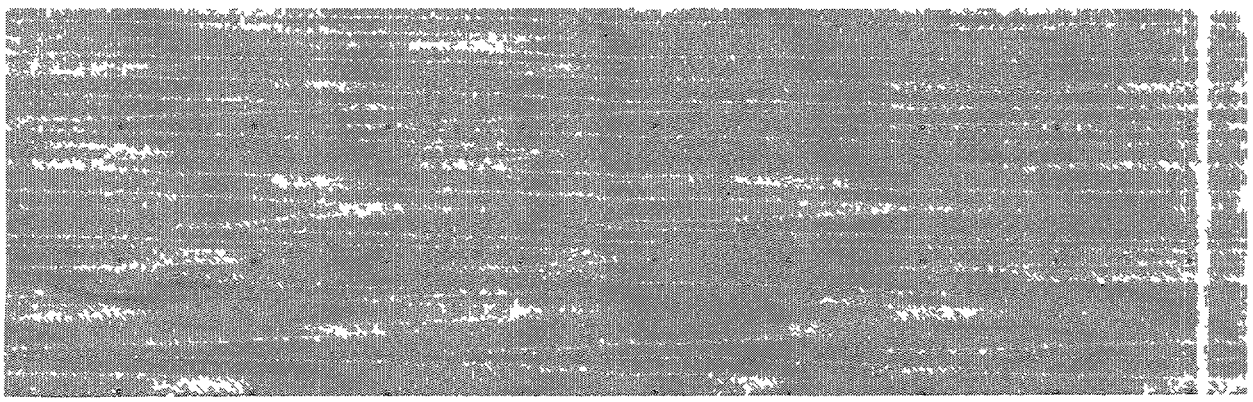
- ambushes, to kill an individual or traveller from another ethnic group either to rob grain, clothes, tools, a gun, or cattle, or just to kill to prove personal "courage" (by a *tègay*, a junior age-grade member);
- the raiding of enemy cattle camps or compounds, with violent deaths of both defenders and attackers. These were short hit-and-run raids, with a brief and intense attack under a barrage of rifle-fire and a quick retreat;
- occasionally: destructive one or two-day battles to destroy enemy settlements or wipe out its people. This was battle-warfare *(kaman)*, and was the most serious form of violent interaction between two ethnic groups. Chai have had such fights with all their neighbours, except the Mursi. The primary purpose in such large-scale attacks was to steal cattle, but also women and children were captured, who were then incorporated in Chai society. While the violence used was intense and often deadly (hacking with knives and spears, shooting at close range) forms like rape or torture of the enemies were, however, unknown.

As one can see, the context of this external violence may be partly "resource competition" and partly political strategy: the (re)drawing of group or territorial boundaries between political units. They do not fight because they are "separate groups", but the reverse: in order to become different. This also holds for the Chai in their dealings with neighbouring groups (compare the same argument on the Mursi by Turton 1994).

Relations with the agro-pastoralist Nyangatom were based on an implicit and recognised balance between two similar groups. They had a comparable acephalous organisation and age-group system, a similar subsistence base, etc. Violence was a "normal" social activity, not problematized as such. It also had a code of conduct: even in serious things like cattle-raiding, for instance, there was the rule of the preliminary marking (in the neck) of a few cattle from a targeted herd before the actual raid would take place. Conflict between the Chai and Nyangatom was, in sum, a way to express or assert a boundary with the "significant other". The killing of a Nyangatom allowed a Suri man to make the prestigious *rídò* scarification on his arm.

With the agricultural Dizi people, who dominate the highlands northeast of the Suri and have a very different economy, culture and political ideology, relations were not based on perceived similarity. The Chai always had a disdain for the Dizi and their sedentary, agricultural way of life. But their obvious group differences—despite the myth of common descent of their chiefly families—were codified in an explicit "contract" of rain control, based on the metaphor of sacrifice. In times of drought, the Chai would pay homage to the Dizi chief of the highlands, bringing a black ox and a black goat for sacrifice by the Dizi chief. The political tension (between two basically *unequal* groups) was "appeased" in this agreement, thus keeping inter-group violence at bay through the metaphor of ritual sacrifice (substitutive violence). There were incidents between
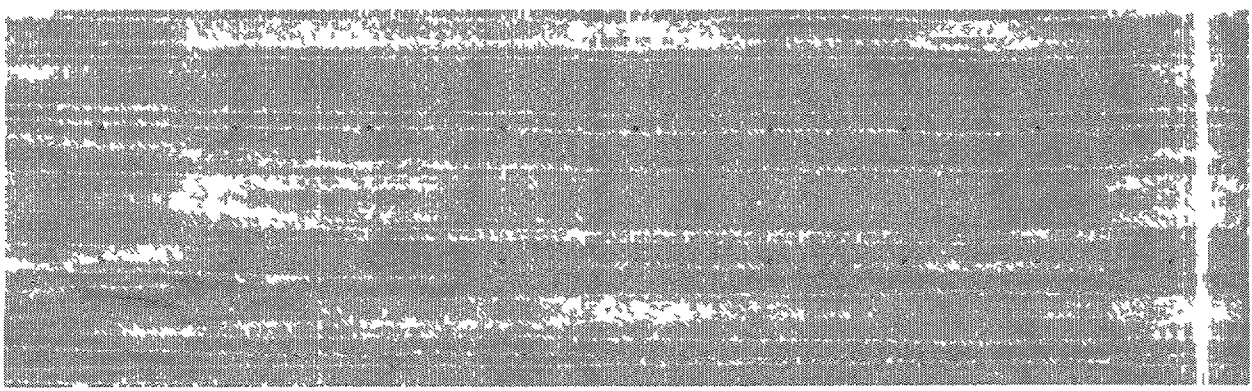
individuals of the two ethnic groups, but no major violent conflicts or battles. Neither did Suri apply the *rídò*-markings.

The above elements shape the Suri practice of violence and define their *habitus* (in Bourdieu's sense defined as human dispositions acquired in society due to a process of internalisation of external "objective" social conditions). The habitus is also incorporated into action, feeling and thinking of individuals in a specific society, often in a quite literal sense, since the emphasis is on the bodily basis of these dispositions. This is also evident among the Suri. A habitus is, however, not static.

"Deranged" violence? Transformations of the violent *habitus*

Since a decade, the face of violence among the Chai and their neighbours has changed significantly. Although the traditional situation of "normal" relations between the ethnic groups in the area was not always harmonious and should not be glorified, it is apparent that the past years have shown a serious crisis in inter-ethnic relations. This kind of situation is becoming general in many parts of Africa due to internal and external factors, often in the context of globalisation, bringing together various spheres of inter-action and articulating conflicts of interests. Traditional rituals and customary law usually cannot achieve what they were designed for in bygone days. Local societies are structurally unable to maintain their integrity and moral fibre due to accelerated drought and famine problems, population pressure, faulty state policies, tourism (see Abbink 1998a), modern formal education and criminal activities.

As a result of recent political and other changes in the Maji area, both the internal, thus far ritually contained Suri violence as well as the violence towards other groups tend to break the bounds of custom and to turn into the uninhibited use of force (this was also the opinion of most Chai elders, though expressed differently). While it makes available new options for local people, the new violence tends to endanger the co-existence of groups as well as the peace in Chai-society itself. Relevant factors have been population movements in the Ethio-Sudan border area due to the Sudanese civil war, increased local conflicts about pasture and water holes, periodic drought and famine, epizootics, a temporary retreat of central state author-ity from the local scene, and generational conflict among the Suri, all this coupled with the rapid spread of automatic weapons among all groups, with changed the extent and intensity of violent encounters (see below). These factors have contributed to more inter-group conflicts, a decline in market contacts and a virtual halting of shared use of the environment and of long-term mutual social contacts (including intermarriage and ritual friendship bonds). A three-year record kept by the author of violent incidents between the Chai-Suri and Dizi (leaving out the conflicts which either group has had with another neighbouring population), shows at least

sixty incidents with a fatal outcome, the number of people being killed ranging from one to several dozens per case. (With other ethnic groups like the Anuak and the Nyangatom the Suri also have violent conflicts, but due to geographical separation between them, the number of confrontations and of casualties has been less than with Dizi and highland villagers.)

One of the problems to explain is why violence "got out of hand" and led to a break-down of social relations between the Chai and other groups. Is it because their cultural models and their *habitus* were, in a sense, "violent"? In the course of the conflicts with the Dizi, one can see a *qualitative* difference in the view on, and exercise of, violence, especially among the members of the *tègay* age-grade (see Abbink 1994): violent action—attacking and killing—became an aim in itself, a medium of self-glorification and of personal status which, while based on assumptions and ideals within Chai society, has gone well beyond them.[11]

To understand why this happened, we recall two general factors. First, the Chai subsistence base. They are transhumant herders and shifting cultivators, not sedentary farmers: they have never invested in long-term agricultural adaptation but in mobile cattle-herding. For them, boundaries between "territories" and "resources" are not to be strictly observed, it is against the nature of their open economy and flexible "membership policy". If such a closure occurs, due to conquest and exclusion policies (e.g., of Nyangatom, due in its turn to population growth and also Kenyan military pressure) or to developments of "sedentarization" and administrative boundary-making, violent conflict cannot but increase. This is what has happened in the past decade. There is less and less room for Chai to follow traditional strategies of conflict resolution: avoidance, migration, or division and territorial spread of groups.

Second, the process of state expansion in the Maji area. Since the turn of the century, when it was nominally incorporated into Ethiopia, Maji has always been a "frontier area", incompletely administered and on the margins of the state monopoly on violence. Recent efforts to re-establish the state after the change of regime in 1991 have "problematized" all expressions of Suri violence. The state is by nature presenting itself as the normative, overarching authority which should have the exclusive use of legitimate force as well as combat "harmful customs". Local violence of Chai or of any other group is proscribed, regardless of its context (this was already the case under the previous state-communist regime of Mengistu). The state representatives have also, at various points, tried to prohibit many Chai activities or customs: not only cattle-raiding, ambushing, etc., but also things like animal sacrifice (the killing of cattle for divination or funerals), the customs of ear- and lip-plates,

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11   In fact to such an extent that it endangered the cohesion of Chai society itself (See ABBINK 1998b)

removal of lower incisors, and body scarification (these were called "harm-ful customs" in the 1987 constitution of the previous regime, a concept which returns in the policy documents of the post-1991 government). Recently, in 1994 and after, it was also tried to ban the ceremonial duelling contests.

It is obvious that this so-called "civilisational offensive" represents an assault on the socio-cultural fabric of Chai society. As the Chai are held responsible for most of the violence in the Maji area, state officials think that by reforming the what they see as overall "violent character" of Chai culture they can halt violent conflicts. It is, however, likely that if this state campaign to "reform" Chai culture—by banning the customs just mentioned—would be successful (it is not), the violence against non-Chai would notably increase when these domesticated forms of violent expression would cease to exist. In addition, while the state discourages or forbids even Chai self-defence and redressive action against enemy raiders, at the same time it cannot guarantee defending the Chai and their territory against such raiders (e.g., from the south or from Sudan), nor protect them from drought and subsistence crises, factors which necessitate at least some violent action. More immediately important factors stimulating the overall use of violence have been:

1. the wide availability of automatic rifles and ammunition from both Sudanese and Ethiopian sources;

2. continued ecological pressures: drought, cattle disease, more scarcity of bush land for cultivation and pasture for livestock. There was a major famine in 1984-85 and again one in 1994, and in one early 1997. This contributed to theft, ambushes and raiding;

3. the conflict in southern Sudan, which became the source of population movements in the region, pushing the Toposa to the western borders of the Suri territory, thus making their pastures and their old ritual sites, chiefs' burial places and settlements unsafe, and posing a threat to their physical and also cultural existence.

The effect of such changes in the socio-political and physical environment on the Chai, and on their use of violence in their relations with other groups, has been dramatic, although it is not a one-way causal chain—the developments in their own society have combined with such external factors to reinforce crisis and violent conflict.

It could be seen most clearly in the crisis in the age-grade system, which is the core of their political organisation and internal order (cf. Abbink 1994, and 1998b). In the age-grade system, the elder or reigning age-set of *rórà* is to be accorded respect and obedience from the younger one. They occasionally expect to be honoured and, in a metaphorical sense, "fed" in recognition of that fact, e.g., by being offered sacrificial cattle.[12] Their blessing of the land and the cattle and their authority on

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12. Cf. TORNAY (1989) on the Nyangatom.
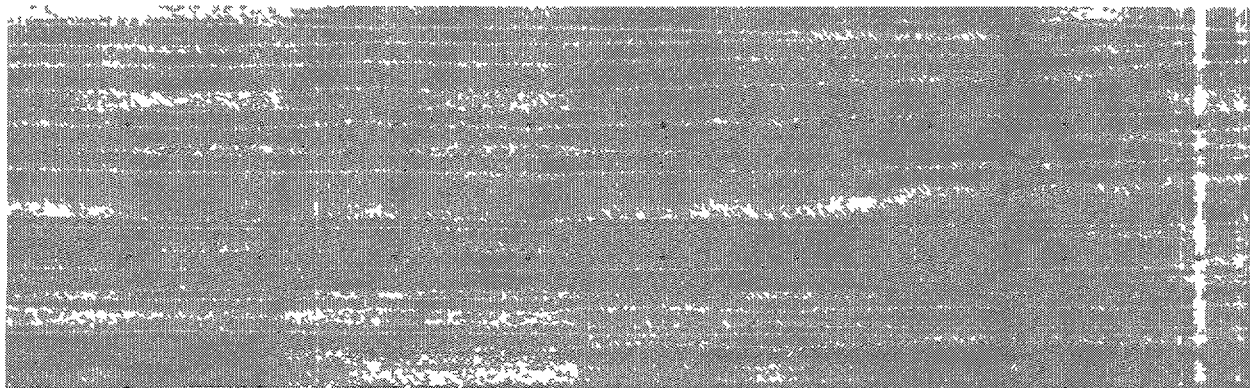
the basis of age is seen as a necessary element in the social order. But it was resented by the reigning age-set called Neebi (= "Buffaloes") that the *tègay* were always taking violent initiatives on their own, not sanctioned by public decisions at meetings. The *tègay*, mostly younger herders who lived in the cattle camps (in an area six hours' walk from the villages), could assert themselves because of the power of their rifles and on their growing economic leverage (as herders and as gold traders: see Abbink 1993a). Also in other domains the respect of the younger generation toward the elders and parents was diminishing, even within families: personal property and heads of cattle were often taken away by youngsters, without the consent of the parents.

The growing violence perpetrated by Chai youths initially convinced Chai elders (who control the date and the proceedings) that the new age-set initiation, which was already due in the early 1980s, should be delayed. With this, they expressed that the Chai first should formulate an answer to their problems, such as being exiled from their country, recovering from the drought and famine period in the mid-1980s, running into trouble with the Dizi and the Anuak (which endangered normal social relations and trade), and not respecting the elder generation. The *tègay* were blamed for all this, and the elders did not have a clear answer to the problems. The increased violence had brought out internal contradictions in the age-grade system and the authority structure and norms it was supposed to uphold. In fact the metaphor of age organisation as a cultural model of ordering social life was fundamentally disputed.

The availability of automatic weapons, now acquired by virtually all men, led also to changes in the concept of violent action and to new violent practices. Above, we have discussed some core elements of the cultural basis of "violent imagery" and action among the Chai. In the new situation, their values of male achievement and reputation, raiding and hunting exploits and ceremonial duelling provided a fertile basis for the expansion of violent performance by means of the new weapons, for instance:

• compared to the spears, knives and old three or five-shot rifles of less than a generation ago, the possibilities of the AK-47s (Kalashnikovs), FALs and M-16s seem to have a fascination and momentum of their own. Their availability not only leads to mimetic exercise of violent acts by the *tègay* vainly seeking recognition still structurally denied to them (see above: the delayed age-set ceremony), but also giving the possessors the idea of "social self-sufficiency": they explicitly de-emphasised the value or even the need of normal social relationships as formerly maintained with the neighbouring groups;

• the weapons also have been put to new use. For example, there have been some unprecedented instances of Chai killing their own cattle, to prevent them from being captured and taken away by enemy raiders (this has also been observed among the Tirma, and among other newly armed

pastoral groups in Uganda and Kenya, the Pokot, Turkana, Karimojong, etc.). There has been the gunning down of Dizi elders and women, and the killing of unarmed Dizi girls in ambushes, things not done in the recent past. Through this violence, exercised largely with impunity, the Chai and Tirma became more and more saturated with the feeling of power, and challenged not only the Dizi peasants but also the state army. This built up until October 1993, when a big Ethiopian army attack reputedly caused several hundred of Chai and Tirma (men, women and children) to die. Only after this obvious defeat, the elders decided to hold the age-set ceremony, initiating and conferring adulthood on the "delayed generation" (see Abbink 1998b). Since then, Chai Suri violence has decreased. The Tirma sub-group, which has not yet performed the initiation ritual, shows at present a higher level of violence than the Chai.

Two other internal changes in Chai society are the following:

• in the past six or seven years, the institution of *thagine*, the ceremonial duelling, has undergone a metamorphosis. First of all, the frequency of the contests has much increased. They are held almost every two to three weeks over a period of three to four months after the main harvest of sorghum (September-November, and after that as well, e.g. in January and in the time of the first rains in April-May. Secondly, the influence of the elders (including the *komoru*) and the referees over the contesting parties has diminished: nowadays, the young men and their friends continue as they like, and after one party has "lost" one contest, they grab their Kalashnikovs and start shooting (usually, but not always, in the air) to show their irritation. This has led to several accidental killings. One can hear the Suri elders say that the meaning of duelling is being eroded. We see here another cultural scenario in flux, whereby accepted meanings of violence are transformed;

• there has been an increase in feuding: when a homicide is perpetrated, Suri seem to lose the patience to sit out the traditional compensation talks. The kin group of the victim, if strong enough, demands immediate damages, or else call for retribution. Such feuding conflicts also affected the family of the *komoru*. Among the Tirma-Suri, for instance, there has been a long line of killings between two lineages since one of their two komorus was accidentally shot dead: by a Tirma. This in itself is unprecedented.

The above forms of violent behaviour are now also contested within Chai society: elders, the *komoru*, and women especially talk against wanton violence against Dizi and other travellers, against unprovoked killing and robbery of former Dizi bond friends, and against the shooting at duelling grounds.

The changes in the exercise of violence both within and without Chai society points to major shifts of meaning. In fact, we see a movement from ritually contained violence to political and instrumental violence, the aims and meaning of which are less clear to everybody. There is a phase

of deep uncertainty and sometimes fear, of a transition of meanings.
There is an awareness that many of the tègay generation have abused the
cultural norm of status acquisition on account of killing an adversary: this
happened only in battle with recognised, long-standing enemies (i.e., not
with Dizi and other highlanders except after manifest injustices). The
tègay do it repeatedly, "without a reason", and break the rule of restraint
in violent behaviour.

Concluding remarks

Chai-Suri culture is marked by ideals of male personhood and peer status
which accord value to assertive behaviour which may translate into violent
behaviour when material interests and competitive economic and social
relations with other groups are involved. Suri culture can, however, only
be called a "culture of violence"—reproducing violent behaviour as a
template, an ideal or a habitus—in its relation to, or opposition to, those
outside their "moral community".

Chai-Suri expressions of violence have shown important modifications
in recent years. While ecological and material conditions play a role in
explaining this, an anthropological, cross-cultural understanding of the
new dialectics of violent action needs to take into account how violent
processes actually unfold on the basis of symbolic-cultural representations
and how they establish meaning, either instrumental or expressive.

Violence breaks the bounds of culture, of the social system. The
ritualisation of violence is diminishing, more unstructured and unpredict-
able forms emerge. We see here a society pushing against its own
structural and cultural limits. In relations with neighbouring groups (espe-
cially Dizi and Nyangatom), this Chai violence can still be seen as a
"language", a communicative act, but mainly one of intimidation. Vio-
lence in this sense "bridges" the communication failures which have
emerged, but it grounds group relations in suspicion and fear—in the
absence of shared frameworks of control (the breakdown of the rain-
agreement with the Dizi and of the fighting code with the Nyangatom are
cases in point).

A more neo-functionalist explanation of violent behaviour, as in recent
evolutionary approaches, seems of limited value, because it tends to
assume what has to be demonstrated in each empirical case (cf. Knauft's
criticism, 1987, 1991). For instance, the interpretation of Chai violence
seems to preclude an easy association between successful raiding or violent
behaviour on the one hand and "reproductive success" on the other.
Comparing census-material and involvement or prestige in raiding of
dozens of Chai men did not give any direct, meaningful correlation. The
most important killers were not more popular with women and did not
have more wives and children. Neither did they have larger herds.

Certain rules make accumulation of this sort difficult: the captured cattle is being divided among all participants of a raid in a time-consuming and laborious procedure. Other facts which refute such a connection include the position of the *komoru:* he usually has a large number of wives and children and the biggest herd of cattle, but he is noted for his reconciliatory and mediatory role, and his role-model de-emphasises aggressive behaviour and aimless violence. We also saw already that in the *thagine* ceremonial duelling the victors are *not* the universally popular guys outshining the losers: all participants regardless of their place on the list of honour are esteemed.

What the examination of the Chai case makes clear is that in certain conditions "violence" is deemed an essential, inherent part of social life, and need not be "contested" in the sense of categorically rejected by victim and perpetrator. This was true for the Chai and the Nyangatom— both the same focus on cattle herding, both with a stratum of "warrior-herders", and with the underlying idea that "violent self-assertion", in ritual as well as in group defence, was, in their view, inevitable. When people were killed it was said to have been "bad luck" for them, caused by, for instance, failing ritual protection, but it was not contested in itself. With the Dizi case it was different, but we have seen how their perception of illegitimate, excessive Chai violence in recent years was partly generated by the breach of a previous "historical contract", and by changing regional and state-local society relationships, where different forms of incorporation into overarching political structures and value systems (as expressed in the fight over the monopoly on the means and exercise of violence) of both groups led to regional discrepancies and conflicts.

Traditional Chai violence is a concomitant of their evolved survival strategies as lowland cattle-herders in a precarious natural and human environment. Their *commitment* to the herds, to feeding, defending, and expanding them, has led to a close socio-cultural bond between humans and cattle, symbolically elaborated in their culture and values of social personhood and achievement. Violence is, however, not simply a "selectively advantageous trait" of Chai behaviour. Their values and ideals certainly reflect a complex violent imagery, but at the same time a pervasive sociality within and beyond their society, suggesting that, on this elementary level also, both are inextricably linked. This again shows the ambiguity of violence as a category of social action: it constitutes and it undermines sociality, the latter especially when released from its cultural formulations.

When the Chai mode of existence is undermined, either by long-term disturbances in ecological conditions or in the inter-group and state relations putting them at a disadvantage, a recourse to more hard violence will be likely. Traditional understandings between local groups then further lose importance, the regional equilibrium is disturbed, and an overarching accepted state structure is not present. Also, the availability

of modern weapons and plenty of ammunition has had a seductive effect on Chai young men, prompting them to use violence *beyond* any instrumental necessity. As we saw, this has led to serious internal contradictions within Chai society, and to decisive changes in traditional Chai meanings of violence.

In most of the situations which we presented, violence in Chai society can be seen as a means to symbolically construct a group identity, or "we-consciousness"—it is not there automatically. This consciousness is based upon ideas of clan descent or affiliation, language, and a cultural aesthetics expressed in decorative customs, but forged into an enduring group identity—or at least into one valid for some purposes—within the network of competitive and exchange relations with other groups in the region. As such, violence is inevitable, a fact of life, and not in any sense problematic or destructive or an irrational regression to evil human nature. When we talk about the violent "images" in Chai discourse, the usefulness of Riches' definition (1991) is limited: from a Chai point of view, much of their violence is not "contestably rendering physical hurt", but only uncontested, legitimate self-defence, retaliatory or pre-emptive damaging of enemies, or beneficial sacrifice of animals, with which no one in that context would argue.

Finally, this question of violence being contestable in local Chai terms would only arise on two accounts: a) when according to the normative authority figures such as elders and the *komoru* the people, especially the younger generation, defy the rules and obligations and act on their own account, thus changing or undermining the social order; b) when new forms of aggressively violent and wanton cruel behaviour would appear, such as rape, torture, hired killing, or nihilistic destruction, well-known from our Western societies. The possibility that such forms can emerge may not be precluded (as we know from cases elsewhere in Africa). Subjectively perceived economic exploitation, unbalanced state interference or disturbance, rigidified ethnic boundaries, unsolvable problems of resource competition combined with factors like the easy new technology and power of killing (hand grenades, automatic rifles) may prepare the ground for it. Also more intangible factors connected to the process of globalisation, such as the penetration of a new language of visual images or of a fantasised reality evoked by, e.g., imported "video-culture", might enhance this process, invalidating—or at least transforming—codes of restraint and social order.[13] It is known that this has happened in extraordinary situations of disturbance such as in Papua New Guinea, Mozambique, Liberia or Sierra Leone. At present, there is one frontier town just north of the Suri country where such videos are now becoming readily

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13. Its emergence and adoption in Africa should be investigated in detail. The negative effects of violent and sadistic videos after their displacement to, and appropriation in, other socio-cultural settings are underestimated.

available, also for visiting Suri. Such factors might create a new discourse of violence, which would also mark the inclusion of the Suri into the globalised domain of displaced signs and commoditised symbols, and would have an impact on traditional understandings of violent performance. The Suri have, however, not yet reached this "advanced" stage of development, and whether the process would mean the emergence of "more" or "less" violent behaviour cannot be predicted. What seems likely though is that more state authority in the area will transform cultural notions and patterns of violence but not necessarily cause their disappearance.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an account of the ideological form and practical exercise of violence among the Suri people, an agro-pastoral group in southern Ethiopia. In theoretical terms, the general question is addressed of how, on the elementary level of a small-scale, relatively traditional society without stratification, central leadership and modern economic features, "violence" is constructed and performed, and how it partly defines the social persona and collectivity of this group, as opposed to others. It will be asserted that, while their connections with other ethno-cultural groups in a partially shared environment and contacts with state forces are not new—recent developments in this wider societal and political context of the Suri have an important transformative impact on their patterns of violence.

RÉSUMÉ

Formes rituelles et politiques des pratiques violentes chez les Suri d'Éthiopie méridionale. — Cet article traite des formes idéologiques et de l'exercice de la violence chez les Suri, un peuple de pasteurs et d'agriculteurs d'Éthiopie méridionale. Sur le plan théorique, on s'interroge sur la façon dont, dans cette société traditionnelle

sans stratification sociale marquée, sans autorité politique centralisée et sans éco-
nomie moderne, la violence est construite et mise en œuvre, et comment elle définit
partiellement les rôles sociaux et les groupes qui composent cette société par
opposition aux collectivités voisines. Bien que les rapports entre les différents
groupes ethniques au sein d'un ensemble régional plus vaste ou que les contacts
avec le ou les États ne sont pas des phénomènes nouveaux, les transformations
récentes qu'a connues la société suri ont modifié de façon sensible leur façon de
gérer la violence.